

ELAGABAL KUPERUS



KARL HANS STROBL

BERSERKER

BOOKS



Table of contents

Part one. The strangling hand

The house of Eleagabal Kuperus and the widow of the poet

Waldmensen

Adalbert Semilasso discovers the world

Thomas Bezug gets a son-in-law and buys a living poet

From the doorman Palingenius

The comedians. Reference discovers a star From
a prisoner in search of man

With poor people. Emma Rößler makes a covenant

In the garden of the inn "Zum General Laudon". Adalbert enters the
circle of Eleagabal Kuperus. A conversation about the future of the
Humanity and one about death and life

The 'Society for the Utilisation of the Earth's Surface' holds a meeting.
A small argument between Bezug and his son-in-law

The engagement party

The puppet show, the ape-man and a small experiment on the effect of
art

Elisabeth wants to go to Antothrace. A farewell
to Antothrace

Part two. Journey to hell

Two enemies approach. Sea and woman. Elisabeth receives a visit

Desponsamus te mare

A man goes overboard and a boat is capsized A missing
man returns. Looping the Loop

A flight of death

Nella's diary

The prisoner frees himself. Hainx makes one last attempt The club
of Babylonian maidens

In Enzberger's mill. The solar eclipse The
terror

At the place of grace

The frenzy begins

The Records of the Astronomer The

Brothers of the Red Death

Adalbert and Regina. The battle for order Carnage. The
miracle

Reference new plans. Johanna's life story. Act conclusions

Part one.

The strangling hand

The house of Eleagabal Kuperus and the poet's widow

Behind the cathedral, where the roofs of the small houses huddle around narrow courtyards, the alleyways lose their direction and, constricted by old grey fronts, give way to suddenly protruding corners, descending and ascending over steps until they end in some corner, surrounded on all sides by houses. In this innermost core of the city, the new era, which is working to expand the perimeter, has not yet changed anything, and the past crouches under dark archways, in gloomy niches, with trembling little lamps burning in front of their black images of saints. The steps by which the houses descend and ascend have become slippery and slippery from many treads, so that the old women dare to go to the cathedral in wintertime only timidly and with a prayer. The joys and sorrows that have been carried up and down these stairs have also worked their way into the round holes in the granite, where small pools of water stand after summer downpours and ice crusts crackle longer than anywhere else in winter. The old houses look pensively and sometimes a little glumly out of small windows at the few people who walk carefully over the bumpy pavement, as if the haste and restlessness that rushes past the cathedral hill had no power over them yet. You see a lot of old people here. Life seems to drag on longer in these quiet, crooked little streets than anywhere else. And when you see all these old men and women wandering to the cathedral on Sundays, it's like being in the realm of memory, where the shadows of what has been walk around. But the youth lives among the old people, cruel, unruly and noisy as outside, and defies the present with the right between the grey houses, raging up and down the stairs and, like the sunshine, cannot be prevented from giving the happiness of strength. The

Old people watch and smile, because the past and present are not yet at odds here. That's why old age loves green plants and white curtains, and many of the small, multi-coloured windows are alive with greenery. In summer, the blood-red buds of the fuchsias nod over wooden lattices, and broad-leaved pelargoniums stand worthily in the background. Then there are whole windows full of blooming hyacinths in all colours, and at the frame maker's, who also keeps animals and stuffs birds, you can see foreign foliage plants and whimsical orchids, so that all the children around are forced to stand in front of his windows and dab their fingers against the panes. On great feast days in summer he displays his passion flower, the beautiful and sad blossom that shows all the instruments of Christ's torture, the nails and the hammer and even the hideous crown of thorns. Here, people still pay attention to feast days, emphasising them among the days of work, and even the houses change their faces at Easter, Whitsun or Corpus Christi. When the procession comes through the narrow streets, when the bells tinkle and the white incense floats in broad clouds above the heads of the priests, rows of candles flicker in the windows and images of saints look out of sleepy eyes into the abundant light. And at Pentecost time, the green birch is not missing from any door, so that it looks as if spring has put a bouquet on the breast of every house. Then everything looks so bright and cheerful into the world that you almost can't believe how many strange stories sleep behind the old brown doors and small windows; secret and uncanny stories that awaken on dull days and in the long winter nights.

Near the main staircase to the cathedral, guarded by two stone saints with cold, empty eyes, stands a house around which many such stories are spun. This is where Eleagabal Kuperus lives, who is the subject of strange stories in the houses around the cathedral, who is surrounded by the pale glamour of mystery in the imagination of the young and whom the old women shyly avoid when he crosses their path to the cathedral.

His house is certainly the oldest around here and has a crooked gable sitting on its wrinkled brown face like an old hat. In dry weather, its front appears dusty and rutted, but when the rain beats against its walls, ancient images emerge on them: Isaac's sacrifice, the judgement of Solomon, the passage of the Jews through the Red Sea and many others for which the people up here know no interpretation. Just as a secret writing is awakened by the sun or the water, so these images emerge from the damp, stretch out over all the surfaces between the windows and appear, interwoven with tendrils of plants and animal bodies and with illegible sayings. Above the door, however, which is richly carved and studded with rusty iron bands, a figure becomes visible, standing in the garb of a distant time, holding a sword in one hand and a key in the other. A ribbon emerges from its mouth, on which is written in ancient letters: "Believe the miracle". But the strangest thing about this figure and the strangest thing about the whole house is that the hand holding the key protrudes from the wall in a real, tangible form, a hand which, with its curved fingers, with the tendons and the clear veins between them, so closely resembles the living hand of a human being that one has to admire the great art of its sculptor. When the rain has trickled down its furrows and the sun has dried the wall, then the pictures and sayings have disappeared, and only the hand holds its key above the door, as if it were growing out of the wall and wanted to show that there is something locked here that can only be opened by it. And this door too - it is the terror and the never-exhausted riddle of the children, for its carving depicts Saul's visit to the witch of Endor. The hero is surrounded by misshapen bodies, hideous grimaces and lindworms. Above, a dragon spits out fire, and below, the leviathan swims in a sea of pointed waves and blows powerful jets of water from its nostrils.

Of all the people who have strange stories to tell about Eleagabal Kuperus and his house, old Mrs Swoboda stands out,

who lights slender candles in the dome for the souls in purgatory. It is she who, on a moonlit night, saw how the fingers of the hand above the door detached themselves one by one from the key and stretched out, just like the fingers of a human hand trying to overcome a cramp. And it is she who, in the dawn of a bleak winter's day, saw clearly how the dragons and monsters of the carved door swarmed about and how Saul raised his arm to banish them. Now she swears that Eleagabal Kuperus is a sorcerer, and a legion of old women stand behind her, claiming the same. But even the men, who only laugh at this gossip, avoid the old man in the mysterious house, and if one is to meet him in the twilight of the poorly lit alleyways, he prefers to go to the other side. Only rarely does the bell ring under the hand with the key, and it is always a stranger, someone from the bustling city below, who visits Eleagabal Kuperus in his castle.

The woman, who came up the large staircase on a winter evening filled with a heavy haze and secret voices and walked slowly across the small square in front of the cathedral, hesitated a little at the door of the house where Kuperus lived. Up here only a few lights were still awake, and one of them stood motionless like a fixed eye in the forehead of this house. Mrs Swoboda, who came out of the sacristy of the cathedral, saw a dark figure groping for the bell at Cuperus's door, and, shuddering, sent up a short prayer to heaven for the salvation of this poor soul, who had given herself up to evil here. As she rounded the corner of the alley, she heard the shrieking of the bell and, freezing and glad of her own godliness, she wrapped herself more tightly in her large shawl.

The woman who wanted to be admitted to Eleagabal Kuperus had to wait a while before the heavy door opened. The rays of a nearby gas lantern, weary from the battle with the fog, stirred the carvings of the door into a rippling curl, slid over the hand with the key and stranded on the shore of darkness, which was difficult to reach.

lay at the end of the alley. The gate opened quietly. A long corridor led the woman into the interior of the house, where she walked silently over soft carpets. To the left and right, luminous letters that combined to form words without comprehensible meaning, hieroglyphics, cuneiform signs and glittering symbols gave so much of an unsettling twilight that tall, dark images and statues could be recognised accompanying the entrant along the corridor. A fountain splashed like a melancholy melody in a red-lit room in which the pictures gathered round the walls; here a servant, whose hairy head, small pointed ears, and evil glowing eyes made him resemble a wolf, waited and raised his hand in a silent gesture. The woman followed him through a narrow passage between two walls of books until he took a ball from a basin and let it fall back again with a silvery sound. From the folds of a curtain that blew coolly around her hot face, she stepped under a dome of glass that arched over a room of marble. As in a temple, two rows of pillars rose upwards, but no entablature weighed down on their broad capitals, from which animal heads looked down between scrolls. They were seemingly purposeless, placed in this space only for their own sake, the lower part of which they organised, while the dome stretched unsupported and free above it like a symbol of the infinity of the sky. All kinds of marble made up the colourfulness of this room, from the white marble of the Tyrolean quarries to the flamed, jagged, starry wonders of colour of the rarest varieties. Red streams trickled over the walls, as if a small stream of blood were emerging from a hidden opening up there, branching out and flowing over the smooth surface; next to them were slabs painted like maps, then delicate ferns, mosses or small trees seemed to be enclosed in the stone, now corals bloomed and spread their branches wide apart, as if they were unfolding all the marvellous powers of unrestrained growth. The white, yellowish and ivory-coloured types of marble poured out their flawless surfaces and enabled the eye to take in new plays of colour.

This room showed a rigid lifelessness, which at the same time sparkled with the most violent life, a calm in which an irrepressible movement roared, it resembled a head in which confused thoughts storm, in **w h i c h t h e** strangest ideas dwell, none of which becomes loud or enters into real life. The dome was screwed tightly over this tangle so that none of it would get out, curved and glassy like the cornea of an eye on whose retina the most delicious and wonderful colours play.

Eleagabal Kuperus sat at the marble table in the centre, guarded by the two rows of columns on the right and left. His hand was resting on the table, his fingers tracing some vein of the marble, his lips moving. Now he looked up and his gaze enveloped the strange woman in a veil of questions. Deep inside a head that had as much of an old patriarch as of an old predator lay those questioning eyes. Above them rose a high forehead, drawn into so many parallel wrinkles that another man would have laughed at them; below them began a wild white beard, a tangled thicket that spread out on all sides, yet forced in one direction, fell down on the chest. Between the undergrowth gaped the dark cavern of a mouth, from which two boar tusks emerged. The incisors had been lost, but the canines of the upper jaw had developed rare strength, and when Eleagabal Kuperus laughed, they crept out of their sheaths like crooked knives. A thin ring of white hair lay around the bald skull, which seemed to bristle as if electrified by strong emotions.

The woman approached him hesitantly and placed a round parcel she had been carrying under her coat on the table in front of him.

"You are welcome," Eleagabal Kuperus said, beckoning the servant with the wolf's face, who had been lurking behind the woman in the hunched posture of a predator, to move away. "You are welcome," Eleagabal Kuperus said again, and the woman felt his gaze penetrate her. Then he added, his hand pointing towards the round parcel: "You bring me your husband's head."

A tremor came over the woman, and the table at which Eleagabal Kuperus was sitting began to rotate rapidly on its axis, so rapidly that it seemed as if the man in front of her was multiplying. Dizzy, she reached for one of the pillars, but quickly withdrew her fingers, for the stone was so hot that it almost burnt her skin.

"Take things as they are. Death is a powerful master, almost as powerful as life, and sometimes it is as if it overcomes it. I honour your pain and I want to fulfil your wish."

"You know what I wanted to tell you?"

"I know it. Her love was great, and I bow to love." Then the woman burst into tears and looked around her in despair, for she felt so weak that she needed support. Eleagabal Kuperus rose and came to her; he put an arm round her shoulders, and the strange thing happened that Mrs Emma Rößler, who had come with horror and fear to this disreputable old man, to this uncanny man, hid her head in the thick undergrowth of his beard. So they both stood quite still, and the silence crackled like a narrow blue flame. Then he led her to his chair at the marble table and made her sit down.

"Tell me about your husband, who was a poet and only didn't know how to organise one thing - his life."

"It seems that you knew him," - Eleagabal Kuperus smiled and the two boar's teeth crept out of the hollow of his mouth while his hand signalled her to continue - "his name was on everyone's lips, and his future was bright and wonderful before him. But despite all the promises and pledges, his present remained dull and gloomy. He did not know how to put himself on the market and proclaim his works with boastful gestures. People kept giving him hope and recognising his talent. Ah, he didn't even have the proud consolation of being unrecognised. But one bought his books only just enough for us to live in a bourgeois comfort, while he thirsted for an opulence that would not have satisfied his

We were not rich enough to rise above mediocrity and not poor enough to speak of the lot of the poet. We were not rich enough to rise above mediocrity and not poor enough to speak of the poet's lot. With his eyes fixed on a distant peak, he walked a road that was neither arduous enough nor accompanied by enough wonders. This was how his life passed. He could not be called a fighter, but neither was he a lucky child who had stars fall into his lap. With quiet, prudent labour he acquired just enough to lead a life similar to that of thousands, until he sank at the end without too much pain, without a trace of tragedy, except that here fell silent one whom fate should have allowed to say his last."

Eleagabal Kuperus stood in front of the woman and listened to her, running his hand over his long beard like a gardener stroking his bushes. The wrinkles on his high forehead moved. It was as if thoughts were running over them. "His life and his death are not as bleak as they seem to your love. His life should not have been more brilliant, for I know that then his strength would have melted away in a soft twilight. But he could have made it richer and deeper, for he had your love. And that is why I said that he did not know how to mould it. All happiness comes from the depths. And his death was not bleak, for he was at the end of what he was destined to give to the world. His memory may be sacred to you, for it is no diminution of his value when I tell you that he had 'no last' to give, that he would have created only continuations, not increases. Around his head shone the glory of that modest immortality which men have to bestow. If the world had had to expect his last, it would have become impatient and would have denied him the credit for the values he had placed in it. But you spoke to me of him, now you speak of yourself."

"There is nothing to be said of me but that I loved him."

"Love is only one. But its manifestations are as diverse and changeable as the colourful images of the world, and nature will never be

to awaken their blossoms in ever new guises. It is the play of their festive days."

The glass dome arched higher, and a delicious hush descended from it, ringing like silver on smooth marble walls. Then the woman began, her hands stroking the cool surface of the table with pointed fingers: "He lifted me up when I was about to fall. I spent my youth among strangers, in whose houses I had to teach spoilt children. I was tolerated at the table so as not to be disturbed too much by the naughtiness of the boys and the cheeky questions of the little girls. But they never forgot to make me feel how good a work it was to make use of my labour. The grown-up sons and the masters of the house often enough turned into tender wooers when they were alone with me; they brought little presents and flowers, which they asked me to hide from their mothers and wives. And since I was not inclined to understand their hints and wishes, I could not find a home anywhere. The journey made me tired, and in the house that finally took me in, my resistance was worn out by the impetuous urging of the Lord, who was gifted with an uncanny power over all his surroundings. A terrible gentleman who had something of the cruelty and lechery of Assyrian conquerors. It was an evening in a quiet park when, after a heavy storm, I felt that my strength was broken and that I would soon be under his will. Swans were travelling on a narrow river, and from afar came the sounds of music, like blue birds with large wings. Then a young man spoke to me, and his first words told me that a poet was standing beside me. He empathised with my soul and read my despair and distress. So good were his words, which seemed to caress me with soft hands, that I could hide nothing from him. Then he offered to share his happiness and his meagre life with me, and I accepted it like a gift from an old friend. He led me away from the house of my oppressor, threw his threats to the winds and did not allow himself to be disturbed by his gnashing teeth and

Intimidating gestures of anger. Then we lived in a dream for six years and ... were ... happy."

Eleagabal Kuperus' long beard trembled on his chest. His finger traced a red marble vein of the table where a young blonde woman sat, her eyes still dazzled by an already sunken glamour. The dark shawl had fallen back from her head and shoulders to her lap, and all the light in the room, flowing from invisible sources, seemed to gather on her pale face and radiate back from it transfiguringly.

"Have you told me everything?" asked Eleagabal Kuperus.

"I have drawn a sum. It means: we were happy."

"Why aren't you telling me that your husband cheated on you?"

"It was his right as a poet, and by always returning to me, he only increased my triumph."

Then Eleagabal Kuperus leant forward and kissed the young woman on the forehead, and she looked calmly into his eyes as he took her by the hand. "Now I would like to fulfil your wish."

"He spoke of you with admiration and drew up many plans on how he wanted to approach you. Your life exerted a great power over him. He often said that he had the strength and courage to shake off everything that did not suit him. He created his island, which the world must pass by. He built high dams around his life, and only narrow paths lead to him. Now he himself comes along a narrow path. It was his wish to keep his head. Do you want to deny him your art?"

"I waited for him and he never came. Now I don't want to deny him my art. Follow me."

Eleagabal took the woman's hand and walked with her towards the marble wall. No door was visible, and the woman flinched when her forehead almost touched the stone. Then she saw that the green and red veins of the marble hung like tendrils over a clear transparency, that they stretched like fine nettles in front of an opening; and when the man's hand reached in and lifted the tendrils, she stepped through. Another

A room lay before her, a kind of laboratory with marble walls, like the domed hall with a row of columns, filled with the same mild, conciliatory light that came from invisible sources. All around the walls were marble pedestals on which human limbs lay under glass panes, arms, legs, hands with the appearance of life, their cut surfaces still fresh and bloody. Eleagabal Kuperus lifted one of the glasses and invited the woman to touch the arm, a round, beautiful woman's arm. Emma followed without horror or disgust and felt that the skin was soft and supple, that the flesh yielded under the pressure of her fingers. "This arm is thirty years old, it belonged to my daughter Konstanze," said Eleagabal. "I thought about it and researched it for a long time until I invented this way of saving life from death. The ancient Egyptians preserved the bodies of their dead for life in the underworld. But these withered, shrivelled bodies, whose cavities were filled with spices and wrapped in endless bandages, are more horrible than decay, because they no longer have what makes life so wonderful, the beautiful appearance of form." He pointed to a corner where a head covered in wrinkled black skin could be seen emerging from a weathered wooden coffin, a narrow gold band seeming to glow around its forehead. Emma was startled and quickly turned away to follow Eleagabal, who led the way with explanations. His words led her from pedestal to pedestal, from one memento of his loved ones to another, and everywhere she marvelled at the perfection of this art, the perfection of her victory over death. Relatives and friends had given parts of their bodies to this strange museum, and however many decades had passed since their deaths, their limbs had been preserved here in unchanged freshness. The two of them stopped in front of a glass lintel, under which the head of a Negro lay on a shiny mirror disc: "The head was not the best thing about my Hassan," said Eleagabal Kuperus, "but it was a strong skull that splintered thick boards and more than once absorbed blows aimed at me." There was something flatteringly tender about the movement with which Eleagabal gripped the dense hair cushion, the

The softness of the caress given to a faithful dog, Emma felt that it was beautiful to be loved by this man. There was something of the breath of eternity, of a continuance of sympathetic relations unbroken by death, in this room, whose pedestals all round repeated at measured intervals the assurance that oblivion was unknown here. The peace of the temple and the tranquillity of home gave a deep happiness here. Nothing could happen here, time was held fast, dammed up, and flowed only to the extent that it pleased the Lord of the place, slowly and without a ripple. Its waters, which outside carry the odour of cesspools, which often carry the filth of human inadequacy, the carcasses of misguided desires, were purified and clear here, cleansed of all impurities by a commandment of power. So detached from all relationships, floating as it were in itself and through itself, a world in space, lay the peace here, and as strange as the things were to the young woman, as strange as their appearance appeared to her, she surrendered to them contentedly and unquestioningly. As she absorbed this and slipped further and further into infinity, the mild light of the room changed, became stronger and more radiant, and it seemed as if reddish beams of light were emanating from the pillars until the marble walls were a glowing red. The light bled as if through ruby glass, and all the limbs on the pedestals twitched in these strong, vivid rays.

With a long look, Eleagabal Kuperus took leave of the memory of his dead and turned to a table in the centre of the room bearing strange instruments, jars and retorts. Among sparkling knives, lancets and clamps, as sharp and certain as the knowledge of truth, lay the poet's shrouded head, which Emma knew at that moment had remained on the marble table of the domed hall. But she had no time to wonder how he could have got in here, for the old man had taken up the round pack with a gentle tenderness and began to remove the wrappings. When the beloved head was revealed

When he came, the pain wanted to rise caustically from the depths, but it receded under the good and miraculous gaze of the old man. Decay had already sent the shadows of destruction ahead. The eyes were deeper, the mouth gaped open and was wet with a cloudy foam. The cut surface of the neck stuck to the canvas with coagulated blood. Under the levelling work of death, this head had lost all meaningfulness and now showed the poor, dull humanity that a rich and refined spirit had once endeavoured to overcome. The gentle fingers of Cuperus lifted the lids from the dead man's eyes. The wife, who had resisted the actions of the washerwomen, who felt that their workmanlike behaviour was a desecration, looked on with the emotion with which one accepts it when a friend caresses what one loves best.

"You are welcome to me, poor poet, more welcome than any of those whose bodies were subjected to my art. Now you are saved from," and after a moment's reflection Eleagabal Kuperus added with a phrase from one of the dead man's works, "smashing the blocks of your own greatness into gravel stones for the public highways."

The wife stood in amazement: "You know his words."

"I do not live in the world, but I live with it. Shall I tell you a parable? The point in which equal forces intersect, striving in opposite directions, remains eternally motionless. It persists in all the currents that flow through it alternately and takes part in everything. I live in this point, in the possibility of pouring myself out everywhere. But the best and finest is reserved for tranquillity. Everything comes to me and the world becomes deeper and deeper for me."

He raised his hand: "Go, my dear friend. You brought a stream of beauty and love. My most careful art will preserve your husband's memory. I need not first tell you to do what is necessary for others: that you never give away this precious thing, for only in the hands of love is immortality preserved."

Somewhere in the marble wall, he gathered up the tendrils of the veins and let the woman step into the domed hall, where the servant with the wolf's head was waiting to escort her out of the house.

* * *

She stood still outside the door for a moment, looking over at the cathedral, whose immense weight, reinforced by the night and its heavy, motionless mists, seemed to press down on the hill on which it stood. The darkness, fought against by the lonely, flickering gas lanterns, crept towards the foot of the cathedral, and stretched upwards along its walls as if they were really being swallowed up by the earth. Seized by the thought that in these deserted alleys she was easily exposed to the attack of a drunkard and even more frightened by the idea of the sinking cathedral, the woman did not dare to leave the door of the Eleagabal Kuperus. Above the front of the cathedral, enchanted into a stony grimace by the uneasy games of darkness and dim light, with its broad, talkative, now closed mouth, with the baroque estrade above it and the windows raised like astonished eyes, stretched two unequally high, stumpy, squat towers. They grew out of the massive nave as inorganically and strangely as fingers springing from a head. After the impression of harmonious calm and wise modesty that Emma had received in the domed hall and the museum of Eleagabal Kuperus, this cathedral seemed to her a lurking monster of stone opposite his house, with a haughty, distorted grimace, squinting at the hand above the door, ready to carry out some terrible murderous attack. Like the masks of warlike peoples, the hideously painted shields, the Medusa heads on the armour, the open maws of the helmets, the sight of this monster sinking into the darkness was spellbinding and enchanting.

Domes. The friendly gesture of hospitality with which he beckoned the laden to him during the day had been transformed in this night, filled with restless murmuring voices, into a train of vile maliciousness, repulsive malice, which seemed intent on spreading fear and horror. And now came - swelling ever more clearly out of the tangle of voices - a sad and relentless melody, a long-drawn-out, desolate song that rose and fell, lingering on a few notes, as if it wanted to bore itself in all the more insistently. There was something desolate and desolate in it, like a breath that comes over immeasurable plains from which a magic word has wiped out all life, something poisonous and exciting, like a wind that sweeps over battlefields. This song, this unbearably monotonous humming, seemed to emerge from between the tightly closed mouth of the dome, as if a voice trapped inside was seeking an exit. This monotonous humming waxed and waned, and though it was lost in the mist to a whisper, it did not leave the trembling woman for a moment. She knew that this had some relation to her life, that she had suffered from this song in her recent past, but she was unable to make sense of it, and could not even tell whether it was an experience of reality or of dream. She still stood at the threshold of Eleagabal Kuperus, holding on to the iron ring that protruded from the carvings on the door. Some superstition had taken hold of her and made her fear that she would fall to a hostile power if she entered the cathedral square.

From the darkness of the alleyway came slow footsteps, doubled by a muffled echo against the house walls. The night had grown feet and was walking over the cathedral hill. But it was only a watchman coming through the fog with heavy legs, tired from long service; his movements were drowsy and seemed haphazard in the thick fog, like the journey of a ship that has lost its direction. He passed the woman, looked her sharply in the face, with that scrutinising gaze that watchmen use at night time towards lonely women; then he walked hesitantly

and stopped under the lone street lamp, ready to do his duty with all the rigour he could muster. The top of his helmet began to glow under a beam as if it were carrying a blue flame. His appearance broke the spell of this place. Now Emma regained her courage. She let go of the ring, the coldness of which had frozen her fingers. Then she crossed the square, and between the two sullen stone saints, around whose upraised arms the mist gathered, she descended to the city. The cold, empty eyes of the saints and the doubled steps of the guard followed her.

When she came home, the night was far advanced, and in the bakery, whose basement windows were lit up, she saw the boys standing ready with wings, while the fat master counted them the rolls for the morning. There was already a stirring here and there in the spacious building; that first early noise had awoken with which sleepy maids are wont to announce their unwillingness to work and their indignation at all those who have yet to leave their beds. On the stairs to the third floor, she was startled by the cobbler's apprentice coming from some maid's chamber of forbidden pleasures. Then she unlocked the door of her flat, in which the obtrusive odour of funeral wreaths and incense still contended with the terrible smell of incipient decay. She opened one of the windows in the bedroom and let in the first faint sounds of the street with the mist-filled air of the winter morning. In the large armchair where the deceased used to rest, she revisited the experiences of that night. Now that she was no longer protected by the proximity of Eleagabal Kuperus, everything seemed wondrous and terrifying to her; she remembered small details which, taken out of context, left the impression of cruel dreams. The servant with the wolf's head, whose creeping tread she felt behind her like a danger; the negro's head, whose skin looked like purple velvet in the red light; and the mummy with the brittle yellow bandages and the wrinkled black forehead. And suddenly that desolate, bleak, monotonous melody was there again, under whose incessant on and off

she had endured all the torments of fear. She pursued it with the determination to free herself from it by discovering where it had come from. The words, the words ... she could not find the words, they must be words in a foreign language. Yes, they were Latin words, and now she suddenly knew that they were the words of a psalm that a bearded, cowardly priest had sung at her husband's coffin while sprinkling the corpse with consecrated water. These words echoed in all the cathedrals; this melody was the voice of deserted churches; an endless litany of the horrors of death that incessantly filled the souls of the living. No one was safe from suddenly hearing this melody loud and threatening before his ears when one of his loved ones died; where these words had once risen to their mournful course, there they imprinted themselves on the walls; they soaked themselves into furniture and clothes and were rulers of the room. They mingled with the scent of funeral wreaths and decay, triumphing over life and wearying it with the incessant reminder of death. The woman's arms hung wearily over the back of the chair, in exactly the same posture she had often noticed in her husband. When she realised this, she shrank back and changed her position. Then she fell asleep. Outside, however, the life of the street grew louder and louder and became more and more pressing and demanding.

When the servant knocked, Emma slept so heavily that she did not wake up immediately. Mrs Fodermayr began to fear that the widow might have done something to herself. In her imagination, frightened by the fantasy of the illustrated extra sheets, a terrible family drama with a lot of blood was depicted. Finally the door opened. Mrs Fodermayr, her pale face and frozen fingers leaning against the jamb, greeted Mrs Emma like a faithful dog. The widow's eyes were still veiled by sleep and her limbs had become stiff from the uncomfortable position in the armchair. Now some warmth came into her. The servant's undisguised cordiality did Emma good. She answered the anxious questions about her condition with emotion. Then Mrs Fodermayr returned with the consolation of the old women: that one cannot

could know whether God did not want to save the dead man from more severe suffering by taking him to himself. Today Emma found in this talk a strange correspondence with the words of Eleagabal Kuperus. Between her visit to him and now lay sleep. Her experience with him seemed to her at the distance at which fairy tales and legends take place. It seemed to her quite incredible and beyond all possibility that she had found the courage to make her request to him and that she had been in his house for a few hours.

After she had washed and tidied her hair, she stepped out onto the wooden gallery that ran from door to door around the entire courtyard of this quadrangle-built house.

In this neighbourhood of barrack-like tenements, this house was one of the largest and busiest. One hundred and twenty tenants shared its rooms. There were all kinds of flats here, from the chamber-like dwellings of poor labourers to the comparative bourgeois comfort of Emma's flat, a ladder of affluence and comfort.

This house, which, square and heavy, seemed to have grown out of the needs of the big city, enclosed a noisy republic of children in its courtyard. The courtyard was never empty of drying laundry in summer; it hung on long ropes pulled from one stunted tree to another. Now the trunks stood bare and bore the deep scars of the chafing ropes on their bark. The mist was caught high up between the damp, damaged roofs and sank down in broad layers to the pavement of the courtyard, where the children played in the corners with the wet remains of the snow. This house had been her home for so long and these people her neighbours. The world had had nothing else to offer her husband, the creator of new beauty. But at least it was a home. But what would the future hold? She had not yet thought about what would become of her. She now climbed heavily and anxiously through the ruins of her happiness to this question, as if to a vantage point from which only the full extent of her life could be seen.

of the devastation can be overlooked. She now also became aware of her duties to herself. While Mrs Fodermayr was clearing up, she endeavoured to distract her with many words; meanwhile Emma paced restlessly up and down in her husband's study, took a book from the wide wall shelves and put it back in its place without even reading the title. Rubble all around and not a hint of new life.

Mrs Emma looked at the postman who brought some letters without excitement. What else could he bring but empty words of condolence about her husband's death? But among the business cards was a large envelope. It was a letter from a publisher whose favour the living man had sought in vain and who was now inquiring about the deceased's estate. He promised careful editing and indicated his willingness to organise a complete edition of all his works. The widow was assured of a fee to meet her modest needs. There was no joy at this turn of events, for greater than the triumph of recognition was the bitterness that it came so late. Mrs Emma decided to ask her husband's friends for advice; but misgivings arose against every name she mentioned, until at last she stopped at one who had not known the living and who was a severe judge of the dead, and who nevertheless had all her confidence: Eleagabal Kuperus.

Somewhat reassured, she began to imagine the details of her future when Mrs Fodermayr announced a gentleman who wished to see her. "Madam," began the little beardless man, who immediately followed the servant as if to make a refusal impossible, "I took the liberty of calling on you yesterday, but I did not meet you at home and therefore take the liberty of repeating my visit. I am a reporter" - he mentioned the name of a large newspaper - "and I have come to ask you about a sensational piece of news which was mentioned in yesterday's evening papers in connection with the name of your late husband."

Mrs Emma stood wordless and pale and could not bring herself to invite the questioner to sit down. She felt his intrusion to be shameless, his words, which came from a nervously smiling, large mouth, like blows, and felt how his restlessness, this hasty search for sensational stories, jeopardised her hard-won equilibrium. She was determined to turn the troublesome man away; but she wished for the occurrence of an event that would save her from having to act. Meanwhile the journalist continued to pester her with enquiries; his questions probed at open wounds. For what purpose had the deceased decreed that his head should be preserved? In what way would she preserve the head? Had she already made any arrangements? Had her husband's wish been prompted by vanity or some other weakness? And whether she would not be inclined to have a plaster cast made of the head? Leaning against her husband's desk, Mrs Emma looked so fixedly into the grey eyes of the little beardless man with his authoritative smile that everything else disappeared. She wished to hold that gaze, which was continually darting from her to scrutinising and intrusive flights over the room and its furnishings. And in wanting to banish it, she herself was banished, as if she were looking into a funnel in which an ugly, confused life was whirling. The power which the stranger served presented itself to her in a multitude of images; machines pounded and a wild noise came from underground rooms. All the events of time were ground into "news" here; all greatness was cut to size, and the saws of a merciless race of dwarves shrieked from forests of thought. The types leapt up like goblins, words of beauty and dignity burst apart into black metallic letters; whole rows of sentences fell staggering down, only to reassemble themselves in a twisting of their meaning. Between whirring wheels, dirty hands with crippled fingers became visible, grasping the wriggling letters and freezing them with firm pressure, while endless rolls of paper disappeared between rollers. No standstill, no point of rest interrupted the tumbling bustle. The

Columns of letters followed one another like armies of labourers, drawn incessantly by the whirring machines that pressed them against the paper so that their metal bodies dug into the white masses. The crowd became more and more frenzied. The searching hands multiplied, tampered with delicate and majestic words, dragged the sense of the lonely down to the crowd, drove the life out of the living by capturing it in black and white. The machines spewed printed sheets from wide mouths, piling up into mountains, towering up into pillars, threatening to suffocate the world with the thousandfold repetition of the same vain and petty news, the same desecrated and truncated thoughts, the same murderous and malicious sentences. Cranes descended from great heights, their iron clamps gripping the bales and lifting them out of the whirling funnel, while the machines stamped on and the letters, barely detached from their structure, were once again forced to serve like black earth spirits that a powerful sorcerer had made slaves.

Her husband's hatred of the busy and inquisitive world of newspapers burned in Mrs Emma, who did not appreciate the value of an interview. And suddenly she left the journalist in the midst of his flurry of questions and went into the bedroom, picking up the portieres with that round, somewhat joking gesture she had so often seen in her husband. In the arm-chair she pondered how it was that she had grown into the habits of her dead husband, as into shells that have fallen off and are waiting for a new centre. Was it really the case, as he had often fantasised in his twilight hours, that a person's deeds and actions, all his words and even his little everyday habits remained behind after his death, a kind of astral body, and continued his life? Invisible as thoughts, woven from the emanations of the soul, disembodied and yet perceptible to the finest nerves like magnetic effects or moonbeams, they claimed this man's place in the world from which the coarser appearance of his matter had already departed.

Next door, she heard the journalist clearing his throat, who seemed determined to besiege her until she gave in to his questions. But then she was astonished to hear a conversation between him and another man's voice. The tone of his words was soft and authoritative. The other voice spoke in a muffled, yet firm and commanding tone. A lorry with clanking and rumbling ironwork had just passed outside the trembling windows, so that the meaning of the words was smothered in the noise. But it seemed to Emma that the other's urgent orders forced her besieger to give way, and when the lorry had passed, the study was silent. Mrs Emma rose and stepped onto the threshold. A strange man was sitting in front of her husband's desk, with one leg crossed over the other, his folded hands wrapped around his leg, looking at the tips of his shoes as if there was nothing more interesting in the room than the round, impeccably built tops of his shiny boots. The elegance of the dandy, which extended from the English-cut face to the heavy knot of the tie and the creases, lay as a mask over another layer. She knew: here was a more dangerous opponent than the one who had just left her. Immovable like an idol, behind whose stony grimace lurked wild lust, he seemed completely self-contained, unassailable, filled with the utmost tension. From the rich treasure trove of ideas she had inherited from a poet, one of them instantly connected with this man: this must be what the emissaries that Asian despots, rulers over millions of slaves, sent to each other to negotiate looked like.

The curtain moved a little, the stranger looked, gave up his comfortable posture without embarrassment and stood up: "I have not been registered, madam, my name is Rudolf Hainx."

Mrs Emma forced herself to nod her head, and with a smile that lifted the corners of his mouth just a little, he continued: "I'm not a journalist, I must say that up front, because I've found a gentleman from the press here, if I come on a matter anyway,

which seems to have some connection with his, I must ask you to hear me out."

"I'm ready to hear you."

"In the most noble neighbourhood of our city, where the countryside already encroaches on the city, there is a villa in a large garden that is furnished with every conceivable luxury. The stairs are made of Parian marble and the walls are covered in gold inlay. The furniture was supplied by Vereinigte Werkstätten to designs by Riemerschmidt, and the glass on the credenzas was made by Tiffany in New York. In a small room with windows shimmering in all the colours of the rainbow, you will find a box containing jewellery by Lalique in its compartments. An anteroom, which cuts a square out of the sky like an atrium, is cooled in summer by a fountain designed by Hermann Obrist, and since I know that you love paintings, I won't forget to mention that paintings by Böcklin, Thoma, Manet and Leibl are distributed in the various rooms, while Klinger's sculptures stand on the landings of the stairs and in the vestibules. One room is decorated with originals by Hokusai, whom you love so much, and for those twilight hours when you want to indulge in your dreams, there is a cabinet with paintings and etchings by Rembrandt. All the arts have poured their best energies into this princely home. You will find a music room and a rich library with rare prints and incunabula, an ancient Roman bath and a stable with English and Arabian racehorses. You will not exhaust all the treasures this house contains in one year. It has not been forgotten that abundance awakens collectors' inclinations, and that is why one hall houses a collection of weapons, another a well-organised collection of stamps. As you walk through a succession of rooms, you pass through the styles and cultures of all ages, from ancient Assyria to the Biedermeier period, and I might add that the furniture and utensils in these rooms are not skilful imitations but originals. The garden around this house is divided into

Departments that will delight you with all the horticultural arts and the past. You will find the hanging gardens of Semiramis and the intricate and ornate bosquets of Trianon recreated. A host of servants will be at your service ..."

"I heard you out; why are you telling me this?"

"On an island in the Adriatic Sea, which knows no winter and carries all the wonders of paradise into the present, there is another house, built in the serene freedom of Greece, from the portico you can see the sea, which is more beautiful here than anywhere else, more mobile, more capricious and which carries many sleepy colours that play their games in the morning and in the evening. A balcony, high above the rustling treetops, opens up the view in all directions and the heaviest and most pressing longing becomes light and winged up there. Nothing stands in the way of surrendering to a colourful Hellenism there in delicious solitude or with good friends, of rediscovering the language of undaunted joy in the face of the sea and the sky and of building more luminous temples above all the ruins of the past. A barge sways in the small harbour and red purple sails shimmer through the tops of the pine trees. This barque resembles the magnificent ship of Agrippina and, like it, it crowds the rarest treasures together in the smallest of spaces."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I've come to offer you the house outside the city and that island."

Mrs Emma wriggled under the thoughts that seemed to come crashing down on her, torn from their strongholds by blind and senseless forces. What kind of images were these? Where did this tangle of colours and splendour come from in her future? The very description of this splendour was dangerous. And that this offer was no joke, she could see from the serious and unmoving mask of the man, who now pulled a long paper from his breast pocket and spread it out on the desk.

"It goes without saying that I cannot make this offer without granting you the carefree abundance that makes it possible,

to lead the life that corresponds to this gift without worrying. Tell me the amount you consider necessary and don't be modest. My order only sets a lower limit, not an upper one. Use your imagination to invent a fairy tale of gold. I am authorised to write any figure you name on this cheque."

"They offer me tremendous treasures. I must confess that all this confuses me. What do you want from me? You speak of a mission. On whose behalf have you come? Look around you and you will see my past. What can I say to the fact that you want to push me into such a future? Is your offer a gift? Whose gift? And what ... my God! ..."

"You can call my offer a gift. For what you are expected to do in return is so small in proportion that it cannot be compared with it. Many others would not consider giving it for less. But you had to be offered millions. Before I tell you what is required, I would like you to consider one more thing: is the memory of our past attached to objects, to real things, or not rather to the tender and indelible life of vivid memories? Would Caesar have lost his martial glory, would his glorious past have been erased, if the manuscript of his memoirs of the Gallic war had been destroyed in a fire, if a thief had stolen the armour worn by the general in the battle against Vercingetorix? Is Timurlenk's career changed because of this, can he no longer renew the beautiful feelings of victory when the skulls of his defeated enemies fall worn and rotten from the spearheads and turn to dust again?"

"Keep quiet, keep quiet, I suspect..."

"You promised to hear me out. It is known from the newspapers that your husband has made a peculiar arrangement concerning his head. It is also known that Eleagabal Kuperus is able to fulfil the dead man's wish. My mission is to help you for

to offer this head everything that I endeavoured to describe to you in a few words earlier."

"Ah!"

Emma's trembling fingers played around the heavy bronze sphinx lying on the desk, but Rudolf Hainx's eyes blazed like suddenly flaring stars and forced her gaze down. She no longer dared to look him in the face and allowed him to sit down, take up his pen and get ready to write. This pen, with which a poet had recently written a melancholy sonnet about this transience, stood steeply in the stranger's hand. Emma had never seen such a hand before. It was a cold, lean hand whose tendons suddenly spread out from the base of the hand as if they could not wait to reach the fingers and communicate their impulses to them. The fingers were curved and pointed, tufts of hair grew on the first phalanges between the wrinkles of a wrinkled skin like bushes in rock cracks, and tufts of hair sat below the yellowish knuckles. On the hand, which had been formed for the sole purpose of holding it, all that was soft and mediating, the beautiful curves of the flesh, the gentle swellings of the fat, seemed to have been removed so as not to hinder the game of grasping and clutching. A ruler's hand lay on the elongated paper, stretching its lines to accommodate an endless series of numbers. Evil eyes burned like baleful stars over the decision of this moment.

"You said that you came on someone's behalf. Won't you tell me who gave you this assignment?"

"I realise that it is important for you to know this. I want you to see that my employer has the power to fulfil his promises, but also that it is in his power to make disobedience to his wishes severely penalised. I have been ordered to mention his name only in extreme emergencies. I do you the honour to take your reluctance so seriously that this extreme emergency has arisen. - Mr Bezug has sent me to you."

Then the woman jumped at the messenger, snatched the feather from his hand and threw it to the ground so that it stuck trembling in the middle of a black blob. "Out," she cried, "out," and dared to look the man in the eye; now he had no more power over her. Rudolf Hainx took his dove-grey gloves off his chair and reached for his hat: "You'll regret it!"

Mrs Emma looked around as if searching for weapons to use against him. Then she ran to the door to the courtyard gallery and leant against the iron railing, which swayed beneath her body. She seemed ready to call the whole house to her aid and summon all her neighbours against the messenger. Rudolf Hainx strode past her without looking at her, an envoy who had broken off the negotiation and gone off to announce war. He descended between the scuffed, dirty walls of the staircase, which framed his impeccable, smooth elegance for a moment, and emerged only once more to disappear into the wide mouth of the front door, striding across the courtyard below.

Forest people

Table of contents

Andreas Semilasso had given up living among people half a century ago. His habits were so contrary to the laws of the general public that his life was a constant struggle. And as much as he enjoyed fighting, he did not like being constantly defeated by the stronger majority. The forces were too unevenly distributed, and it was impossible for the strongest personality to prevail against the written laws and the rules of custom. After having laughed long enough at the follies of Andreas Semilasso and shaken their heads at his extravagances, they began to realise the danger of his example, and the smile disappeared under folds of anger. It had been recognised that society could not be contradicted with impunity without serious consequences, and that a man who, in the midst of others, lived only according to his own wild and reckless impulses, was a hotbed of revolution, of revolt against custom. It was as if a beautiful untamed beast were on the loose; in its teeth and claws, in its unbridled strength, lay an irrepressible threat to peaceful citizens. At first the law magnanimously overlooked Andreas Semilasso's minor misdemeanours, but when he once threw a tax collector down the stairs, breaking his leg, it seized the impudent man and put him behind secure walls for a while.

After Andreas Semilasso had been released, he once again considered the pros and cons and found the disadvantage all too much on his side. He was sure that, now that he had been overpowered, he would be dealt with more severely and decided to give way to the superior force. It was impossible to live among these crippled people, who had lost all their instincts. And since he had never set out to win disciples or to free himself from the

He did what he should have done long ago: he gave up his abode among the people. With his few belongings, which he loaded onto a donkey, he set off for the city, wearing a wide grey woollen smock with a knitted belt and sandals on his feet. To protect his face from the sun, a broad straw brim sat on his head, the remains of a panama hat, from which he had removed the top so that the black hair stood out shaggy. Like a massive halo, the yellow straw rounded his grim face, and like a wandering apostle, belligerent and hostile to all luxury, he strode off through the streets of the town, pursued by a horde of jeering street urchins. Andreas Semilasso let them shout and rave behind him, but when a journeyman butcher stood in front of the town and shouted derisive words after him, he turned round and threw a stone at his head. So he took leave of the culture and moved into a cave in the forest, which he had discovered on one of his day-long forays. Now he had won solitude, now he was no longer confined to lowly rooms, now he was free to live above and below ground as he pleased. From his cave, in the front part of which he had two cosy chambers with windows, doors and a stove, branching corridors led far below the rocks to a dome whose pointed arches pierced the darkness high above, even when bright fires were burning inside. Andreas Semilasso often sat here in complete darkness on a mound of rubble formed by fallen rock. He listened to the voices of the depths. Somewhere below, in the crevices of the limestone rock, a water was heard, like the song of blood circulating in the veins. Over the years, he explored his cave and called its passages by names that sounded like they were taken from ancient chronicles. The corridor of right was one that, winding and long, led round and round in circles, finally losing itself in hesitant spirals in the darkness. The corridor of injustice was another, which was short and led straight to a hole in the rock face from where there was a view of the valley. In a small chapel, which he called the chamber of glittering pillars because of its white stalactite formations, lay a massive heavy black block and

that was called: the deed. A black pond in the background of a distant grotto, whose cold water carried the torchlights like pointed flames on its ebony-black surface, was called the Nimmersatt. Its waters welled up from somewhere deep below, filling an abysmal shaft, and when the snowy waters flowed down in the spring, it often came out suddenly and flooded part of the cave, so that Andreas Semilasso's life was in danger more than once. That's why he loved this treacherous pond. It was no mere playfulness that the hermit wanted to express with these names. When a story came to his ears in which someone was oppressed by the brutal laws of the majority, in which some finer feeling was suffocated under their compulsion, then he walked the corridor of justice to where the unexplored darkness began, and extinguished his torch to wait until he heard the darkness laugh. The tidings of a swift, bold deed, contrary to the wishes of the crowd, led him into the corridor of wrong and to the window where he waved greetings to the valley. When he wished to strengthen his will, he went into the chamber of glittering pillars and laid his hand on the damp black block until he felt his strength mightier and mightier and ready. Everything that seemed superfluous and foolish to him, the dispensable objects and the remains of his meal, he threw into the Glutton, and when he wanted to get rid of tormenting thoughts, he banished them with tension of the mind into stones, which he sank into the black pond. One of his favourite wonders of this subterranean realm was the Fliegempor chimney, which he visited when he wanted to clear his mind. Here a narrow gap led to the upper world. Fir trees stood above its mouth and drops of water slowly trickled down. Every rustle of the wind in the branches here was a wild roar of strangely beautiful and moving rhythm, like the beating of the wings of the sublime angels of creation, and the falling drops of water counted the passing of time between this wondrous song of the eternities with a silvery sound.

Andreas Semilasso often did not emerge from his corridors and caves for weeks. But then the beauty of an invading

The light of a ray of light, the green of the trees outside his door or a purple glow of evening that he caught sight of from some crevice, was so powerful that he left the underworld and surrendered completely to the wonders of light. Now life began in the forest and on the lonely hot mountain meadows, where forgotten tree trunks lay among the tall weeds, with sparkling resin dripping from their cut surfaces. Andreas Semilasso lay for hours beside the trunks he called his brothers, so still that the emerald lizards crawled over his hands and shoulders and came close to his face, lambent. What the woodpeckers knocked in rotten bark, what the hawks and falcons cried, what the wood pigeons gurgled, was familiar to him, and the busy ants, the predatory ground beetles had no secrets from him in war and peace. He often sat naked high up in the trees and felt close to the sun and the light; he often stood under the narrow fall of a forest stream and let the drops spray over his body. Lying on his belly, he watched the plump swimming beetles in the pools at the edge of the pond and caught the slender gobies with hours of patience in the hollow of his hand before flinging them into the water with a wide swing. On moonlit summer nights, he sought his way over jagged boulders to the ridge of the Hexenstein, where crooked and rippling slabs of rock offered stony adventures. Grim faces peered out of the stone's wrinkled crannies, the heads of aldermen and grinning gallows birds, serious mountain spirits and amiable moonlight women. Tree roots lay in the crevices like sleeping giant snakes, and alraunches giggled under the moss. From here he looked out over the sleeping forest, where at this time of night only the old fairy tales kept watch behind bushes and under fir trees. Andreas Semilasso caught them on his paths, placed the shimmering things on the ridge in front of him and let himself be told until the day began. At dawn, they ran away from him and hid in their secret corners again. While the depths always remained the same, the forest offered him the changing seasons. The hermit was no less fond of winter than summer. Then the forest clothed itself in white steel, and when the wind

The ornaments of his armour rang and clanked as he drove over them. The mountains wore helmets, the streams hid themselves behind strong armour plates, and all the fairy tales were now in white. As the days were now so short, the hours of light were all the more delicious. Climbing up snow-covered slopes and, once at the top, hurtling back down the arduous path on a smooth board in the blink of an eye was often a whole day's work and pleasure for him. He pursued this business with a seriousness and fervour as if he were accomplishing something of great importance ... Completely devoted to the present and intent only on deriving the greatest possible pleasure from every hour, Semilasso always focused exclusively on what he had undertaken and chased away all doubts, all ambiguities and all inattentiveness in the game. The forest stood around and watched seriously, like someone who is used to finding the deepest meaning in a joke. The sun lit sleeping colours in crystals.

Semilasso hated the human paths. He avoided the roads and wooden paths; and even the narrow, barely visible hunter's paths he rarely used, because the traces of people could be recognised on trampled grasses and bent branches. One day, when the markings of a tourist organisation were laid out in the middle of his most beautiful wilderness and the trees, decorated in bright red and yellow, revealed the path to all hikers, the hermit became furious. He grabbed his large scraping knife and went after the signs. "You there," he addressed a tall spruce, which towered above its comrades as if it were proud of its bright colours as if they were an award, "Yes, you! Do you hear me! Are you really so foolish as to think that you're something because a greaser has soiled your beautiful tribe? Do you think that you are now more than the others who don't wear a ribbon? I will gladly accept it if you rise up more freely, if you overtop the treetops of others, because you have grown beautifully and have the right to do so. I pay homage to your power. But I laugh at your pride in the blob." As the spruce was silent and stretched itself upwards, merely answering the wind with its broad crown, as if it saw

Andreas Semilasso took the knife very angrily and scraped off the bright colours together with the bark so that the shreds flew. And so Semilasso went from one of the desecrated trees to the other and restored it to its former grace and naturalness.

Twenty years had passed since the hermit had moved into the forest, twenty years with summer and winter, with the double life between depth and light, and Andreas Semilasso was now fifty years old. His body was like the wood of the oaks, his hands like the clinging roots of the spruce trees that split the rock, his face, which he kept free of rampant hair growth, like the rock faces of the Hexenstein, his eyes like the water of the forest pond, blue when it was clear and grey-brown when it was stormy. The farmers in the neighbourhood had become accustomed to the inhabitant of the rocky cave, and as they did not know what a heathen he was, they took him for a saint. Of course, he was a strange saint. In their relationship with him, fear was stronger than reverence, for he took what he needed to live without paying for it and did not settle his account in the manner of other hermits through prayer, good advice or healing potions. Even the women had become accustomed to enduring his fierce caresses. At first there had been fights. The belligerent crew of a village had gone out to chastise Semilasso for his abuses. But when they came to the cave, the hermit confronted them with a young spruce tree in his hand, which he held around his head like a light staff, looking terrible, as if he had been seized by the wrath of God. Like a prophet of the Old Testament, he stepped among them and shouted: "Who dares lay a hand on me? Do you know how the one God shows himself in his creatures? Do you still have eyes to see what pleases God? I tell you, what I live is more true before the Eternal than what your pastor preaches!" His words were heavy and wild and crashed down on them like rocks. They did not understand him, and so it seemed to them as if God was speaking from him. The neighbours retreated timidly and took off their hats, those at a distance followed them, and at last the crowd was lost in the forest until their murmuring was dissolved by the rustling of the treetops.

became. Once again, someone rebelled against the inconvenient man. It was too much for the miserly Morbeser when Semilasso happened to take two chickens from his farmyard for his table in one week, and he reported the theft to the gendarme. The next morning he fell from the rotten ladder that led to the hayloft and died on the spot. This sign shut the mouths of all the witnesses, and the constable was quite pleased that everything was in the hermit's favour and that he did not need to take action against him. From that time onwards there was complete silence about everything that was done for Semilasso; neither the parish priest nor the secular authorities learnt anything about the fact that some villages were paying tribute to a tyrant. Semilasso eased the burden, for he needed little for himself, and people became accustomed to handing over their tribute to him without a word. Thus all the threads between him and the world were broken, and he too was forgotten.

A few days after his fiftieth birthday, which Andreas Semilasso noted on the notches of his annal tree, a terrible storm broke out. A family of travelling acrobats, surprised by the storm on the road far from human habitation, left the canvas-covered wagon, which was submerged in an instant, and sought refuge in the forest. The head of the family, a man whose unquestioning obedience to his family had given him an unquestioning dogmatism as the backbone of his personality, led them around the forest, dragging the stumbling horse by the halter, pretending to know of a ranger's house here. When night fell and the storm did not abate in the least, all but the guide admitted that they had gone astray. They couldn't even find the road again. At last chance brought them to the cave of Andreas Semilasso, through the window of which came the cosy glow of a fire. The hermit stepped onto his threshold and seemed ready to chase the lost men away with grim words. Then, in the flickering light of the whipped torch, he saw the tramp's youngest daughter, her soaked thin clothes clinging to her marvellous body. He stepped back and opened the entrance. That night

Nella shared Semilasso's bed. And when the acrobats set off the next morning to move on, Nella declared that she wanted to stay with the hermit in his cave. The father cursed and threatened, the mother begged and cried, for he did not want to lose the skilful tightrope walker and she did not want to lose the child. But then Andrew got up from the hearth, where he had prepared a meal for the guests, and stood in front of his parents. He took a rope from the rock face and quickly wrapped it around his own and Nella's wrist. "I give her my house and my hearth," he said, "and make her my mate. She is more firmly bound to me than by the blessings and ceremonies of men, for her blood is related to mine." The parents saw the determination of the two and were shocked by the size and power of Semilasso. They gave up all hope and allowed the hermit to take them back to the country road without protest. Andreas Semilasso watched as the horse was harnessed to the cart and stood until the weeping siblings and parents mounted. Then he shook hands with everyone and returned to the cave, where Nella had covered the stone floor with fresh spruce saplings and where her red headscarf was stretched out over the bed to decorate the grey wall.

Now Andreas Semilasso lived with a companion and introduced her to all the wonders of the deep and gave her all the delights of the light. Five years were like single days. Then Nella bore him a son. Andreas Semilasso took him in his arms and went with his wife to the Hexenstein, where the view was unobstructed on all sides and from where chimneys and pointed towers could be seen rising from a cushion of smoke on the horizon. He lifted the boy up to the light and called him Adalbert. When Adalbert was five years old, he had a sister who inherited her mother's name. The children's games were surrounded by nature; stones and plants became familiar to them and Adalbert learnt from his father to understand the calls of hawks and falcons and the hoarse sounds of crows. The increase in the number of inhabitants meant that the cave had to be extended and a third chamber was built to house supplies and tools. A small economy grew up among the busy

hands of the mother, a tidy square bore all kinds of kitchen plants and a brood of chickens clucked in the fenced yard. Now Andreas Semilasso could do without the tribute of the villages. He was completely forgotten; only among the woodcutters and hunters did his existence live like a legend. The forest was the children's favourite friend, and their mother's stories alternated with the tales hidden in its secret corners, telling of the country road and the life of a great beast called the city. They still feared the depths and were astonished to see that their father often did not return for days from the dark abysses into which they had seen him disappear. Huddled close together, shoulder to shoulder, hands clasped tightly, the children stood at the edge of the darkness, staring down to see if they could see their father's torch somewhere deep below, listening to hear the echo of his footsteps. The mystery of the darkness attracted them and stood like a big question in the small circle of their experiences and imaginations. Through some strange concatenation of thoughts, Adalbert could not get away from the idea that it must look like an anthill inside the earth. Confusing corridors, criss-crossing, sudden expansions in which white, larva-like creatures are piled up by the hundreds, soft rollers with eternally hungry, demanding, devouring mouths. The bustle of working goblins in between, swift brown fellows with six legs and two sharp pincers instead of a head. Nella followed these fantasies with wide-open eyes, and when she shook with horror, she asked her brother to stop and tell her something friendlier. And Adalbert began to talk about the brown forest women and the enchanted wren, who had once ruled over a whole town and had now become very small because he had once thought himself too big in his arrogance.

One evening, the father came in and heard the story of the wren. He took the boy by the shoulder and, his eyes turning from blue to grey-brown, asked who had taught him this story. Adalbert looked up cheerfully: "Nobody," he said, "that story

I invented it myself." That day, the boy learnt about the breath of darkness for the first time. Without saying a word, his father led him into one of the passages that Adalbert had long wished to enter. At first there was only a blissful curiosity in him, but then, as he went deeper and deeper into the mountain, as the walls pressed down and the ceiling squeezed, fear grew rapidly in his chest like an eerie giant mushroom and settled damply and harshly on his lungs. At last his father stopped and said: "Your fairy tale about the wren is nonsense. He who has power should have courage; he who has courage should also have over-courage, for this is the flower of all power. Only the weak are punishable, and remorse and atonement are man's worst enemies. I am punishing you for the weakness of your thoughts by first teaching you to recognise the night, which I thought I was bringing to you as a friend, as an enemy. Stay here until I come back!" Then his father left and his torch disappeared behind the rocks. Adalbert now got to know the darkness as an enemy. It crept up on him with a sticky body and groped over his face with large, wet hands. He often thought he saw a face in front of him, a monstrous, sad and yet cruel face. Then sparks flew across his field of vision, his eyes began to ache and it seemed to him as if they wanted to pop out of his head with the effort of catching a glimmer of light. He pressed them back into his head with both fists and rubbed his eyeballs, furious with pain and shaken by a fear of the incomprehensible. Whispering voices approached, and ideas of the life of the deep awoke in him, so that he drew back his hand with a cry, as if he had touched one of the soft, whitish, larva-like figures. At last his thoughts were spinning so wildly that it was impossible for him to hold on to any of them, and only a whirring, wild, confused roar roared in his head.

From that day on, Adalbert was careful not to tell his stories when he knew his father was nearby. It was incomprehensible to him what his father demanded of him, and the course of his fables always seemed to him to be the only right thing to do and self-evident.

But Andreas Semilasso found plenty of other reasons to be dissatisfied with his son. In every conversation, in all his dealings, he discovered in him a manner quite different from his own, a soft devotion, a rapturous adoration of gentleness and kindness, and it became ever clearer to the old man that his son was incapable of understanding him and continuing his life. By the punishment of darkness he only deprived the boy of the candour and courage of his confessions, without being able to give him the steely nerves and hard heart he wanted to train in his son.

The mother suffered from these scenes and from Semilasso's reproaches, who did not conceal his suspicion that she had spoilt his children's blood. If little Nella showed similar tendencies, he cared less, but he would have liked to see his son go his own way.

Adalbert Semilasso, however, was a poet and saw the small world in his circle not with the eyes of the ruler, but with the eyes of the beloved. He did not conquer it, but surrendered to it.

When he was twenty years old, his mother died and Andreas buried her at the foot of the Hexenstein between brambles and blackthorn. He kept vigil for a long winter's night by the stone he rolled over her grave. Then he came into the cave dwelling, and it was as if he had never had a mate by his side. But the old man's irrepressible blood, which seemed to have absorbed the life force from the forest and rocks, still roared wildly and stormily. Like the rocks, he seemed hard, insensitive and protected against time, accessible only to the secret voices of the deep. Now that his mother was dead, his desires stretched towards his daughter. When Nella finally understood the language of his eyes and his fervently trembling hands, she evaded him, but his attacks became more and more impetuous and unquestioning. Then came a night when his blood compelled him to use violence, and Nella only saved herself by a quick escape into the forest. She did not return for two days. On the evening of the third day, when Semilasso had just left to look for her, Nella returned.

carefully down the slope above the cave. The brother was sitting on a tree stump in front of the cave and was in the process of translating the woodpecker's knocking into words. She called to him, he rose, walked towards her and held out both hands.

"I must leave you, little brother," said Nella and kissed him.

"You want to leave me alone with my father?"

"It has to be, I can't stay here any longer."

"What do you want to do?"

"I found the country road and came to the village."

"You want to go out into the village?"

"I want to go further. I want to go to the city and maybe even further. In the village square, I found the green wagons with the little windows that my mother told us about. A tall man was standing there and when I lifted the corner of a canvas house, he jokingly patted me on the back. He took me inside and showed me lots of wooden benches and a scaffolding where his people played every evening. He also showed me the clothes, stretchy skins that you pull over your legs and that are all glittery and silver. Then thin skirts made of a fabric that is completely transparent."

"These are the costumes, aren't they? Mum called them costumes."

"Yes, and he took my arms, lifted them up, struck here with the edge of his hand, he clasped my ankles and lifted my skirts up to my knees. And then he asked me if I wanted to go with them and dance in front of the people in the evening and wear these glittering skins."

"And you, and you?"

"I thought about our cave and the father being so horrible, and that's when I said I wanted to go with them."

"I want to go with you, Nella."

"Come on." But then she thought to herself: "Father ... should he stay all alone? In his loneliness ... Will he be able to bear it ...?"

Then Adalbert kissed his sister and didn't hold her back with another word.

"You know, little brother," said Nella, putting her arm around his neck, "I'm going out, and when I've seen everything there is to see outside, I'll come back and get you."

"Promise me!"

"Here, I give you my hand!" Nella kissed him once more, shook his hand and walked away with a farewell. Slowly she climbed back up the slope, waved once more, and then the green bushes reached for her, crashed over her and hid her. There was only a gentle swaying of the branches up there ...

The next morning, his father came home with the traces of the night on his clothes and face. Adalbert, who had dreamed on his litter of a great gate, surrounded by large yellow and red flowers with human faces, looking down on Nella, who walked through it in a glittering skin, Adalbert, who saw the wishes sitting around his bed like great birds, sat up and recognised from his father's expression that he had been holding a secret dialogue with the rocks and the trees. With a glance at the empty leaf litter where Nella usually slept, the old man set about preparing the morning meal. He didn't say a word about his daughter, neither that day nor the next. Silence covered her escape. At first it seemed as if the father, more tired than usual, had shed his vigour and heaviness, but soon he picked himself up again. During the days of his exhaustion, he had chosen a new annal tree for his daily notch, for the old one was covered from more than man's height down to the root with the sharp, deep marks of a life spent in the forest. Adalbert was astonished to see that his father had begun to carve the new tree far below, as if he no longer hoped for the abundance of days that had scarred the old tree and killed it with the hermit's imperious life. For the first time Adalbert realised that his father was an old man. But he had hardly got used to this thought when one day Andreas Semilasso did not add the notch to the bottom of the row of others, but cut it high up in the tree, at the height where the first sign of the old annal tree

sat. Now it was clear to him that the old man still intended to go on living, that his fatigue had not overcome the instincts and desires of his still vigorous body. Again Andreas went into the depths of his cave and to his friends in the forest, and as Adalbert preferred to sit and dream and string together sonorous words rather than take care of the house, the economy fell into disrepair. The hens ran away into the forest, the garden bore strange weeds and lush, gaudy flowers, and the forest, which had been driven out by him, reached out for him again.

Father and son spoke little to each other. It seemed that the old man wanted to avoid finding his son on paths that led to destinations other than his own. Andreas Semilasso reasserted his old sovereign rights, tyrannised over the surrounding villages as he had done in the past and found an ally in the legend of his terrible power, which had grown monstrous over time and made the peasants submissive to him. Adalbert, however, walked around with his head bowed and wept with happiness over the play of light in the dewdrops or over the colourful pebbles and the delicate trembling ripples of water in the stream. On soft summer evenings, however, he wept from an unbearably sweet pain for which he sought in vain to find relief through the word. Those were marvellous hours with delicate veils woven of longing and desire; they all came and leaned down to him and kissed him on the forehead, which was so hot with thoughts, and on the heart, in which the blood sang. And once, when he least expected it, when he was stretched out on the grass, just looking at the white, changing edges of the clouds - islands full of flowery snow in a very, very blue sea - an hour came and took him gently by the hand and said: "You want your little sister. Now the word was found, and Adalbert knew all at once that he lacked nothing but a brotherly heart to pour himself into. Since then he no longer lay motionless and dreaming, waiting for her to return to him, but he went out impatiently, and alternately thought he was going after her, and then again that he was going towards her. For he was so full of wondrous stories and melodious words that he could no longer hold them in. Everything

The desire inside him urged him towards the sister. But he got no further than the next villages, and in vain he looked for the green carriage, the canvas-covered stage, and the tall man with the glittering skins hanging over his arm in all the squares. The youths of the village, who had first given way before him because they feared the power of the father in the boy, ran after him when they realised that he was shy and timid. They mocked him and threw stones at him. But Adalbert was not deterred and kept looking for the green wagons in the village squares.

Then the malice of the boys played a terrible trick on him. They lay in wait for him behind hedges, and as he walked through their pile, always with his eyes in the clouds, a rope stretched across the path caused him to fall. He tried to pick himself up, but a long brat pushed him back down. Now it became dark before Adalbert's eyes, he felt his size and strength and the insult that the children were inflicting on him, the man-to-be. With a sudden display of his strength, he seized two of the tormentors, knocked their heads together so that the hard peasants' skulls cracked and threw them down like sacks. The boys fled, but from the fields and from the houses the peasant boys rushed, fell upon him and beat him so badly that he had to flee in a hurry, pursued by stone-throwers. He ran up the slope towards his hiding places and felt the swaying branches of the birch trees lashing his wounds. At last he was out of range of his enemies, who, rejoicing in a great victory, were retreating down the road to the village. His body ached, his head was heavy and his eyes clouded with trickling blood. It was harder to find the sister than he had thought. Completely absorbed in his thoughts, he tried to make sense of this painful experience, tried to fit his experiences into the beautiful picture of the world that he had made of her, and in doing so he ignored a soft rustling in the bushes. Now he looked up. A young girl was standing next to him and, as he was about to jump up, she put her hand on his shoulder. Her eyes were good and her hand felt good, although it was torn from hard labour. She had witnessed his struggle and his defeat.

and now came because she wanted to save him from loneliness. The evening, the soft, trembling colours of the horizon, the blue green of the meadows or the subdued bellowing of a cow, some forgotten melody that did not rise from the sea of the unconscious, something close to the goodness and gentleness of nature, had inspired her.

She stayed with him until nightfall and only left him when she had washed his wounds and kissed his aching forehead. The next evening she met Adalbert in the same place and again her marvellous care surrounded him. The wounds had long since healed, and Adalbert and Barbara still met in the sacred place of their love. With gentle hands, he took the sparkling signs of the evening and pinned them into the girl's hair as a diadem. From the sinking night he removed the veils and placed them around her shoulders, so that she could raise the transfiguration of the mystery even higher. All the beautiful and sparkling words he had found during the day, the newly discovered magic of rhyme, he brought to her, and the peasant girl listened in wonder, floating through his love over the rough blocks of her life and quite light, ennobled, estranged from the manner of her parents, her friends. No hint of mistrust, of the hatred of the lower world for the higher, disturbed the hours in which she listened to him with her rough hand on his shoulder; she understood him with her heart.

Something grew inside him, like a dark flower of glass; and when the girl kissed him, the purple flower tingled.

One evening, when the ringing had become as loud as the sound of large, echoing bells, he said: "Why do you always go back to the village when you've been with me?"

"Because my parents and siblings live in the village."

"Am I not more to you than your father or your mother? Why don't you stay with me?"

Then Barbara began to talk about how the people in the village didn't make things so easy for themselves. That time would have to pass, that the priest would have to take care of it and give his blessing. But Adalbert

Semilasso understood none of this. It was only natural that Barbara should stay with him because they loved each other. His father's cave was room enough. "And you will make the garden beautiful again and get the chickens out of the forest. Everything will be like it was when my mother and sister were still with us." A painful and beautiful image of the simplicity of paradise, the dream slumbering in the depths from the primeval times of mankind, moved Barbara to cast all doubts aside. She forgot about the heavy tombstones that lay over this dream; with the power of the Saviour, he burst the tomb and celebrated a radiant resurrection.

Weeping, she kissed Adalbert and promised him that she would come back tomorrow evening and never leave him again. For today she wanted to see her parents and kiss her little sisters, tomorrow she wanted to pack her few clothes, and then she wanted to come without saying a word, without saying goodbye. Adalbert held her tightly by the hand and pondered how he should speak at that moment. And as he squeezed her warm, rough hand, he remembered a little saying that his mother had saved from her life on the country road and had recited to him often enough, a little verse in which the memory of a great poet lived on among fire-eaters and tightrope walkers:

"I am yours and you are mine,
you can be sure of that,
you've taken me into your heart,
you've been captured,
The key has been lost and you
must always be inside."

He engaged the girl with this little saying. He knew no other way.

That evening, as they sat together in the stone room, he told his father: "Father, tomorrow I'm bringing a friend who will be with me from now on.

will always stay with me."

The old man looked at him and gave the tin crockery on the table in front of him a jerk: "You want to tie a second life to yours?"

"Yes, Father!"

"And she wants to follow you without further ado? Whoever enters this cave can no longer return to his own."

"Yes, Father!"

"So come with me, I have something to tell you!" And the old man rose, took the torch from the wall and went ahead of his son into the branching corridors, where the voices of the depths whispered. A cold drop fell on Adalbert's hot face, so that he was frightened and felt the darkness behind him even more pressing and frightening, like a rift that wants to close vividly around those who dare to pass through it. After walking for half an hour, they came to the chamber of glittering pillars. It was as if the darkness here was dreaming longingly of the light in wild fantasies, all the crags were hung with white, shining veils, all the gullies and grooves were filled with glittering streams, heavy silver candelabras reached upwards, curtain fringes of white silk hung down from above, and where candelabras and fringes had joined together, pillars seemed to support the vault. In the centre of this decorated room lay a large block, like a reminder of the night from which this glory was born.

"My son," said Andreas Semilasso, laying his hand on the stone, "I cannot say that I have had much pleasure from you. You have given yourself too much and asserted yourself too little. But now that you are uniting a second life with yours, it remains for me to do the last and most extreme thing: to call upon the secret powers of this stone, which it received from me in the alternating current and gave me. On my annal tree I saw that tomorrow you will be twenty-five years old, now you are ripe for its effects.

"What do you want me to do, my father?"

"I tell you, this stone is an altar; as the things that surround us take on our lives, so this stone has come to life because it was close to me in my most sublime hours."

"What do you want me to do, my father?"

"Step in front of the stone, lay your hand on it and repeat after me: I want nothing more than to assert myself, I want to liberate the divine animal within me, I want to experience myself in all shivers, I don't want to be attached to stars or people, I don't want to wear the world on my soles and be ready to shake off what is troublesome to me. I want to be related to everything, but not connected to anyone, I want to feel everything deeply, but I want to keep my wits about me at all times in order to push away anything that wants to have me all to itself."

Adalbert Semilasso slowly repeated the heavy words, feeling the cold of the stone up to his elbow, but otherwise he felt nothing. The stone remained stone to him. When the two of them were sitting at the table in the front room again, Andreas searched his son's face in vain. With a wave of his hand, he pointed to the other end of the table opposite his seat: "That's where your place will be."

The next evening, Barbara was sitting in this seat. She had come, weeping, shaken by inward sobs, and yet in expectation of great happiness. Now she felt the desire for burning tenderness, but under the old man's eyes she hardly dared to look at Adalbert, for those eyes were lit with wild flames and burned on her face, on her hands, on the curve of her shoulders, and when she rose she felt hot streams around her figure. Something inexplicable distanced her from her lover and erased the memory of the wondrous evening hours. They sat deep into the night, and as meagre as the words were, the hours flowed by quickly. When they rose and Adalbert took the girl's hand to lead her into the next room, the old man stepped between them and pushed his son back. With a look that made his son tremble, he led Barbara to his own bed and told her to undress.

He then ordered his son out of the room and he obeyed the order, just as his mistress did.

Neither of them dared to resist the fact that their union was being torn apart, that the father was taking what the son had acquired. After that night, which Adalbert, who had escaped through the window, spent out in the forest howling like a wolf, he dared not look at Barbara. And when at last he sought her eyes, he saw that she had become a stranger to him. She did not blush before him, she showed no fear or embarrassment, she took up the chores of the household as if she had always been intent only on managing the economy of this cave dwelling. All memory was gone from her. She met Adalbert with the affectionate friendliness of a new mother meeting a grown-up son. She skilfully prevented his intimacy from encroaching on her reserve. The most incomprehensible thing had happened. The old man of eighty had triumphed over his son. In the nights that Adalbert, now always far from home, spent on the Hexenstein, he endeavoured in vain to answer even one of all the thousand questions.

All around him, the petrified councillors, the grimaces of the gallows birds stared into the moonlight, and from their motionlessness came a longing for coolness, for numbness. Tentatively the fairy tales crept up to him and laid their transparent hands on his forehead; but he pushed them away, for he wanted to think of nothing but this mysterious strangeness. When he passed the moonlight women banished to the rocks and heard their hot, pleading whispers for salvation, he laughed; and all around him the mandrakes hidden under the moss laughed. One night the ancient forest snake came crawling across his path. A golden crown sat on its toad's head, its green eyes twinkled, and on its endlessly long body rattled the steel scales, each of which bore a sharp, sickle-like curved spike. Adalbert had such a powerful rage in him that he wanted to pounce on the worm and strangle it with his bare hands. It was his wish to have his arms mangled, his head under the

The snake's teeth could be heard cracking. But the old, clever snake looked at him and shook the toad's head. He laughed so that the wide mouth went round the head like a deep crack, the crown began to sway and the long tufts of hanging moss flew around his ears, from which the vibration threw whole flakes of fiery drool. Rustling, she pulled her long body after her and disappeared into the ravine. Adalbert was enraged by her friendship; he had wanted her to be a destroyer, a destroyer.

Then came a day when his will, weakened by the sleepless nights and incessant restlessness, could no longer contain his despair. His father had gone into the forest and Adalbert was alone with Barbara. When he saw her busy at the herd with her swift, graceful movements, when the hairs on her neck, which he had kissed so often, moved in the breeze, his rigidity melted, his pride and his reflection went down in a roar. Panting and repeating some word or other senselessly in his hoarse voice, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him, using all his strength. Only when he was lying in a corner with a bleeding forehead did he come to his senses: what had happened to him? She had hammered into his face with her hard fists, she had given her body the vigour of a young tree, and, rushing from his embrace, she had pushed him away so that he fell against a ledge. Now he was alone and on the stone floor ran a narrow, bright red stream of his blood. Through the window he saw her busy outside in the garden, as if nothing had happened. She was using a hoe to turn over a bed and clear it of weeds. The swaying of her short skirts, the slender ankles, his blood, which he felt warm and tasteless on his lips, the pain that remained in his head, confused him, and with a cry he rushed at the woman. Then she straightened up, jumped back and raised her hoe. The two stood facing each other for a moment, then Adalbert began to back away like a predator whose leap becomes impossible and crawled into his chamber.

Andreas Semilasso returned in the evening. His wife had been waiting for him at the edge of the forest, took him by the arm without saying a word and led him in front of Adalbert, who was sitting huddled in a corner and whimpering like a dog from time to time.

"That one there," she said, her arm pointing at him implacably, "has a desire for me."

The old man looked at him with fiery eyes: "I am glad, my son, that you are growing strong. But I advise you to give way, for I am still the strongest, and I hold on to what is mine."

Adalbert tried to rise, and with some effort he stood up, swaying, and walked between his father and Barbara. His jaws cramped and he wondered whether his teeth were strong and firm enough to bite through the woman's throat. But by then he was already standing outside the door and leaning against a tree, trembling. After a while he felt his way up; he felt notches in the rough bark and realised that he was leaning against his father's annal tree. The trunk stood straight and steep and its slender splendour seemed to offer plenty of room for countless notches.

This was the last night that Adalbert spent near Barbara. As the two slept in the cave dwelling, Adalbert stole a saw from his father's toolbox. With all the caution of a thief, he set about cutting up the tree and crouched beside the trunk for hours, always listening to see if the crunching of the saw had woken the old man. Then he crept away. The morning breeze came over the witch's stone, reached into the crown of the trees and ruffled them. They all gave themselves up to the games of the early dawn, swaying and cheerful and aware of their strength. Only one, whose life had been cut short, could not participate as usual; he leaned more and more to one side and with a groan he crashed heavily to the ground. Andreas Semilasso awoke from the noise and stepped outside the door. There lay his annal tree, smoothly cut, across the small garden, having smashed the fence in its fall and dug itself deep into the soft earth of the flower beds.

By this time, Adalbert Semilasso had reached the edge of the forest, where the bare slopes of the Hexenstein descend to the country road. It was still dark below, only above, high up, the first pale lights of day were hanging. Under his feet he felt a soft, squishy mass, and as he stepped onto the country road, he saw a broad black stripe running across its lighter-coloured ground. He waited until the sky gave him more light, and realised with ever wilder joy that the black streak was alive, that it consisted of billions of brownish-black caterpillars crossing the road here. An army of devastating, voracious little beasts, caterpillars of the processionary moth, swarmed before him, and the direction of the procession was towards the forest Adalbert had just left. He knew that nothing would stop this procession, it would climb the slope, pour over the forest and carry destruction into his father's realm. The forest would stand bare and ugly, its wonders and secrets would be exposed, and the restless pincers of the caterpillars would tear holes in its carpet until it was overrun with disgusting worms, contaminated by the odour of decay, and its beauty and majesty disfigured by disgust and horror.

Adalbert cried out. He screamed like a hawk whose war cry he had learnt in lonely hours. Then he waded through the unstoppable stream of caterpillars and went his new way.

Adalbert Semilasso discovers the world

[Table of contents](#)

This new path led through sleeping villages towards the world. Adalbert Semilasso wore his heart on his hands and his wishes on his tongue. He spoke with an excess of happiness to everyone he met: a cat sitting on a fence with its back bent let him stroke it, he spoke a few words to a farmyard dog guarding a sleepy farmhouse, and he was pleased that the dog showed his understanding by wagging. To the bellowing of the waking cows, to the half-loud cries of early labourers, came the first trills of larks high above, like golden dots on a wall of blue silk. But when he came out of the circle of villages, where people were accustomed to his strange pilgrim's dress and manner, as the people came out with the rising of the sun, he heard laughter around him. He approached a man who was harnessing two large dogs to a milk cart in front of a farmstead: "Listen, where is the road to the town?" The man looked at the questioner, his eyes became wide open and fixed, and then, without answering, he burst out laughing unrestrainedly. With a shrug, Adalbert walked on. But the laughter around him grew louder and louder, and people were already shouting words at him that he didn't understand.

Now he no longer dared to ask, but continued along the road he had once taken. Descending from the Hexenstein, he had taken roughly the same direction in which he saw the town on a clear day; and when at last, towards evening, he saw towers and chimneys above a cushion of smoke and haze, he was glad to see it again. High roofs rose into the grey curtain, and the landscape sloped gently upwards with small houses along the road to this mighty background. The city loomed ever larger, and when Adalbert came to the suburban streets, he realised nothing of the

Vapour and smoke. In his imagination, a heavy smoke had filled the whole town and lay like a blanket over everything. He was delighted that the evening sun shone so brightly and sharply in the shining windows, that the little gardens in front of the houses were so clean. He stood still in front of a well-kept lawn and admired the glass balls on the stems of the rose trees. This blue, red, green, sparkling splendour was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He came very close to the spheres and drew back when he saw his face broadly distorted in them. Did he look like that? The stream had shown him otherwise! But then he had to laugh heartily, for he realised that all things became so strange when they approached the spheres. His finger suddenly ran towards the tip as if it had a lump on it. Now he also knew what these spheres meant. They were all delicious jokes, round, glittering jokes that caused public amusement.

While he stood admiring the glass balls, a crowd of people had gathered behind him. At first he took their laughter for a chorus to his own, for the effect of the funny balls, and was all the more pleased, so that he began to laugh even more heartily. But now the shrill sound of scorn and malice, for which his ear had already become sensitive, mingled with it, and he felt the back of his frock being tugged at. He turned round. There stood the crowd, laughing in his face. Adalbert Semilasso suddenly felt ashamed and became all the more confused because he couldn't say what he was ashamed of. A little fear came over him at the thought that they might end up attacking him like the lads in the village. But he quickly rescued himself with a feeling of security: now he was in the world where his sister had asked him to go. She would have come back to warn him if the town was cruel and bad.

His embarrassment had turned into a smile again; it was easier for him to be followed. He stopped in front of a shop, in the window of which lay loaves of brown bread and yellow rolls. It was at the sight of these things that he first felt hungry. His

A day's march, the desire to reach the city had left him no time to think about it.

He entered the shop, where a plump woman was slumbering gently with a knitting in her lap. The bell jarred the sleeping woman awake and she rose, her unsupported bosom swaying up and down in her light blouse. Adalbert Semilasso was almost startled to see the enormous masses and the red, swollen arms leaning on the counter like paws, while her eyes were wide open and fixed on him with the gaze he now knew so well. A cat had jumped off the woman's lap and was rubbing its back against Adalbert's legs, purring. In a round, almost physically tangible ray of sunlight, which penetrated the shop as if shot from a pipe and fell, spreading like a funnel, onto the baskets on the table, lay shiny golden rolls. Adalbert took two of them, thanked her and left. He had already reached the door when the woman, who was only just recovering, called after him: "Hey, you there!" Adalbert looked back with a friendly smile.

"And pay?" cried the woman, her bosom swaying up and down with movement. "And pay? Pay - don't you?"

Buns in hand, he approached her: "How? What do you want?"

"Jesus Mariataferl! Take the bread rolls and go! Has anything like this ever happened before? Takes the rolls and wants to go? Johann! Johann!!!"

Johann came out of the next room, a broad, fat guy who looked just like his mother except for his bosom and stretched the same red, puffy paws out of his puffy shirt sleeves.

"He just takes the bread rolls and wants to leave without paying! Has anything like that ever happened? What do you think?"

"What a rascal, a damned one!" And Johann grabbed the stranger by the collar. "Give me the money or I'll call the police."

Like a walking tower, the mother had meanwhile staggered to the shop door and pulled it wide open, just as a security guard, who had been attracted by the crowd outside the bakery, was already coming up the steps.

"Come on, security guard, come on. The gentleman there is taking two rolls and wants to leave, but there's no sign of numbers."

All the dignity of the authorities destroyed the young poet. "Sir," snorted the guard from under the drooping bushes of his moustache, "so what's this again?"

"I don't know; what does this woman want from me?"

"I want money! Nothing else; money!"

"I have no money!"

"Then you can't want rolls either." And Johann snatched the rolls out of Adalbert's hand and threw them back into the basket with the rest. The guard had never seen anything like it before: "So you, Don't make any jokes. And anyway - come with me!"

Now Adalbert Semilasso entered the town, a guard at his side, while an ever-growing crowd followed the spectacle. The noise of the streets around him swelled, the houses shot up on both sides, these masses of stone became more and more threatening and frightening, and as dusk came they became more and more illuminated, so that Adalbert lost himself in amazement. It was quite like a dream, his will was asleep and his imagination delighted in unheard-of wonders. Through a high, gloomy doorway, in which stood many men wearing glittering helmets and carrying sabres like his companion, he came to a bare room with iron beds. To the questions of the man sitting in front of a table covered with papers, Adalbert knew nothing but his name. Finally the man stood up impatiently and said to Adalbert's companion: "Let him sleep in. He's either drunk or mad."

The room to which Adalbert was now taken was even more bare than the first and had a single barred window overlooking a courtyard where night was already falling. A few men were sitting and lying on the low beds around the walls, who burst out laughing when they saw their new comrade. "Do you hear me," said a black man whose face was disfigured by pale scars, "you're going on a pilgrimage to the holy grave? Are your sins so grave?"

Adalbert felt at home here; people addressed him as Du and, once the astonishment at his appearance had subsided, he was quite

friendly to him. Here he was as among brothers, and with the exception of a drunken man, who lay in his soiled clothes like a rag on his cot in the corner, and a man who sat in another corner with his head buried in his hands, everyone soon joined in the conversation. The oil lamp on the ceiling burned dimly, from time to time the hatch in the door was opened and someone looked into the room. Then the leaf-coloured man always stuck out an enormous whitish tongue, grinning in the direction of the door. Although the air filled Adalbert's lungs with a heavy, pungent odour, although a tremendous sadness seemed to emanate from the walls, descend from the ceiling and rise from the floor, although he was startled every time he looked out of the window into the completely shapeless darkness of the courtyard, he liked the jovial tone of the company. He did not understand much of what the others were discussing, many of their questions, but he valiantly endeavoured to make sense of this new world into which he had already penetrated. He realised that he was missing much that was familiar to the others and that asking about it would only have provoked their laughter. All his attention was focussed on finding out where they actually were. They had hardly been brought together here to talk. There was no fear for his future, only a curiosity about what would happen next.

After talking for a while about things that Adalbert understood very little about, the leaf-coloured man turned to him and asked why he had been brought here. Adalbert told the story of the bread rolls. A roar of laughter broke out.

"But, young man, how can you trespass on someone else's property?" The leaf-coloured man used a different expression and a different tone of voice when he spoke to Adalbert than when he spoke to the others. His words were spoken as if on stilts.

"What is this, property?" asked Adalbert.

They laughed again, even louder than before. "Property is always what the others have."

"Property is what you would like to have and what you are not allowed to take." The man in the corner looked up and tossed long strands of black hair out of his face with a jerk. A thin red tie sat high on his neck, as if a strip of blood separated his head from his torso. "Property is theft," he said with a gesture that seemed to incite indignation. It was a popular orator who had been arrested this evening for making a seditious speech.

"And what is theft? Theft is self-defence. So property is self-defence!" The little man with the red face who had said this looked around the circle defiantly.

"You're a confusion counsellor!" said the leaf-coloured man.

"I'm a sophist," and the little man banged his fist on the table. "I was always first in logic at grammar school!"

Adalbert dared to ask about the meaning of the word money. Now everything went into a frenzy, as if he had uttered a magic formula.

"Oh money! Money is youth, beauty, pleasure."

"Money is our desire."

"Money is ... money ... is money!"

Adalbert was left with a tremendous respect for this powerful word. Eager to see what tomorrow would bring, he lay down on one of the beds next to the man with the long black hair and red tie as the others yawned and went to sleep. Completely new concepts had forced their way into his mind and shattered all his ideas. The relationships of the world in which he had suddenly found himself seemed increasingly strange and intricate. He could still hear the laughter of the people, and at one point he jerked up suddenly because he felt Johann grab him by the collar again; then he slipped into a dreamless sleep.

At midnight there was noise and commotion. A woman's room was brought in, a woman with a red blouse and a crooked hat with black feathers dangling from it. She looked the sleeping men in the face as if she were looking for acquaintances.

"Good day, Annerl," said the leaf-coloured man from his bed. "Oh dear! Have they got you again?"

"Yes, I'm celebrating my twenty-fifth anniversary today."

Adalbert still heard the woman's laughter, then he sank back into the darkness of sleep.

In the morning, coming gloomily and hesitantly into the room filled with the vapours of sleeping people, Adalbert was brought before a young man who looked at him in astonishment and tried in vain to appear composed. The questions from yesterday evening were repeated and Adalbert could not give any better answers than yesterday. "Listen," said the officer, "first of all, I ask you not to say you to me. That's an outrageous impertinence." Adalbert decided to comply with his request. But that didn't make his information any clearer.

"But you need to know whether you're single or married. Whether you have a wife or not."

Then the memory of Barbara came back, and Adalbert was about to tell the story of his love when the official continued: "And you should also know what religion you are. You don't give the impression of being a completely unintelligent person. And even the most stupid blokes know that."

After the officer had practised his patience long enough, he called a guard: "Tell the doctor to come over for a moment and take the man into the next room for the time being."

Adalbert waited in a small room that reminded him of the room he had just left tonight and also reminded him a little of the other room. The walls were lined with tall cupboards containing dusty piles of old paper, so heavy that the boards bent. When Adalbert had waited for an hour in vain and was about to despair of boredom, he went through the next door, came to a long corridor, climbed up and down some stairs, crossed a courtyard and finally came to a street. He walked on and on and

let the life of the city penetrate him. He marvelled at the tram carriages, moved by an inexplicable force, the shops full of strange things whose purpose was unknown to him. He stood for a long time in front of a hardware shop and greeted the tools, hammer, shovel, hoe and saw, like old friends. In a park, he rested on a bench and watched the walkers pass by. He tried to appease his hunger, which, despite the breakfast he had been given in his night's lodgings, soon reared its ugly head again, by chewing plant leaves. As long as he didn't have the mysterious, powerful money, he didn't want to enter a shop to avoid a repeat of yesterday's performance. Deadened to the astonished laughter of the people, blind to the strange grimaces of those he met, he wandered on and on until he came to the low suburban houses in the evening, following a wide street. The open field lay before him and he criss-crossed all sorts of paths outside the town, a little intimidated and a little disheartened that he could not gain a firm foothold in this world he had chosen. From a hill he saw the back of the Witchstone in the distance, blue on the horizon. There the caterpillars had begun their work. He almost envied the animals this enormous supply of food, which was enough to sustain even an army of such voraciousness for a long time. A lone walker came over the hill. Adalbert stepped into his path and asked him if he could give him some money. With a push to the chest, the man freed himself and ran downhill towards the town. Adalbert saw him running along the country lanes for a long time. His thoughts were disturbed by this strange behaviour and when he came to a tangle of mounds, ditches and piles of rubble, he was determined not to return to the town but to spend the night here. While he was looking for a suitable spot, he heard voices from behind one of the mounds and, coming closer, saw some huts. Under a roof leaning diagonally on posts, men were sitting around a fire with a kettle hanging over it. A hideous old woman, as if from bad dreams, was ladling porridge into tinny bowls. Off to one side, two of them sat in a circle of

They stretched out the fingers of their hands against each other at breakneck speed, shouting words in an incomprehensible language just as quickly.

Adalbert stepped among them. Under wide-brimmed hats, brown faces with dark eyes looked after him. They surrounded him and questioned him in a foreign language. The poet stood there helplessly, surveying the space that separated him from the cauldron on which his longing hung. When the Italians realised that the stranger did not understand a word of their language, they fetched the guide, who was already asleep in one of the huts. With the few words of German known to the black fellow, and even more with gestures, their sympathy built a bridge of understanding. At last they realised that Adalbert was hungry, and now a wide circle quickly formed around the kettle from which the old woman drew porridge for the stranger. The Mora players left their conversation and sat down with the others, who watched the spectacle of this satiation. It was a pleasure for these people, who lived far from their home of hard labour, to be able to offer hospitality to someone who was completely homeless. Under their roof, by their fire, sat a stranger whose manner and costume differed from those of the people, and as if by secret agreement they recognised him as a relative by a gleam hidden deep in his eyes. The fellows lost their predatory rudeness for Adalbert, the old witch was not at all so hideous, the language did not sound so strange for nothing, the porridge tasted better than any other food Adalbert had ever eaten. He put down his spoon and was delighted when the old woman patted him on the shoulder as if in praise. Quietly, one of them began to sing a Venetian song in a voice that floated over the water like the sighs of enamoured girls; the others joined in and a slender folk song was among them. Then Adalbert sang about loneliness, he didn't ponder the words for long, they came naturally to his tongue and the notes were there with them. His song told of the forest and the witches' stone and its bright, fresh colour became painfully dull when he came to how his love had been destroyed.

had been. Now it crept closer, swarming, thousand-legged, its words, rhythm and sound expressing danger. But now it freed itself and flew on, with bolder words towards the world, determined to conquer its resistance. The Italians sensed the meaning of the misunderstood words and were silent as long as Adalbert sang. When he had finished, they thanked him with another song, and so an alternating song kept them awake until the middle of the night. When Adalbert rose to go with them to the huts, the sky was bright with stars. The earth lay in reverent darkness and was silent before the sublimities of the night, whose pearl necklaces hung down so low that their ends seemed to drag across the distant mountain forests.

It came about quite naturally that Adalbert joined the ranks of the Italians and took part in their work. He was given the suit of a worker who had died, and the foreman registered him with the site managers as a replacement for the deceased. Adalbert now worked with the others on the works that were to supply the town with water. When he felt the hard resistance of the earth, wedged deep down in a narrow shaft, when he swung his hoe, smeared with clay and soaked with groundwater, he often straightened up and saw the sky as a narrow blue band above his head. Such was his life now: the prospect of a little light cut off from the world by straight, inexorable lines. But there was little time to dream, for the Italians were anxious that the work they had taken on should be finished by the appointed time so that they could return home. Adalbert now learnt many new terms. The strangest thing to him was the handful of round things he received at the end of each week, in which he had to recognise the money. Slowly his understanding of the life of the world grew, which bound itself at a thousand points by binding itself to words. Once a bird came out of the forest and told him such marvellous stories that Adalbert laid down his hoe and crawled out of the narrow shaft to understand it better. All the tales of the forest began to resound, so that the poet pressed his breast with both hands, so as not to feel the pain within. Just as the

When Adalbert heard a bird singing about the sad moonlight women, it was as if the ground beneath him trembled, and a cry interrupted the chirping. Adalbert ran back to the shaft, but he saw it filled with masses of earth, and the sand of the surface tumbled after the large clods. A landslide had buried the companions who had been working down there with Adalbert. After many hours of hasty labour, their bodies were discovered. Three of them were dead, the fourth lived another night and died the next morning. After the funeral, the lot leader took a piece of paper and wrote their names next to some of the others already on the list, made a cross for each one and noted the amount to be paid to their relatives as their credit. Adalbert was very quiet that day and looked at the blue ribbon of sky more often than usual.

Although he already knew the workers' language well enough to feel comfortable among them, although they loved him and treated him kindly, Adalbert was disturbed from then on and not inclined to work. The danger, which he did not know and did not even suspect, had torn their veils and stepped in front of him. He had no desire to be buried by the earth or to end his journey into the world by falling down a shaft. He always saw the dead before him with their crushed bodies, their crushed chests and dislocated limbs torn from their bearings, their eyes with traces of sand in the corners and their lips covered in bloody foam mixed with clay. One of Beppo's bent fingers had clawed into Adalbert's skirt as he carried him away with others, and when they tried to put him down, the finger held him like a hook. Adalbert had freed himself with a blow to the dead man's hand. But sometimes he felt it like a light tug on his skirt, and with horror he took it as a warning.

Now it occurred to him to free himself and return to the world, which he was only allowed to view from afar as if through bars. It would have been best to simply walk away, but his gratitude obliged him to seek an excuse from himself.

On Sundays, the earthworkers went to the neighbouring villages to show off their velvet skirts, wide trousers and large hats. They were not very welcome to the lads who ruled the dance parties. There were often enough scuffles when the Italians dared to interfere in the merriment of the others. Most of the time they kept to themselves, huddled together in a bunch and just watched the dancing from their corner. But there were also younger lads among them, daring fellows with flashing eyes, who, seduced by the beat of the music, heated by the scent of the girls' skirts and bodies, wanted their share of the fun. As they were otherwise temperate and did not exert their strength for pleasure or slacken in it, here the sound and the swing were all the more tantalising. All their accumulated and preserved capacity for love, and their quick and intoxicating way of wooing, burst forth on such occasions. And the girls, who had had enough of the slow and dull and clumsy manner of their lads, who liked the southern agility, the clearly perceptible fire of the Italians, gladly threw themselves into the arms of the superior ones. The strangeness attracted them: the brown velvet skirts and faces, the strangely shaped trousers, in whose pockets - they knew - the knives were loose enough. This made the boys all the angrier, and the youth of all the villages soon formed a general conspiracy, the signs and preparations for which were the occasional scuffles.

On the Sunday that was to free Adalbert from his friends, a beautiful Sunday in late summer, he went with them to the church festival in a neighbouring village. Across the bare fields, all spun with the silver threads of Indian summer, came the music of the festival and, caught in the glowing net, seemed to hover close to the ground. The girls stood in double rows around the tree in the middle of the village square, which was decorated with brushwood and paper flowers and marked the centre of the festival. They held hands and moved around the tree in a continuous counter-movement of the outer and inner ring, singing an old dance song. Their stiff, wide skirts, under which

The shirts and petticoats were made of a special iridescent fabric which, in addition to a bright main colour, had a whole range of secondary shades. The colourful headscarves and spencers, the white, puffy shirts ruffled around the neck gave off a smell of new calico and starched canvas. The girls were surrounded by the party organisers, lads whose hats were densely covered with towers of ribboned flowers, paper bags, pictures and pieces of glass, and they carried beer in tin pots to their ballerinas. Then the music started again, and after the lead dancers had danced their individual routines, the rings of girls broke up into couples. The Italians watched the whirl from a small hill. The contagion had already taken hold of them, desire was already in their eyes, and some of them slipped down to follow the girls they had chosen. Adalbert, in his Sunday clothes, which he had bought from the estate of a dead man for a little of his savings, looked like one of his comrades, but he was careful not to follow their example; it did not escape his prudence that something was at work here against them. Away from the dancing-place stood groups of lads who were not taking part in the dance, and seemed to be waiting for some other business; while Adalbert watched one of them, who, with angry gestures towards the little crowd of strangers and towards the girls, seemed to be inciting the others, a tumult arose in the whirl of the dancers. Some cause had unleashed the hatred. They were fighting down there. Now they ran down the hill into the melee. In the first rush, they rescued the robbers, one of whom was already badly mauled. But one of the peasant lads was also bleeding from a stab in the hand. He raised his bleeding fingers, shook them so that the red drops splashed on the girls' white shirts, and screamed like a man possessed. The girls ran away and the reinforcements broke into the Italians' backs. With shakes and sticks torn from the nearest fences, the boys fell upon them, avoiding the enemy's knives with terrible blows to the arms and legs.

Hands. Adalbert ran down one of the party organisers, took his shillelagh from him and beat about him bravely, the dust rising from the dance floor in thick clouds and only giving an idea of the course of the fight from the terrible shouting. If one of the Italians succeeded in undermining his opponent, he stabbed him blindly in the face and chest, clutching at his neck and muttering terrible curses between his teeth, far more often than was necessary to render the enemy harmless. Like an enraged cat, he bit into his victim and allowed himself to be struck down by his friends. The lads scuffled more systematically, with more deliberation, more calmly, almost matter-of-factly. Their tactic was to break up the closed group of enemies. Adalbert was pushed against a house with others. Every now and then he saw a wounded man staggering past through the dust. It was as if none of this concerned him. The blood of the attackers was in him and made him consider the situation while he dealt terrible blows to the left and right. There was a narrow path between two houses that led past garden fences into the open field. He shouted to his comrades to flee here and stepped into the bottleneck with his shillelagh. The pursuers shrank back before his determined face and his terrible gestures. "Donkeys," he shouted to them in their own language, "that's enough of this foolishness. To hell with you too, you've been good to y o u r s e l v e s and now it's over!"

"What are you doing at the Katzelmachern?" shouted one.

"None of your business, sheep's heads!" And Adalbert hit one of them over the head, who jumped at him and tried to snatch the shillelagh from him, so that it cracked. The others pondered, and Adalbert saw that the fury of the fight had left them. Slowly he retreated between the garden fences, and when he had reached the open field, he ran towards the group of comrades who were out here, reinforced by reinforcements from the camp, taking up the fugitives. There were still some particularly fiery pursuers, but they contented themselves with shouting and threatening with their clubs. They retreated in an orderly fashion.

In the evening, there was a need for canvas bandages in the Italian camp. The old cook bandaged heads and hands until late into the night, tied arms

and spat three times on the body of the internally wounded woman while praying. Blackish lumps stuck to her fingers and her face was smeared with blood, making her look even more hideous than usual, a witch rummaging through corpses. She pulled a splinter of bone from the leader's thickly matted black hair, which lay like a coarse blanket over a gaping head wound, with pointed fingers. "I thank you," the man said to Adalbert, who was standing in front of him, with the corners of his mouth tilted, "you have decided the battle." And with the politeness of an Italian, he added: "Our gratitude is a thousandfold, you are a hero, you would be worthy of being an Italian."

Adalbert squeezed his hand. Then he went into his hut, put on his work suit and left the camp just as the gendarme arrived to enquire about the course of the brawl. Now he was free of his friends and returned to search the world.

For a few days, he lived only by looking at the wonders of the city. He enjoyed testing the power of money and using his savings to buy all sorts of unnecessary things to fill his pockets: porcelain figurines, metal tins, blotter rolls and a black leather ladies' belt. In the evenings, he liked to spend time in one of the main streets, where beautiful ladies walked past the brightly lit shops. Adalbert stared at them, not realising that he could have bought one of them with his money.

But this money melted away, and soon he had to make up his mind to go back to work. He entered a bureau, above which was written: "Municipal Employment Office", here again there were questions about his employment and his past, which Adalbert did not have to refuse to answer; for now he had already conquered a past. Finally he was told - the fat gentleman grinned and winked at his clerk - that he should report to the cloth factory of A. Weißgerber & Sohn. "Even if you haven't worked in cloth, you'll be well received, at least for the time being you'll be welcome." The official's smile became more and more mocking as Adalbert thanked him profusely and left,

he heard the two of them burst out laughing behind him. What was there to laugh about if someone wanted to work? Outraged, Adalbert looked for the factory of

A. Weißgerber & Sohn, and he strode resolutely towards the large courtyard gate when he was suddenly stopped by a man.

"Listen," the man said and placed a broad hand with gnawed fingernails, over which the flesh protruded, on Adalbert's shoulder,

"where are you going?"

"Into the factory here, as you can see. Let go of me!"

"What are you doing here in the factory, you ..."

"I'm looking for work. And now ...!"

"No way," the man shouted, and the group that had quickly formed around the two of them raised their fists and shouted threateningly: "Hu! Hu!"

"Leave me out. What do you want from me?"

"You won't be working, I'm telling you. We won't tolerate it. Won't we, comrades!"

"No! There is no such thing!"

"We make short work of strikebreakers."

"We won't let them get us down."

"The traitors shall be slain."

Adalbert only understood so much of the shouting, the threats and the commotion around him that he was being prevented from seeking work, and, pushing the man with the bitten nails away from him, he jumped onto a cornerstone and shouted "Quiet". The labourers, accustomed as they were to the events of popular assemblies and to the manner of public speakers, were at once impressed by his commanding gestures, and Adalbert was able to speak. "What do you want from me? Why are you stopping me? I don't know what this is all about. I only know that I'm looking for work. Why? Because I have learnt that you earn money by working and that you starve if you have no money."

"Very right, very right," some in the crowd shouted against the others.

"I want to live, and as unpleasant as the work is" - here the speaker had general agreement - "it is necessary. I beg you, let me go on and don't keep me any longer."

A few workers, serious, sedate men with broad shoulders and massive fists, broke through the crowd to Adalbert and took him into their midst. "He's right! He's right!"

"My children are hungry."

"My wife is ill."

"The merchant won't lend me any more."

"We need money."

"We want to work."

The others were outraged by the renegades and wanted to tear Adalbert down. A fight broke out and the opponents were thrown into confusion. The hats were knocked off their heads with punches, they pulled each other around, they rolled on the floor. Suddenly, windows rattled. It was like an electric shock to the crowd and turned their collective anger against the factory. Someone claimed that the factory owner was standing behind the windows and watching his workers fighting among themselves. "What, while we're beating each other to death here, he's standing upstairs rubbing his hands!" And in a moment the fierce opponents were reconciled, all prudence was gone, the cries of distress were drowned in a clamour that hurled the workers' demands against the windows in slogans as heavy as stones. The thought that the factory owner could wait in secure peace until they had consumed themselves in vain anger, until they, exhausted by hunger, torn by dissension, would humbly beg for work, made them furious. From minute to minute the heat of this body of a thousand heads rose. The stones flew thicker and thicker, iron bars and bricks smashed the window frames, the company board was torn down and smashed on the pavement.

Adalbert stood among the others and marvelled at this fit of madness. Then he felt himself being pulled to one side by the flow of the crowd. Horses' hooves clattered on the pavement and over the heads of the workers

Mounted policemen appeared, brandishing their sabres. The crowd retreated into the side streets and cleared the square in front of the factory. Infantry marched up and occupied the entrances to the badly damaged building, while a company with felled bayonets set about clearing the streets.

"Riff-raff!" shouted the man with the gnawed fingernails, "Commissary bread-eaters!" Stones pattered and hit. One soldier's rifle fell from his hand, another suddenly fell down as if his legs had been cut off. A threatening command from the officer was powerless against the shouting of the labourers. "Oh, what's biting me!" The leader hurled a stone, hitting the young officer on the shoulder. "Beat them to death, the dogs!"

"Fire!"

In the narrow street the volley crashed against the densely packed crowd, and the bullets penetrated with a dull sound, as if a woollen sack were being beaten with a shaker. Adalbert, who was far behind, was surprised to see two people slump down beside him, as if their bodies had suddenly lost their grip. Howling, the labourers fled, pursued by the bayonets of the soldiers, and Adalbert ran with the others, seized by a terrible fear that passed from his comrades to him. He was completely on a par with these strangers facing imminent death; he accepted them as his fated comrades and felt the general horror within himself. Outside the town, where the vegetable gardens begin and the draw wells with their one skinny, sharply bent arm stabbed into the evening sky, they stopped, a defeated army, each one intent only on his own salvation. Leaning against a rotten garden fence, Adalbert saw an old man in a broad gardener's hat going about his peaceful business. He walked with careful steps among late flowers, the remnants of summer, and was already beginning preparations to promote and tame the fertility of a future summer. Adalbert began to sense deep connections, and his inner self sobbed now that the

horror began to dissolve into melancholy and longing. With a heart full of heavy and echoing bells, he walked along the fences under an opal-coloured sky and thought of nothing. Behind a bush he heard a soft whimper. There lay a man, dead, his clothes torn and stained with blood, one who had dragged himself here, badly wounded, to die. His wife lay over him; her hands, which were half hidden in the grass on either side of the dead man, sometimes closed in a spasm of pain. Adalbert recognised the man as one of the workers who had surrounded him protectively and, like him, were defending their right to work. It was the man who had shouted: "My children are hungry." At first Adalbert wanted to kneel down beside the woman and, bending over her body, speak kindness and love, but then he realised that his words were small and pathetic in the face of this pain, and wishing to show his gratitude to the dead man, he laid most of his money beside the woman's cramped right hand.

When he returned to the city, he passed through a zone of intense excitement in the suburbs. The event of the afternoon was discussed in intimidated groups, rumour increased the number of dead and wounded to fabulous proportions, and workers who had been present described the events with lively gestures. Adalbert thought he recognised each of them by a common movement, by an astonishment that he was still alive, and by a constantly shaken horror that made them start up from their descriptions as if they suddenly heard the roll of drums and shouts of command. To these people, to whom nothing was further from their minds than the thought of outrage and revolution, all this had come as such a surprise that they were completely confused as they searched for connections and struggled to find explanations. The inner city wore the indifferent mask of its traffic and business life, but even here there was an echo of the infantry volleys and the cries of the wounded beneath the ever-same surface. At the railway station, where Adalbert came on his aimless wanderings, people spoke of the bloody strike that had ended, and when he approached, they kept silent with a look of shy amazement at his

Labourer's garb. People looked at him as if he were a sight to behold, and the clever ones surmised that they were looking at a leader of the uprising who was trying to escape arrest. A man in a grey overcoat walked behind him with long, creeping steps; Adalbert felt guarded and was about to leave when he noticed that the travellers were crowding in front of a counter and then, laden with suitcases and boxes, left the waiting hall. From a conversation he learned that distances could be bought here for money; for the rest of his savings, which he placed on the counter's board, the clerk gave him a card without asking, and Adalbert followed the stream of travellers to a row of low black houses with many windows. He huddled modestly in a dark corner and let his future come to him without asking, even without feeling any curiosity about its course. He began to experience something quite delicious: his own fate became like that of a third party, like a story that you put away in the evening and perhaps pick up again in the morning when you have nothing else to do. A cheerful equanimity shone on his experiences, the moment became important enough to him again to break the connection between past and future for his own sake. He looked out onto the illuminated platform, where delayed travellers, followed by panting, heavily laden servants, were running towards the train. Near the open door of the restaurant sat a regular, surrounded by officious waiters, and looked at the pomposity of the others with the discomfort of a non-starter. Adalbert felt akin to him; he was a spectator like him - on a point of perfect equilibrium, of absolute steadiness, where he could easily follow any outside impulse, no matter from which direction it came. The panes of the carriage window were clouded by the increasingly dense smoke and haze, and it seemed as if the light outside was creating raised coloured edges around the body of the quiet regular passenger. The signal to depart was given and the train began to move. The station glided past, the carriage bumped and shook on the interchanges, and always

The signalling lights shot across the windows more quickly. Adalbert found the rapid movement pleasant and followed the rhythm of the journey with his whole body.

A number of peasants and simple townspeople were sitting in the carriage, chatting loudly. A couple of young lads were joking with the peasant girl who had taken a seat next to Adalbert, her stiff, rustling skirts pressed down again and again in embarrassment. The smell of the freshly starched clothes wanted to take him to a past in which this smell was associated with the memory of beautiful summer evenings; but Adalbert persisted in the present and left his happiness and pain far behind. The stations along the route followed one another, the travellers changed and the loud speeches became sleepy murmurs. Only a young man with a club foot sang incessantly to himself, as if to attract attention and prove that he was not at all dull. Outside the windows lay a leaden darkness, in which one could sense wide, flat and now completely dead-silent expanses. With the girl's head on his shoulder as she fell asleep, Adalbert looked out and was free of desire and longing. Then he too fell asleep and lay still with his head back and his mouth half open in the yellowish circle of light from the ceiling lamp.

Someone was screaming. Adalbert woke up and saw the girl next to him, half-erect, both hands pressed to her temples, her eyes wide open in horror. The other passengers had also jumped up, and the young man with the club foot had opened a window and was hanging out of the carriage with half his body. Shrill whistles came from outside, a scream, and beneath Adalbert a screech seemed to shake the floor of the carriage.

"Jesus Maria!" cried the girl.

There was a crash, as if all the bones in a giant's body were being broken. Suddenly the front part of the carriage lifted up, everyone staggered back, a jolt from behind threw them forwards, the light on the ceiling

went out and Adalbert felt himself hurled into a darkness filled with groaning, crashing and screaming.

When he regained his senses, he was shaken by the cold of the autumn night. He lay in the open field and saw small lights wandering in the darkness. The derailed train was burning in the distance. He and other injured people were picked up and taken to the inn in a nearby village, where benches and straw had been used to make camp. The lamp on the ceiling swung softly to the wailing of the people, and on the wall hung a crucified Christ, hideous and dirty like a criminal, bloodthirsty and contorted in agony, with his head bowed down as if he was immersed in his own pain so as not to see the pain of the others. In front of the bar, behind which the landlord kept himself and his bottles of schnapps, the porters stood and had a yellowish liquor poured into large glasses. The sudden cessation of a moan next to him made Adalbert turn his bleeding head. Here lay the peasant girl with her eyes rolled forward and staring, her legs drawn in and her clothes torn down. A large splinter of wood was stuck in her abdomen, its end protruding from between the torn shirt. Her skin was strangely white where it was not covered in blood. She had just died. A little further on, the singing young man sat on a bench and let his club foot dangle loosely.

"You see," he said when he recognised Adalbert, "now the foot is all to hell!" Then he began to hum softly again.

This whole scene, the desolate pub room, the men in front of the innkeeper's bar, the desperate Christ on the wall, the whimpering of the wounded, imprinted itself on Adalbert's mind and coagulated into an image whose meaning seemed foreign to him until now, but whose meaning he was determined to pursue.

Three men entered. The doctor, whose left cheek was cut by a deep scar, immediately set about examining the wounded and applying makeshift bandages. His companion stood by, watching and asking questions of the wounded. In contrast to the doctor, he was dressed very carefully and the knot of his tie was impeccable, as

His boots were as clean and shiny as if he had walked on smooth tarmac rather than dirt tracks. In the light of the hand lantern, which the doctor's assistant sometimes raised and sometimes lowered to help him, his face looked as rigid and lifeless as a wooden carving. As he walked among the wounded in his trousers, the creases of which he had carefully kept from crumpling, and avoided the traces of blood that had mingled with the dust of the floor to form a red excrement, he disturbed the picture Adalbert had made for himself; he made him think of one of the stony grimaces from the crest of the witch's stone, as if it had descended and yet, despite all appearance of life in its face, had preserved the coldness of the stone. Now the men stood before Adalbert. The assistant held up the hand lantern, and the doctor asked, like someone whose business involves asking a lot of questions and for whom every word is therefore important: "What is it?"

"Shoulder and head!"

"Shine!"

With his large red hands, the doctor applied painful grips to Adalbert, which he resisted with clenched teeth.

"It's nothing," said the examiner, "head: flesh wound, shoulder: contusion and dislocation." In a few minutes he had stitched up the laceration on Adalbert's head and pressed his arm into a tight bandage. "You can get up and walk!"

Adalbert got up, and he felt as if he ought to be ashamed of his softness, that he had lain here and considered himself a seriously wounded man when he could stand up and walk. His weakness galled him, and although his legs trembled under him, he tried to walk up and down a few times to test his willpower. But after the fourth crossing of the room he had to sit down on a bench that had just become vacant; the man who had died on it had been carried into the neighbouring dance hall with the other dead.

"You're hurt worse than you think," said the elegant man, stepping up next to Adalbert and looking at him with his cold eyes.

"I say!"

"It often looks completely harmless and the serious consequences only materialise much later."

So that was the comfort the stranger gave the injured. But it matched the grey eyes and the stony face, and something - Adalbert couldn't figure it out himself - reminded him of his father. Despite his dislike of the man, which was expressed in gestures and words of displeasure, he followed his invitation to accompany him outside the house. There they sat and looked over the hill to the railway embankment, where workers were busy clearing away the rubble and repairing the track by torchlight. Black figures swarmed there seemingly without a plan in front of the reddish, trembling circles of light, and in strange ways Adalbert's memory slipped back to the time when his father had brought him into a darkness filled with similarly moving flames and roaring voices. Inside the parlour, a woman was screaming in an incessant, high-pitched tone. Next to Adalbert sat the stranger, silent and dark as a part of the night itself, and his proximity had the effect on him of a premonition of danger.

"Now the relief train will soon arrive and take you back to the city with the others," said the stranger after a long silence, during which the distant shouts of the labourers and the woman's screams were doubly loud.

Adalbert laughed.

"You're laughing? You're a philosopher."

"I'm laughing because I find it strange that I only bought wounds on my head and shoulder with my last money."

"Where did you want to go? Didn't you have a specific plan?"

"No, I didn't have a specific plan! I don't have a goal."

"Allow me! You must know what you want. Only those who have enough money can afford not to know what they want. The others are all slaves to their own ends."

"I have no purpose. I want to get to know the world, get to know as much of it as possible. But not just superficially, but deeper, more penetrating, to the point where you can learn something about its true nature. There are so many things you want to know. Why do we live? Where is it all going? Is death the end?"

"Your skirt says you're a labourer, your words say you're a philosopher and poet. What are you actually?"

Then Adalbert saw a large blooming heap in front of him, completely interwoven with white meadowfoam, golden yellow buttercups and red carnations. The edge was lined with black-green fir trees and in the middle of it stood a slender white birch tree, as if astonished and a little ashamed because it was so alone, its light green top looking towards the white clouds. It seemed to him as if this meadow expressed what he himself did not know how to say about himself.

The red-shrouded windows of the inn let in a dull light that seemed to be coloured by the blood of the wounded inside and slowly seeped down the slope into the darkness. After a while, the voice next to Adalbert began in the darkness: "You said that you live to see the world, but you also said that you have spent your last money on this journey. So how will you realise your wish if you lack the most important thing: the golden bridge to the world, the golden hand to unlock your closed wonders?"

"I will earn money anew through my work."

Now the stranger laughed: "One can see that you are a poet. You believe in fairy tales and have the confidence of unworldly eccentrics. There's only one way to have money, so much money that it's worth talking about, and that's to sell yourself as dearly as possible. Not to sell to labour, because labour is a miser who pays poorly, just enough to keep you from starving. You have to sell yourself to whoever can pay. And for the highest price they can get."

"I don't understand you. Is it allowed to buy people?"

"Who would want to forbid someone who has the money to do so?"

"And who would be interested in buying me?"

"You are a poet. Poets have risen in price since the whole world started writing books."

"A poet? Good! It's ... it's ... who should ... I still don't understand you."

"So now I'm travelling around the world to buy a living poet."

"You?"

"That's right. Me! I offer you a good, comfortable life with everything you could possibly want. You will have the opportunity to see a lot. You will get to know the world as you never could if you defiantly continue to rely on yourself."

"And what do I have to do for it? It's not for nothing ..."

"You must sell yourself to my master lock, stock and barrel. As long as you live, you belong to him, with everything that you will conceive and perhaps one day give to the world. After death, you can do what you like with your immortal soul. Your cherished corpse belongs to Mr Thomas Bezug. But you couldn't care less about that."

"And I shall ... I shall see all these marvellous things clearly - I shall have time to admire the light of day and the dusk of evening. It's true, those who have to work never have time for that. And I will get to know people's lives?"

"More than you'd like."

"And I am completely bound to your master?"

"You are only free in your thoughts, unless he has devised a method to subjugate your thoughts as well."

Adalbert pondered the words of the strange gentleman. What he had heard was the strangest of all the incomprehensible things in the world, and confused him more than any other of his previous experiences. Was it possible to sell himself so completely? But if he did, all obstacles would be removed and he could turn his dreams into reality.

he could advance to the limits of what was achievable and, in possession of the golden sceptre, he would rule the world.

From a distance, a train could be heard approaching, whistling and rattling. The door of the inn flew open, and at the same time the light fell broadly and brightly on the shaky stone steps, over which the stretchers with the wounded were now being lifted down. The porters, who had overdone it on the landlord's liquor, now found the loads too heavy, and cursing and displeased, they began their service with little consideration. They organised themselves into a procession led by the one whose anger was the greatest.

Rudolf Hainx stood upright next to Adalbert Semilasso and held out his hand to him: "Come in, poet! Come with me to my master."

"I'll go with you," said Adalbert, grasping a cold, lean hand in which a strange twitching made all the tendons play, a hand that closed his fingers with a sudden pressure, as if it did not want to release him.

Thomas Bezug gets a son-in-law and buys a living poet

Table of contents

Nowhere did the modest citizen from the neighbourhood behind the cathedral feel more esteem and at the same time a lowering of his own self-esteem than in the part of town that in recent years had drawn ever closer to the large public park to the north. In long streets the great noble houses seemed to move closer, taking the green island into their centre and surrounding it, large as it was, with stone walls, so that their breathing became restless and anxious. The stone eyes of the houses looked indifferently and boredly over the green shoulders of the trees, and with their well-dressed façades, with t h e i r hanging and pasted decorations of scrolls and fruit garlands, with their projections of tin and stucco, they stood there like a court party forced by some incomprehensible whim of the prince to contemplate nature. All the transferred ornamentation, these meagre remnants from better times of taste, these glued-together fragments of Rococo, Baroque and Renaissance revolted against the obtrusive honesty of this park. All the columns and volutes, all the cornices and caryatids, all the plaster flower arrangements, the balconies with their huge bellies, the turrets with their little knobs and flags, you could see that the rustling of the trees down here was extremely distasteful to them; One mocker said he could hear the stone froufrou with which these painted old maids proclaimed their indignation, and another declared that one of them pulled up the balcony like an upturned upper lip, so that the slit of the front door was visible below like a toothless mouth, just as if she wanted to call out *shoking*. But the mockers who took care of the disrespected park were rare in this neighbourhood, were

the exceptions among a chorus of praisers and worshippers. The small bourgeoisie fell silent in awe, for this was where the rich people lived, the factory owners and bankers, the people for whom nothing was impossible, and when they walked in the park on Sundays, they were always drawn to its outermost perimeter, where they could admire the bored grins of the high nobility.

One of these houses was even more distinguished than the others. When the citizens from the neighbourhood behind the cathedral passed by this house, they only dared to whisper. For this was the home of Mr Bezug, the man whose wealth was beyond all comprehension, who owned all these houses around the park, who ruled over most of the neighbouring streets, almost the entire new district, ninety-two houses in all. His factories far back in the smoky neighbourhood of Labour sent out clouds of smoke from a forest of chimneys, and other forests were his too, rustling green forests, almost all the blue heights around, which could be seen from the high tower of his ruling house. The most marvellous things were to be seen in this tower. Maps hung on the walls, showing his vast possessions, his fortune was listed in pigskin folios with locks of gold and silver, and a thick book contained the names of all the labourers he employed, all the businessmen who depended on him. Another smaller book contained the names of all the women he had owned. The leaves of this book were made of silk, its cover was made of a fabric coloured with the juice of the purple snail, and the clasps were set with precious stones. The silk was a gift from the Emperor of China, the purple fabric came from Syria and the clasps were made from agraffes that had once been found in the treasure of Sultan Soliman. He had the power over the fortune and misfortune, indeed over the life and death of hundreds, and it was said of him that he endeavoured to subjugate the whole world to his will. The most marvellous tales were told of his adventures and his successes; gold rushed around him in streams and

gathered in him, as if in an enormous container that collects all the inflows.

There was a murmur among the spectators standing in front of Joseph Hoppe's house of mourning when Mr Hoppe, accompanied by a young man, stepped out of the door and got into his car. The interest in him was almost greater than the interest in the dead Joseph Hoppe. And that was no small thing, because Joseph Hoppe had also been a very rich man, and there were also some very strange stories about him. It was a secret that could be heard quite loudly on the streets and in the pubs that Joseph Hoppe had been involved in some incredibly daring bank robberies about twenty years ago and had laid the foundations of his fortune at that time. He had been one of the most daring of the bank robbers, but he had managed to cover his tracks with such mastery that no magistrate, however clever, could catch him. Although he was tried several times, he was never convicted. By his iron forehead, by his very keen powers of deduction, with which he carried through a once initiated responsibility with criminal logic to its last conclusions, all the traditional cunning of the court persons were destroyed; with his well-played civility, his open face and his already then grey, venerable head, he deceived the jury as if he, an excellent actor, were standing before people to whom all the tricks of the theatre are foreign. He was able to list ten dropped investigations and six acquittals. When he had acquired enough, he went into less dangerous fields and increased his fortune in a short time to such an extent that he began to be mentioned immediately after Thomas Bezug. One had to admit that he was an exemplary husband and family man, and one admired his generosity towards charitable organisations, his joyful giving mood towards the whole world. Now Joseph Hoppe had died, and the whole new neighbourhood followed the next mourners in an endless line of carriages, while the curious crowd, restrained and harassed by guards, followed the

I marvelled at the splendour of the gilded coffin, the nodding plumes of the eight mourning horses, the dignity of the coachman dressed in black silk and the attire of the priests.

The procession made its way through the town to show even those who had not gathered in front of the house of mourning who had died with Joseph Hoppe. The veterans' association, of which the deceased had been an honorary member, could be seen in the procession, and it was impossible to get enough of the firemen's tight posture, the immense mass of black frock coats and the lightly rolling carriages of the distinguished mourners. In one of the small, winding alleyways behind the cathedral there was a courtyard wedged between two low houses, accessible directly from the alleyway, as if it had been a part of the public road that had been cut off and taken over by the greed of the residents. This courtyard was high up on the remains of the former city wall, and the neighbours had all gathered here because they could watch the funeral procession in comfort from down below. The chatter of Mrs Swoboda, the candle-woman from the cathedral, accompanied each carriage and its occupants with a trickle of remarks and exclamations, and she was so completely absorbed, so lost in a pure happiness of satisfied curiosity, that she did not notice how the ringlets from the Trinity cobbler pinned a dirty paper to the corner of her shawl. The frame-maker, who also stuffed birds and grew passion flowers, found it difficult to answer her, for he was stammering more than usual today with excitement. For the old men and women who crowded around the rotten wall of the courtyard, this glamorous procession down there, this procession to the realm of death, was a celebration, and the children, who got up to all sorts of mischief behind the old people's backs, felt no less festive. What the people of this neighbourhood got to see of the goings-on of the distinguished society was limited to the ceremonial appearances, the displays on special occasions when it is customary to allow the public to participate in the events. Now they crowded round so as not to miss anything, and all at once the hunchback shouted

The upholsterer's ribs were pressed hard against the sharp edge of the wall. Everyone was outraged. "Quiet," Mrs Swoboda shouted, "the Lord reference ... the Lord reference looks up."

Bezug said to his companion down in the car: "Old junk up there behind the cathedral. That should all be torn down."

"They have little respect for the past and for historical memories."

"That's right! You're right: I have no respect for them." -

Joseph Hoppe's body in its gilded coffin enjoyed the honour of being escorted to the grave by all the participants in the procession. None of the carriages moved off to the left or right into one of the side streets, none of the clubs disappeared inconspicuously and cheerfully into a conveniently located pub after a short appointment, as was usually the case; and when the coffin was lifted from the carriage by six honourable veterans, everyone crowded round to see the mourning family. The green iridescent plumes of the veterans nodded in time, and the coffin moved on their shoulders through the gateway into the cemetery. Although the representatives of the press present endeavoured to show their own emotion in the vicinity of Joseph Hoppe's family, they paid careful attention to the mourners and the associations and scribbled their remarks in notebooks or on cuffs. Now the crowd stood like a wall around the open grave, and the clergyman raised his voice in a hymn to the noble humanity of the deceased. He combined snippets from older sermons with lively phrases that he had coined and honed especially for this purpose, and did not fail to pause at appropriate points to give space to the sobs of the crowd. The image of the deceased rose higher and higher; the gems of virtue with which he embellished his memory were ever more brilliant; the gloriole above his head became ever brighter. The Amen concluded the speech, like a seal on a deed, with which the deceased is completely assured of heaven; and the quiet prayer, which the clergyman spoke with upturned eyes, gathered all devout feelings into a gentle conclusion. Then the clods rumbled. After the

family, Mr Bezug was the first to take the spade and, throwing earth into the grave three times, said: "Let the earth be light for you."

But when he **g o t** into the car with his companion, he said: "Swindle!" and then, after giving the coachman his orders: "So, Doctor, and now to our business."

"I prefer to be completely undisturbed during this discussion."

"As you wish. Theodor, let's go!"

In the silence that the two men maintained until they reached Mr Bezug's house, they gathered themselves as if for an impending battle. Doctor Hecht drew all his energy from the hidden sources of strength, and Mr Bezug prepared himself to calmly reject every attack, every uncomfortable demand. Tense to the extreme, they left the car and climbed the stairs to the tower room. The doctor found it difficult to maintain his equanimity in this strange atmosphere of a house filled with strong smells and colourful wonders. As often as he walked through these endless halls, as often as he lifted the heavy curtains of precious fabrics by hand, as often as he heard the tinkling of the mechanical musical mechanisms, his strength plummeted and his hands began to tremble. Sometimes he would sneak past a precious piece of jewellery standing seemingly unnoticed in a corner and could hardly resist his desire to take it. Sometimes he would hurl one of the old Venetian glass vases to the ground to dance on the crunching debris. His instincts awoke, flared up and could hardly be tamed, his senses became confused at the sight of this abundance and whipped up his desires to crave the same abundance. He was always on the lookout for traces of his daughter Bezugs, as icy cold and beautiful as one of the hated and beloved Venetian glass vases, as fine as a cobweb like the fabrics of Indian artists, who had only a commonplace smile and a few fleeting words for Hecht. Finally, the spirit of these rooms filled with wicked luxury and this slender woman became one to him, and he could no longer desire one without the other.

As he climbed the stairs to the tower behind Bezug, he endeavoured to look neither left nor right, so as not to lose anything of his collection; but he could not prevent himself from entering the tower room less firmly and confidently than he had intended.

Several telegrams lay on the table, whose inlaid ebony top, in which gold and ivory had been combined, showed Danae's devotion to the golden rain. The woman's beautiful, ivory-white body was almost covered with the ugly, square-folded papers. Only a part of her breast shone through, and then some of the round golden coins, which burst forth as if from the womb of the night with sudden, bright flashes. The whole story seemed to be reduced here under the covering papers to its brutal basic elements: Flesh and gold; and more clearly than in the fully visible work of art, the essence of the purchase was expressed in this mutilation. Around the edge of the table ran a ribbon in which satyrs chased after fleeing nymphs, the recurring movements of running and chasing gave the conclusion the impression of a hurrying restlessness, a repulsive greed; the circular closure indicated the endless duration of the chase. Above the surface, a ray of the low autumn sun had erected the end pillar of a bridge whose arch seemed to lead out of the window, beyond the city into the evening. At that moment the doctor felt that his endeavour was so foolish, so hopeless, that he wished himself away from here and looked longingly after the sunbeam.

In the meantime, Bezug had approached the table and picked up the telegrams. He opened one after the other and, after a cursory glance, threw them back down without making a move. He only stopped at the last one, read it again more carefully and then put it in his pocket, muttering: "Well, finally!" Then he lit a cigar, handed the mosaic box to his guest and sat down in a chair: "Well?"

The doctor had succeeded in forcing himself to strengthen his will. He found the cornerstones of his character unshaken: his tenacity in the pursuit of a goal, his tenacious cunning, his covetous cheekiness, and he built himself up on them. Now he stood in the holy of holies, of which fairy-tale rumours circulated, at the beginning of the scene, which he had rehearsed a hundred times in all its nuances so as not to fail at any sudden turn. Once he had overcome his confusion at the heavy, oppressive splendour of this room, at the domineering majesty of its austere colours and at the walls adorned with trophies of a hundred great victories, he felt strong again. As if in battle, he stepped in front of Bezug, who was reclining in an armchair whose arms were adorned with snakes, and struck the first blow: "Our business begins with my asking you to give me your daughter Elisabeth in marriage."

While Bezug watched the blue smoke of his cigar, which interrupted the sun bridge arch with swirling restlessness, his hands played on the arms of his armchair, with his legs stretched out and his stomach protruding, he lay almost horizontally and said, the cigar between his teeth: "If I don't have you transported out, young man, it's only because you amuse me. I want to tell you something. You are the illegitimate child of a major. Your mother was a canteen-keeper's daughter and is now a tobacconist on the corner of Brunnengasse and Rittergasse, running a servants' agent's business on the side. The old woman's livelihood is meagre, for you contribute nothing to it; on the contrary, until recently, before you got the job as a suppleant, you were lying on her pocket. But it is our right to take what we can get. I don't think I can blame you for that. I am only telling you this so that you can see how great your audacity is. You went to grammar school under the hardships of your mother, and it is said that your abilities in all scientific subjects caused a sensation. Then you studied and, I am assured, learnt more about books than the world. With your knowledge you now stood

There, with your hands hanging down and your head bowed, because you didn't know how to go about forcing success. Or was it because you were waiting for something better to come along than the miserable way out of a job? In the end, you had to be grateful to chance, which granted you the miserable position of an assistant. There is nothing at all exciting about your career; it is of the ordinary type from beginning to end. You see that I know your past so well as to be able to predict your future: it will be just like the past, a slow and arduous upward climb without any surprises, without any particular events that might astonish you. What do you have to say to that?"

"I'm asking you for your daughter."

With the expression of a man who is immensely amused by something he should be taking seriously, Bezug straightened up a little to look the young man in the face. He made no effort to play hide-and-seek, and in the twinkling of his eyes, the contemptuous flaring of his nostrils and the lowering of the tips of his moustache, as if through a shop window, he showed all the expressions of contemptuous astonishment. It flickered in the empty spaces around his eyes, which with their dull grey gave the impression of salt lakes in the middle of the steppe, it twitched in the bushes above his thin lips, and finally Mr. Bezug slapped his thighs with both hands, throwing back his upper body at the same time: "Bravo, bravo, you are a brave man, Herr Doktor, I like that! You are the most impudent man I have ever met."

"Oh, please!"

"Yes, sir! You amuse me ... really! I tell you that you are nothing, a miserable teacher, a beggar, that I can crush you with one push, that I only have to wave and you are lying on the street outside, without bread like a vagabond, and you answer me - ."

"Give me your daughter!"

This was the moment of highest tension, the moment in which the further course of the scene had to be decided, where success teetered on a razor's edge. Doctor Hecht had certainly hoped to get this far, to this point where he was finally forced to take the thrice-repeated demand seriously, but if he had dared to think further in his design from then on, a furious whirlwind had swept his hopes and ideas away. He had finally refrained from visualising this storm in more detail, and in his preparation had only begun again beyond this roar, this shouting, stamping and tugging, assuming that perhaps he would survive it after all. Now he looked at the wall clock, above the dial of which a large, black vulture was beating its wings slowly in time with the pendulum, as if it were time itself, with its crooked beak, fangs ready to grab and tear, and glowing eyes, waiting for victims. Three ... four ... five blows - and the screaming still stopped, nobody grabbed him by the chest, and he didn't hear a chair being thrown to the floor. Six ... seven ... eight ... nine wing beats of time and still nothing ... Hecht could no longer hold on to himself, turned his head and saw Bezug looking at him with a gaze that burned like red-hot ore. Under this gaze he melted as if in the fire of a blast furnace, melted away and felt the lust of a complete downfall. But Bezug looked away from him, took the spell of this terrible, cold and yet searing gaze from him and let him come to himself. What was that? Had the crisis been overcome and the terrible moment passed, was the mute stare of Bezug, his thoughtful silence, supposed to signify the success of the attack? Two thick, bloated hands with brown liver spots lay on the snakes of the armrest, as if they wanted to stroke the green iridescent heads. Under the pulled-up sleeves began a whitish arm rounded by fat pads, its skin reminiscent of the colour of day-shy animals that dwell in depths like grotto elms. In the half-turned face, the eyes were like salt lakes, but lakes that suddenly, through an adventurous play of nature, had all

Turning water into molten lava, bubbling and swelling at the edges. They lay in a strangely empty part of the face that stretched around them like a desert. Not a muscle lived in this desert, not the slightest nerve twitched, and even the play of light and shadow seemed dead in this completely smooth and motionless expanse between the bushes of the upper lip and the rising bulge of the hairless eyebrows. Between lifeless, never blinking lids, the eyes lay like grey pools, changed only by fire in their depths, but never by the bright wonders of the sky. The vulture above the wall clock had been flapping its wings for a while, and Hecht had given up counting the beats, becoming more and more certain the longer the silence lasted.

"Now, my friend," Bezug began, his thick fingers groping at the emerald eyes of the snake heads, at the scales of green-tinted copper and the protruding forked tongues of red coral, "tell me what you are offering me in return."

Doctor Hecht had arrived on solid ground after a desperate fall through layers of clouds, after a flight through fog, grabbed an armchair, pulled him over and sat down opposite him: "Allow me."

Two equal parties were about to negotiate with each other, two businessmen, one of whom was at a height achieved through experience and the habit of victory, the other of whom was fighting his first and decisive battle; a battle for which he was equipped with cold blood and a will of steel.

"I assume," said Bezug, "that you are not insane and that you will therefore have something to offer me if you come with such an outrageous request. You have spoken of a bargain. Will you tell me what business it is? But first I would like to tell you - if you do not already know - that among the rejected suitors for my daughter I have thirteen dukes, three reigning princes and two American princes.

billionaires, not to mention lesser names or fortunes."

"I am well aware of this and I also know that you want to bring about a world war of money in which only one person will ultimately prevail alongside you. You will give your daughter to the strongest of your opponents in order to bring about an absolute government of billions, a despotism of wealth, which will remain in your family. What I am offering you makes this struggle, the division of power, the recognition of someone equally strong unnecessary and, with the most perfect victory, secures you the most perfect power, which no other can equal. No one will rebel against you, the whole earth, as far as it is inhabited by men, will become subject to you, and above all the supremacy of the state you will have to be recognised as the emperor of this earth."

"I like your introduction. It shows perspicacity and an understanding of my plans. I await your comments."

"It's just a matter of making a commodity that is absolutely necessary for life, a property that was previously common to all, your exclusive property, which the others now have to buy from you."

Bezug recognised the correctness of the thought by leaving his outstretched position: "And this common property of all ... Ah, you know it? You have taken the same path as I have in long ..." he remained silent.

"This common property of all, which you must seize, is the air. Or rather, the oxygen of the air necessary for breathing. No law has yet prevented you from making the oxygen of the air your monopoly, for until now this possibility has been beyond the reach of the legislators. It will be your task to seize this hitherto common good, of which there is no ownership, before the law can prevent you from doing so; for once you are its master, only the law is what you yourself want to make valid, and the states are just as much in your hands as the individuals. No one may want anything other than what you authorise him to want."

The wings of the time vulture beat heavily in the silence. The room grew wide and receded into the distant distance. Bezug stood up and stepped to the window, stretching out both hands over the city and the green park in the depths, with a gesture of greed that made his thick fingers tremble. The sleeves of his skirt stretched far back from his whitish arms with the skin of grotto elms. "And you know the way to it?" he said without turning round.

"It is basically just as simple as this idea itself. You know that the existence of the right mixture in the atmosphere is based on the activity of plants. Plants absorb carbon from the air and exhale oxygen to renew themselves. If we succeed in changing the living conditions of the plants in such a way that they breathe out no or only very little oxygen, this absolutely necessary renewal is missing. The available supply must be used up in a short time by the incessant activity of fifteen hundred million human lungs - not counting the lungs of animals. If this process is accelerated by means of enormous devices that extract oxygen from the air, you will soon reach your goal of having made an indispensable element of life your own."

"Your idea is bold, but I doubt that it can be realised.

It is impossible to change the living conditions of plants."

"Until recently, we Europeans thought what was said about Indian fakirs was impossible. Now science has convinced itself that there are people who stop the functions of life at will, who do not digest, do not breathe and yet do not perish. My discovery means something similar for plants. Plunged into an even deeper sleep than that of winter, they cease their activity. The oxygen released by the evaporation of water is captured by our apparatus and the formation of new water is interrupted. We change the atmospheric air, the weather, the water conditions on the whole earth, life itself. We stop the respiration of plants, we dry up rivers, lakes and oceans, we s n a t c h all oxygen through monstrous oxidation processes,

We bind him by rusting whole mountains of iron and destroy him in immeasurably large incineration processes until mankind, to whom our project has been a mystery until now, recognises the terrible meaning and, breathing heavily, panting, driven by unbearable fear, begs for life at your feet. This is how I make you master of the earth!"

Then, still looking silently out of the window, he added: "And demand nothing but your daughter Elisabeth and my share in your power, a share that consists only in the enjoyment of the goods. The exercise of power shall be reserved for you. Even in the remote islands of the South Seas and the deserts of Inner Africa, you shall be feared as God and be worthy of interest. You shall have the power to give and take life, and it shall depend on your will whether the face of the earth changes or not. On your countenances will hang hosts of prophets, charlatans of science, who will claim that they can predict the upheavals of your whim and that they have found the laws of your variability. You will be studied, observed, like the cracked skin of the moon or the heat pustules of the sun, for you will take the place of these gods. According to your will it will be decided whether you, who will be more powerful than Jehovah, Vishnu, Zeus, Baal or Wotan, must be sacrificed or whether it may live. When your face darkens, the world will tremble as if the globe were being torn from its hinges; when you wave your hand in a friendly manner, everything will blossom and sing. At your discretion, you will show people the silver steps of the ladder to heaven or the red fiery hounds of hell, for you, like God, are incomprehensible in your decisions and utterances. Nothing can prevent you from having altars erected all over the earth and forcing people to worship you; as slow-working as God's means often are, as long-suffering as his patience is, so that the impudent sinner mocks you with laughter, so swift and terrible will your punishments be. Through the enormous air pumps, through the huge machines for removing oxygen, a whole city will be destroyed,

a province, an empire will soon be brought to despair. With bulging eyes, panting breath, beside themselves with horror, the masses will rush before you and, as they tear the clothes from your struggling chest and clutch at your constricted throat with their hands, you will demand to know the name of the one who aroused your wrath. One word from you and the rebel will be hounded to death by the angry brothers, torn to pieces and his remains will be burnt on your altars. Think these possibilities through to the end. Nowhere will you encounter a barrier. There is no limit to your power, no end to your glory - but that which is common to all men. If you want to ascend a throne, no emperor may deny you his, if you want to create the spectacle of a famine, of a gruesome death of hundreds of thousands, if you want to feel all the splendour and cruelty of a force of nature, of a destructive element, people will fall before you like flies. Two states hate each other and take up arms. Armies raise their flags and march against each other. But you raise your finger and the battle that has already begun must be stopped. The whole earth lies within the reach of your arm. All that is called consideration and morality may fall away from you. You will no longer need to offer clods of earth and murmurs of sympathy to old scoundrels like this Joseph Hoppe. You can openly despise him, and you will say: he was a scoundrel, but not one of those who can be admired. You will no longer be bound to the authorisation of a high authority in order to lay down whole districts, to prove your hatred of all history, to completely erase the past of an individual or a people. Today I saw your annoyance at the clutter of the neighbourhood behind the cathedral. When you have become the god of the earth, no one will be able to prevent you from digging tunnels under these old houses, filling them with tonnes of melinite and blowing up this district along with the cathedral. If you want to be shameless, you will be shameless, if you desire a woman, it is as if she were already yours, and if you have the powers

If you manage your body wisely, a small library will grow from the volumes with the names of the defeated women. I am at the end; my imagination is not enough to even hint at what you will fulfil. Reality will be richer and brighter than all dreams."

Bezug turned round and approached Hecht. The fire of the deep hissed in the grey pools of his eyes and, leaning on the table to hide the trembling of his hands, he said, "You're the most dangerous crook there ever was."

"After you, Mr Bezug, after you."

Thick fingers lay over the white body of Danae and it looked as if he wanted to grasp and knead the flesh of this body: "You are talking to me about success, about the effects. Now talk about the ways and means!"

"Above all, it will be necessary to seize the earth's vegetation as far as possible. You must buy all the forests and steppes, all the fields and meadows, or at least make their owners dependent on you. In the meantime, establish a consortium of large landowners for the rational cultivation of the earth's surface. This is a matter of perseverance, cunning and the power of money. Are you strong enough to do this?"

"I'm strong enough to do it!"

"Good. In the meantime, we are building the machines to remove oxygen from the atmospheric air. We claim to be pursuing chemical-technical purposes and can be sure of the support of all states."

"This is also feasible."

"Then you will take over the leadership of your consortium of large landowners, and then my task will begin to stop the plants from breathing."

"But when they find out what we want, when they crush us with laws, when the mob attacks and kills us."

"We will not be brought down or slain, because humanity as a whole is blind and trusting. And as soon as only one part of our plan has succeeded, it has definitely succeeded. How we bring the plants into a state of rigor mortis is our secret, and how we bring them back to life is our secret."

"Our secret?"

"That is, Mr Bezug ... my secret!"

From the wall clock, the vulture flapped its slow wings and cawed out the sixth hour with a hoarse cry, as if it had been disturbed in its nest, as if it were outraged by an intruder. Bezug pressed his fingers more firmly against the white body of Danae. Then he said:

"I give you my daughter Elisabeth."

Doctor Hecht stood up: "So we are agreed, father-in-law," and stepped towards him to embrace him, but at that moment he was frightened by the eyes of Bezugs, as if he saw an impending danger in their dull grey. He stopped and bowed: "You will call me as soon as you think it is time to begin."

"We need each other, Doctor Hecht."

"Yes, none without the other." Then he left the tower room.

Bezug circled the table, looked out of the window a few more times over the roofs of the city, gazed into the green island of the park and finally began to wander through his house. In a hall whose jasper columns opened onto the colourful background of a park, Elisabeth sat almost buried in the white polar bearskin of a rocking chair, holding her hands under her head and looking up at the ceiling, from which opalescent light fittings hung down on strings of pearls. She sat among the golden tendrils of ornaments twined around the jasper pillars, which seemed to stretch out from the tangled shrubbery as if they had their roots there and had only turned to gold when they touched this house; like everything to do with it, they seemed to have given up their nature to submit to a barbaric triumph of gold. Elisabeth heard her father coming, but did not lift

her head. Only her knees twitched under the tight, taut white skirt.

"Listen," said Bezug, who had walked straight towards her, "you will have to prepare for the fact that you will soon be getting married."

Elisabeth seemed to count the drops of pearl strings with an unwavering gaze: "I hope you made a good deal!"

"Only time will tell."

"So you're not sure from the start? I'm surprised, because I know you're usually careful."

"Especially with the big deals, you have to take a chance."

"You're right."

"Aren't you curious to know the name of your groom?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because I don't need to know it until it's time."

Beneath the dark hair, the intertwined hands loosened themselves and lay together again on the lap of the white skirt; a dark, soft glow seemed to emanate from them, a kind of nocturnal lustre that they had brought with them from the hair. This gesture of a nameless boredom, a reluctance heightened to the point of weariness, a royal nonchalance towards all experience, was something Bezug could not resist. With clenched teeth and closed mouth, the bushes of his moustache bristling above him, he withdrew. He wandered through his house again, brushing past the marble statues in his collection of antiquities so close that he almost knocked a small Hermes off its pedestal, and finally went into the park, which had become very quiet from the autumn. The wonders of art had been joined here by the most burning colourful wonders of death, and a little tree stood very close to the white marble wall, so that it looked as if its red leaves were sticking to the cold stone - glaring, rutting cries from the soul of a child just awakened to sex. From the tangle of his thoughts sticking together, Bezug searched for the one

or the other. Otherwise he had divided everything neatly into registers and, like Caesar, was able to think of seven things at once because he carefully preserved their order. Now his order had been destroyed, his registers were jumbled up, his thoughts and desires roared confusedly in new furrows that they had torn up violently. This time, too, he did not pass a door he usually stopped at and listened to the chattering and babbling, the chanting interrupted by laughter. But none of it penetrated below the surface of his consciousness, and the pain that usually set in here was absent.

He remembered that at such moments the heroes of plays on the stage realise their situation through monologues, but he searched in vain for the liberating words. When he wandered into the reception room, he found two gentlemen waiting for him. Rudolf Hainx had brought Adalbert Semilasso with him. One day had been enough to dress the poet for his new life. Now Rudolf Hainx put his merits in the brightest light. This was no ordinary poet, not one of those lamentable, battle-weary people who, like battered cart horses, only yearn for the stable. He was not a starving man who, in the face of despair, only had the path left to walk that Hainx had shown him, but an upright man who still had strength left in him. He was also different from others of his name in the sense that he had not yet given himself away to the public. No book of his had yet been read, his verses had neither been praised nor censured, he had neither been lifted to heaven nor trodden into the abyss. He entered the service with all the dawn of his talent and wanted nothing more than to be able to unfold with him. The trombone wailing of the ecstatic crowd was as foreign to him as the yellow hissing of envy and the cawing of gloating. Unaccustomed and unspoilt, he was ready to experience his first successes under his rule and to offer his wreaths to his Lord.

After this long speech, which Adalbert Semilasso had listened to with great astonishment, Bezug laughed a little and asked: "So the man has

"He has written nothing, composed nothing, and yet you bring him to me, my dear Hainx, and claim that he is a poet. How do you know that with such certainty?"

"He told me the story of his life. And it is so marvellous that it could only have been experienced by a poet, that he who experienced it must be a poet." And now Hainx repeated what Adalbert had told him about his life in the forest, about Barbara, about the depths in the rock and the raptures of light over colourful forest meadows, about his adventures in the city. Adalbert listened in amazement, and his youth had never seemed so strange to him as now, when he heard a strange man tell another strange man about it. She moved away from him. She appeared in a different light. In this room, the unheard-of splendour of which was so confusing beyond all measure that everything seemed to flow around it in coloured streaks, this story was like a familiar melody. But it was incomprehensible as a melody, nothing real, nothing tangible, nothing to which one could express one's trust and gratitude.

"I'm pleased with you, Hainx," said Bezug, "you've found something quite apart, a sensation that's in the right place in my house."

Then he turned to Semilasso and shook his hand: "I welcome you here. I want you to see how good a master I am to my loyal servants. Isn't that right, Hainx?"

Hainx bowed his head. When he raised his head again, his gaze was dull and shrouded his thoughts. "Have you prepared everything, Hainx?" continued Bezug.

"Of course! The contract is ready to be signed!"

"Then let us go and make our covenant, Mr Semilasso, the covenant between a prince of the spirit and a miserable commander of money. Go ahead ... I beg you ... here .."

And while Adalbert drew back a curtain and opened the door he had been directed to, he whispered to Hainx: "The great

Ceremony, understood, that has the greatest effect on such children ..."

Through the house, whose splendour impetuously invaded Adalbert, a path led into the depths. They passed through the portico, where Elizabeth was still seated in the frame of two jasper columns, with the garden in the background, which was now already dusky, so that she seemed to rest on the white polar bearskin as on a cloud. Adalbert, who adored the beauty, bowed before her and saw nothing of the quietly twitching astonishment of her gaze and the movement of her knees under her white tennis skirt. Chambers sparkling with rubies and garnets were passed through. Then came rooms that presented the wonders of Indian nights in the green light of emeralds illuminated from within. In other rooms, where amethysts reigned with their cool violet colour, everything seemed cold and icy as if under the rays of the northern lights. Now carbuncle stones were burning again. Now topazes and rock crystals enveloped the hikers in a mixture of white and yellow clouds. Other rooms seemed to shimmer like the inside of milky opals. All the colours flowed through each other, united to form new bundles of rays without names, striving from the mixture towards clarification and purity, finding new relationships again and changing from twilight to bright light with every step.

It went down deeper. Granite walls ran alongside, like implacable sentinels whose job it is to remind us of our captivity at every step. Above their heads were bulges on which the monogram Bezugs was repeated in white stones. The same intricate letters broke out of niches full of lurking darkness, they were found on the smoothly polished porphyry columns, they finally joined together on the walls to form elongated rows of ornaments and sank down to the floor to scatter a strange mosaic over the rocks. These two letters T and B, repeated over and over again, joined together, coming one after the other, imposing themselves from everywhere, finally unsettled the whole room like a swarming army of white animals.

It went down deeper. The walls gave way before the bare rock, a labyrinth of tunnels spread out, cut into the rock itself. The monogram reference showed the way. The incandescent lamps dangling from weak wires became rarer and rarer, the stone sprouted the bloom of light. The twilight was getting deeper. Night was already creeping in from the side tunnels. Then Bezug came to a standstill in front of a rock face that blocked the way. As Adalbert watched the guide begin to touch the rock with his pointed finger, he heard the crunching of rocks sliding over each other and a hole gaped in place of the wall through which they entered. There was a pale light in the room, a pale, sick light that seemed to have nothing in common with the day or with the artificial light sources used by humans. All around the walls were iron coffers, blocks of uncoined silver piled up, and in the midst of the treasures sat a figure, a monstrous giant, made entirely of gold. Adalbert Semilasso trembled. Wandering through the corridors had heightened his fear along with his anticipation, and the fact that he was alone here underground with the two strangers and an incomprehensible popanz inflamed his imagination of danger, the imagination of a man still closely connected with nature. He saw the human in a hideous distortion, more sinister than all the hauntings of the witch-stone, more ghastly even than the wonder of the old forest snake. He saw this head, which was not a head after all, but only a broad mouth with jaws like pincers, the torso that closed on this head without a neck, the clumsy elephant legs, whose toes curled upwards like beaks, and the long monkey hands, at the end of which hung enormous fists, heavy hammers on a thin handle that seemed too weak for their force.

In front of the golden giant was a small table with writing utensils and paper.

While Adalbert was still standing there staring at the monstrous pop-tank, hundreds of little flames suddenly sprang up on the walls. They seemed to be arranged in a meandering pattern, flickering and

flamed, as if they were moved by the same cool breeze that now swept over Adalbert's face. At the same time, a soft, gentle, sweet music began, flattering and wooing, which seemed to kiss Adalbert's lips.

Rudolf Hainx stood behind Adalbert and watched with a mocking smile as the naïve apparatus began to have an effect on the young man. He could see it in the shrugging of his shoulders, in the involuntary movements of his elbows, in the pallor of his cheek, which he now recognised as he leaned forward a little.

Bezug nodded to his confidant. And this nod said that the master was satisfied. "This idol," Bezug said after a while in a solemn voice, "comes from the excavations in an Assyrian city. It has been preserved from all the robberies of the centuries to find its way into my palace. I don't know where it could have found a more worthy place than in the cellars of this building. It serves me as a symbol. Please note that this inanimate sculpture bears the belief of countless generations in the power of gold, that millions of people have prostrated themselves before it to honour the idea that money is the ruler of this earth. This is the oldest of all religions, the one that commands the most reverence and at the same time brings the most practical benefits. It is therefore not without deep connections that I take this idol as a witness to the contracts with which I bring new adherents to this religion."

Adalbert Semilasso heard the murmur of words. The peculiarities he encountered here had made him self-conscious and paralysed his will. His mind, which was inclined to all things fantastic, was touched by relatives and surrendered unconditionally. The idol in front of him rose to a gigantic height, seemed to push against the vault, shattering it and towering into the darkness of the universe in eerie grandeur.

"Sign it!" said Rudolf Hainx and led Adalbert to the small table. A piece of written paper lay there in the bright circle of light from an electric lamp. A golden pen lay across the inkwell.

"It's the contract," said Thomas Bezug. "Sign it! Hainx has already told you the terms."

Adalbert hesitated for a moment. An old legend came to his mind that he had heard from his mother. The story of a devil's covenant in which a pact was signed in blood. He would not have been at all surprised if he had been asked to do so now. But the pen Hainx handed him was dipped in ordinary ink.

He started and signed with slow, large strokes, just as he used to paint his name.

"We can catch up on the legal formalities tomorrow," said Bezug, "they are no longer relevant."

Then they left, the Sanctuary of Gold closed behind them, and the white name signs of reference guided them through the labyrinth of rocks, gliding along the granite walls and leading them back to the palace.

Bezug dismissed his companions and climbed up to the tower room. Night had fallen. The black vulture above the wall clock looked up at the lord of the tower with a bent neck and whipped the darkness with slow, steady wing beats. A light flashed on. From a wall cupboard, which fitted into the ornate panelling of ebony inlaid with silver, he took a carafe of ruby glass and poured a slender, small goblet, a miracle of old Florentine goldsmithery, full of a green liquid. He drank and his dull eyes began to glow. With a quick step, he stepped onto the gallery of the tower and looked out over the dark, rustling island of the park and the roofs of the city. There lay the piece of the world that was to feel its power first and foremost, and it seemed as if it hardly dared to breathe under the gaze of its master, as if it had extinguished all its lights in fear of the lurking danger. Only from the neighbourhood behind the cathedral, high above all the roofs, came a bright, unmoving light, a watching, calm eye that met the gaze of reference without flinching, a clear, safe light that knew no flickering. While all the houses ducked under Bezugs's feet,

a man of equal strength stood up opposite him and looked towards him, and it was as if the small, modest houses of the old neighbourhood had stopped at him and, stirred by him, rose up in resistance. He stared for a long time at the light in Eleagabal Kuperus' house, and tried not to blink before this eye that seemed to watch over the city. "Ah," he said, raising his fist towards the black ridge of the cathedral hill, in the centre of which the light sat like the carbuncle in the magic shield. "Ah, I'll deal with you too!" But then he was seized by a sudden rage that struggled to find an expression. And when a piece of mortar detached itself from the wall with a soft crack and rolled at his feet, he seized it and hurled it against the still light, as if to extinguish it with this throw, while he uttered a cry which, carried far over the dormant city, confused the dreams of the sleepers and frightened their wanderings in the poppy fields of the night.

From the doorman Palingenius

[Table of contents](#)

Heinrich Palingenius, the tower keeper, lived with his daughter Regina and old Johanna on the higher of the two towers of the cathedral above the old smoky neighbourhood. He "lived" there because, in the manner of owls and crows, he had known how to make his nest inaccessible, an eyrie into which - with a single exception - he allowed no stranger. Just as he demanded of the world that it should not disturb his peace, so he had no desire to descend from his tower, and thirteen years had passed since he had last been down in the city. At that time he accompanied his wife's coffin out, and when he returned, gloomy and without a tear, he counted the steps to the height of his eyrie. Above the hundredth step he painted a black cross on the wall and from then on his kingdom extended down to this cross. Up to this hundredth step the surf of the world was still going on, the noise of the street, the tinkling of the electric railway, the clamour of the market, which, although muffled by the quieter quarter around the cathedral, nevertheless carried the breath of the city across this zone i n t o a steady, strong surge. From the hundredth step, however, the roar became a hum and at the very top it was no different from the murmur of a distant sea that no longer has the power to shake the calm. Since then, the tower had been restored inside and out, and the masons had taken great pains to whitewash the eerie cross, whose meaning was unknown to them. But when they had finished the work, Heinrich Palingenius went down to the borders of his kingdom and renewed his boundary marker so that it stood out even more brightly than before against the white wall. When his daughter and old Johanna went down to the town to see the

mother's grave in the city's large cemetery, the tower keeper followed them with his telescope. Through the tube screwed to the parapet of the tower gallery, Palingenius watched the road leading from the maze of suburbs to the cemetery. The two men he had lost in the alleyways below were bound to reappear there. And the moment they stepped into the telescope's field of vision, the two turned their heads and greeted the old man with a nod and a wave of the hand. Heinrich Palingenius nodded and waved back, although he knew that nothing of his greeting could be seen. Then he followed them with the telescope, accompanied them on their way to the cemetery, saw them pass the inn in front of which the farmers' carts always stood, saw the carts of the electric railway roll past them and went with them to the white house of the gravedigger, under whose archway they disappeared; then he saw them emerge again from between graves, walk along the streets of the dead and finally stop in front of a grave. He knew exactly whether the lilacs were already blooming over this grave, whether the flowers on the hill were beautiful, whether the leaves were dancing over the simple iron cross and whether the snow was not too heavy. Those returning did not need to tell him anything. But Regina never failed to approach her father and kiss him on the forehead with warm lips. She brought him the greeting of the dead.

Heinrich Palingenius loved his daughter and old Johanna with the great love that he could no longer give to his wife. But besides them, he also loved his tower, just as one loves the home one has never left. How one loves the earth from which one has emerged. He had lived up here for as long as he could remember, and his earliest memories saw him scanning the horizon alongside his father to see if there was any fire threatening the property of the people below. He felt as if he were a creature of the tower, and Regina and old Johanna were also surrounded by their common kinship. The history of the tower was a piece of his own past. He had collected all the records that could be found about it, the brief hints of the

Chronicles, the legends associated with its construction, of the bet that cost the master builder his life, of the ox that was walled into the foundations alive in order to give the tower stability and whose whimpering could still be heard in the stormy nights of the autumn equinox, of the dutiful tower keeper who, in the sleep of a heavy drunkenness, had failed to report a fire that spread through the night and reduced half the town to rubble. He was laid bound in the clock case, where he was seized and crushed by the enormous wheels with their fierce teeth, crushed by the heavy weights. His broken bones and torn flesh had been thrown down from the tower and the dogs had fought over the morsels. But on Epiphany night you could still hear the breaking of the bones in the clock case, the rattling of the martyred man, while the clock continued its steady, heavy chime. The secrets of the bells were also recorded in this book, from which Palingenius used to read aloud on winter evenings: of the great Susanna, who had been baptised in blood, of the Victoria bell, which was cast from the metal of captured Swedish cannons.

At that time the tower had been even higher than it is today, and it must have looked out powerfully with its high helmet, if even its stump still rose so proudly above the city. But the Swedish cannons, the same ones that then had to give their metal for the Victoria bells, had also shot down the proud helmet and perforated the walls after they had taken down the twin brother of the tower almost to the nave of the cathedral. After the victory, work on its construction began again, but money had become scarce during the Thirty Years' War, the builders ran out of breath, fires licked at its ashlar three times, and even if they could not bring down the tower itself, they destroyed part of what had already been built. All this was recorded in Heinrich Palingenius' large folio volume on the tower, and the builders' accounts, which

Plans for the restoration were included with each item as if in an archive kept with the utmost care.

A strange custom gave the tower a strange appearance. Whenever one of the canons died, one of the cubes on the outside of the tower was painted white. Now the tower with its white cubes looked like a large box whose surfaces were formed by enormous chessboards. When Heinrich Palingenius had rung the train bell and after three days had rung the thunder of the great Susanna for the deceased, he took the liberty of crawling out onto the swaying board himself and, holding on to the rocking sides from a window hatch, whitewashed the cuboids of the new dead man with a coarse brush. He devoted faithful attention to this work. Nothing could equal the quiet melancholy with which he looked down from his seat at the jumbled walls below him, which seemed to sink to the earth in a flight of plunging lines, dragging the memory of all these hundreds of dead down with them, as if even this indestructible building did not give an eternity of remembrance. This, too, was written in the book of the tower: who all the dead were for whose sake the ashlar of the tower had been whitewashed. All their names, honours and merits were listed here; and behind each of them a little black cross said the same thing, the word of the common fate of all, so that it was as if one were reading off a list, a litany, to which the same thing was always answered in a monotonous voice. Then t h e r e w a s a number next to it, indicating which cuboid belonged to the deceased. Heinrich Palingenius knew this list so well that, awakened from sleep, he would have immediately named the corresponding name for each number and the number for each name.

But besides the tower, there was one other thing that filled him. Heinrich Palingenius was a genius of mechanics. During long winter evenings, he had learnt a thousand tricks and skills from his father, to which he added his own experiences and improvements, so that he had now achieved mastery in this field. When his father was still only

While he had made harmless toys to pass idle hours, his son's little works of art were almost never without a deeper meaning. Here he sat, high above the city, and for thirteen years he had not crossed the boundary of his realm marked by a black cross. But his mechanical figures, the mysterious machines, the little boxes filled with rollers, wheels, coils and power springs, related to the needs of the people below, to their wishes and aspirations. Sometimes Palingenius learnt of new inventions through his daughter or the old Johanna, who connected him with the world, which once again astounded people. These were moments of triumph. The Türmer was never happier than when, after he had listened with a grin to the end of the report, he could take a model out of his treasures to prove that he had already made this invention before. The secret chain of associations in which the inventions progressed was revealed to him, and he was able to predict, as if the course of development had been clearly revealed to him, what was now to be invented. The room next to the living room was a workshop and museum. In the confined space, the machines and models were stacked in the corners, the finer works of art were stored in glass cabinets, the strangest things hung from the ceiling, and when the top of the tower shook in a thunderstorm, the hanging machines swayed and banged against each other so that wood and iron rattled. Palingenius had built niches in the walls for the electric batteries, and a highly ingenious system of nesting allowed him to store three times as much in this room as could actually have been accommodated. Once Palingenius had tasted the triumphs of his prophethood in matters of mechanics, his ambition drove him on and on. Now he had been working on the flying machine for years. He was determined to invent it earlier than the people down there, and often enough, when he had been working in his workshop for a whole day, he would get up at night to record an idea of the dream. The dream of flying, the rare happiness of others

People, was the event of almost every night for him. He always woke up due to a fall, but he hurried to quickly record the new impressions he had gained from this dream. And he transferred the experiences of his dreams into reality, so that a kind of bird slowly emerged in the workshop, a frame with wings, wheels and screws, which became all the more complicated the longer Palingenius worked on it.

Regina grew up in this tower steeped in legends, surrounded by her grandfather's and her father's witty and outlandish gadgets. She became accustomed to looking at the world from the perspective of great heights and, like her father, accepted her stay below only as an interruption to her existence in the tower. As if she had been transported into the unfamiliar atmosphere of a strange star, she breathed more heavily down below, as if under pressure, and gladly followed old Johanna, who also wanted nothing more than to ascend to the eyrie again quickly. The two of them were reluctant to make the necessary journeys. When old Johanna prepared to descend, she looked at her stilt with a wistful expression, as if it were in danger of breaking. And when they returned, she sat in her softly upholstered armchair and rubbed the wooden leg with an expression as if she had to reward it for a special achievement. After Regina had lost her mother in her seventh year - a quiet, always sickly woman whose heart could not tolerate being at this altitude - h e r father and old Johanna were almost her only company. Strangers came now and then. Regina had to show them the bells, explain the fire alarms and open the clockwork, never failing to mention, with a shudder, the legend of the doormaker who had forgotten his duty. Then she led the strangers to the gallery that ran around the tower and pointed out the city and the country that wove a carpet of rich ornamentation down there. But when the visitors asked to see the tower keeper's flat, Regina had to refuse them entry on her father's orders.

Heinrich Palingenius kept his distance from people - with one exception. This exception was his friend Eleagabal Kuperus, the man who had been his father's friend. Eleagabal sometimes left the old house with the crooked gable on the wrinkled, brown face, climbed up to the doorman and was always very welcome to the hermit.

When he entered his friend's sitting-room on this cold, wet autumn evening, he found the people of this little kingdom gathered round the great book from the tower. On the table stood a bright lamp, the shade of which consisted of moving, translucent pictures that matched the heavy, tanned words of the book in rich variety, presenting views of old towns, costumes of bygone times, the whole colourful life as it is found on old woodcuts.

Eleagabal Kuperus hung up his coat, which had become quite wet on the short walk across the cathedral square, in the corner and accepted his friend's invitation to move a chair to the table. Heinrich Palingenius continued: "But there is another story to tell from the year 1423, namely how the great bell Susanna was baptised with blood. The chronicler has labelled it as a warning to all unfaithful administrators and to show how harshly the court dealt with those who sinned against the common people. At that time, Mayor Andreas Guggenreuter was an extremely proud man from the noblest family, who was bold and fearless enough, but also rash and reckless. As brave as he was in battle and as courageously as he defended the town's rights against the margrave's encroachments, he brought so much confusion and discord into the community through his brusque, arrogant and unruly behaviour. Instead of calming the conflict between the guilds and the families with wise words, patience, patience and compliance, he exacerbated it with all sorts of sharp speeches and his unbridled arrogance, which, when it reached the ears of the guilds, provoked fierce anger. But he was also unpopular with the families, for he placed his ancestry above that of all others, and it was said that he thus

to bind the dignity of mayor to his family for eternity. Moreover, for all his other abilities, he was possessed by the bright devil of gambling. No stakes deterred him, no matter how high, from taking up the game, and he usually succeeded in his daring, so that in his delusion he always measured himself more and more absurdly. The saying "He who dares, wins" was always on his lips and never had this saying proved as true as with Mayor Andreas Guggenreuter. Unpious as he was, he often rode across the countryside during high festivals, while the citizens crowded into the cathedral to hear God's word, stopped off at the homes of his knight friends in the surrounding area, travelled from castle to castle, shook his dice cup everywhere and won, indeed did not disdain to linger in taverns where few good people frequented, if only he was sure of finding comrades and friends of the dice there. And when one of his own clan once reproached him for this behaviour, he replied with a laugh: "So it's a good thing that the townspeople are in the churches with God in the meantime, because the devil can hang around outside all the more freely and have his claws in with the game." On Corpus Christi Day in 1423, while the citizens were putting on their best clothes to go to the cathedral, the mayor had his bay horse saddled and rode out through the Jewish Gate to seek out his friends and ask for a hearty game. As he rode along the Way of the Cross, he was met by another rider, who came out of the thickest forest between bushes and trees, as if it were a paved path, and sat on a black horse as big and heavy as Andreas Guggenreuter had ever seen in his life. "Holla!" the stranger called out to him and asked him where he was going. When the mayor replied that he was looking for companions to play with, the stranger told him that there was a pub nearby where the merriest fellows could be found, the merriest birds in the whole country, who didn't care for a drink and a throw of the dice. The mayor, who already had the gambling devil breathing down his neck, was pleased to find such merry companionship and followed the stranger who, after a while, offered him a drink.

Criss-cross, up and down in front of the pub. There were already some of the revellers sitting there with red heads and rattling the dice, banging on the table with their free fists. The Guggenreuter found this noise more welcome than choral singing and litanies. He quickly sat in the middle of them, swigged his drink and shook the cup so that the dice rattled brightly. "Behold the knight without fear," cried the crowd, and one of them, a tall, broad man with a single eye, called out to him, "Does he dare to fight me in the end?" "I am not a knight," said the mayor, "I am only a citizen, the chief of the townspeople, but I am just as good a fearless knight as any other, and I will prove to him now that I dare to fight anyone." With that he put a handful of ducats on the table and knocked over the cup. The one-eyed man made the higher throw and won the bet. The mayor was furious and made new gold pieces sparkle. But this time, too, his opponent won, and as often as Guggenreuter renewed the game, he lost his bet, just as if all luck and certainty of winning had deserted him today. When he had finished his money, he wanted to leave the tavern with a curse, but behind him sat the stranger who had brought him here, and whispered to him that he still had to bet his horse, so that the mayor, still hoping that he could win everything back, dared to make another throw. He also lost his horse, and piece by piece, as he could no longer stop throwing the dice, his rich hangings, the foam coins, the fur collar, the doublet and finally the shirt from his body. Now he gave up the game and rose to leave the inn. But then the strange rider pushed him down and said, "You are too quick; perhaps luck wanted to take it to the extreme. Dare this extreme, since you claim to be without fear, set your city against all that you have lost so far, and fortune will return to you." "I will venture to do so," cried the one-eyed man, and when the mayor refused to do so, they assailed him from all sides with laughter and mocking speeches, until he, fearing that they might doubt his courage, struck the table and exclaimed, "So I will put the

City with everything in it in the devil's name on this throw." And so, with the throw of twelve eyes, the one-eyed man won the whole city with everything in it and rose from the table: "So I will come in three days at midnight with my friends and my servants and you will open the gate for me so that I can take possession of what is mine." Then Andreas Guggenreuter learnt that he had bet his town to Jodocus Lipansky, the bush knight and highwayman, and lost it. And after everything that could serve the winner had been discussed, the mayor left, on foot and alone, for no sooner had he lost the town than the stranger who had brought him there had disappeared from the inn. At midnight on the third day, the mayor went to the small walled gate behind the cathedral, which was not considered necessary to guard, and pushed back the rusty bolts. Shortly beforehand, however, the great Susanna had been cast and wound up in the tower and was now hanging in the belfry, decorated with wreaths and wrapped in ribbons, because the consecration of the bells was to take place tomorrow. But the mayor, fearing that its loud mouth might rouse the townspeople to resistance before the time, crept into the tower with two journeymen and lifted the clapper out of the iron gullet. He then gave the signal, and Jodocus Lipansky's troops burst into the town with swords and burning wreaths of pitch, attacked the guards and set fire to the houses. Some of the citizens were still asleep, and those who awoke opened their eyes only to close them forever. While murder and confusion raged below, a heavy dream drove the doorman from his bed and out into the street. Then he saw the torchlight in the streets, heard the clamour of battle and rushed to the bell-rope, where he began to ring with all his might. The heavy bell was already swinging, but its mouth remained silent and gave no sound of warning. In this distress, the tower keeper fell to his knees and, being a pious man, called on St Chrysostom, the patron saint of the city, and St Susanna, the patron saint of the bell, to prevent the city from perishing and to restore the bell's speech. Then

Trusting in his prayer and in the power of the saints, he took the rope and lo and behold, the bell began to ring, ringing so loudly and tumultuously without a clapper that the citizens were awakened by the unfamiliar sound and rushed into the street en masse. Then they saw the enemy, gathered around their quartermasters and attacked Lipansky's servants with such force that they fled in fear and left their master in the lurch. About sixty men were taken by the sword and the Lipansky and three of his friends were captured after a hard fight. The mayor, who had been seen among the enemy, was captured by a blacksmith and put on trial for blood. The next day, the consecration of the new bell was celebrated in blood. Down in the square in front of the cathedral, Jodocus Lipansky, three of his friends and the mayor's two henchmen were tied to the wheel. The mayor himself, however, was bound and, after the miracle of St Chrysostom and St Susanna had been duly marvelled at and acclaimed, was hanged by the legs with his head down in place of the clapper in the bell. And then they rang the Tedeum with him, with which the city solemnly celebrated its liberation from the hands of the enemy."

"Horrible stories live in your tower," said Eleagabal Kuperus when his friend had finished.

Palingenius closed the book and stroked his hand over the leather spine: "Yes, it was a cruel time ... truly! One has to marvel at how inventive people were ... when it came to such things. But still ... I don't think our time is any less cruel. Back then, it accumulated in people, rose and rose, and then all of a sudden it burst out of them ... like an eruption, you see! Something big happened. A few thousand people were beaten to death; or they were tortured ... But in between there were quiet and cosy times ... at least that's how I imagine it. But now the cruelty is more finely dispersed. It forms part of the air. It penetrates everywhere. It floods all our actions; and we notice and heed it as little as the poisonous gases that we incessantly emit.

inhale. It has become thinner and finer. But it's in everything we do."

"You will process this thought into a theory of the aggregate states of cruelty."

"I have other things to do. My flying machine is close to my heart."

"Are you happy with your work?"

Heinrich Palingenius immediately began to talk about the new improvements he had made to his invention. With infinite love, he described the smallest advances, lingered on questions of mechanics, descended into the most refined discussions, and then again let the songs of his hopes, his unspeakable longing for the bliss of flight be heard. He became the rhapsodiser of an arduous task. He presented the images of a serene and utterly pure happiness that must consist of opening up a realm in which immense wonders were to be discovered. "To find the self-evident! That is the great word. Among the movements in the realms of life, flying is the most natural. The soaring bird is the ideal of bliss. To rest on outstretched wings high above, while the earth remains below, is my goal. And when this is achieved, all struggle, all ugliness of fatigue will disappear, people will be good and great and brave and prudent. They will gain the view from great heights. They will learn to love when they can fly."

"And when your work has achieved its goal, you will still withhold your invention from the people; you will still have done so."

"Because I don't want to share the fate of all explorers. First they are ridiculed. That is painful. Then they are celebrated. In the noisy way of the world. And that's embarrassing."

"But how are people supposed to learn to fly?"

"Oh, I know for certain that I need only complete my invention, and they will learn it from someone else. Someone will arise who has found the same thing and will hand it over to the world with a shout. The whole of mankind is only one individual. There is a fluid of invention.

This flows through the entire body of humanity at the same time. All great inventions prove this. They are made not just once, in one place, but almost simultaneously in several places. History has not been able to marvel at this enough. And yet there is nothing marvellous about it. Just as there is nothing marvellous about a tree that is filled with the idea and power of spring and simultaneously sprouts blossoms in many places. Or - as my friend Eleagabal Kuperus likes to say: this too is natural and therefore a miracle. I remain aloof. But I experience these miracles all the more deeply. I only want to be the first blossom, I, the old man. I want the powers of spring to show themselves in me first. I hope this with all my longing, with all my expectation of the bud. When I have reached my goal, I know that it has also been reached for humanity. The fluid must then also become effective in other places. I think you will understand me, Eleagabal. You yourself are keeping the world away from you."

"You know my reasons for that!"

"I know them and I keep quiet."

During this conversation, old Johanna had fallen asleep. She was sitting with her head slumped back, her bonnet was a little out of place and showed her short-cropped grey hair, her hard, masculine face with its many wrinkles was in shadow, only her throat was visible in the light of the lamp, stretched up, steep, interspersed with strong tendons, between which the larynx rose and fell from time to time in convulsive movements. With her chin overgrown with stubble, her flat chest and hairy, bony hands that had lost their stockings, she looked more like a man, and as a child Regina had never really wanted to believe that Johanna was really a woman. Her stubble scratched just like her father's and her voice was similarly deep and rough. At last she had begun to understand her father, who explained to her that the sexes drew closer together in old age and began to equalise, just as it was difficult to distinguish between boys and girls in tender childhood. Since her mother had died, Regina had confided all her girlish thoughts to old Johanna and loved her.

She remembered how she had loved the dead woman. Now she had moved her armchair very close to the sleeping woman and tried to support her heavy head. She listened attentively to the conversation between her friends. Her eyes shone. Her father's thoughts were not unfamiliar and incomprehensible to the girl. Growing up among a wealth of mechanical toys, the inventor's interests had also been communicated to her and made her follow him. Far removed from the scepticism of the wider world, from her views, which were focused on the immediately practical, on the usefulness of the moment, she lacked all the inhibitions and limitations of a sense of reality. Outlandish hypotheses and audacious plans had nothing ridiculous for her, and just as the stories in the chronicles had become real events for her, she learnt to see the seemingly impossible as solid bridges to the future in her fantastic surroundings.

The lamp, for which Palingenius did not use the electric power supplied by the tower, but some kind of self-prepared luminous gas, emitted a series of barking sighs in quick succession, whereupon the doorman prolonged its life with a few hand movements. Then there was a silence again, and the heavy vibrations with which the clock marked the tenth hour seemed to lift the floor of the room. The hours roared upwards with powerful impacts and transmitted their noisy call to the quiet parlour of the Türmer, so that the pictures on the wall began to clink, the small machines, the mechanical mechanisms that stood on all the cupboards began to rattle. The wave seemed to propagate itself through the whole body into the head, and when the last blow had been struck, silence fell into the empty space created by the noise, like the air sweeping along behind rapidly moving objects.

Heinrich Palingenius took his rubber coat off the hook and went out into the gallery.

"And you're never afraid," the friend asked, taking Regina's hand; "you're not afraid when your father is outside and old Johanna is asleep."

"What should I be afraid of?"

"You hear such bloody stories, murder and fire from all centuries, and it's as if the most gruesome events in the whole city are linked to this very tower."

"As a child, I often had nights when I couldn't sleep because I was so scared. But my father said that we have to get used to living with the ghosts of the past. I got used to it. And I haven't lost much of the fear. Just a slight shiver, and it's not so terrible. I don't think I could even live in a new house. A new house is bare and empty. Just a pile of stones. There's nothing there yet ... nothing inside. I don't know how to say it. You can still smell the work everywhere; you still think of the bricks being laid on top of each other and mortar being thrown on top of them. Everything is possible. There's nothing superfluous. Two years ago they renovated the tower and we were all very unhappy for a few weeks. Until the old triumphed over the new."

"I like to hear you speak. You speak very differently to the girls of twenty down there. Why don't you come and see me again? My house, my old house will love to see you."

"I will come."

Old Johanna woke up with a heavy breath and a gurgle in her throat when the doorman returned from his tour and hung the dripping rubber coat back in its place.

"Go to sleep, go to sleep," he said and herded the women into the small adjoining chamber where the beds had been prepared. Regina shook hands with Kuperus and repeated her promise, then followed old Johanna, who had gone ahead with her head shaking and her knees swaying. With his left hand, the doorman lifted his drooping beard above his lips and said quietly, "Johann is getting weak and childish. Climbing the stairs has become a burden for him and he claims to have pain in his missing foot. He used to sit with me until midnight and

longer, told stories and enjoyed being able to laugh at the people down there. Now he doesn't even enjoy that anymore."

When the noises in the adjoining chamber fell silent, the solitude arched over the friends like a large, ringing bell made of glass. As if detached from the earth, with no connection to the world below the tower, they floated in space. Only the cracking of the old staircase and the loud, steady chiming of the clock joined their conversations, loud noises to which they were all too accustomed to even hear. The conversation was about old Johann, who had lived in the tower for decades under the name of Johanna, dressed in the clothes of a woman, looked after the economy and had shown Regina all the tenderness, the thousand acts of kindness, the enlightening miracles of a caring woman after her mother's death. A few days ago Palingenius found him kneeling in front of an armchair with some papers lying on it, which he was covering with meaningless words. When asked what he was doing here, he replied that he intended to write down his experiences. And then he added, laughing to himself: there was little meaning in his life. He would therefore write down all the words he could find and only then would he choose the right ones. In this way, he hoped to reach his goal. Another time, he had sneaked into the doorman's workshop and dressed up one of the racks with women's skirts, jackets and a bonnet. This, he explained, was his past, and as he was now endeavouring to view the past years of his life impartially, he had to remove them from him in order to see them better. As he did so, he tilted his head to one side and shouted either swear words or pet names at his image.

"Only one thing seems to be keeping him going," Palingenius continued, "the hatred against the one who made him a cripple. He still hopes to get his revenge. When he comes to talk about it, he straightens up and his wooden foot rattles around the room as quickly and vigorously as before."

The friends had left the parlour and entered the turret's workshop, where the flying machine looked like the skeleton of a bird.

lay on the floor. With its white frame, the matt sheen of the aluminium components and the splayed framework of the wings, it resembled the skeleton of a primeval beast whose shape we could not remember. Standing between the controls of the apparatus, Eleagabal Kuperus said, checking one of the screws: "And as it does so, it becomes ever more powerful and reaches everywhere with its claws."

Heinrich Palingenius let go of an inhibition so that a crank began to turn furiously: "He should only want to reach here once it's finished."

"He will soon take to the air after you if someone rises up somewhere who has invented flying like you."

"I almost wish I wouldn't succeed."

"And would still strive restlessly for it."

Moved by some impulse, the frameworks of the wings, some of which were already covered with a grey fabric, began to stir, rising a little from the ground as if they were gaining life and were impatient to take the master, who was standing between them, into the air for a first flight. The whole skeleton of the bird trembled, and in frenzied revolutions a crank very close to Palingenius' hand multiplied into a shimmering, whirring disc. It looked as if a secret fluid was flowing from this hand. In one corner stood a Negress made of black stone, showing the hours in her right eye and the minutes in her left. While her right eye stared fixedly at the flying machine, her left eye trembled incessantly as new digits appeared, as if winking at the master in nervous agitation. From five to five minutes she raised her hand and waved a greeting, the quarter hours she indicated by crossing her arms and bowing her head, and when the number of a completed hour popped up in her right eye, she stamped her legs so that the bells on her ankles rang, turned in circles and performed a dance as if she were rejoicing in the manner of brutal people that an evil that affects everyone could not harm her alone: time. Eleagabal Kuperus loved this Negress. With the

With his arm around her black neck, he watched the first stirrings of the flying machine. Above his head circled a planetary system of many balls which, varying in size, colouring and movement, represented the wonders of the universe as if in a more easily comprehensible abbreviation, in a script more adapted to human capacity.

From all these objects, from the finished and unfinished machines, from the fine mechanical devices and the robust skeleton of the bird, from the tools and the as yet unused components, a kind of life of its own emanated, a silent language that was only understandable here at the height of the tower and was familiar to the two friends.

"It will soon be necessary to arm ourselves against it," said Eleagabal Kuperus, and his fingers glided over the cool black stone, where it ran from the armpits of the Negress in gentle planes against her proud breasts. "Already the danger is growing more imminent. There is no doubt that he is earnestly endeavouring to make the earth his throne, to raise himself to the idol of mankind, to offer the sacrifice of a world to his vanity and his hatred. One has been found who was missing from his plans. Now he is concerned with making the air, which has hitherto been common to all living things, his own and through this means becoming lord of the earth. His successes are satisfying for him. He himself, who strives for an ideal, hates everything that still clings to the ideal. He laughs at beauty, art should have nothing else to do but proclaim his sublimity. Barrenness and blessing are to be dispensed by his hand alone, while he stores up around him the most marvellous works of all masters and all times, he hates them fervently; for they draw men away from what he alone wants to leave to their thoughts, from the worship of his power. Now he has won a poet and committed himself to him for life and death. By humiliating him, he humiliates the spirit, tramples underfoot the most precious goods of men. He pulls him up from the misery of everyday life, surrounds him with gold, weaves his powers around him and then puts him in the pillory. His soul is completely filled with a

fervent anger, a desire to destroy everything that shines, to extinguish all that is marvellous. Since he can only hate, nothing is more alien to him than our saying: 'Believe the miracle'. He enlists science and forces it into his service. It is to atomise the world and sacrifice it on its altars to a single goddess: analysis. If he succeeds in his plans, he will forbid the world all speculation, he will put the philosophers, the deep dreamers of ancient longings, in straitjackets, he will forge the incorrigible creators of beauty on rocks and expose their entrails to the eagles, he will tolerate only one inequality, that between him, the master, and between all others, the servants."

The Negress slipped away from her friend's caresses and danced the twelfth hour with jingling bells. She danced into the new day while the planets continued to circle tirelessly above her head.

Palingenius angrily turned the screws of his bird so that the wings flapped and the whole frame seemed to crawl towards the floor of the room.

"And the people," he said, "the people, won't they try to stop him?"

"People are blind as ever. They will awaken when it is too late, and will rage angrily against their fetters to feel that they are firm and unbreakable. I have a quiet hope: nature is so great that it seems impossible to me to find its limits, to master all its conditions. But we must at least be ready when the hour comes."

"You know I'm not a fighter or a prophet."

"And it is my destiny to only be allowed to work when I am called."

"We need an awakener, a shaker."

"We can only hope that he will find himself. It must be born out of desire, out of dreams, out of the unconscious of humanity. It is necessary for it to be there, like a miracle."

The night lay before the feet of the friends who had stepped out onto the gallery of the tower. The city slept deep and dark. Palingenius began his walk with the watchman's careful gaze and Kuperus accompanied him, filled with a warm compassion and a longing love for the foolish sleepers. The two shook hands as if in a promise; behind them in the walls the clockwork beat, and each stroke cut off a piece of time. -

The comedians. Reference discovers a star

[Table of contents](#)

Thomas Bezug woke up in an excellent mood. Yesterday's meeting of the shareholders of a planned "Company for the Rational Management of the Earth's Surface" had produced certain and favourable prospects. All parts of the world had sent representatives, and the proposals had been received with enthusiasm. In this assembly of billionaires the word "impossible" was unknown, no objection in detail had remained unrefuted by Bezug, and when they finally parted and entrusted Thomas Bezug with the elaboration of the plan, the further preparations, it was clear that the most important fortunes of the earth had agreed on a common course of action. So Bezug woke up in an excellent mood, distributed the mail lying on the table in his study to his secretaries and got dressed. While tying his tie, he read Adalbert's new poems, which, as always, were lying on the toilet table. Then he made a fidibus from a sonnet to spring and lit his cigar with it. This poem reminded him of spring, and although his head was a little heavy, he didn't feel reluctant to use the sunny morning for a ride.

Rudolf Hainx arrived for the morning lecture, and Bezug quickly began to skim the blue-coloured sections of the newspapers he had brought with him, most of which reported on yesterday's meeting with expressions of the highest reverence. The press bowed to the immense sums of money that were written as numbers behind each participant's name, spoke of a grandiose, thoroughly modern idea and promised the plan the best future. Only one of the papers attacked the shareholders, spoke of a danger, warned the public and called on the legislature to take timely measures against this monopolisation of fundamental values.

"Hm?" Bezug said, pointing at the sheet.

Hainx saw about reference shoulder and shrugged the shrugged his shoulders:

"Social democratic!"

With his pencil in a golden case, Bezug drew a five and then four more zeros on the white margin of the newspaper next to the unfavourable article, stopping after each additional zero as if he was considering whether it was necessary to add them to the pile.

Rudolf Hainx looked on and shrugged his shoulders twice more, as if he were adjusting a burden: "People have a mind!" he said.

Without looking up, Bezug turned the five into a zero and put a one in front of the whole row. "Maybe now?"

"Three editors and the publisher ... Now it will be enough!"

The short stay was already over, and Bezug was convinced that the "Volksstimme" dared to resist alone with two or three other newspapers. All the others danced around the originator of the idea, and as if they were proud to be able to bow down before him, they praised him as a genius, as a pathfinder into the realm of undreamt-of possibilities. It was as if they were competing with each other to see which of them could display the glory of the reference more brightly and radiantly, as if they had been seized by a dance of St Vitus and whirled around, losing their senses at the sight of an enormous mass of gold.

The sleeves of the skirt pushed up and the whitish, spongy arms, reminiscent of fat, bloated grotto elms, became visible. "The discipline with which the pressmen kowtow is impeccable. But this one, although full of poison and bile, has done a particularly good job."

A pointed finger came over his armpit, its joints overgrown with tufts of hair that sat in wrinkles like undergrowth. "That's our friend Herold. You have to admit that he made an effort. These press people have their own honour. At first Herold was a little miffed because I got rid of him when he called Mrs Rößler - you remember: the wife of the poet with the cut-off head - 'Mrs Rößler'.

wanted to interview him. But when I gave him the job of beating the drum for us with all his might, he was immediately reconciled. They want to be busy, these gentlemen, honourable assignments, they want to feel important and indispensable, then they are our friends." With a satisfied nod, Bezug wrote next to Herold's lines in his large, angular characters, which were so ill-suited to his bloated hands.

seemed to fit, the number: 500.

"There is one more thing I would ask you to note, here under the bottom line of the 'Tagesnachrichten' a feature article by our Adalbert Semilasso. He must have asked for permission to reprint it?"

"No! - Contents?"

"A rich young man loves a poor girl. As his parents refuse to give their consent to the marriage, the young man abandons splendour and wealth and feels happy to be able to share the poverty of his beloved. Final tableau: There is room in the smallest hut for a happily loving couple."

"Nonsense!"

"To tell the truth. The old story is charmingly written; it sounds like new."

"The guy is making a fool of us. Tell him that in future he has to submit everything, but also everything he writes and has printed, to me."

"That's right! At last: there are three workers' deputations outside."

"Will receive from you."

"The first one comes to congratulate us on the anniversary of the opening of the wagon factory."

"A day off with free beer and sausages for all workers!"

"The second reports the end of the strike at spinning mill number five."

"For your information."

"The third from leather factory two demands a reduction in working hours and an increase in wages."

"Wages will be reduced and working hours increased until they have become reasonable. In the meantime, you can confront this deputation with the second one to show them an example of how a strike usually ends with me. Anything else?"

"I'm done."

With a nod of the head, Hainx was dismissed and Bezug completed his toilet. Then he sought out his wife. In a dimly lit room that smelled of spices and essential oils, Mrs Agathe was lying on a sofa cutting her seventh lemon. For years she had been concerned only with maintaining her health, and after consulting all the famous doctors and visiting all the spas, she had given herself up to all kinds of natural and miraculous cures. For several months, part of the house had been turned into a cold-water spa, and in the mornings you could see the mistress dragging her bare feet through the dew in the garden. Then she had called in the famous shepherd Kaltenbauer and organised her life according to his instructions. All sorts of strange potions and concoctions stood about, and Kaltenbauer, with his shrewd, clean-shaven face, walked under the veil of mystery, turning part of the park into a herb garden, where he cultivated hollyhock, foxglove and nightshade, and caught all sorts of beetles and worms, of which he knew the most marvellous properties. Under the influence of his successor, an American prayer healer, the rooms of the Gracious changed their appearance once again. Everything profane was removed, in place of the photographs and paintings a series of framed salvation sayings covered the walls and the silence of hidden chapels spread out, interrupted only by the murmur of incessant prayers, by the cries of rapturous devotion. Then, when all the prayers proved powerless to banish Mrs Agathe's sixteen illnesses, old women began to come and go. After lengthy negotiations, Mrs Bezug decided in favour of a lemon cure, which the oldest and most venerable of these women had suggested to her. Starting with three lemons a day, she went up to twenty-five lemons a day and then went down

again up to three in order to conquer the summit once more. The patient underwent this treatment with a perseverance and punctuality that stemmed from her belief in its absolute effectiveness. She felt free of pain, claimed to have a clearer head, and the cramps in her stomach subsided. Even the heart defect and pulmonary consumption gave way to the power of this cure, and the good counsellor became Mrs Agathe's best friend.

As Mrs Agathe did not like to be disturbed when she was at one of her cures, she pretended not to hear her husband's greeting and, after cutting the lemons into slices, began to eat slowly. Bezug watched her for a while and then approached her from behind as his salt sea eyes awoke to a cruel glow. "Good morning," he suddenly shouted in her ear and then withdrew to await the effect. The slice of lemon had slipped from Mrs Agathe's lips, her hands reached for her ears, then she sank back onto the sofa. Turning to the ceiling of the room, her eyes seemed to implore heaven through her, and every gesture, the limp posture of her hands, through which a faint twitching passed, the tilted position of her head, called a world to witness this martyrdom. Then Mrs Agathe looked at her husband with the look of a victim, and returned his greeting in a low, sick voice: "Good morning."

The flickering of the salt lake eyes went out. They lay dead in the desert beneath the hairless eyebrows. "I have something to tell you and that's why I woke you from these reveries."

With a lowering of her head, Mrs Agathe indicated that she was ready to listen.

"You know that I have promised our daughter to Professor Hecht as my wife in the event of certain circumstances. The time has now come for these certain circumstances to become a fact, and in the near future some conditions will be fulfilled which will force me to fulfil my promise in part."

Mrs Agathe forcibly tried to pay the attention of a good mother. She even sat up on the sofa. But the effort had so exhausted her body, weakened by the fright, that she sank down again like a fly in autumn. "Sorry," she mumbled, reaching for the slice of lemon lying in front of her, "I feel very unwell."

"You will still have to prepare Elisabeth for the public engagement to take place soon."

Mrs Agathe's curled lips held back a word of objection at the last moment. She came to her senses. If she resisted her husband, she would only cause herself inconvenience without being able to dissuade him from his decision. Either he would shout at her that he wanted it that way, and that would shatter her nerves and could even be dangerous for her with the serious heart defect. Or he came up with reasons, and that was even more difficult because it forced her to think. So she quickly popped a slice of lemon into her mouth, shook herself a little, puffed out her nostrils and fell silent.

Bezug followed his victory. "I hope you have more influence over her than I do. Elisabeth is a strange girl. She has nothing but cold obedience for her father. But I want her to realise how much my orders contribute to her well-being. Everyone else should obey without question. But my children ... my daughter should realise ... In short, it will be your task to convince her ..."

Agathe looked after her husband with some astonishment. It was as if she had suddenly heard a knocking under his armour, as if something was stirring there. That was strange enough, and as she cut a new lemon, she almost tried to think about it. But at the right time she remembered that the miracle woman had advised her to take the greatest care of her mind, and all her questions were quickly submerged under the interest in her cure.

Bezugs's mood was as splendid as the spring weather. His car was parked in the courtyard, spick and span in all its metal components, with a massive

swollen rubber tyres, and the chauffeur pulled off his cap. The red leather of the seat was warmed by the sun, and as the machine shot out of the open yard gate, Bezug leaned back in comfort. Never before had he found so much satisfaction in the consciousness of being in complete command of an immense power as he did today, when the houses seemed to merge into long, low ribbons and people leapt out of his path like shadows. He enjoyed driving the car through some forbidden streets and defying the angry gestures of the guards. Now the poplars of a shady avenue whipped past like rods, suburbs came towards and stayed behind, playing children ran screaming apart, the machine seemed to rise above the ground, and the whizzing of the air became a thin sound whose pitch rose with the speed of the journey. Leaning back in his car and strangely excited by this vibrating sound, Bezug savoured his thoughts. He expanded the events of the last few days into contemplations, traced each of them down to its outskirts and tightened himself into a web of threads. Such was the noose he wanted to throw over the world's head, such were the foundations of his rule. He began to tremble as his thoughts touched on the final possibilities of his triumph.

A terrible bang burst like a bomb into the fabric of his desires. He was thrown out of the car so suddenly that even as he lay in the ditch he could not get away from his thoughts for a moment. The limping chauffeur got up beside him and ran towards the machine, which was lying on its side in the other ditch. One of the rubber tyres had burst and Bezug had to resign himself to waiting here in this miserable little village until the damage was repaired. As if angered by a personal insult, he drove away the curious boys who had gathered around the wrecked car. But when they kept returning and seemed to mock the fallen glory with a grin, he left the car to his chauffeur and the boys he had brought to help him. With angry steps, he walked across meadows and pastures.

Field paths around the village. There were a few houses here in the valley between wooded mountains. A strange forest, by the way, with large bare patches of dark, winter-browned green like the fur of a mangy animal. When Bezug got to the other side of the village, he saw two wagons of a travelling comedy troupe on a grassy field. Some men were ramming stakes into the ground with heavy blows, binding them with rotten boards, while some boys were pulling apart a tent roof whose folds were sticking together from wetness. From one of the wagons, two women carried the comedians' miserable equipment out into the sun. It was to this strange world of misery and wretched amusement that Bezug turned his attention. By watching it, he revitalised his sense of superiority and overcame a kind of shame that had not left him since the accident. The skilfulness with which the men assembled the wooden frame of their little stage was admirable. Every move was made in its place and at the right time, every movement was limited to what was necessary to avoid any confusion. Nevertheless, the leader did not refrain from giving orders in a loud, coarse voice, shouting at one and the other or even calling out a name with an Italian or Hungarian curse behind it. He never lifted a hand himself, standing in his brown velvet doublet like a king among his slaves and flashing his black eyes. He had a painterly air about him, something that had been learnt in the studio, like a model who has changed jobs but still retains the pose of his former life. He was the handsome man among the other inconspicuous and coarse-boned fellows, and in this consciousness he had acquired his exceptional position. Nobody cared about him, nobody followed his orders, but the chief seemed to care less about that than about giving orders himself. His voice changed its tone, as if he were playing on it. After shouting harshly and roughly for a while, he gave her a deep, full bell sound, a veritable peal. Every word rolled out of his mouth, resonating for a long time in

The sound of the song died away in the hot air and seemed to lose itself in a hum that floated over the meadow in the trembling embers of midday. But the men also paid little heed to the new tone. They did not allow themselves to be disturbed in their work and did not accelerate or delay a single step or hand movement because of their leader. In the meantime, a small stage had grown out of the lawn, which now seemed to invite the audience with a front of barriers and a number of benches. The tent roof stretched over the stage and auditorium, its ropes fastened to the ground with pegs. Several pictures in bright colours, promising the most wonderful things, decorated the walls and at the same time promised unheard-of delights. A man was seen devouring whole lumps of fire and, while the flames were still blazing from his mouth, a huge knife was already running through his body so that the tip could be seen coming out the back. Then they saw a pyramid of six men standing stiffly like wooden figures, one on the armpits of the other. Then they saw the beheading of a woman; a broad sword swung at her neck with a terrible force, her head flew off her torso in an arc, and bloody drool gushed from the wound in her neck. Then you saw Dogo, the wonder dog, riding a tricycle with his front paws resting on the handlebars. Then you saw Nella, called "the flying fairy", high up on a tightrope, in a graceful position, only touching the rope with the tip of one foot, while the other stretched out to the top of the picture. There were also contortionists in tight-fitting costumes, wearing iridescent snake skins, with their heads between their legs and, lying on their stomachs, using knives and forks with their toes or twisting their bodies into a knot. Here the painter's art had reached its peak. If his figures were otherwise characterised by a persistent disdain for all proportions, in this painting everything human was far removed from them: Accumulations of limbs, a knotting of all sorts of remnants, which gave the impression that here, as in creation, everything unsuccessful, everything

The superfluous had been concentrated in order to be completely kneaded and utilised anew. Nowhere was it clearer than here that man is made of clay.

His spirits rose as he contemplated all these shortcomings, and he tried to recognise the models of these pictures by their ridiculous and childish resemblances. The woman with the ample bosom, whose head flew in an arc from the torso, was carrying the tin shells of the lamps on both arms; the younger woman beside her, who was now bending over so much that her bare legs were visible up to her knees under her short skirts, was certainly one of the snake ladies; the pyramid men were just e r e c t i n g a shooting gallery beside the theatre, in which the fire-eater was setting up the dirty, shot-up tin plates. Not far away, Dogo, the wonder dog, was lying under a bush, gnawing on a bone he had found somewhere in the village. But the man wielding the sword as the red-clad executioner in the picture of the beheading was recognisable in the talkative leader himself. He approached with a bow and a scratching foot: "Will the Lord do us the honour of attending our opening gala performance? Allow me to make the polite invitation."

"When do you want to open?"

"Tonight, Your Highness, and we'll be playing here for eight, ten or a fortnight, d e p e n d i n g . Our productions are well worth seeing, and we've already had the most exalted gentlemen among our guests."

"What is your programme?"

"Extremely rich, Mr Graf. Exciting, amusing, interesting, in a word worth seeing and brilliant. These pictures here are only a small part of our programme."

"Who made these paintings?"

The leader took a step back as if to give the stranger a better view. Then he said, tapping his velvet skirt with his index finger: "Me, Sir Count!" All the pride of a great

artist lay in this self. "I could have become a painter, Count. But fate would not have it. Now I could have a villa in Rome or on *Lake Garda* and could drink red wine instead of wandering around here and getting annoyed with lazy blokes. In Rome, I only socialised with painters. Mr Anselm Feuerbach never wanted to work without me, he never did a picture without asking me. He had the technique and I had the taste. He made a name for himself and I got stuck in the mire."

"You wanted to become a painter?"

"My benefactor wanted to have me trained. He had recognised my talent. But he died too soon." And then Biancini, after introducing himself with another scratchy foot and a bow, went on to tell a story in which the eternal Roma was elevated above all the cities of the world, but in which the greatness of his stunted talent also emerged clearly against this background. Just as he was in the middle of his story, he was suddenly interrupted. From the village, with the footsteps of fate and the grim countenance of the law, the town servant had approached. He had been torn from his sleep, which he had surrendered to after the labours of the night, when his duties included keeping watch. Since he could not be awakened, cold water had been poured over him after he had been shaken to no avail, and he had been entrusted with a diplomatic mission. Now he brought his anger to Biancini with his message. Without further ado, he explained to him that the municipal council had made it a condition that a deposit of fifty guilders be paid before the performances began.

Biancini shook his artist's head so that the black curls flew: "And why, *amigo*, why? Please, there must be a reason."

"There's a reason!"

"So please, say."

"Because people always steal when there are gypsies like that in the village."

"We are not gypsies, we are artists."

"That's all one thing. Last time we had twenty guilders worth of damage. What should we do with you? They open at night and in the fog

and take what there is to take." The community servant had addressed his explanation to Bezug, whose prosperous appearance instilled confidence in him.

But Biancini also turned to him: "Tell me, Mr Graf. So please tell me: how is art supported here?" And then he suddenly shouted: "No, no, not one kreuzer. Tell the municipal council. Not one kreuzer, not one kreuzer." Before Biancini's glittering eyes, before the high pathos of his indignation, the municipal servant retreated. In the circle of his followers, the chief vented his anger. With the strongest words of passion, he took up the cause of his disgraced art, hurled curses at ignorance and recklessness, spoke bombs and struck at an invisible enemy with his clenched fists. German, Italian and Hungarian mingled into a tangle. His words roared along like an avalanche, growing ever more powerful as it fell. All traces of prudence were left behind him and he jumped around between the components of the shooting gallery, unable to stand still for a moment. The members of his troupe watched the spectacle with laughter, and the woman with the ample bosom squeezed her sides, whinnying. He made a speech from a bench, brandishing one of the air rifles with all the fervour of a barricade fighter who is serious about his cause. The boys of the village, who had grown bored with their time at Bezugs Automobil, had drawn themselves here and howled with delight after every sentence. At the height of his indignation, however, something happened that Bezug had thought impossible.

A young girl climbed onto the bench behind the screaming man, and just as he had thrown up both arms, she grabbed his wrists and stopped the momentum of his gesture. Beside the chief in his velvet doublet stood Nella, "the flying fairy", in a simple, nice calico dress, as if she had emerged from a recess, and gently bent down the arms of the enraged man. Like a machine suddenly stopped in its tracks, Biancini purred on for a while and finally came to a halt with a

Jerk stood still. The girl laughed into his flushed, sweaty face, black curls sticking to his forehead, and it seemed as if the man shrank to half his size from the laughter. He regained consciousness before the laughter. Without letting go of the chief's hands, Nella had jumped down from the bench in one leap and was now pulling the man after her without effort.

"Taddeo, but Taddeo," she cried, crossing the arms of the defeated director over the doublet, "what nonsense, what imprudence! How can you give the public a free show! Who will come to see us if they have already seen the best for nothing?"

"We're not going to play at all. Because, oh it's outrageous, we're being asked for a deposit! Fifty guilders! As if we were gypsies travelling around stealing chickens and geese. What can you say to that? We pack up and drive on."

"You know, Taddeo, that the authorities don't always represent the wishes of the people. Appeal to the public and you will win as always. Let it be decided between us and these mistrustful people. And what a triumph when the people say that the authorities have done us w r o n g . "

"But how can I put up with this?"

"Save your pride by showing the best we have."

"They're not going to let us play."

"They'll let us play, believe me."

Slowly, step by step, a small brown horse had come closer, carefully breaking through the circle of spectators by snorting at people to get out of the way, and was now nudging Nella's shoulder with its soft muzzle. "Oh, my Mizzi," cried Nella and kissed it right between the nostrils.

"Oh yes, oh yes, I forgot. Did you find it?"

Then Nella became very serious and the smile in her eyes disappeared behind a cloud. "No, I haven't found him. And the ..." She dropped one word and replaced it with another that had a completely different meaning.

The forest is no longer like it was back then. As if the evil enemy had taken up residence in it, as if it had been cursed. Its beauty is gone, its trees have been eaten bare by ugly caterpillars. The smell of these beasts is unbearable. You can see the destruction from here." She pointed to the carpet interrupted by brown patches that wrapped around the shoulders of the mountains like the mangy fur of an animal. A strangely shaped rock loomed out of the forest, and its stony figures seemed to rebel in disgust at the devastation all around them, as if desperate to hurl themselves down the slopes. Like a procession of wailers, they rose above the forest, like a line of pain-filled thoughts grown rigid in the excess of terror. - Mizzi had laid his head on Nella's shoulders and was looking with shrewd, moist eyes in the direction her finger was pointing.

Then a murmur drew their attention away from the forest. It seemed as if Nella's joyful confidence was not justified, for the village servant came back along the village road, leading the headman and a few peasants who had offered their services to the authorities. With arms dangling, fists hanging like weights, shirtsleeves rolled up and necks craned, their sinews already taut for battle, the village army approached and lined up in battle formation opposite the troop of comedians, while the headman addressed Biancini. Once again he repeated his order to either post bail or leave the area immediately. He was careless enough to use a word that immediately reignited Biancini's rage. He said: riff-raff! Biancini's face turned white, then he raised his fists to the sky as if to call down a thunderbolt on the man. But Nella gently pushed him aside and, followed by Mizzi, stepped in front of the head of the community. "Why do you want to make it impossible for us to play here? We live from one day to the next and have no money to bail us out. But we are decent people, even if we are comedians."

The pyramid men moved to their side like a bodyguard, and their grumbling was so menacing that the municipal council retreated to its battle line. While Biancini continued to make his tragic gestures unheeded, pausing for a while in each particularly successful pose to give everyone an opportunity to admire him, Nella tried to persuade the men from the village with gentle words. She still managed to prevent the outbreak of hostilities, but the situation became increasingly tense the longer the representative of the village refused to fulfil the comedians' request. With the awareness of trained strength, the athletes and acrobats looked at the peasants, who confronted them with the vigour and defiance of the defenders of the homeland. Neither side wanted to back down, and the individual fighters began to choose their opponents and weigh up their chances of success.

Bezug wavered for a moment as to whether he should go through with the delightful spectacle of the fight or whether he should let his glory prevail and bring about the unexpected turn of events. But when he looked at Nella, trembling with excitement, his cruelty sank under a sudden surge of desire. There was a spot on the girl's neck that he was determined to kiss, and just as the top pyramid man stepped forward and spat defiantly at the head of the community, he pushed his way through the line of battle and took the furious man by the arm. He tried to break away, but Bezug waved a banknote back and forth as a peace flag. Astonished, the farmer grabbed the paper: "A hundred guilders? For that one?"

"Yes, and now go!"

His appearance was like the sudden untying of the knot in a convoluted comedy. The unexpected had happened. The tension was released. The threads of the plot rolled on smoothly. All obstacles to understanding had been magically removed. With all reverence for wealth, the village council grabbed their hats and signalled the retreat. On the hot village street the peasants trotted away in a heap, from which from time to time the banknote emerged like a trophy

fluttered as if one could not get enough of her. The saviour stood in the middle of the circle of comedians and listened to Biancini's speech, the handshakes of the pyramid men and the rapturous exclamations of the women. The last of them all to shake his hand was Nella, who gave him a tentative smile, still a little depressed from the last quarter of an hour. The children of the snake people swarmed between his legs and Dogo, the wonder dog, sniffed at the back of his trousers. There was no end to the words of gratitude, admiration and reverence, and Biancini kept repeating that he had never met a nobler friend of art in all his travels, and that the patrons of Roman painters were miserable hucksters compared with him. He was not satisfied until Bezug had promised him to attend the performance every evening in the place of honour, where so many of the highest nobility had already sat. Biancini's tirades became more and more heated and the favourable opportunity to display his art of speaking carried him away. When the chauffeur reported to his master that the car was ready for the return journey, Biancini's troop gave their saviour an escort of honour. Three parterre acrobats led the way, walking on their hands so that their sharply bent legs stood in the air like army signals. Then followed a contortionist who had twisted his body into a knot and hopped like a toad, his face turned backwards, his eyes fixed on reference. The fourteen children of the troupe ran ahead of the saviour, who walked gracefully in the middle of the procession, led by Biancini on one hand and the lady with the ample bosom on the other. Behind him followed three pyramid men and finally Nella with her horse. Once again Biancini stepped in front of his troupe and raised his voice. The notes came from deep in his chest, as if from an arching maw, rolled round and full in the air and exuded a sensual charm like the voluptuous women who offer themselves in the public squares of Italy. Biancini's enthusiasm grew with the pleasure of the sound of the bells. "My dears," he said, "how rare it is nowadays to find pleasure in those arts.

The last memories of the divine games at Olympia have been saved. We are contemptuously called "comedians" and the word is emphasised as if we were talking about people who just have to be tolerated because they can't very well be killed. But I emphasise with pride: comedians, that means artists, and our respect for ourselves increases in such historical moments, in w h i c h humanity proves through its chosen representatives that it has confidence in us, that it also has respect for us." The speaker lost himself in a forest of lush ornamental plants of expression, he showed all kinds of gardening skills of style, flowery surprises, showed every moment a different view of his historical and philosophical knowledge and would certainly have talked for a long time if the chauffeur had not put the car in motion at a hint from his master. The speech was cut short by the three cheers of farewell. Bezug looked back once more and saw nothing of the whole group but Nella leaning her head against Mizzi's neck and caressing his muzzle with light hands.

As Bezug drove into the courtyard of his palace, Adalbert Semilasso, the poet, stood at the entrance to the park and dreamed of a small, light cloud that had been visible in the sky for hours and was shaped like a gondola covered with white silk.

"Hello, poet," Bezug called to him, "did Hainx give you my order?"

Adalbert sank back into crude reality: "Yes, Mr Bezug."

"I have another occupation for you, so that you won't be tempted to write tawdry stories again. Write me thirteen sonnets to love. You understand: to red, purple love. I'm not asking for moonshine, but for champagne. Oh, that's right ... where are you supposed to get it from? You don't love like that. But I'll give you the opportunity. Get ready to write blood red and then write purple poetry."

With that, Bezug climbed the stairs to the tower. After sitting in his armchair for a while and touching the carved snake heads, he got up and took the folio volume of obligations from the drawer. On the last page of the letter B, he entered Biancini's name. Then he pushed the volume away from him and picked up the book of gallant adventures. The thin silk of the pages crackled between his fingers as he slid the volume across the tabletop, where the ivory-white body of Danae surrendered to the golden rain rushing down from the ebony night. Hastily he sought out the last entries, turned round and wrote on a new page, equidistant from the upper and lower margins, with a gilded peacock feather: Nella.

That was his first meeting with Biancini's troupe. From then on, he came every evening and sat among the peasants in the seat of honour - where many of the highest nobility had already sat - and enjoyed the triumph of being able to refer all the artists' efforts and all their expressions of gratitude to himself alone. What Biancini's troupe offered was in no way above the average of travelling comedians and kept to the pictorial promises of their performances without much variation. Every evening Biancini sliced off the head of his voluptuous wife, every evening the pyramid men built up their three storeys, every evening the contortionists performed the same tricks. And it was always the same. But every evening, Nella, known as the "flying fairy", also walked the tightrope. And it was different every time. Her performances were not aimed at him alone, her smile and graceful thanks after the difficult jump from the rope were for everyone in equal measure, and Bezug saw with angry amazement that she did not single him out from the rest of the audience. It was not enough for her ambition to win his applause alone; she wanted to enthral everyone, and her pride was in constantly adding new pieces and new nuances. He was displeased to see that this girl, who was so fervently devoted to her art, was only interested in the matter itself. Moreover, all his attacks had been unsuccessful. First he was,

who was used to winning at the first attempt, had gone straight for his goal and, after a few introductory bouquets of flowers, had surprised Nella with a diamond jewellery that was as dazzlingly beautiful as if a drop of liquid sun gold had been caught in each of the stones. Although Nella accepted the jewellery with trembling hands, it seemed as if she was completely unaware that by accepting the gift she was declaring her willingness to perform a service in return. The customs of the artistic world had no power over her.

Bezug seethed with anger and changed his plans. He wanted to woo her in a more delicate way, as it did not seem to work in the tried and tested way, and at the same time laid his heart at her feet with a few poems. But Adalbert did not work to her satisfaction. One evening, the "Countess" had come to the poet on Bezug's behalf and offered him her beautiful body, anointed with lust of the most shameful and seductive kind. She undressed before him and danced naked in the red drizzle of a traffic light, while incense burned on golden basins. In the smoke of the odours, her white body gave him a tantalising freshness and her breasts trembled with desire for his young strength. She danced for a long time and finally fell down before him, clasping his knees, and her head with its long, blond hair lay on his lowered hands. Then she looked into his sad eyes, in which a great pain seemed to be hidden deep down, and suddenly, with a sudden outcry, she tore the veil of her ardour, flung the unclean torches from her and began to weep. Tears streamed unstopably from her eyes and wetted his hands. Her splendid neck shook before him and her hair flowed down her back like a cloak. Then she got up and fled with her clothes into the next room, where she dressed, as she was ashamed in front of him. With the suddenly awakened fanaticism of a remorse that seems reserved for the souls of the most shameless prostitutes, she begged for his forgiveness and for his friendship, which were now more important to her than all the triumphs of her body and on which her bliss now hung. Adalbert did not enquire about her past or her future and took her in like a

Saviour, with gestures so mild and humane that her whole soul sobbed. Every day she came to his chambers, and when she thought they were abandoning themselves to the wildest raptures of love, they sat at the window and looked out over the green park to the town, and talked of the homesickness that lived in them, or else they were silent and forgot the hour. The soft words of Adalbert's poetry all resounded in the countess and she carried his poems around with her with a suddenly awakened fondness for melodiousness and beauty. Often, when her hot body had tormented her so that she was forced to plunge anew into a frenzy of lust, she came with shy steps and the look of a dog, fell down before him and struck her white forehead against the floor. Once she had seized the scissors and wanted to cut off her blonde, tangled and sinfully beautiful hair. But Adalbert caught her hand and held her back, warning her not to destroy her beauty. From then on, she caressed this hair, spread it around her shoulders, and when one of her lovers spoke of the splendour of this blond coat, she struck him in the face with her clenched fist. And another time, when Adalbert had taken her hand and held it in his for a long time, she said, and it was like a cry: "You're waiting, aren't you, you're waiting for someone like you." "I don't know," said Adalbert, looking over her and over the roofs of the city, above the crowd of which the cathedral with its two unequal towers seemed to be waving lonely.

Thus Bezug was betrayed in his hopes. He had not succeeded in confusing the poet's life with the bloody rays of love; instead of purple and provocative poems, he received quiet, pale verses like pearls or tears, words of an indefinite and shapeless love, poignant and deep and completely inwardly urgent, but also wistful and not at all suitable for arousing a woman's senses. Poems like this:

My love is not a flood of fire,
It hurts and flickers and does not dazzle,

It is not a scorching, crackling ember, it
is a quiet, eternal light.

Her purple light burns before the
altar, Where tall, slender
candlesticks stand And old
windows clear as day

Seeing through clouds of silver
incense. And old pictures hang there
Around a Madonna picture in a
circle, The pulpit waits for God's
word, In old chairs it cracks softly.

A shadow dances on a bare wall And
slowly the traffic lights turn - I feel as
if a loving hand

Quietly stroking my hair.

Nella awaited these poems with a strange impatience. She didn't ask who had written them, but it was as if she felt as if she were the poet through him. He was nothing to her, he always remained only the messenger.

It was after the performance, and Nella was standing by the stairs to the dressing room trolley, where she had just taken off her leotards. In her nonchalant posture there was devotion to the words of love, and she kept raising her hand in the light that obediently crept up from the comedians' camp. Then Bezug thought he could deceive the infinite and eternal longing of the woman in her and dared to put his arm around her shoulders. Excited, he pursued his victory when the girl did not push him back and pushed her into the darkness. "No, no!" said Nella, beginning to struggle, "what are you going to do!" Then he quickly let her go, for he saw that she was with the poet. And now he realised that he must proceed with greater caution and patience, and that Nella was not to be won over like the frivolous girls who ran after money or were softened by sentimentality. He had to detach her, transplant her, translate her into a soil where he could

was the undisputed master. He took a different route. It led via Monsieur and Madame Biancini, and its construction cost no more than a small cheque with three zeros. Madame Biancini in particular soon sided with him. She was not free from jealousy and was glad that these caresses, the intimate get-together with Nella, would now come to an end. She felt neglected and had sometimes raged so fiercely against her husband that he had felt compelled to reach for the dog-whip that always hung over his bed. Biancini was more difficult to change his mind. But when he had reached the climax, when he stood there with his arms raised, his beautiful head tangled with black curls, a figure of enormous and larger-than-life sculpture, a narrow strip of paper passed before his eyes and caused him to turn back. He did not give in at once, for it was not to be said of him that he had sold Nella, but he left one position after another, and at last resigned with a touching and wistful gesture. "It is for her happiness," he said, "What can she achieve with us? She has everything it takes to be a great artist, she will conquer the world."

Artistic ambition was the Archimedean point from which Bezug let his powers work. Slowly and carefully, Biancini woke Nella from her sleep. He spoke of the tremendous progress she had made recently. That it was a real shame to waste so much grace and skill in front of dirty bumpkins. Astonished, Nella reflected on herself and agreed with Biancini. In the mixture of the light from the smoking circus lamps and the moonlight coming through the poles of the tent from which the roof had been folded back, the work of the comedians seemed senseless and foolish, and the jeering applause from the peasants was like a mockery to Nella, who was standing backstage waiting for her act.

Bezug had stayed out for a few evenings to let his poison take effect. When he returned, the path was ready. He found Nella under the willow trees on the bank of the stream. Mizzi's dark head lay on Nella's

Shoulders, snorting softly, he announced his arrival. The patron admired Nella's performance this evening with hot words.

"Oh, don't talk about it," she said discouragedly, "I don't want to hear about it. Biancini has driven me crazy."

"How?"

"He says I can do better. I'm wasting away here. It would be a shame for me."

Then the cover was applied with warmth and pushed her forwards. Yes ... he was almost ashamed of her when he looked at her like that, an artist in her field. And he wondered why she hadn't broken away long ago and followed her star. Then he concluded thoughtfully that perhaps he could help her a little if she wanted to trust him.

Nella listened up.

Bezug was careful not to let his eyes show and said in the same calm and level-headed tone: "Right now, Kutschenreuter, the famous Kutschenreuter, the owner of the largest European company, is looking for an artist in your field. I was with him yesterday and saw the procession of applicants. Kutschenreuter sits there with his legs crossed and lets the women talk. Some he sends away after the first few words, others he invites to descend into the ring and show off their skills. What you get to see! You would n't believe all the people who dare to offer themselves to Kutschenreuter. From children with matchstick legs who can barely stand on the rope, to jubilant old ladies who jump back and forth with a crazy smile, as if they don't want to admit that a bed and a heated room would be far more beneficial to them than the rope and the ring. One of them dropped her false teeth out of her mouth during a daring jump, the other destroyed the stretched leotard with her pointed knee - oh, it was a horror. Kutschenreuter only ever waved his hand: out, out! What do you want? Out of forty-five applicants who had rushed from all directions at the news of Kutschenreuter's vacancy, not a single one was acceptable. The defile was unsuccessful."

"And I should dare to do that?"

"They have little confidence in themselves. A healthy ambition will do anything. Why don't you give it a try? I'd like to prepare the man."

"They'll tell him miracles. And he'll be disappointed."

"I'll tell him the truth and he can see for himself whether it's the truth."

Nella caressed Mizzi's soft muzzle and laid her head against his neck. Now she was completely surrounded by a dazzling column of light, as if enclosed in a crystal. And Mizzi turned to her and snorted tenderly into her ear. Trembling with lust, Bezug raised his arms, then retreated into the darkness. When Nella looked up, she was alone, and touched by so much tenderness, she embraced Mizzi anew, giving herself up to the pleasure of the sensation of being so lonely among men that an animal must be her closest friend.

"Kutschenreuter is expecting you tomorrow," said her reference the next evening, after he had spoken to Biancini alone for a quarter of an hour. And Biancini laid his hand on her head as if in blessing, with an expression as if he were saying "Father's farewell". So now it was decided, and Nella was almost frightened when she thought that she must now leave her comrades. "Do me no dishonour, my child," said the chief, thrusting his hand into the front of his velvet doublet, and followed this admonition with an endless gallery of advice. In between, he led Nella up high mountains like a tempter and showed her all the splendours of the land of promise from up there. He flapped his hands and clapped his knees to express the roaring applause and delight of the audience, he bowed five or six times in succession ... "you won't be able to come out often enough." Then he became elegiac and big, heavy tears ran down his scuffed velvet collar. Meanwhile, with the help of her colleagues, Nella packed a small suitcase, in which there was even room left because she had to leave half of her belongings behind as souvenirs. Gitta, the snake woman, who had long since been stung in the eyes by one of Nella's brocade belts, cried so long and so urgently, holding the belt

so conspicuously that Nella had to give it to her. In return, Gitta gave her a tin capsule containing a beard of the miraculous Christ of Trofajach, whose hair on his head and chin has to be shaved every year. "This is the best protection. If you have this with you, nothing can happen to you outside." And so all sorts of other barter deals were made. In exchange for a silk scarf, Rolf, the third pyramid man, told Nella that the best cure for dizziness was to whisper "Jehuboa" three times to herself with her thumb pressed into the pit of her heart. While Biancini dissolved into poetry and made "At the Turn of Fate", Nella's good nature succumbed to the amiable onslaught of her colleagues. But she gave away her possessions without regret, and if someone had told her to give him the rest of her clothes, everything that was still in the small suitcase, she would have done it with the same absent smile without hesitation. It seemed to her that it was good not to bring anything from her old life into her new one. Biancini's wife sat on the steps of the cloakroom trolley, wiggling her legs and eating chocolate sweets from a large cone that had been handed to her with a bow. Then, with an outstretched arm, she lured Mizzi towards her, who watched the driver, tripping with restlessness. But the horse would take no notice of her beckoning and would hear nothing of her promises and did not even turn its head. Anita had no doubt that in a short time Mizzi would have forgotten as much as Biancini. She was satisfied with the relationship, with Biancini, with the whole world, but most of all with herself. She leaned back comfortably, laid her head on her arms crossed behind him, and felt the still considerable weight of the bag swaying between her breasts like the promise of a long-lasting pleasure.

That night, Nella climbed the Witches' Stone, looked into the wrinkled faces of the stone councillors, walked between the grinning gallows birds and stopped at the moonlight women. She looked around cautiously and peered deep into the bright shadows, fearing an encounter with the one who holds the throne of his kingdom up here.

had erected. Her blood rushed purple into the silence. Then the palest of the moonlight women leant towards her, breaking her rigidity, and whispered to her: "Farewell, my child, and keep well. We cannot do otherwise than we must. Thus speaks the wisdom of the stone to you." Green veils wafted gently around Nella, and she pressed her face into the stone robes of the moonlight woman and wept. This farewell was sadder than the first farewell had been, and Nella's heart beat so hard for a future into which she had been driven without knowing how it had come. As she crossed the ridge, the gallows-birds all made grave faces, and the councillors shook their wrinkled heads. From the forest came the foul odour of decaying caterpillars, which succumbed en masse in man's struggle against the destructive brood, and yet, invincible as a disease of the blood, emerged in other places for fresh work of destruction.

The next morning, Bezugs's car pulled up, and with a respectful gesture, the saviour invited Nella to take a seat next to him. He had her small suitcase covered by one of the precious car covers and then signalled the departure. Biancini stood in front of his troop and played the sad father. He felt very sad indeed, and his tears came without effort; but nevertheless he could not refrain from heightening his grief to monumental proportions, and from straining at the beautiful impression. The moment the car began to move, Mizzi broke through the ranks of the comedians and trotted after it, whinnying. He set off at a gallop, but soon he was no longer able to keep up with the increased speed. Then he stopped, whipped his flanks with his beautiful, long tail and stood and stood ... At the corner where the forest forces the road to bend, a man jumped out of the path of the carriage. It was a man, tall and massive as a tree, whose shirt-like robe, gathered at the belt, flickered as he leapt. Nella turned pale to the lips and looked at him with

The man's aching pulse followed him as he quickly climbed the hill between the trunks until he disappeared behind a hawthorn bush.

From a prisoner in search of man

[Table of contents](#)

What Adalbert Semilasso had to experience that winter, his first in the service of D, had stripped away all his unselfconscious cheerfulness. At first he faced the world into which he suddenly found himself torn with heroic curiosity, determined to make everything his own and ready to surrender himself completely to everything. But he soon realised that this world was neither inclined to surrender to him nor to accept his devotion. The wonders which he found daily renewed in Bezugs Haus overgrew his powers of comprehension, and there came a time when he was unable to grasp anything new or to bring anything of what he had already grasped into the order which he had conceived, in the manner of the poets, as the essence of the world. Overwhelmed by ever new surprises, he lost himself in a labyrinth of incomprehensibilities. He tried in vain to penetrate the meaning of all these things and people. As he endeavoured to get closer to the essence of the events, and as he was repeatedly confused by the brightly coloured and multicoloured surfaces, he felt as if the ground beneath him was giving way and he was falling into a bottomless pit.

Eternity, God, destiny entered into a round dance that went on high above him and all others. At last, with a kind of defiance, he began to give explanations to all these words, as he found them in himself, and tried to organise his life and its paths according to them. That was when the first conflicts with reference orders broke out. At first Adalbert rebelled against his master, but his resistance crumbled under the hard gaze of the conqueror. Without Bezug having to remind him with words, without reminding him of the duties he had taken on and the ceremony of the oath, Adalbert bowed to the stronger will that lay upon him like a yoke. Some power

emanated from this man, which seemed to permeate everything and made it impossible to fight against it.

Adalbert Semilasso had tried twice to escape from the house. One night he suddenly jumped out of bed and, after dressing quickly, ran down the stairs towards the exit. When he lifted the curtain on which Nala and Damayanti's first meeting was told in gold embroidery, Bezug stood in the middle of the hall and looked with his empty eyes at the poet, who froze with the gathered curtain over his right shoulder. So terrible was the gentleman's face, so threatening the tension of that huddled body, that Adalbert dared not breathe. Without speaking a word, Bezug turned round and left the hall, leaving the way open for the poet to escape. But Adalbert stood motionless, feeling the cold of the stone floor penetrate his whole body and reach his heart. The silken curtain weighed on his shoulders as if he were carrying a heavy burden, and as if in a horrible dream from which one wakes with a scream, he thought he could still see the cruel face of Bezugs in the middle of the hall. It was as if he were still there, as if the hall were filled with his terrible, indomitable will as if by a living force, as if a zone of danger stretched between the pillars, the crossing of which must bring death to the Wager. While he was still staring at the point where the shimmering, crackling currents seemed to be spinning in a vortex, from which a cruel face emerged, something strange happened. He felt himself sinking with the threshold on which he was standing ... sinking, sinking ... sinking deeper and deeper. With a cry he reached into the folds of the curtain and tore it down so that the fine fabric enveloped him and hindered his escape. He hastily broke free and ran back to his room. Trembling, he pushed the bolt in front of the door.

He tried a second time to leave the Bezugs Haus. It was a stormy night in the spring equinox, and Adalbert was more prudent than the first time in his escape. He waited until Bezug had visited his tower room and until there was no danger of

encounter was there. With all the caution of a conspirator, Adalbert left his room in the middle of the night and crept along the loggia, w h e r e the wind had gone astray and where rain mixed with snow made the stones slippery. The park lay before the arches of the loggia, a land that had risen out of the darkness, unknown and inaccessible to man, like a new continent that had emerged from the sea. Through this mass of darkness and noise, which seemed to boil in the storm, lay the path to freedom. The air above the park was whipped up as if by a furious clamour, and a smell of fire penetrated between the blasts of the wind. All the gallows-birds of the Witchstone were let loose on this wild night and rode over the roofs of the city on long, black, tube-like worms. With wide open mouths they screamed against each other, as if they wanted to let off the imprisoned life of the stone in these few hours, as if all the wild desires of the rocks were released through them. The crash of one against the walls of the house was followed by the laughter of the others, and they frantically tore the strongest branches from the trees to spur on their disobedient mounts. The fire spirits of the houses crouched fearfully in the corners, wary of being caught by the gallows birds. Leaning over the parapet of the loggia, Adalbert looked into the throng, in which the tops of the trees, forced by strong fists, bent like the bows of the arcoballists. Now he descended the stairs and hid in the stormy, fluttering folds of the night. But at that moment, a shining lance shot from the tower above into the body of darkness. Hit by the sharp beam, it reared up and foamed like a wild animal. Her flanks gasped and the gallows birds hooted over the wounded woman. From the glowing helmet of the tower, the light fell bright and hard into the secrets of the stormy night. And now the light began to wander, piercing cruelly into the body of darkness, twitching back and forth as if in search of a particularly bad pain. Adalbert stood under the broad lime tree and wished he could grow together with the wet bark. When the ray found him, he stood still and

pinned him to the tree. As if struck by a lance, Adalbert was unable to move and had to endure all the fears of that terrible night. "Listen, is that why you left us?" one of the gallows birds shouted in his face and hit him over the shoulder with the branch. The beam dissolved into a bundle of light, the threads of which intertwined and entangled until it became a net that held the fugitive even tighter than the piercing lance. He stood like this until dawn and then returned to the house, soaked, discouraged and powerless like a beaten fighter.

Since that night, he no longer dared to evade his master's power and bowed to his will. Of all his longings, only one seemed to remain alive: the longing for people. He knew that he expected its fulfilment from his household in vain. Of them all, only Elisabeth seemed to take a little more interest in him. Her coldness gave way in rare precious moments, and when she had encouraged him with kind words, he felt as if he had to speak of his fate at her feet. But he always drew back with a painful feeling when an icy stream hit him as he approached, like a breath from shrouded peaks. Then he began to wander endlessly through the streets of the city and sought out the old neighbourhood behind the cathedral, where the past huddled in smoky niches, in dark arched doorways. He loved the churches in the quiet hours between public services, when only a few worshippers sat in the pews, lonely refugees like him, crushed by the majesty of the high vaults and the solemn silence of the altars. Although the sacred and colourful windows, the strangely twisted columns and the flickering eternal lights did not conjure up any religious images for him, he surrendered to the serene, enraptured peace and found the most intimate images for his verses here. Then he climbed up and down the crooked streets and followed people's lives with his eyes. He liked to stand in front of Eleagabal Kuperus' house and ponder the figures and stories that were told on the street, which had been flooded with rain.

were visible on the soaked front. Since the events of the Bible were foreign to him, he gave the depictions his own interpretations of a rare and quite absurd marvellousness.

On a day at the end of March, which stretched from morning to evening like a desert in which the hours wandered blindly and aimlessly along lost paths, Adalbert Semilasso found a trembling expectation within him that he knew neither direction nor name. In the desert of that day he stood lonely as a preacher with his arms outstretched and his eyes fixed on the horizon of his destiny, from where he longed for a more glowing and illuminating light. His mistrust stood like a shadow behind him, at his heels, the same mistrust that Adalbert had shown towards life since his defeat; but Adalbert did not turn round after him and was deaf to his whispers.

He went out to search. As dull and confused as the fabric of this day appeared, Adalbert strode through it as if driven by a strong call and overcame all the inhibitions of the hours, all the influences under which he usually froze as if under the effect of spellbinding knots of magic. As he passed the door of Eleagabal Kuperus, he stretched out his hand towards the knocker, and for a moment it seemed to him that what he was looking for was waiting for him behind this door. Saul stood erect opposite the Witch of Endor, and all around them were all the abominations of the medieval woodcarver's imagination. But none of these monsters, neither the fire-breathing dragons, nor the leviathan, nor the griffin, nor the bird Rok, were sculpted in such a way that one would have thought them impossible. With a remarkable sense of the organic, the master of this door seemed to have augmented creation with some unsightly and violent, hideous and dangerous creatures. It was as if he had been allowed to look into a room where the models for a number of animals were ready, the execution of which was later omitted. Captivated by this bizarre artist, who revelled in strange adventures and whose taste in some things seemed akin to Adalbert's, he stood still for a long time outside the door, and it was only when a familiar and affectionate

voice, he was able to take his attention away from the carving.

"Now I must go to Eleagabal," said the kind voice.

"Do that, he loves you very much," replied another.

"I love him too."

Two women walked in front of Adalbert. The younger one was slender, and her shoulders, sloping a little and then sliding hesitantly towards the more agile lines of her arms, moved the poet like one of the little ditties that sometimes fluttered out here in the neighbourhood behind the cathedral. Girls who had just been taking part in the boys' games suddenly became dreamy and moved away from their mates to sing these ditties. The slender girl's companion limped so hard at her side that one hip was thrown out with every step, as if her body might go out of joint at any moment. Now the portal of the cathedral with its statues of saints closed around them like a frame, and Adalbert followed them as if it were self-evident that from now on he would only ever have to go where the slender girl led.

Mrs Swoboda tended the offerings of pious people in front of an iron frame whose round hoop held a number of thin candles, some of which were burning. Always busy extinguishing one burnt-out light and lighting another for a small gift, she nodded to the two women. Although she did not at all approve of Heinrich Palingenius' faithful friendship with the wizard from over there, she loved his daughter just as much as she cherished the strange man's faithful memory of her youth. Apart from her service to the poor souls in purgatory and the pleasure of a conversation with her friends flavoured with all kinds of sensations, she only retained a warmer interest in this memory. All these corners of the cathedral, the corridors that led from the sacristy to the tower stairs, sometimes revived in her mind images from a past in which she had gone through all the intrigues of a little love game with Heinrich. The old woman often felt as if her life from then to the present had been

The water was only dark and still, in which all reflections had sunk, while over there, in the bright light, stood the figures and events of youth in an unearthly, indestructible splendour. Ever since the tower keeper's wife had died, the old woman had had no greater wish than to meet Palingenius once more, and she never failed to remind his daughter of this wish. Regina would gladly have done her bidding, but her father's prohibition was so strict that she dared not even speak of Mrs Swoboda's hints, of her sighs and reproaches. After the old woman had done her duty for the souls of those languishing in purgatory, she shuffled on felt slippers to the bench where Johanna and Regina were sitting.

"Is father better?" she asked, and her toothless mouth seemed to hold a few words of regret, but they had to be properly chewed and moistened before they could be spoken.

Heinrich Palingenius had had a terrible winter. Some demon seemed to have overpowered his healthy strength and was tormenting him with all kinds of previously unknown pains. He thought he could feel a slight tingling in his whole body from his spinal cord, a warmth in his joints increased to an unpleasant heat, until an agonising, searing tearing made his limbs powerless. But Palingenius was not inclined to succumb to these attacks of approaching old age and carried on with his duties as before. One day, however, as he was dangling on his seat outside painting the ashlar for the deceased canon Athanasius Vypoustil with white paint, a sudden weakness came over him, the brush slipped from his hand and fell over in front of an old woman who was reading the names of today's dead on a black plaque at the foot of the tower. It was fortunate that the tower keeper, as he sank, had wrapped his arms round the rope, crossed and twisted as if in convulsion, so that he was able to pull him up with infinite caution and save him. Regina put his father to bed, and when he came out of his unconsciousness

When he woke up, he silently tolerated his daughter's efforts. But when the girl announced her intention of calling a doctor, he sat up straight in bed with a jerk and shouted, throwing back the covers, that he would get up in an instant if he was not allowed to rest. Dismayed, Regina went to old Johanna for advice, and she moved the fingers of her drooping right hand backwards, which meant: let him have his way. Without a doctor, the doorman dragged his suffering through long months, but as he did not want his daughter to suffer with him, he managed to show a friendly and contented face despite all the pain. Only sometimes did he become impatient when he thought of the work on the flying machine, which now had to celebrate. But even all his desire for the pleasures of his workshop could not persuade him to accept the good offices of his friend Kuperus, who, sitting by his bedside, waited only for a word, only for a distant hint of an invitation. Stubbornness ran through the centre of the Türmer's thoughts and feelings like an immovable iron axis, anchored with both poles in the rigid masses of eternity, around which the system had to revolve. Once Heinrich Palingenius had made up his mind and fixed it, it remained so for all time, and neither the iron pincers of logic nor the friendly enticements of loving concern were able to pull him away from it. To this was added a kind of shame, an embarrassed sadness that his body was so feeble, that feeling which drives sick or wounded animals into solitude until they can show themselves healthy and strong again before their comrades. Once he was convinced that nature had to help itself, there was no power in the world that could have made him accept outside help. In the meantime, Regina and Johanna were on duty for him, keeping watch, making sure the clocks were correct and swinging on the bell ropes over the abyss below the mighty callers. And so the winter went on, and with the first glimmer of spring, that pale, whispered hint of spring, the tower's condition really improved, as if this weakened body had merely heard the call to renew everything.

waited for it to blossom. With a happy face, he went into his workshop, made his plans and drawings and began to take apart everything he had devised in long, sleepless nights and prepare it for transfer into reality.

Regina was therefore able to give Mrs Swoboda good news. And with childlike persistence, the old woman whispered her wish. She would not be satisfied until Regina had once again promised to convey her greetings to her father and to wait for a favourable opportunity to take him by surprise: "Well ... if he tolerates him over there, why shouldn't I come to him? There was a long guy among the altar boys, his name was Franz, I've forgotten his other name, and he didn't like me. And once in autumn, in the plum season, he threw plum stones at me so that I slipped and fell on the slippery stones. But Heinrich, your father, Miss Regina, borrowed the guy. As rough as Franz was with the girls, he was such a rabbit's foot otherwise. You know all the stories people tell about the tower, all kinds of scary things. And one evening, as Franz was walking past the tower steps, a white figure suddenly appeared in the dark and whimpered. Whimpering wonderfully, because I was hidden under the stairs and heard everything. Franz thinks it's a ghost and runs as fast as he can. But my ghost chases after him, grabs Franz by the collar, throws him down and knocks him out. By the score, I tell you. The ghost was Heinrich, and the beating Franz got was as thorough as a rainstorm. But because I was afraid, as soon as it was over, that we might get a bad name for playing ghosts, and something might really come over us - you never know - I cried and demanded that Heinrich do some penance. What does Heinrich do for my sake? He went to the teacher and said that it was he who had beaten Franz. The beating came back to him with interest. And when the teacher had finished, Heinrich got up and said to me: 'Don't cry, silly goose, nobody can take Franz's away from him. You were like that

Father, Miss Regin'!" And whispering, the old woman continued her thread, tying it to special events and couldn't get enough of showing her childhood friend's daughter the delicious connections, the strange confusions of his course.

In the darkness of the nave, where the trombone angel hangs from the parapet of the organ choir, Adalbert stood leaning against a pillar and saw nothing in the whole church but the girl's head, in whose neck a blond knot sat under the simple black hat.

Under the tender and penetrating force of his gaze, Regina turned round. For a moment her profile stood before a dark altarpiece, pure as a pious thought, like a child's prayer and illuminated by an inner light. Adalbert was determined to discover the great resemblance, the mysterious relationship to something he had already seen. With great care, he searched through the impressions of his life in the world and uncovered his leaves with quiet fingers. Now he rejoiced, and it was as if this discovery had given him a stronger right to this girl, as if he had been given an excuse to approach her at the same time. On the front of Eleagabal Kuperus' house, among other pictures, was the image of Solomon's judgement. A mild judge sat on a high throne, his hand raised with an appearance of cruelty against a servant threatening a delicate child with a naked sword. Of the two women facing each other on the steps of the throne, one threw back her head and seemed to assent to the command; her splendid and powerful body stood like a pillar, while the other, weaker and more delicate, clung to the back of the throne and desperately contradicted the judge with a strength heightened by the moment of supreme danger. Her arm outstretched against the servant made the gesture of renunciation; her whole body reared up to prevent the terrible; the lines of fear and love flowed together in her face to form a chaste beauty. - The girl sitting in front between two old women resembled this woman, raising her head from time to time under the influence of Adalbert's gaze.

Now they rose and walked away. An old, heavy door next to the altar slammed shut behind the three women. Adalbert waited until the old woman returned and resumed the missed service for the poor souls at the iron hoop. All the candles had been burnt down and Mrs Swoboda had to give the carrier a fresh coat of paint. To the young man who approached and gave her a large coin, she murmured an astonished: "Thank God," for the money was enough to redeem a whole gang of robbers from purgatory. And as he still stood there staring at the bunch of red candles in Mrs Swoboda's hands, she thought he had special wishes for a roll call and asked to whom her prayer should be addressed. Then he said sheepishly:

"All together. All together" and left. He had actually wanted to ask the old woman who the girl was. But he couldn't get a word out, and with the shyness one has just before awakening from a dream of happiness, with the shyness that would prevent a beautiful illusion from being destroyed, he avoided asking. At length he stood before the house of Eleagabal Kuperus, but the twilight was wiping over the front, and long veils of shadow hung from the gable to the doorstep. Then he began to wander again through the crooked streets of the old neighbourhood and came to the disreputable alleys where the cries of prostitutes lured him from the doorways. A young woman with misery in her eyes stopped him. She had none of the coarse gaiety of the girls of the trade; she could not attract by her dress or by an urgent and provocative perfume, by those gestures so familiar to the lust of the alley. She had nothing in her favour but that she was a woman. And she offered him only her womanhood, with no other promise than the pleasure of a tired body taken from misery. Adalbert gave her a banknote and went on without listening to her anxious and confused "Sir, sir!". For the first time, wealth made him happy. And he was not satisfied until he had emptied his purse completely. A child who had just come out of a pub with his box of matches, where he had been running in vain from table to table amid the laughter and jokes of the guests.

table, he took his stash and gave him back the matches as well as the money. A few ragged boys stood around a chestnut boy's little stove with their hands in their trouser pockets, inhaling the scent whenever the boy lifted the lid. They backed away at first when a strange gentleman offered them both hands full of chestnuts he had just bought. Among their instincts, mistrust of the givers was foremost; the question that dominated their parents' whole lives, the restlessness that always suspected danger and would not allow them to believe in gratuitous charity, in the joy of giving, were no longer foreign to their youth either. But Adalbert held out his gift with such a friendly smile, with such a pleading look, that the tallest finally ventured to take a chestnut. Two other boys followed, one very small and one with a limp, and then the others came and reached with both hands into the constantly replenishing supply until the top of the small oven was empty. After Adalbert had distributed money among them and given the vendor a present, he broke through the circle of spectators and continued his search. A blind man sat under a red lantern, holding a harp between his knees and trying to warm his cold hands by breathing on them. The little girl next to him had pulled her feet under her torn skirt and hid her head under his arm, as if she didn't want to see how dark and lonely the streets already were, how sad and uncertain the paths she had to lead the man along. In this pause of a hurried life, going from pub to pub, the hopelessness of an existence came to the fore. Now that he had time to come to himself, he overlooked the barren distances he had already travelled and at the same time saw that the way forward was lost in the night. Adalbert read all this from the posture of the huddled figures, from the weary lean of their shoulders against the cold wall, from the snuggling together of the two bodies for whom touch was the only comfort. His heart suddenly became so heavy that he thought it must sink in his chest. With a word of pity, he stopped and took a large banknote from his wallet.

The man, who had been expecting a handout, felt a piece of paper in his hand and thought he was being held for the best by a rough journeyman, a joker. "Father, father," whispered the child, "for God's sake, money ... money!" and in the light of the red lantern she spelt out: "Hun ... dert." The blind man stood up so suddenly that the harp fell to the ground with a sudden outcry of all the strings. "Where ... where ... is?" But Adalbert had already left and quickly turned down a side street. Along a dark, dirty millrace, he reached a small square where the new town met the old neighbourhood. Here the ever-busy, ruthless search for renewal began to advance against the castle of the past. A breach had already been torn in its outermost perimeter, and the heaps of rubble of demolished houses showed the first success of the attackers. The old town on this side still held on to its silence, the darkness of its alleyways and the dim glow of its lanterns. The small houses with their sparsely lit windows, crooked chimneys and rickety wooden steps leading down to the water rose from the millrace that slid past on rotten planks, as if to give the inhabitants a constant opportunity to seek out the shadows of the soundless water and the tangled reflections of the dim lanterns. Beyond, however, the great broad fronts rose out of the noise of a busy alley, like the first iron limbs of an advancing army: like an army, too, in that none of the houses differed from the others, and that they seemed to obey with the same implacability a single purpose. But in the middle of the breach, on the border between the two parties, stood a hut made of canvas and laths, with "Photography" painted in large, rain-washed letters above the entrance. All of a sudden, Adalbert felt as if this shack was even more desolate, as if the lives of the people who sought their poor livelihood here were even more hopeless than everything he had already seen this evening. A life that belonged so closely to the old cottages, to the quiet millrace behind them, ventured right up to the edge of its homeland, like a displaced person desperately fleeing to the enemy.

would like to pass over. Adalbert tried to pull back the curtain on this sad game, but the place was locked and the owner was hiding somewhere in a nook and cranny. Deciding to return here and help, he walked through the noise of the city. He felt as if he had made himself completely pure and worthy to bear the happiness of the marvellous encounter, as if his hope was built on this foundation.

In the portico, Elisabeth sat with a beech tree in her rocking chair covered with a white polar bear skin, sheltered by two jasper pillars, and behind her head the darkness of the park stretched out. Completely filled with his new world, troubled by an almost unbearable tension that urged to be released, Adalbert was unable to conceal anything from her. He spoke unhesitatingly of his bliss, which stemmed from his good deeds, of the justification of his life. Standing at Elisabeth's side and absorbed in the sight of her slender, white hands, he told her everything - except for this wondrous encounter, except for the luminous hour in the cathedral. He felt as if his gifts had freed him from the shame of his servitude, as if he could now present himself to Elisabeth more joyfully and with greater awareness of his worth.

With a strange look that began to search for something between the pillars still connected to the wintry panes of glass, Elisabeth looked straight ahead and kept the rocking chair in motion with her left leg. Under the raised hem of the white skirt, this foot seemed to be obeying some particular and obstinate thought, seemed to be emphatically affirming something by its repeated movement, until Adalbert, puzzled by Elisabeth's silence and this movement of the foot, interrupted himself in his narrative.

"You have allowed yourself to be deceived, my dear friend," Elisabeth said at last. "That honours your heart, but not your mind. How little you know the world. No wonder, since you have only lived in it for such a short time. But here, here you could have learnt a thing or two." Elisabeth looked around her with such fierce, hateful eyes that Adalbert couldn't help remembering the sudden outburst in her father's salt lake eyes. As if under

Elisabeth looked around her as the jasper columns melted under her gaze and the hundred treasures of the room fell scorched from the walls. The slender foot under the narrow hem of her skirt beat a faster beat. "What good do you think you have done? You guileless one! If you had followed the people you have made happy, if you had dropped the mask with which people have succeeded in arousing your pity, you could have done wonders. The harp-player now probably invests his fortune for a capital intoxication, rejoices to be able to drink to his heart's content for once, and, after his comrades have joined him in some of his pleasures, falls into a corner where they will steal the rest of his money when the child he has dragged from one tavern to another for several nights has fallen asleep from fatigue. It is no different with the parents of the boys to whom you have given opportunity for rash and disgusting outrages. I suppose the poor woman has a starving child at home for whom she went out into the street. But surely the woman also has a husband who, after beating her, takes her money and makes off with other women."

The girl pronounced her judgement with harsh and implacable words, as if she were at home in the souls of those people, as if she were familiar with the chastisement of poverty, as if she knew the adverse fumes of depravity. She seemed, leaning back in her rocking-chair, with the heavy knot of her beautiful hair under her head, like a flower which, transferred from marshy ground to a splendid hothouse, has yet preserved all the pungent odours of its origin. Adalbert remembered seeing a beautiful, oddly shaped flower in the park's glasshouse, with fleshy lips wrapped in a precious mackerel-coloured fur, waiting for flies. When one of them, seduced by its splendour, ventured into the cup, the lustful lips closed and the cruel thorns hidden under hot colours penetrated the twitching bodies. Where did this girl get this wicked certainty, this sisterly knowledge of all wickedness? She sat there as if in a pale light and moved the rocking chair with a narrow foot.

Adalbert's thoughts tumbled apart, an army in disarray, a crowd overcome by sudden terror, having lost all sense. Why did she take away his joy, why did she dip his victims in poison, why did she not leave him one of his happy deceptions? And when Elizabeth did not cease to prove to him that no one was worthy to have mercy on him, when she spoke without pause in ever sharper words of the indignity common to all men, when she revealed her cold and implacable heart more and more furiously with a sparkling hatred, Adalbert bowed and left her without another word, with a bitter taste in his mouth, so that she suddenly fell silent and was left alone in the hall. He went down into the park, and paced up and down for a long time in the darkness among the high hedges; he passed the wonders of the night without seeing any of them, without listening to the whisperings of the bushes, in which good friends of his lonely hours were hidden. His whole attention was focussed on expelling the poison which Elizabeth had poured into him, and he glowed his strength in a holy anger, in an honest indignation. Every time he came to the end of his tunnel, and when the light from the illuminated glass panes in the hall reached his feet, he felt like picking up one of the pebbles from the path and hurling it at the panes.

Between the broad, dark trees, some of the light caught on the panes of the glass house. Adalbert saw motionless palm trees pressing their leaves against the glass as if they were reaching out into this strange world. Far away, in the depths of the glass house, a light danced to the gardener's work. And suddenly Adalbert's anger, which had faded before the royal splendour of that night, returned. He tore open the door and paced in the sultry air as if in a balmy bath. Looking up from his work, the gardener took off his cap, which he never took off even here in this heat. Without caring about the man's astonishment, Adalbert ordered him to go ahead with the light to the orchid beds. There they stood in countless rows, a collection of every imaginable variety, a mixture of the strangest colours and shapes, with

wide, drooping chaps, with grotesque crowns like jester kings, with pincers and red tongues, with wide cloaks and conspiratorial masks, with glittering stilettos and blood-spattered spearheads. Some were as dark as monks, but their contorted figures concealed a restrained violence, others screamed out in the light of the gardener's lamp in fiery, garish colours, in a covetous red, in a poisonous yellow; in a lewd blue. Like bloated corpses, some seemed to float on the twilight of the flowerbeds, others towered high and steep, like erased virgins who kill the man who loves them. Thus they stood in countless rows, caressed by the warm air, and one could almost see the disgusting greed with which they extracted their food from the ground. They were all awake, all looking at Adalbert with wide-open eyes, and all seemed to open their cups of night with voluptuous shamelessness, like women who sell themselves to crime. Confident of their power, they called out to each other, covetous and mocking at the same time, gloating and full of barely concealed malice. And suddenly, without any warning, Adalbert was overcome with rage. He threw himself over the bed with his arms wide open, crushed and broke the flowers under his body, tore out what he could reach with his hands, stamped, thrashed about, churned up the earth and threw the crushed plants behind him. The gardener stood trembling with fright, unable to utter a word and shining a light on the furious man to destroy him. Adalbert raced here and there, criss-crossing the whole bed, trampling everything underfoot and then suddenly knelt down to rage all the more ferociously in a smaller area. When he was tired, he stood up, pale and proud, as if he had won a great victory, and walked past the still speechless gardener out of the glass house.

The next morning brought the deepest shame to the awakened man as he came to his senses. All the glory of victory had been taken from him; he faced his deed like a stranger, like someone who had been set on a path he would never have chosen himself under the influence of someone else's will. The incomprehensible stood before him, a naked rock whose

The summit is shrouded in clouds. He searched in vain for connections. Why had he raged like this? Did he not have to thank his luck that he had not confessed to the destroyer his most marvellous experience of yesterday evening? What was the matter with the other, since the most important thing had remained untouched. He crept to the breakfast table like a sinner, expecting a devastating punishment. They probably already knew of his fury. Elisabeth looked at him strangely, and her pale lips held a word whose image was already veiled in her eye.

Bezug said: "A storm destroyed our orchid bed tonight." And Mrs Agathe, who had never had any idea of what was happening around her, asked in amazement: "Oh, how is that possible, there was no storm tonight?"

With a slight shrug, Bezug looked after Adalbert. That was all. But when the poet passed Elisabeth after finishing the meal, she quietly uttered the word she had saved for him:

"Rampage!" Her eyes smiled. At the door, Adalbert looked back once more and noticed how Rudolf Hainx threw a question, a reproach, a mute, significant warning into Elisabeth's face with a dark, almost flooding look.

Adalbert's shame could not stop the return of happiness. After tormenting himself for a day, it was suddenly there, like the splendour in the night, like that radiance descending from immeasurable heights, filling him like music, like the grateful feeling that lifted him above himself when he had succeeded in writing a beautiful poem. He had found the person he had been looking for, pulled him up to his white cliff in his thoughts and let the world below burn. Laughing, he shook the drops out of his hair, and laughing, he showed the girl the futile storm of the waves against her bold loneliness. Completely wrapped in his secret, he believed himself safe and guarded his happiness, a delicious shrine containing even more delicious stones. Like a wise bon vivant, he put off visiting the neighbourhood behind the cathedral for a few days and meanwhile went to the other

He wandered around the neighbourhoods, completely freed from the pressure of his chains as he had been when he had come to the city, ignorant and trusting. He gave himself up to the little scenes of the street, was able to watch for a long time the busy behaviour of some dog, to observe a servant leaning lazily on the street corner, or to give half a day to children playing in remote alleys. In the busy squares, he found the women who bore some resemblance to the girl from the cathedral and followed them at a distance so as not to disturb them. At last, after he had abstained long enough from seeing her again, he rose one morning with the resolution to go to her. He was as full of confidence as when he had found her, and did not doubt for a moment that he must find her again. He climbed the steps to the cathedral as if for a feast, walked between the two saints with their cold, empty eyes, who stood on their pedestals like pious guardians, and entered the square in front of Eleagabal Kuperus' house at the same hour as then. He stopped in the middle of the square and looked around him. Few people were on the way; in a side alley he heard the screeching, loud counting rhymes of cheering children:

"Me and you,
Mül-lers - cow,
Mül-lers E-sel
der - bist - du!"

and laughter broke out at the last word. Then a girl began another little verse in a very thin, high voice, drawn out like a wire:

"One, two - police; three, four - grenadier" to "nine, ten - go to sleep." Nothing of the paintings on Eleagabal Kuperus' house could be seen in this dry weather, no matter how hard Adalbert searched for their outlines. Only the hand, that strangely lively-looking hand, held the key, as if it were handing it to someone, as if it were making a wish,

that he should be taken and made use of. The days had grown a little longer and even at late hours still gave enough light, but Adalbert, tormented by the one thought of seeing her image, of enjoying the music of her body, the rhythm of her gestures, changed his position in vain. As he passed one of the two stone saints, who held his head against the sky with a daring turn, as if he had jumped out of the vortex with devotion to the supernatural, he saw that a small wreath of spring flowers, liverworts, crocus blossoms and a few trembling, shy violets, was wrapped around his prayerfully folded hands. And following a sudden intuition, without giving himself the slightest account of their origin, of their appearance, he thought he knew that these flowers had come from the girl. He looked round, and when he saw the cathedral square lying deserted behind him, he reached for the flowers, took them from the saint and, after kissing them, put them in his breast pocket. As if the wait had now become easier for him, he stood patiently into the night until a man in a white coat lit the gas lanterns on the corner, and only when the doors of the cathedral were closed by the little church servant did he turn to go.

After a few weeks of waiting in vain, his longing receded into the shadows of the unfulfillable. Several times he came close to asking old Mrs Swoboda about the girl, but when he stood beside her, he pressed a coin into her withered, cold hand, and to her question as to whom she should pray for, he replied in a hushed and sad tone: "For all of them together, for all of them together." An exaggerated idea of the young man's piety became fixed in the mind of Mrs Swoboda, who preferred, among all good works, the offering of candles for the souls in purgatory; she did not fail to call his attention to the vergers and her friends, so that soon, when he entered the cathedral, all heads turned towards him. She was all the more astonished when after some time he failed to appear, and regretfully

she concluded that he had departed and was now giving his pious gifts to other churches.

But Adalbert had not left, he had just given up looking. He closed his tender adventure inside himself and lived only in memory, in which longing sometimes lifted its dazzling wings. And since he wanted to give the girl in his dreams a name, he called her his queen, or Regina, a Latin word he had heard from the gardener for a slender, wondrous palm tree. Renunciation came into his life as large and heavy as a sinking cloud and enveloped his soul. All desires, all anger disappeared in its grey, and he was once again able to remember the cathedral, the crooked alleys and the cheering children with quiet friendship.

During this time, his love flowed into tender poems, overflowing with a mild glow. At this time, however, he demanded fervent fantasies, drunken orgiastic words, sensual rhythms. During this time, he brought the countess to the poet to cheer him on. One day, when the woman had just left him, he followed her after a short time and met Elisabeth on the staircase. He saw at once that the girl must have met her, and that she knew whence the countess came. "Well, my prince," she said, "you cannot complain of your master. His hand is open and his heart is not ungenerous; he likes to share out what is his." It was impossible to get past Elisabeth. "You are mistaken," said Adalbert, "it is not what you think it is between us."

"Pure as ice and chaste as Joseph," laughed Elisabeth, and in these words, apart from the mockery which Adalbert only felt but did not understand, there was something else trembling in deeper reasons. She gave him the way, and Adalbert went away as if he had received a blow, and knew, without turning round, that Elisabeth was standing at the top looking after him.

With poor people. Emma Rößler makes a covenant

[Table of contents](#)

On a hopeless late autumn day, one of those days that crawl cheerlessly out of a hazy east, stagger across a pale sky and sink prematurely under showers of inexplicable fear, Emma Rößler realised that her life was like that day and that there was nothing to do but strive towards the night like it. She leaned against the railing of the little bridge, under which, between the pools of the miserable stream, shards of pots, rusty tin pots, scraps of clothing, a heap of useless and worn-out objects lay half-buried in the mud. It was ridiculous and sad at the same time. It was as if, here in the middle of the park surrounded by noble houses, one could see the otherwise so carefully concealed secrets of the great world, its shortcomings, the secretions of glamorous households open to all eyes. The autumn rains had not yet set in, hiding the shards under the opaque muddy water that came down from the mountains, filling the bed of the stream to the brim and disappearing gurgling into the underground drainage channel in which the stream was channelled under the elegant houses of the new district. But the desolate veils were already gathering over the town, and the wind was blowing excitedly over the crest of the Hexenstein. It swept the bright colours down from the trees, scattered leaves and small twigs across the path and swept some of them swirling into the pools of water among the bent tin pots and broken glass.

A few workers were sweeping up the dry leaves between the bare bushes. They weren't trying very hard, because the warden was at another end of the park and it was futile to keep order from the hissing wind anyway. But when Emma saw one of the

as she carelessly trampled the rustling pile of leaves with her foot, the noisy scolding of the women followed her.

"Can't you be careful, you bitches."

"Such a baroness!"

"We should like everything twice for the people."

Emma stood in front of the large fountain, whose tritone group was protected from the snow by planks, and watched the workers until they packed up their tools, put on their skirts and went home.

Emma delayed her return home, walking slowly through the park, whose trees and bushes grew into walls with the falling darkness, behind which there was a rustling and scurrying of day-shy ghosts. She walked around in the sleepy park until everything to the left and right had disappeared and only a small stretch of the path in front of her feet was made visible by a light that sprang up from the illuminated streets. Then, as a soft drizzle began to usher in the endless autumn rain, she carried her painful thoughts home. From the tower room, a cold, smooth beam came into the mist, smooth as polished metal and pointed as a spear, and sank into the body of the park, making the trees tremble and rustle excitedly around the glowing wound. Emma avoided its cruel path, avoiding her enemy's palace, as if more misfortune might result from approaching its sphere. She shivered as she realised that she had spent most of the afternoon in such dangerous proximity. It was only when she saw the red curtains of Mrs Fodermayr's windows that the feeling of rescue and safety came. All around, the houses stretched up into bare, steep courtyard walls, with small windows looking into the courtyard, where junk was being shifted in the darkness to wild adventures. Emma groped her way towards the red glow. As she stood in front of the invisible door and ran her outstretched hands over the damp walls, she heard the voice of Mrs Fodermayr's husband.

"That's all very well; but please, tell me how long it's going to take. I can't foresee the end. It's been three months now.

And nothing has changed. We will have to run up debts, we will sell and move one piece after another. We will be ruined. It's just enough for two, but not enough for three."

Mrs Fodermayr's reply was accompanied by the clattering of plates and glasses: "Don't talk like that. Back then you were fine with me bringing something every second or third day. If we had children, we'd have to get along. What do you want to say? What do you know about life? Other people have six or seven children and have to get by. Do you want to throw the poor woman out into the street?"

"But it can't stay that way."

"She'll feel better again. And maybe you'll be glad that we left her with us."

A sobbing, monotonous melody seemed to descend over the roofs, mingling with the darkness of the courtyard and filling every corner, a frightening humming, that melody which Emma had first heard rising from the stone vault of the cathedral and which had never left her since, became clearer. All the agony of a lonely life deprived of tender love expanded into a litany, the paragraphs of which hung together like the links of a chain and weighed on the woman's neck with the weight of iron fetters. The darkness around her was suddenly even more hostile and cruel, animated by dangers that stretched out their hideous heads towards her. Some force seemed to tear her away from the red gleam of salvation, pulling her towards it, so that Emma, beside herself with fear, hastily sought the door and, pulling it open with a sudden jerk, stepped into the room.

"Good evening," she said. She was pale, as if she had encountered something terrible. Just this night, just this night under a protective roof. Mrs Fodermayr returned the greeting with embarrassed friendliness and continued to set the table. From his corner, where he was painting the damaged gold frame of an old photograph with bronze paint, the man also grumbled an unruly

Response. Emma looked around the small room that had been her home for three months now and took off her hat in silence.

"You've got all wet," Mrs Fodermayr asked, "is it raining outside?"

"It's raining a little." Emma now realised how wet her clothes were and shivered as she approached the stove, where a small, cosy fire was burning. With gentle fingers she stroked one of the tiles, on which the sacrifice of Isaac was depicted in blue with crude figures, caressed another, on which Noah's ark was filled with all kinds of strange creatures, and let the light, invigorating warmth flow into her body from one of the small squares where Abel's sacrificial fire rose to heaven. It was as if the fire, which was pleasing to God, was really burning and spreading the friendly comfort that comes from old stories and half-submerged fairy tales. The haunting melody, the voice of hopeless grief trapped in lonely domes, receded before the hiss with which the iron stove top received the greeting of the flames.

"Supper's ready," said Mrs Fodermayr, lifting the tin lintels from the large pot so that the aroma of cooked potatoes rose in great clouds, wafted around the hanging lamp and then glowed brightly towards the brown ceiling of the room. The man put down his frame, corked the small paint bottle and shuffled to the table in his slippers.

"Come on," urged the landlady, "we have herrings. The first this year." On the small plate next to the bowl, where the steaming potatoes now formed a small mountain, lay three silver herrings with open mouths and dull eyes. Emma hesitantly came to the table and took her share. While Mrs Fodermayr cut up and cleaned her fish, she tried to hide her husband's unfriendly silence by telling him little stories from home and farm. She took his inhospitality behind a wall of seemingly uninhibited chatter and told of a hundred trivialities that made her life here between the high walls rich and busy. Emma saw

She forced herself to answer their questions, to respond to the interests of the tiny household and to pay attention to events that had taken on strange guises when recounted by maids and cooks. What had happened outside had become something quite different when told to her friends in the courtyard from the kitchen window; the facts were seen in a new light and under different conditions. Emma saw here, as it were, the other side of the world she had known before, and for a moment the efforts of the faithful woman succeeded in drawing her thoughts away from the wearying and hopeless path.

But when Mrs Fodermayr had to take a break because a bone was spreading in her throat and didn't want to go either forwards or backwards, Emma's thoughts were suddenly back on their old path. She asked, and in the tone of the question lay the answer: "No letter has come?"

Impatiently, the man put his fork down on the plate with a hard clatter and said instead of his wife, who was still struggling with the bone: "No, no letter has arrived today either. And none will come. Never."

Mrs Fodermayr had finally freed herself and said reproachfully: "Anton!"

"Well, what, what? There will never be a letter until he wants one!"

"The dog, the wretch!" and Mrs Fodermayr quickly drank the rest of her beer to get rid of the scratchy throat.

"He can do anything he wants. All the others together are nothing against him."

"The punishment will not fail to materialise."

"Yes ... yes ... all right! The devil will get him. But for now, he'll do what he wants. Nobody comes up. He lifts his little finger and a tower collapses. If he wants to, he'll say the word and I'll be released. What am I? A simple foreman. I can do something, but a hundred others can do the same. You shouldn't oppose him."

"But keep quiet. You're having a bristly day today."

"Oh no! Because people are already talking about it everywhere. It can't stay hidden from him."

Emma pushed the plate away from her. She reached for the brooch at her neck and pricked her finger. Letting the blood drip into the handkerchief, she said, "You think he'll punish you for taking me in?"

"But madam, don't listen to him. He's exaggerating, he's a donkey."

"Didn't you read in the papers about the companies he's bringing together again? He's eating everything up. You'll see what comes of it. What does he want? He wants to make us all small, very small. When he blows, a whole city swirls, and when he spits, there's a flood. Can I stop him? Hell - it's vile, but what can you do?"

"But that's enough now, keep quiet for once. He can't tear our heads off ..." Mrs Fodermayr's beckoning pointed to Emma, who had stood up silently and glided towards the stove like a shadow. She had turned her head away and was stroking her trembling fingers again over Noah's Ark, the sacrifice of Isaac and the expulsion from paradise. Mrs Fodermayr's heart was filled to the brim with compassion and she struggled to hold back her tears. She, who kept a warm and grateful memory for all the kindnesses she had received in the past, who had carefully booked every special tip, every piece of holiday roast and every slice of birthday cake, could not bear to see the decline of this once so happy and abundant life. Her affection, which was not distracted by any other tasks, had increased to motherly tenderness when she saw her former mistress in need of protection and deprived of all resources. With all her wiles, all her feminine arts, with all the subtle powers of the ingenuity of kindness, she tied the poor woman's fate to her home and knew how to ward off the worst. That is why she now got over the

She was furious at the breach of the peace in the asylum and glared at her husband with the evil eyes of an animal defending its young.

"Yes, because it's true," he said, wiping his moustache, "I haven't said anything for long enough."

Half sobbing, half furious, the woman warned him: "Anton!" But Anton had lost all inhibitions, he raced like one of his Machines when the control system breaks: "Ferdinand, Swaton, Grimm, they all say the same thing: 'how can you submit'. And they're right: how can we be under control? Suddenly the noise will be there, what will we do then? Then we'll all have nothing: not us and not them."

Just as Mrs Fodermayr's anger was about to gain the upper hand over her emotion, she noticed that Emma's shoulders were twitching with restrained weeping, and suddenly the little parlour swam in a damp glow, the edges of the objects trembled and became indistinct, the ceiling and floor leaned against each other and cut the swaying wall at oblique angles, the lights and shadows flowed into each other: with a deep sigh, a strange cry, Mrs Fodermayr burst into tears. "But, my dear madam, I beg you not to cry. He is a donkey, my soul, a donkey; don't cry," her big red hands lay on her shrugging shoulders. "Let him talk; don't cry." In an endeavour to find a word that was taken from the sphere of the weeping woman, that would bring her a native sound, a greeting, a touch of understanding, she searched: "He has no ... he has no ..."

Anton sat in his seat, his stream of words had suddenly disappeared into subterranean chasms; the machine stopped with a jerk. He couldn't bear to see the women crying. Intimidated, he reached for his glass, drank the beer, wiped his moustache, took a puff from the extinguished pipe, poked the ashes with his little finger, closed the lid with a bang and reached for the glass again, even though there was nothing left in it. He stood helplessly in front of the unfolding scene that he himself had initiated.

drifted on the vortex of his own words and longed to get out. With a remnant of energy, he mumbled: "Well, what, what? I only mean -" At that moment he cursed Ferdinand, Swaton and Grimm, whose sharp vines had hurried him into this adventure. "It's not that bad. I only mean -" And suddenly he concluded his attempts: "Heaven's sacrament!"

"Silence!" the wife shouted from the stove.

"I don't want to leave the lady ... we don't want to leave her; I'm just saying! Well! If I lose my job ... You can always support her, even if she's not with us ..."

He was not listened to. Mrs Fodermayr, half blind with tears of course, led the sobbing Emma into the small room where the guest's bed stood. Now the moment had come to flee. But just as Anton put on his hat and put his pipe in his breast pocket, his wife came back and caught him in the net of her reproaches.

Long after Emma had calmed down, she could still hear Mrs Fodermayr's crude words in the next room, her attempts at resistance, her husband's stammered justifications. All this was unnecessary to strengthen her resolve. Was it for her to disturb a domesticity in which, before her intrusion, a frugal comfort had accompanied her days? She realised that the cruel and monotonous melody of her destiny was rising over everything, and that her life was, as it were, pervaded by this sad hum. What future was she keeping for herself, what inheritance had she to guard, that she was so reluctant to give up all resistance and enter into a lightless night like this autumn day? The memory of her husband, the memory of his works, had to be renewed by stronger men. "Only in the hands of love is immortality preserved," Eleagabal Kuperus had said. Those were words, beautiful words. Hatred was stronger than love, and she felt herself being swept away by a torrent of hatred. - The rain was still splashing on the windows, and Emma could see the panes being washed over by the living drizzle. With all her care

Mrs Fodermayr had decorated the room that Emma had only conquered after a hard fight. At first, in her magnanimity, the woman wanted to put her husband's bed here and share the cosiness of the larger room with her guest. Then she finally gave in to Emma's request, but she gathered everything she could to decorate the bare room. Above the bed hung a consecrated picture that Mrs Fodermayr herself had brought back from a pilgrimage many years ago. She had taken it from its place above the small pewter votive font, as if she herself had renounced the protection of Our Lady of Mariazell in exchange for the Madonna's grace for her guest.

"It brings happiness," she had said. But Emma had not found happiness, neither the little bit of sunshine she wanted for herself, nor the success of the task she had set herself. In the old chest of drawers, whose bulbous drawers protruded broadly and were studded with shiny brass, the last of her belongings were stored, linen and clothes, and on top stood the most precious thing she owned, her husband's head under a glass bell jar covered with a cloth. When all the excitement, all the pain, all the trembling of the soul had flowed into the great calm of resolution, Emma found herself ready to visit her sanctuary. She pulled the cloth from the bell, and amidst the reflections of the glass mirroring the light, the man's head emerged. With all semblance of life, unchanged, as if the body had merely fallen away without the head realising the separation, they looked at the eyes. It was as if the pupils had retained the ability to follow the influence of the light, as if the iris were still in a state of changing movement, as if the fine veins of the eyeball were still filled with blood. Just as deeply as the eyes of the living, these eyes, kept awake by the art of Eleagabal Kuperus, lowered their marvellous gaze into the eyes of the woman, and the mysterious effect of these gazes flowed from the dead into the living. That strange mixture of fear and happiness filled her completely, and she felt that there was something besides herself in the chamber from which she had learnt to find reassurance and comfort on lonely nights. It was quite quiet in the next room

sleep had suffocated his reproaches and defences. The rain tapped softly on the windows. Then the front door slammed once, and the sound crept along the walls to the glass prison of the head, so that the glass began to hum like the strange bells that can be heard deep in the earth. While the rain knocked incessantly at the windows, as if some stray were trying to gain admittance with a timid hand, while in the table and chest of drawers began the crackling that gladly accompanies the dead hours, Emma burrowed deeper and deeper into the night and drew her sorrow around her like a blanket. With all the fervour of a prayer warrior, she lay on her knees before her head until she dared to remove the glass bell and free her husband's face from the mocking reflections. And now she was celebrating High Mass at night, the solemn act towards which her soul was striving, the solemn act that her longing had been longing for during the day and which was the most important thing in her life: she put both arms round the red pillow on which his head stood erect, so that the tips of her fingers touched at the back, and a magnetic current she felt in her body was closed by it; she thought she saw his hair move softly, as if a breeze were passing over it, and thought she heard a rustling sound, as if a comb were passing through it. Very close to his face, she closed her eyes under his scorching gaze, opened her lids, shuddered under the blue ray and closed her eyes again, giving herself over completely to the painful lust of the delay. Her mouth was level with the dead man's lips and slowly moved towards its target. The magnetic current circled more strongly through her body, the chamber and everything in it plunged into an immersion, from the depths of which only the pounding of the rain emerged. Although she kept her eyes closed, she felt herself floating towards a great brightness, she felt lifted and floated in space, detached from all connections to the earth. His arms held her tightly, his hands were on her throbbing temples, just as he had always been in the past. And now her mouth touched his lips, warmed them with the warmth of her blood, sucked in and tore herself away, only to press against him even more stormily and wildly.

The whole sensuality of her still young body, refined and purified, had saved itself in these embraces of a shadow, in the kisses on the lips of a dead man; the marvellous power of her imagination granted her a strange kind of consolation, in which the memory of the wild adventures of love, of the cataracts of passion, of the outbursts of sparkling power of the senses was renewed. Panting and with her eyes closed, she continued her kisses, chaste as a bride and insatiable as a knowing woman. The necessities of the body poured into this new orbit, swept away her contemplation and enveloped her with a liberating storm. Emma forgot her guilt and her remorse for the wretched weakness to which despair had then brought her; she forgot the terrible apparition and felt only the bliss of his forgiveness. She was allowed to reunite with him. From the brightness in which she was floating, luminous clouds broke away, came towards her, penetrated her body until its earthly rigidity had given way, until it itself became a light, luminous cloud that rose into an ever more blue radiant glory. From somewhere came a splendour of golden thrones, waving around her, mingling with her pure joy and multiplying her bliss a thousandfold. All the wonders of the ether flowed into her, carrying her away on gentle whirlpools that rose ever higher around magnificent constellations. Sometimes, deep below her, in a zone that had no right to her, like a fragment from the life of the earth, she could still hear the beating of the rain, then this too was over, and only floating and shining remained ...

When Emma awoke from the swoon into which she was always thrown by her excitement, the dawn of the new day hesitated between the pounding of the rain at the window. She veiled her husband's head from her grey, for in this dull and sullen twilight his features remained dull and lifeless. Then she opened the window to let out the suffocating smoke of the burnt-out lamp and lay down on the bed for a short sleep, just as the sounds of the early risers woke up next door.

In the morning, armoured in her resolve, she entered the landlady's room. Like someone who starts a hard job with a sudden jerk, she immediately said: "Today, my dear Mrs Fodermayr, you must let me go. It has taken long enough."

Mrs Fodermayr, who was just about to put the coffee pot on the table, stopped, lifted the pot and for a moment it seemed as if she was going to drop it. "The donkey!" she then said, looking towards the door through which the culprit had slipped away in time. "But l i s t e n , you won't listen to his stupid talk."

"He's right. I know it. It has to end one day."

"Madam!"

"It's taken long enough, no, don't disagree. I'm leaving today."

Mrs Fodermayr put the coffee pot down on the table with a small crash, pretending the matter was settled.

"How I should thank you," Emma continued, "I don't know. You must be content that I thank you in words ... more ..."

Suddenly Mrs Fodermayr turned red in the face, took a step back, put her arms on her hips, realised that this gesture was not proper, lowered her arms in embarrassment, wiped her hands on her apron and, beside herself with embarrassment and consternation, stepped from one foot to the other: "And ... and ... just tell me, tell me, how do you think ... what do you want to do, what do you want to live on?"

With a face that seemed very calm and wore confidence as a mask, Emma said: "Well - it will be decided today; I know, I have the hunch, the certainty ..."

"Listen," Mrs Fodermayr's desperation gave her the strength to make another attempt, which she could not count on succeeding after her experiences: "Someone can help. You told me about him yourself. Why don't you go and see him? He alone can do something ... Eleagabal Kuperus."

But Emma got up and went to the window. Outside, the rain had stopped, the yard was still full of puddles of water, and the rubbish in the

The corners looked as if they had just been pulled out of a pond. But above the roofs, which were close together, there was a patch of blue sky, enlivened by wisps of drifting clouds, like a smiling answer to the anxious question of whether the mild beauty of autumn had given way to the dampness of decay. All the windows opened, and there was a clamour of kitchen bustle and shouts from friendly maids.

"Go to Eleagabal Kuperus," Mrs Fodermayr said again, as emphatically and as High German as possible, summing up all the good memories of her time as a parlourmaid to Countess Pernstein. As always at important moments, she wanted to give Emma the impression that she was consulting with someone of her own kind, as if she could be sure of finding understanding for all her impulses. It was not enough for her ambition to accommodate the gracious woman, she wanted to become her confidante in all modesty and submissiveness; therefore she was anxious to show that she knew how to speak well and that one could talk to her, that all the conditions for approach lay within her. "Why don't you go to Eleagabal Kuperus," she said for the third time, "you told me yourself how he r e c e i v e d you, how friendly he was to you, how he took an interest in your fate. He will help you."

Then Emma turned round and said, devotedly and patiently, like someone who has the hopeless task of convincing someone who doesn't want to be convinced: "Believe me ... I can't go to Kuperus. It's impossible."

Mrs Fodermayr quoted the favourite saying of the late Countess Pernstein: "Nothing is impossible."

"Oh, but it is! This is impossible. I must know that. Something has happened that makes it impossible for me."

Emma retreated into the tower of silence before a new onslaught of questions, incantations, exclamations and well-placed words of wisdom. Mrs Fodermayr did not succeed in convincing her that, according to her own account, Kuperus was not a fierce

She had to put up with Emma's going away without any hint of where she intended to anchor her future, and she was left with the bitter feeling that her guest did not like her. She had to suffer Emma to go away without indicating where she intended to anchor her future, and she was left with the bitter feeling that it had not pleased her guest to let her into his confidence, that he was keeping the answer to the most important questions a secret from her.

But Emma herself did not know the answer to the question about the future. When she left Mrs Fodermayr, only one thing was certain, that the decision would have to be made today. She was determined not to return until she had found another place, and if her search should be in vain, rather - her thoughts did not want to cross over this narrow bridge to a dark land beyond. She hoped for the strength of despair, for the lacerating scourge that would drive her at the moment of decision, for the mocking courage that leaps out of the darkness at the edge of the abyss onto its victims.

The sky seemed to want to make us forget yesterday's threats with a flattering and at the same time heroic splendour. Once more it spoke of light and beauty, and gave away bright colours to the autumn, so that everything breathed more easily and became more careless. The streets were noisier and livelier, but Emma, who usually responded to the changes in the sky with her inner self, took no part in the rejoicing of reckless life. Her thoughts went round and round, past the cruel and grey images of disappointment, humiliation and injury, flinching from the terrible experience and timidly searching for a way out of the pernicious maze of misfortune. Carelessly, she walked across the street, looked the passers-by in the face without seeing anything and failed to hear a bell ringing behind her back, warningly sweeping down the path of the electric tram. The ringing became shrill and shrill, a wild shout that drew the attention of passers-by and made them freeze, but it did not reach the woman's consciousness. People shouted to her to

Brake screeched too late, a shock went through her body and threw her to the side.

There was a gathering of people around the youngest victim of the tram at the moment. Emma looked the people in the face, smiled, tried to stand up and sank back again. A few steps in front of her was the motorised carriage, its driver threatened by an excited crowd and dragged from his seat towards the guard. From the rear platform, pale faces looked after the victim. A flurry of exclamations, questions and insults raged around her, confusing her even more than the pounding in her head and the pain in her right leg, which forced a soft whimper to her lips. There was an immediate argument about who was to blame for the accident, and two parties came out against each other, one claiming that the driver could not be blamed because he had signalled in time and tried to stop the car, while the other shouted wildly at him and showed a desire to tear him apart. In the meantime, the rescue organisation had been notified and the car with the red cross drove hard into the retreating crowd. From the circle of curious onlookers, she was carried into the dark box, which was filled with the odour of blood muted by carbolic acid. An orderly adjusted her body and placed her injured foot in a sling, ignoring her cries.

The young doctors, who happily combined their lack of work at the rescue centre with their ability to serve the public, set about examining the case with great zeal. After exposing the injured foot, they looked at each other. Dangling from a scrap of skin, the foot no longer seemed to belong to the woman's body, a limb that had left the service and could not be put back in place by any art. After a first scream, which her horror forced her to utter, Emma remained silent; she only ever looked at the foot, the piece of her body that now lay loose beside her after one of the doctors had cut through the strip of skin. The bloody stump of her leg was now quickly bandaged. White

Bandages shimmered against pools of red blood. Bare tools clinked. The leg was tied up. Two doctors, who had been watching another casualty at a different bedside, left their post and came over to help. While the young people crowded around her bed, supporting each other with quick handholds and deftly changing places as if in a play, Emma endeavoured to get a glimpse of the foot lying in a bowl next to her bed. She saw, when the circle of doctors opened, its waxy-coloured flesh in a pool of blood; she saw that the toes were curled, as if some terrible pain had drawn them in at the last moment. She had never looked at a part of her body so closely as this pathetic limb that had become a stranger to her.

"Of course, it's better if you're transported to the hospital," said one of the doctors, "but if you wish, we'll take you home." Emma looked the young man in the face. "I have to go to hospital. I don't have a home."

"What are you trying to say? You lived somewhere."

"My former servant took me in out of compassion." She gave Mrs Fodermayr's name and address. It was as if the accident had also broken the hard shell of her modesty, as if the impact of the motor car had also knocked down the scaffolding of her pride, and if anyone had asked her about it, she would have told the story of her misfortune without restraint. But the doctors, who only added a little human emotion to their professional interest, did not dare to go beyond the questions of the protocol until one of the youngest among them, who had meanwhile looked after the other casualty again, read Emma's details in the protocol. "Emma Rößler," he said, "the name sounds familiar." The sun seemed to rise behind his head, as long, dazzling rays shot out on either side of his face and a shining horn rose above the top of his head. "You are the widow of the poet Rößler?"

"Yes." Emma was surprised that he began to sway his body in such a strange way, as if he were moving it according to an inaudible rhythm, while the sun behind his head sent out ever brighter rays. At the same time he receded from her bed, lost mass and was only a shadow against a bright light. His voice came from a distance separated by chasms: "I've read a strange story about his head ... is it all true? It was cut off and embalmed ..."

"It's true!" said Emma. She was determined not to tell these strangers that the head had found its body again, and that her husband was now standing behind her bed with his cool hand on her forehead. For it was better to hide oneself so as not to be struck by the sun's piercing rays. The doctors had joined hands and formed a circle of black figures that now moved slowly around her bed. The glare of the sun kept shooting into the spaces between the men, and the faster the dance became, the faster the light and shadow followed each other, just like walking beside a picket fence in summer, where the changing light confuses the eye. Someone was running after her, and she knew without turning round that it was Richard who was trying to catch her, and so she ran all the faster, for they had quarrelled this morning. Oh, no, she didn't want to be caught, didn't listen to him calling after her. On the great pile of beams where the carpenters were selecting their timber, she ran on until there was only one narrow plank with no end in sight. Suddenly she stumbled and fell. There she lay in a thicket of nettles with little golden fruits hanging from them, and Richard held her by the apron, gasping. "I knew it," he said, "that you would not walk far. You've lost your foot, this is where I brought it." And he handed her the little girl's foot and demanded a kiss as a reward. But Emma cried out, for the foot was all bloody over the joint and blood was dripping down her apron. "It doesn't matter," Richard's comfort was as warm as a loving touch, "Eleagabal Kuperus will help. He can do everything. You see." With a

Bowing, Richard lowered his head and put it back on. Only now did Emma see that this head was sitting on a poor, wasted body that was almost translucent, because the skin that stretched over the bones of the body was as thin and fine as parchment, letting all the light through. "You're a poet, you can do what you want," said Emma, happy to be able to offer comfort herself.

"There we are, that's it," the warden said to Mrs Fodermayr when Emma came round.

"Madam, madam, madam," Mrs Fodermayr stammered and wept. When Emma later thought back to this time, she found it to be the most important thing in her memory: a great brightness that was reflected from the white walls of the sickroom and, when the sun was overpowering in the afternoon, gave way to a green twilight; the sleepless hours of the night, which were more frequent at first and later became increasingly rare, in which lamps burned behind green shades between the rows of beds, the meandering band that ran in a rectangle along the edges of the ceiling and travelled from one glaring circle of light from the lamps to the next, continuing its intertwined paths with the same persistence in the dark places in between; the picture of the Emperor in his general's uniform, which hung almost in the centre of the opposite wall; then the quiet step of the attendant, the whispering of the sick and the sounds of the street, which only dared to penetrate very stealthily; and the wholesome silence from which all this came and into which it all sank again. Then, from this general ground of desirelessness and comfort, emerged the special features, which were presented in order of importance. Firstly, the recordings in which Emma, conscious of her guilt, endeavoured to exonerate the driver. Mrs Fodermayr's fits, reproaches and crying fits, which were often so violent that she was removed by the warden with gentle force. All this touched so hard on the loss that Emma was not a little astonished not to find more regret with herself, more pain, more melancholy, and was a little ashamed that it had come to this with her, above the feeling of the security of her presence the

thoughts of the future. Above all, she remembered that beautiful, warm autumn afternoon when she was carried in a chair into the large hospital garden for the first time and an old man, swaying with leaden limbs on a stick, came closer, looked her in the face like an acquaintance and then said his name: Nikolaus Zenzinger. When he saw that she was looking for an explanation on his deteriorated face, he nodded to her: "How are you? Better already, eh?" From the first moment his grief, his resignation to a fate unknown to her, the cruelty of which she merely suspected, had an influence on her; his words pushed back the bolt of the transparent but always closed gates that separate people's cells from one another. They stepped onto the threshold and saw their kinship.

"Yes," he said, "we came here at the same time. We were brought in the same car. We were both saved." This last word seemed to rebel against his meaning, harboured by a deep bitterness; there was a contradiction in it, and as if the man felt that he must not mix up dissimilar things, he added: "That means *you* really were saved." And then, after a while, he continued: "We came at the same time, but I will be released before you." This first greeting, in which similarities and differences were noted, was followed on the next two days by many other conversations lasting five minutes, such as those held in whispers between patients, about the room, about the comrades, about the doctor and about the warders, conversations on the threshold which, as empty and cold as their topics were, brought the two closer together. On the evening of the third day, Zenzinger pointed to the long veils of clouds flying across the sky and said: "Tomorrow comes the autumn fog, and then winter. Farewell. I'll be leaving in a few days and I doubt we'll see each other again." Emma didn't want to believe it, but the next morning, the fog was thick outside the windows, November was raising its grey flags and no longer gave up the earth. In the boredom of the hospital room, Emma investigated the fate of the stranger, building up a picture from the signs she had seen in

She had found one story after another in his face, his hands, his poor suit and his language, which sufficed with the words of the people, discarded them all and fuelled her curiosity until she succumbed to the compulsion to turn to the attendant for information. "Nikolaus Zenzinger," she said, "I don't know anything ... but I'll ask in his room." That afternoon, the story came out that surpassed her own inventions. Nikolaus Zenzinger had taken part in the campaign in Bosnia as a soldier, had taken a number of bullets and sabre blows in several battles, but these had not caused any lasting damage to his body, and had finally returned home as a veteran. After trying many things to get away, he spent the last of his money on a photographic machine and was determined to utilise a skill he had once learnt as an assistant. He rented a piece of land outside the town, surrounded the machine with four walls of grey canvas, set up a wooden shed as a darkroom and now promised in large letters above the entrance to his salon that he would have everyone's portrait ready in the shortest possible time. At first he had enough to do to portray all the neighbourhood maids, old comrades-in-arms, enterprising schoolgirls and amusing day-trippers. It was loud and cheerful in his four canvas walls, and Zenzinger dragged his tired legs back and forth with a smile on his face between the camera and the groups that gathered in bold positions in front of the lens. The jokes with which he accompanied his manoeuvres gained a reputation. It was a fashionable thing to own a picture from Zenzinger's studio among the lively people from the suburbs, among the Sunday revellers. You could have yourself portrayed by him sitting on ladders, riding on barrels, on top of or next to each other, with glasses of beer in your hands, with your bashful girlfriend on your arm, sober or drunk. Zenzinger had the patience to listen to and respond to all wishes, he met the tastes of his audience, as he himself belonged to their circles, and endured his skill in his four canvas walls with the recklessness of an artist. But with

This changed over time. A flood of developments in his art swept away all these little people, the owners of the canvas stalls, carried them from the city to the countryside, drove them from their fixed seats, turned them into nomads or swallowed them whole. To the great photographers with their beautiful studios, their painted backgrounds - clouds or castle ruins, open landscapes or park paths - the competition for popularity no longer seemed degrading, they lowered their prices to the lowest limit and also adapted themselves to the mood of the maids; and the new generations of commis, the successors of the faithful followers of Zenzinger of yore, now proudly walked past his promise to finish everyone's picture in the shortest possible time, even with their hand-held cameras. The jokes with which the deposed artist cleaned up his act were no longer new and had lost their reputation. Only sometimes the drunkards still came to his studio because they knew that they would have been thrown out elsewhere. Out of a tenacious attachment to his home town, Zenzinger, who had meanwhile become an old man in his profession, kept his place and blamed the absence of his public on a temporary change in fashion. But when his situation did not improve, when he was persistently overlooked, he decided to remind people of himself, left his post outside the town and moved closer. On the border between the old centre and the ever-closer masses of new houses, he set up his four canvas walls in a small square, prepared his camera and waited. He waited in vain. No one came but hunger and need. One day, the tailor, for whom he was a bedmaker and who would have liked to see his money, brought him a newspaper in which an appeal recommended the poor old man, whose business was going so badly, to public charity. Proud of the success of his trip to the editorial office, of his kind-heartedness and industrious charity, the tailor waited for his bedmaker to be recognised. But Zenzinger held the newspaper in his hand for a long time, remained silent, looked in front of him, finally crumpled up the paper thoughtfully with both hands and threw it out of the window into the courtyard, where it was

was caught by playing children. Then, after putting on his better coat and pinning on the war medal and without answering the tailor's questions, he went straight to the editorial office. Standing at attention, hands at the seams of his trousers, looking straight ahead, he first thanked the gentlemen most humbly for their kind efforts, but at the same time asked them to refrain from doing so, as it was not proper for a veteran to accept alms. They tried to reassure him, but Zenzinger insisted that it was impossible for him to live on charity and that he would rather starve than eat a piece of bread that he had begged for rather than earned. "If I can no longer earn my living, then I no longer deserve to live," he said, and the gentlemen from the editorial office looked at each other in amazement at this strange play on words, which they would not have believed the speed photographer capable of. Zenzinger met these harassed people, who were harassed year in, year out by petitioners of all kinds under the most outlandish pretexts, like a miracle. He could not be persuaded that there was nothing degrading in such an appeal, nor did he take the banknote that the editor-in-chief handed him from the editorial office with the consent of the other gentlemen; his resistance was therefore not a well-invented trick, but genuine, not born of a superior intellect, but flowed from a simple and honest feeling. But since the editors' interest had awakened, they managed to reach a settlement with Zenzinger after a hard struggle. In the evening, the newspaper published an amendment to the appeal; now the public was made aware that the aforementioned photographer was not accepting alms, but that he only wished that people would remember his services and visit him again. Thereupon a few pictures of children, kind-hearted old ladies and former comrades were taken. After a few weeks he was forgotten, just as he had not been remembered before, the good souls and old comrades had fulfilled their Christian duty and spared themselves the sight of an unstoppable decline, a sinking into misery that was only exciting to see and yet could not be averted.

After having had the last intake for the portrait of a lapdog five days earlier, Zenzinger chose the maid's way of death when the tailor, who had been outraged by his ingratitude since the story with the call, cancelled his bed. But the poison, scraped off by phosphorus sticks, was only enough to throw his body into a flaming bath of pain, but not to completely destroy his vitality. The Rescue Society came into action and saved him; he was admitted to hospital until the traces of the poison had drained from his body, which was more weak from hunger and the torments of his pride.

This was the story, the main points of which the attendant had learnt in Zenzinger's room. Emma wove the picture of his life from these fragments, from the fragments of a destiny that had been brought to her, with that sure instinct of affection, with an imagination awakened and educated by her share in her husband's labours. She connected the corner-stones by masonry; she sought and found all the relations and connections, and fitted them into the structure; and knew that the picture and the structure were right. She could hardly wait to be released from the hospital, and when her artificial foot was fitted, she greeted this sign of her release with a smile that flashed with tears. On this occasion she was reminded that the electric tramway company was obliged to pay all medical expenses and the cost of the artificial foot, and that she must not fail to make a claim.

"You're out of necessity," said Emma's neighbour, who was lying in bed with a broken rib. "What luck! One must be lucky! Who will give me anything for nearly breaking my neck on the cellar stairs? If you suffer pain, you want something in return. Now you're set for life."

As if through a curtain, Emma heard some words from Mrs Fodermayr which, although different in form, were similar in meaning to those of her neighbour. Now the peaceful comfort, the thoughtless security in the sick-room was over.

over. Before she had taken another step towards her asylum, the world came rushing in and forced her to think of the future. This world, which she had forgotten for a time behind the tapestries of her dreams, rose up with the gesture of a bull-necked gladiator challenging his opponent to battle. But with a new goal in mind, Emma did not think twice. She gratefully accepted the offer of her kind doctor, who promised to find a lawyer for her case. This was followed by information, consultations and negotiations in the hospital consulting room. Endless statements that were disputed point by point by the representative of the tram company. It was a back-and-forth that, with its tricks and ruses, its advances and surprises, resembled the behaviour of a stubborn salesman and a grated buyer. Emma was astonished to notice a change in the position of her lawyer. While at first he confronted the opponent's representative brusquely and declared from the outset that he would initiate legal proceedings if an amicable agreement could not be reached, later his courage and confidence seemed to decline; he backed away from the opponent as if under the burden of a guilty conscience, gave him space, restricted his claims and advised against legal action, acting as if one should be glad to receive anything at all. Emma again felt the influence of that pernicious and mysterious power, and, bewildered by her advocate's aside and frightened by his glances, she finally gave her consent to a ridiculously small sum of compensation, which only saved appearances.

Glad to have escaped the disgusting fight, she answered her neighbour's questions. The woman with the broken ribs made a movement as if she wanted to beat her hands over her head:

"Oh my God! What a thing! What nonsense!" The exclamations followed one another like rockets and poured out. Then at last her tempestuous temperament found reflection in the calmer flow of an explanation. "But, but ... so clumsy! Well, the company got off lightly. And

You missed the opportunity to make a fortune. It was a mean thing to do, settling you for the medical costs and a one-off compensation payment. Medical expenses, damages, compensation for pain and suffering and a lifelong pension - you should have had all that! How can you! That should have been awarded to you by any court. But your lawyer was either a fool or a cad."

Emma was a little ashamed at first, but then she quickly consoled herself with the fact that the woman knew nothing of her persecutor and his power, that she knew nothing of the terrible feeling of always being threatened by an incomprehensible and invincible opponent. When she left the hospital the next morning after an emotional farewell, she made her way without hesitation to the notary's office, where today the result of the negotiations was to be formalised in a deed. The artificial foot made a clattering sound as she walked up the stairs to the notary's office, and the stumbling of the two sticks combined to form a strange rhythm, a clattering that echoed on the stone slabs of the corridor under the cross vaults of the ancient house. It was as if these sounds, which were now inseparable from her future, this clattering that would accompany her on all her journeys from now on, in their multiplication, in their refraction and repetition, were meant to make the loss quite clear once more before she signed. Somewhere in a corner of her imagination huddled like a lurch the neighbour's word about the bad lawyer in her case.

Emma was received with great kindness, a chair was wheeled out for her and she was wooed with an abundance of fine words, as if they were worried that she might change her mind at the last moment and withdraw from the amicable settlement. Then the notary hastened to read out the deed by which Emma, in return for a single payment of that sum, renounced all claims and declared herself fully satisfied. Around her stood all these men, who all took a mock interest in her fate and among whom she had not one friend; she felt that they were looking at her, and in one

In a sudden burst of fear that even this little thing might be snatched from her in the end, she took the pen and signed. The notary affixed his seal, the witnesses added their names, and the representative of the tram company immediately handed her the weighty envelope.

Emma made her way over to Mrs Fodermayr as the gentlemen bowed. There was a new sensation in her leg, a quiet pain, the unfamiliar connection between the living and the lifeless kept a kind of horror of herself alive. From time to time she stopped, tired, and let the people pass her by. She was amazed to see how quickly one could move forward on two legs. She felt as if she were burdened with a chain, as if she were carrying a weight, a heavy ball to which she was forged for all time.

It was uncomfortably cold in Mrs Fodermayr's small flat, and it seemed to Emma as if some of the furniture had been removed. Master Anton sat at the windowsill, even though it was working time, and knitted, while his wife endeavoured to light a small fire of sparks. The joy of the reunion was mixed with dejection, the reason for which Emma began to explore after the first words. She did not allow herself to be misled or distracted, overcame all barricades, pushed forward inexorably and finally found the entrance to understanding with dismay. What Anton had feared had come true. He had been dismissed on some pretext or other; he had wandered about in vain and had been unable to find work. Now that he was faced with the facts, he starved and froze like a hero and fought back all fits of despair; he straightened up his wife, who had become faint-hearted, and utilised his hobbies, knitting stockings and gilding frames, to acquire the bare necessities. His story was free of bitterness and reproach, and was told as simply as if he were talking about someone else. Emma replied with a consolation and a plea. She forced her benefactors to share their small possessions with her, and as she knew how to make Mrs Fodermayr feel at home in

to maintain the belief that her gift came from a great abundance, she overcame all objections and resistance. Mrs Fodermayr's imagination had cast a glamour over Emma's future, she saw towers full of treasures, she had raised the probable to the highest potency and finally, worn down by need and stunned by the thought of salvation, she took what Emma offered her.

"It's not a gift," said Emma, "I'm just paying back a debt."

Mrs Fodermayr wanted to kiss her saviour's hands, but Emma embraced her and kissed her on her wrinkled cheeks, in which the runes of distress could be read. Anton came out of his corner and shook her hand. He said nothing, did not even look at her, but stared at his wife, who stood by the stove and wept; the corners of his mouth were drawn down, his eyelids trembled.

Then Emma walked away quickly. The winter sky over the small courtyard was clear and blue; thick vapour rose from a kitchen window that had just been opened, as if from a chimney. Part of what Emma had felt so heavy and oppressive above her lifted and rose like this vapour. Her path to Nikolaus Zenzinger's canvas house lay clear before her. When she reached the place where she had expected to find his studio, she was a little startled. A few carts had been pushed into each other here, in which the street sweepers used to carry away the snow; under the bridge, the dark waters of the millrace rushed between remnants of dirty snow. Zenzinger's studio had been demolished; Emma soon found her way around. The winter was probably not favourable for his art; it was time to find the tailor. After asking a few guards, an old man and a tobacconist, she climbed the dark, steep stairs to the tailor's flat. The good man sat amidst his patches of cloth and, on Emma's enquiry, pointed with his scissors to Zenzinger's door.

"Oh, you ... you come to me," said Zenzinger and stood up from the table, on which piles of postcards lay next to a few colour trays and brushes.

"I came to see you."

"How do you know...?"

"I've asked around."

"I ... I don't take photos in winter. It's not possible."

"What do you do in winter?"

"Everything that is asked of me. Now, you see, I colour postcards. I can't take you in."

"I want you to take me in another way. I have come to ask you if you will allow me to stay with you."

Zenzinger cleared a lot of bottles, bowls and glass panes from a crate and offered Emma the only chair in his room. Then he sat down on the crate opposite the woman, clasped his hands together and raised them to the height of his face: "Why, why ... are you doing this to me?"

"Take my request seriously. I have no one in the world. My husband is dead. I dare not see the only friend I had again. My accident was very badly paid for. Now I'm looking for protection. You ... you! It seemed to me that the two of us belonged together."

His trembling hands sank down and sought support on the edge of the crate. Then Zenzinger began to cough, undid two buttons of his discoloured, scuffed winter skirt, gave himself a jerk, sank back as if he lacked the strength to stand up, stroked down the sides of the skirt and suddenly went into his pocket. He mumbled to himself, his jaw trembling. And at last he raised his head and looked at Emma with such a submissive and admiring gaze that she seized his hand, sure that she had won him, and in that feeling of kinship. "If it is so," he said, "if it is so ... Yes, then we belong together, we two, we belong together." The bolts were pushed back, and the two people found each other on the threshold. Freed from her uncertainty, Emma saw a land covered by a cloudy sky, but a safe one, a beach where she was no longer lonely.

In the early days of this new alliance, Emma had to find the forms in which their commonality could be expressed. Nikolaus Zenzinger had to be led step by step towards trust; she had to take a roundabout way of getting him used to letting someone else take care of his life. At first he was so stunned by the turn of events that he let everything happen to him, then came the period of rebellion, and when this was defeated by cunning and prudence, Zenzinger surrendered to the new order as if in a dream. After Emma had had a talk with the good tailor and had cleared up his obscurities, she moved away from him, despite his regrets and obsequious overtures, to a widow who washed curtains and rented out two small cabinets. In Emma's room, the table with the picture postcards and the trays of paint was laid out, and while she painted the roofs red, the water and the sky blue and the trees green, Nikolaus hammered, sawed and pasted on a work next door, the idea for which had haunted him for a decade. Ever since one of his customers had told him that his pictures were so bad because nothing better could come out of the old box, his ambition had been to build himself another machine with all the refinement of the present. Time and circumstances had finally blunted his desire and erased the task from his memory. There are secret writings that are invisible to everyone on a sheet of paper and only emerge when the sheet is held over the lamp or against the stove. So now, in the warmth that came from Emma's affection for his old age, the old wish resurfaced, and Emma took it as a first sign of beginning full confidence when Nicholas began to speak of this plan. This wish was to be realised, and its fulfilment was also a prospect for the upswing of the studio. She brought in the material according to Zenzinger's instructions and took over the work that a kind-hearted paper merchant had given him because he had read in the newspapers about the man's strange fate and his indomitable pride.

Now Nikolaus sat day after day in front of his work, screwing, measuring and fitting, filling the flat with all the vapours of glue and varnish and snorting with eagerness. Often Emma would come to the threshold, see his white head bent over some fine piece of machinery and his fingers in hasty motion, and step back with a smile, full of joy that she could smile again. So distant and remote, so isolated from the sphere of her enemy, did this place of refuge appear to her that she felt as if she were hidden in catacombs and believed she had escaped his sight and his power. The agonising fear of flight became less frequent; and the nightly devotions before her husband's head were at once feasts of love and thanksgiving. Shortly after Emma had found the new flat, she fetched her shrine from Mrs Fodermayr and placed its altar on a chest of drawers, which, spider-legged and long and narrow, in no way resembled the bulbous monster in Fodermayr's chamber.

And one evening, when dusk had turned Zenzinger's eagerness into casual comfort, Emma took the cloth from the head, showed it to her friend and told him, who had never asked about it before, her story, which was so closely linked to that of the head. Eleagabal Kuperus became visible in a bright glow, and then the long and sloping walk into the dark began:

"I didn't quite realise whose enmity I had actually incurred. But I could have known. After all, I got to know him when I was a servant in his house. Back then, when he wanted to subject me to his will for the first time, and when my husband freed me from him. But I would never have thought that a man's anger could be so lasting. And that a person would have the power to make his anger felt so effectively. From the moment I showed his negotiator the door, he was like an evil spirit in my path. He has pursued me with his hatred. He has destroyed all my hopes, he has torn everything away from me. But now - hopefully I have escaped him. It all began when the publisher, who had initially applied for my husband's works himself, did not reply to my letters. I sent him

eventually went to see me himself. He didn't receive me and explained to me through his accountant that he had reconsidered the matter because he couldn't foresee any success. I laughed at his short-sightedness and went to another publisher who was initially enthusiastic about the idea. But after a short time, he began to drag out the negotiations and finally cancelled them on similar grounds to the first. It was no different with a third and a fourth. I don't know how Bezug could have learnt of my plans, but this much is certain: he thwarted all my efforts. Now I stood there with my inheritance, and could do nothing for my husband's memory; I could not fulfil my mission; and I buried all that was entrusted to me of his work in the little box you see there. The battle for my own life began and had to be fought. What did I try to do to save myself? What labours did I put myself through! For now that I had realised that I had an enemy, it would have been a base weakness not to put up all my resistance. The more I endeavoured, the more distinctly I felt the pressure of a tremendous hand upon my fate; the more cruel and swift were the effects of the lurking violence. It was always the same. When I thought I had gained a firm foothold somewhere, and when I saw the satisfaction of my employers growing, then came the first slight jolt, a shaking of the ground that I thought was beneath me. They avoided looking at me, they avoided me, and finally the moment came when they told me, often haltingly and reluctantly - I could see it quite well - that they would have to do without my services. I was pitied, but the orders of my enemy were obeyed. I worked as an educator, as a language teacher, as a scribe. And the end was the same everywhere. A regretful shake of the head and a shrug of the shoulders when I asked why, a silence and an embarrassed acknowledgement of the dismissal. Somewhere in the dark, as incomprehensible as a fog, but pervasive and effective on all sides, lurked the hideous violence to which I was subjected. At first I carried my services in

I looked at the adverts myself, then, when I didn't have the money, I stood trembling in front of them, among the others looking for jobs. If I managed to find something, it was always soon lost. Some feeling, some foolish shame, prevented me from seeking the help of Eleagabal Kuperus, who had been so kind to me. If only I had done so before it was too late! For I believe that he, with whom I had seen so many marvellous things, is the only one who can stand up against reference. When I had reached the peak of despair, something happened that made it forever impossible for me to approach him. The excitement of searching, the embarrassment of losing made me ill. One evening, this state came over me for the first time, and then more and more often, temporarily robbing me of my senses. I don't know whether it was hunger or whether my nerves had suffered. Fever or madness, something crept up on me, clutched me and squeezed my limbs so that I screamed with pain. The first time it let go of me after my scream. A dullness followed in which I was indifferent to everything. If I had been pricked with needles, tortured with red-hot tongs or quartered, I would probably have felt nothing. Completely alien thoughts, impudent and sluggish like toads, took possession of me, filled me completely and transformed my ego. After a few hours this passed, and I stood as if awakening from hypnosis. If you believe in remote effects, you will find it understandable that I trembled before this state. For I had no doubt that in those hours I was under the influence of reference, that he had broken my will, and I was ashamed that I could lose myself so completely. Now I raced around and tried again to get out of his spell. A hundred times I exhorted myself to seek out Eleagabal Kuperus, but when I was already on my way to him, my limbs suddenly became so heavy that I could hardly move. Then it crawled after me again, clutched me and snatched my self from me in the following stupor. The clutches lasted longer and longer, and I was filled with strange thoughts. Submit to it, it spoke to me, go to it,

sacrifice yourself to his power, give him the head he demands. Now it was no longer reference but my husband who seemed to be my enemy. The hours in which I belonged to myself became rarer. On the street, in my room, I felt the hideous polyp behind me, something stared at me incessantly with fixed eyes, and often I thought I saw wriggling shadows next to me, smooth tentacles circling me, trunks or feelers with hands at the ends that accompanied my movements. They watched me, guarded my thoughts, surrounded me with nets. An uncertainty came over me, as if my body and my thoughts had lost their centre of gravity and I was unable to keep my balance. I staggered on through an incredibly rarefied air, and then again it was as if the atmosphere condensed into a jelly in which my body became stuck and sank. These tortures to my lungs were accompanied by frequent alternations of heat and cold. I thought my body must shrivel up and crumble to dust; and a few minutes later I felt as if the cold were tearing me apart, as if a crack through the centre of my body would now kill me. This was the third kind of apparition, and from this to the following embrace the intervals became shorter and shorter. But the most terrible thing was that in these times of rest, in these hours of freedom of will, I was unable to keep the thoughts that had filled me before away from me. After I had resisted for a long time, they gained the upper hand, as if they had become too deeply ingrained through frequent repetition. I am telling you all this in such detail so that you can form a judgement as to whether I am responsible for what I did. For although I am certain that I was under the influence of reference during my fits, I cannot believe that I also succumbed to its power during the pauses when I was thinking clearly, when all physical symptoms had left me. For a time I tried to excuse myself by supposing that his influence was an after-effect, and that I blamed my aberration not so much on my weakness as on his malice. But when I regained the courage to

I confessed to myself that no one other than myself was responsible for that disastrous hour. There are things for which one must fight to the utmost; there is no excuse for weakness. These are the things of faith for which hundreds of people have endured the most dreadful torments. After resisting for a while, for weeks, I pushed myself out of the ranks of the heroes and martyrs and deprived myself of the friendship of Eleagabal Kuperus. He had instructed me never to give up my husband's head, and I was not allowed to violate this tacit vow made in a solemn hour. But one day - in a time of peace and quiet, in full contemplation - the following happened. I walked up and down the room, looked out of my window into yards and treetops where the sparrows were making noise; everything was quite clear to me, and I even remember the clouds standing over the cathedral church; so I can by no means console myself with the fact that I was under the influence of reference; for all signs of it were missing, and especially that haziness in which external things then always melted away for me. Suddenly, as if something that had long been prepared were only being revealed, as if the curtain were falling on a finished work, I made up my mind to end my misery. Why was I tormenting myself so much, why was I allowing my soul to be tortured like this when there was nothing else to do but go to Bezug and bring him my husband's head. I knew that if I showed myself obedient to his wishes, I would be freed. Without thinking a moment longer, I prepared to go out, wrapped my husband's head in cloths as if he were a commodity or a pumpkin, and made my way to the palace. I did not go there dully and devotedly, but confidently, like one who goes to an honourable settlement in which both parties win. In full consciousness, I must repeat. And I was shameless enough to admit to myself that I was prepared to give not only my husband's head, but myself, if he should demand it of me. At first I paid little attention to the people in the street. I let the strollers and the busy people go by, and only sometimes looked in

I walked through one or other of the shops where toiletries and food were on display, as if I were already choosing the things I would have to buy once I had signed the contract. As I emerged from the noisy streets of the shops into the wide, quiet alleyways of the upmarket neighbourhood and the hustle and bustle of people died away, I noticed a woman in front of me. She was walking about twenty paces ahead of me along the same path. She was carrying a parcel wrapped in cloth in her arms and something about her seemed both familiar and strangely gruesome. My curiosity was aroused, and I walked faster and faster to catch a glimpse of her face, and at the same time I trembled with fear, as if this look must show me something terrible. But however much I endeavoured to get ahead of her, she always remained at the same distance from me, apparently without hurrying. This woman seemed more and more familiar to me, her every movement, the position of her head and the way she walked seemed familiar. In the bright sunshine, she crossed the street in front of me, just where I had to cross the road to get to the house I was referring to; she turned into the side street and always kept my direction. I think I ran after her, but I couldn't get any closer. At last she went straight towards Bezugs Haus and with a terrible jolt that went through my whole body, I now realised beyond doubt that she had the same destination as me. I wanted to stop and hide, beside myself with fear, but something drove me forward, carrying my frozen limbs and forcing me to keep the same direction. Just as she reached the top step of the stairs, I put my foot on the bottom one. Then - I felt as if I had died - she turned round to look at me and I saw myself - facing myself. It was me and yet not me, because I was standing at the bottom holding my husband's head in my arms. But suddenly ... I was still staring at her without moving, the cloths fell from the parcel she was carrying and with both hands she held my husband's head towards me. Then, with a sudden push, I had the strength to follow the first impulse of life, the impulse to flee. I ran and ran through the park to the outskirts of the city, across fields and meadows, came back to

When I came round at nightfall, I realised that I was still clutching the arm in which I had carried my head. But the head was gone. I knew for some reason that was in me, without being able to say where, that I had not lost the head, I went up to my room and switched on the light. There stood the head under its glass bell, as if I had never taken it away, and on a chair lay the cloths in which it had been wrapped. The night was terrible, filled with remorse and fear. I feared more than ever that the fits in which I had been dominated could return, and I was sure that I would have to kill myself if they came again. But I remained free of them, that night and the following day, and they have not returned. Since that terrible experience I have been spared them. I have not tried to find an explanation for the inexplicable. My husband has forgiven me, but I have not yet been able to do so myself. The morning after the night in which I realised that he had forgiven me, the woman who had been our servant came. She had heard of my distress and had searched for me for a long time in vain; and she wept with emotion when she found me. She persuaded me to go to her, and she protected me until my fate took the path I have now taken to reach you."

Nikolaus Zenzinger sat in front of Emma, stroked his white hair with his hand so that the strands of hair that had been tousled by his work sank smoothly into his forehead, and looked at his head as if he wanted to get an answer to unspoken questions. Then he rose and covered the cloth over the glass bell. The white face disappeared from the twilight. He wanted to say something that would have shown his share. But he could think of nothing. Then he went to Emma, took her hand and said: "Yes, ... yes ... we'll stay together, Mrs Emma." And astonished, dismayed and frightened, he felt a kiss on his wrinkled and trembling hand.

**In the garden of the inn "Zum
General Laudon". Adalbert enters
the circle of Eleagabal Kuperus. A
conversation about the future of
mankind and one about death and
life**

[Table of contents](#)

Today I come as a seducer," said Eleagabal Kuperus as he entered Heinrich Palingenius' tower parlour. He held out his hand to Regina with a smile.

Regina looked at him in amazement. How young the old man seemed today. His face was fresh and half the wrinkles seemed to have been wiped away. "Yes, yes," he said in response to her look, "you must go with me today. I'll take you away from the tower, down into the world. Come on."

"I don't know if the father ..."

"He's back in his study?"

"He's working. He's been working all night again. Tell him, please, that he mustn't make such an effort. What will come of it? He's not so healthy yet that he doesn't need to be very careful."

"That doesn't help much, my child. He's not following me. The work burns on his soul. And the weaker he feels, the greater his fear that it might remain unfinished."

Regina turned away and looked towards the corner where old Johanna was sitting and knitting. Then Kuperus put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her a little closer: "No, Regina," he said, "be quiet. He will finish his work." He said this in such a firm, firm tone that Regina smiled at him gratefully and trustingly. She was now quite cheerful again and walked towards Johanna.

"Johanna, listen, we should go down. Listen, you're going with me."

Disturbed from her senses, Johanna showed a very bitter face:

"No, I'm not going to go down to Bezug."

"But leave the cover. What's with the cover? We're going for a walk, aren't we, Kuperus?"

"No, just go alone," Johanna insisted.

As mildly as a doctor, Kuperus said: "Why don't you want to go with us? Do you think that Bezug has already subjugated the whole world? Are you afraid of him? If he knew that, he would laugh. You know his laugh."

Then Johanna threw down her knitting, stood up and put her wooden foot down hard on the needles and stitches: "He shouldn't laugh at me. It will be given to me once to laugh at him."

"Perhaps! Get ready, I'm going to Palingenius in the meantime." While Regina took her clothes out of the wardrobe, she

Kuperus entered the turret's workroom. Palingenius was sitting in the centre of the frame of his flying machine in front of a small anvil, working on a tiny, incredibly intricate mechanism. Just as Kuperus entered, the fifth hour jumped up in the right eye of the Negress and, rattling and clanking, she began her barbaric dance, the noise of which prevented the doorman from hearing the door open. So Kuperus could stand silently for a while and watch his friend, who was completely absorbed in his work. In addition to his rapt attention, there was a hint of pain in his face, a physical pain that was so far behind at that moment that Palingenius did not bother to suppress its signs. But the pain was there, it would not leave him and had taken possession of his body, unquenchable, but in these hours of labour only like a dull discomfort far, far away. After a few minutes of silent observation, Kuperus leaned his arms on a crossbar that blocked his path like a parapet and said: "Well - Palingenius! What's the work doing?"

The doorman looked up, nodded to his friend and immediately lowered his head over his work again without replying. There was complete silence, with only the faint sound of the eye of the Negress popping open in her left eye.

Minute numbers, then a very fine metallic ringing emanating from the artificial planetary system on the ceiling, and from next door a word from Regina or the low hum of old Johanna from time to time. It all seemed to be applied to a very thin background of sounds, a network of the faintest of tones, the hum of the still air around the tower and the barely audible noise of the city. At last Palingenius lowered his hands with the mechanism, put down the fine tongs so that there was a bright surprised sound on the anvil, and said: "The work! ... I am far from finished. Now I'm about to make his soul."

"That little thing in your hand?"

"Yes, this little thing is supposed to drive the whole mechanism. This tiny device, inserted into the chest of the large body, is supposed to give it life."

"You think of it like our heart, this miraculous central pump for the entire blood canal system."

"Yes, this fine machine is not only the heart, but also the soul of my apparatus. It not only takes care of the mechanical things that can be controlled, measured, changed and improved, but also of the other things over which we have no control, the spiritual or mental, or whatever you like to call it. Something over which we have no influence. We have to accept the miracle and can do nothing but marvel."

"Listen, Palingenius. I also believe in the soul of the lifeless. And why shouldn't a thing that a living person has been dealing with for so long take on something of its soul? It is not possible otherwise. But I fear that you have made this fine apparatus, which has to think for the whole great machine, so to speak, a little too complicated."

"If the thing is to 'think', then it must be very, very carefully crafted, with all the subtleties and skilfulness."

"Take an example from man. The more complicated a person is, the more intricate and refined his soul, the more he distances himself from the views of the big crowd. He becomes more and more free and

He becomes more independent, discovers his own will and acts according to its inspirations. He will not be inclined to believe what he is told by others, he will not follow an order without further ado. But the simpler his soul is, the better a servant he will be to you. You want the machine to have a soul. It would be your pride to give your machine a will. But be careful that your will remains superior to its own. If you make it very fine and complicated, it may set its own will against yours, and it may refuse to obey you."

Then Palingenius stood up. His eyes were large and sparkling in his yellow, sunken face: "It would be my greatest triumph. How marvellous when the created rebels against the master. I believe that God must have felt the deepest and most blessed shudder before his own power at that moment, when the most beautiful of his angels, Lucifer, dared to fall away from him. - But I am not there yet. I still have resistance to overcome ..."

"I didn't come here to talk to you about your flying machine either. Regina and Johanna should go out with me. On this wonderful evening ..."

They stepped to the window. There lay the city deep below, quite peaceful, as if after an exhausting and purifying bath, and the sky above it was clear and high and promised eternities that are unthinkable and can hardly be felt. Palingenius, however, looked down gloomily and only after he had gazed at the bright sky for a long time did his gaze brighten.

"What do you want with Regina?" he asked, "don't seduce her into the world."

"You love the world, even though you think you hate it. And you want to prevent Regina from realising this love. She is a woman, don't forget that. And it may be that the happiness of womanhood is already waiting for her somewhere."

Mistrustful, awakened and shaking off the last spell of work, Palingenius looked at his friend: "You know something again that we don't know."

know?"

Kuperus shrugged and sat down on the back of a small ebony elephant, just below the tower window. Its head was over the parapet of the window with the bright sky as a backdrop. "She's a woman, I tell you. And the children fall away from us. And it is better that life should take them than death." He was silent and after a while he began, as if tying a new thread to the conversation: "I have found the awakener."

"The revivalist?"

"Don't you remember? We spoke of it once. We lack an awakener, a shaker who must be born from the unconscious of humanity. Humanity is not happy, over the course of time the references have become too powerful. And I have this awakener. Whether they will hear him, I do not know. But he has the power to be."

"You found him? Who is it?"

"It is strange that he is also in power. He has committed himself to him with life and limb. But we will free him."

"Cover will fight back. You will have to fight him."

"At last. I'm looking forward to the fight."

"And you will see that the people will be on the side of the righteous."

"It may be. But we will win."

"And who is this revivalist?"

"A young man, a dreamer, a poet. But he will mature into action. I've been following him for a long time and I can see him growing. Now it's time to approach him."

Then there was a knock at the door of the study and Regina immediately looked in: "We're finished," she said, "and you're allowing it, Father ...?"

"You're asking now? If you were in any doubt, you should have asked before you got ready. But - go on!"

Regina blushed with happiness: "You're so cheerful, Father!" And she came all the way in, climbed over the frame of the flying machine and fell to the

He turned away, embarrassed, as if he had been caught in a moment of weakness. "Go on!" he said, pushing her hair back from her forehead. Then, when they had gone, he pointed the telescope at the tower walkway and followed them until they disappeared into the distant streets behind tall buildings and among people.

The three of them - Eleagabal Kuperus in the centre, Regina and Johanna on either side - had taken a path that soon led them out of the town and into the open fields. There were still a few houses on either side of the poorly maintained, badly worn road, which became narrower and narrower between ripening cornfields. They passed the low wall of a cemetery. Behind old cypress trees and weathered gravestones, the chimneys of a factory suburb loomed at the foot of the hill. It was a strange discord: this clean silence up here and the noisy, dirty life behind it. Now they were walking along a railway line cut into the fertile black earth.

Then came a large brickworks that had eaten deep into the loamy slope of the hill. Pools of yellow water stood in the hollows, the still unfired bricks lay in long rows, arranged to dry, and the fresh red of the finished bricks almost cheerfully touched the uniformity of the earth's colours, which the houses and people also seemed to have adapted to. Breathing a sigh of relief, the three of them climbed up the hollow path and came to the small pine forest, where it was very quiet. Since Kuperus and Regina knew little about people, they talked about things and old Johanna carefully placed her wooden foot on the smooth roots stretched across the path beside them, occasionally joining in the conversation with a gruff word of anger at the arduous labour of walking. Until Regina took her under the arm and eased her toil.

They came to the inn garden "Zum General Laudon" on the other side of the forest. Here the hillside descended to broad meadows with individual green tongues stretching towards it. Seen from above, the entire meadow was shaped like a green shield, slightly towards the centre

It was too humped, as a real shield should be, and crossed by a darker band. At the hump this band divided and enclosed the hill. A dark, still water was the ribbon and it flowed secretly and sometimes as if shyly under old willows that touched each other with shaggy heads above the black mirror. On the gentle hill in the centre of the shield stood a gleaming white house, its windows now ablaze in the evening sun. A watch tower rose above the roof, not exactly threatening, but not inviting either. There were beautiful trees all around the house, and two white bridges cast their short arches over the divided river. The inn "Zum General Laudon" is situated in the angle formed by the top of the meadow shield and the approaching hills, where the river also leaves the plain to take the path to the town in a narrow valley between bare slopes. It is situated between the river and the slope of the hills in a quiet, cosy and so inviting location that hardly any hiker can resist the temptation to stop here. The garden has cut off part of the meadow and part of the pine forest on the hill and lies shaded in front of the inn, which leans confidently against the hill. The country road runs past the fence of the garden and, avoiding the wide, unshaded meadow, curves along the edge of the shield. Separated from the inn by the country road is an old mill. The farmstead looks like a fortress; all the buildings are enclosed by an old wall, through which a single large gate leads, the wings of which seem designed to be battered by siege engines. Over this wall, which is probably two paces wide, are the residential buildings with small windows not much bigger than embrasures. And the roofs, fireproofed with heavy tiles, sit firmly and defiantly on top. But despite this grim appearance, the mill does not look gloomy or sinister, for green carpets adorn the wall in many places, the light fresh green of the wild vine or the more serious darkness of Epheus, and the gable wall of one house is densely overgrown up to the roof, so that the small windows can only keep their eyes open with difficulty. And

To make the carpet on this wall even more colourful, every window is filled with flower pots, pelargoniums and fuchsias and all kinds of common but cheerful peasant flowers, to whose burning clusters the green aerial tendrils of the vine lean down as if in longing.

Here lives the miller's wife, whose mind, although no longer young and worn out by hard labour in the house and fields, still retains the cheerfulness of youth. And a great gratitude towards life, which she has learnt to love, because she was once on the threshold of death. And an even greater gratitude to the man who brought her back to life at a time when the doctors were already shaking their heads as they left her bedside to turn to other patients where their art had a better chance of success: Eleagabal Kuperus. The miller is of a more serious and serious nature, but he too has retained great gratitude to the man who gave him back his young wife when she seemed doomed to die after barely a year of marriage.

If the mill looks like a fortress, the inn might make you think of an Italian osteria. With a cheerful and open forehead, it looks out into the garden and across it to the large meadow. The mill, which has stood on its site for several hundred years, needed strong walls and a robust construction to withstand the swarming Hussite hordes, but the Osteria owes its existence to the whim of the princely lord of the hunt, who gathered his guests here in the happy times towards the end of the eighteenth century. Its open portico and wide gabled bay are reminiscent of the south, but the beautiful marble reliefs are no longer here, but in the town's museum. After all, what does a pub owner do with marble reliefs? And the sober owners, who have ruled here ever since the prince sold the house because the large forests in the neighbourhood had to make way for the town, have often wanted to tear down the whole funny little castle. An inn wants other rooms than a hunting lodge. But the Kunstverein has held its hand protectively over the building and is still fighting against the

The intentions of the sober have obtained a ban. Thus, a single corner has been preserved here, full of lovely seriousness, suitable for safe rest, whose comfort attracts even those who are unable to account for what they love so much about this place.

When Eleagabal Kuperus stepped out of the pine forest with Johanna - Regina had stayed a few steps behind to tidy her hair, which had been tangled by a pert twig - and when the view over the inn and mill below and the broad meadow shield was clear, Johanna stopped and pointed to the white house on the dark hump of the shield. "What's new?" she mumbled.

Eleagabal Kuperus looked out, his hand over his eyes: "Not exactly something new. The house has been standing for a year."

"I haven't been there for so long. It's new to me. Who does this thing belong to?"

"Promise me you won't rage ..."

"Him. So it's him again. I thought it straight away. He has his hand everywhere. He has to change everything according to his will and everywhere he shouts at you: I'm here too. How much longer is this going to last?"

"Well, here I am," Regina said as she joined them. She had put her hair up in loose braids, carried her hat in her hand and walked ahead of them down the steep, narrow footpath, which was badly torn by the rain. Halfway down, however, she changed her mind, turned back and held out her hand to the old woman, who was leaning on it, still grumpy and looking angrily at the house on the little hill.

All the tables in the pub garden were occupied, and Eleagabal Kuperus, after a quick look round, approached one of the tables, where a single, broad-shouldered, shirt-sleeved man was sitting in front of his beer glass. "Good evening, Müller," he said, "you still have room for us here."

The man looked up, showing a face dusted with flour, and when he recognised Kuperus, he moved from his chair as if a prince had suddenly stepped up to him. Flushed with joy, he shook hands with Kuperus and immediately began to arrange the chairs around the table. Then they sat down and Kuperus said in response to the miller's questioning look: "Good

I brought friends out with me today. The housekeeper and the daughter of the tower keeper Palingenius, who I've already told you about."

Then the miller gave them both his hand across the table, and although he only closed his paw very gently around Regina's fingers, she felt every bone crack. He was a giant and even when seated he towered over the tall figure of Eleagabal Kuperus by a head. Reaching out his hand was like a promise of protection, like being accepted into a secret covenant. Regina immediately felt drawn to this man, and when he began to speak, with heavy words that he weighed carefully, she felt warm and at ease. This was the man she would have preferred to confide in, next to her father and Kuperus.

"You come out too rarely," he said. "My wife is very sad when you come out so rarely."

"You know how I live. But when I go out, I only have two destinations, my friend's tower and this place here. And what is the woman doing?"

"My God, we're always busy. The servants are unreliable. Everywhere I have to be behind it myself. But - may I fetch the wife. She wants to be happy."

"Get the woman!"

When the miller had gone, the three fell silent. At the back, on the steps of the staircase that led to the portico of the inn, sat a harmonica player who was now playing a waltz in a strange arrangement with a lot of strange intermediate chords and false runs. The landlord approached, slowly and indifferently flapping his napkin, more disgruntled than eager. He didn't need to be particularly polite, his guests were safe with him, for there was no nicer and more comfortable place for an excursion so close to the town. But after recognising Kuperus, he immediately changed his demeanour and approached the table shyly and submissively. Like everyone else, he feared the old man, about whom such strange, mysterious stories were circulating.

He took the order attentively and left. And just then the miller and his wife came out of the large fortress gate in the enclosure of the mill. She, considerably shorter than him, walked beside him and smoothed out the large apron she had probably just put on.

Regina looked at the giant and said: "He could be living in one of the stories my father recorded."

"He comes from an old family. And how do you like him, Johanna?"

Johanna did not answer. Her hard male face was motionless and left no room for interpretation. And there was no more time to press into her, for now the two had approached and almost shyly the woman greeted Eleagabal Kuperus first, then the others, and took a seat between Regina and Johanna, immediately addressing the girl with a cheerful question. Eleagabal looked kindly at her for a moment, then nodded, as if confirming a thought, and said to the man: "You can see that she feels closest to youth. She is still so lively and fresh. You need that. You're a little too serious."

"Well, sometimes it gets grumpy, it doesn't always go the way you want it to. Then we'll drive to the end. But she can laugh so well. She can laugh, yes. She still does. Then everything will soon be fine again."

"And why doesn't everything go the way you want it to?" Eleagabal said cautiously, like a helmsman between cliffs.

"My God, it's all sorts of fun that the servants don't parry properly, that's the least of it. But also otherwise. We're getting a neighbourhood that doesn't suit me at all. But not at all."

"Who?"

"The Lord's reference, I believe. Nobody knows anything about him. But I just think it's him. Because he's buying up all the fields far and wide. And in our village he's already got half of them, **t h e** bloke he sent out there. What does he want to do **w i t h** the fields and all the forest?"

"He has also built a house here with you."

"Yes, it seems to me like the spider in the web. He sits in it and spins his threads."

"He's building many more houses like this all over the neighbourhood."

"The guy was at my place too and wanted to buy my fields and my forest. For what, I ask. What's he doing with it? But he won't come to me. What does a farmer do when he has no more fields? He goes to the city and becomes a worker in the factories. Thank you. In the dirt and the smell and the noise. I'd rather stay a farmer and grind my grain and give the other people theirs too."

"But it does worry you."

"It just makes me think because I don't understand why he needs all that land. Does he want to buy up the whole world?"

"Maybe!"

Johanna did not listen to the women's conversation and sat facing the men. Suddenly she reached her hand across the table to the miller. He took her hand and looked in amazement into Johanna's glowing eyes. "The dog, the wretched one!" said Johanna. The miller looked questioningly at Kuperus.

"She has an old hatred of reference," Kuperus said.

"Yes, on receipt," Johanna repeated, releasing the miller's hand and sitting there again with her back hunched over, staring ahead of her after a deep draught from her glass.

"But seriously," said the miller, "what can 'r want?"

"I'm telling you: maybe he wants to see how far his money will go."

"It won't reach me. I know that. He can come with cannons of gold."

"You also have a beautiful fortress."

The miller looked round and embraced his home with a warm gaze: "Yes, my house is firm and secure."

"It could be that we need a safe house one day."

"Then come to me, Mr Kuperus, only to me. I'll close the gate and smash the head of anyone who tries to get in. Anyone!"

There was a small crowd at the garden entrance. A group of people were crowded there, and children were running around between the adults' legs. Then the whole crowd came into the garden, opened up and, surrounded by curious people, five strange fellows stood there. They were musicians with strange instruments, and their dusted and torn clothes showed the traces of a long journey. Now they looked around to see if they would be chased away, and after a brief consultation they took their instruments off their backs.

"The poor devils," said Regina, "they seem very hungry. The misery looks out of their eyes."

The musicians seemed to have had bad experiences on their journeys, for they were still hesitant to start. But at last the consideration prevailed that they could count on earning money here and satisfy the long-felt demands of their bodies. They were just about to put their instruments to their mouths when the harmonica player appeared before them. He had a thick, angry red head, tore away the first man's instrument, a kind of clarinet, and waved it in front of his face. At first speechless with indignation, he quickly found all the eloquence of the man who had been disturbed in his possession:

"What, I'm Bagasch', I want to go to the shop. Ös G'sindel, here I am, vastand'n! I've been washing up there for thirteen years. No one else! vastand'n! Bagasch'! No one else can flush there. Only me! Vastand'n! Look, out it comes, as a gypsy. Go to a pigsty and flush the pigs with a mule. There's no such thing. Vastand'n!"

The audience, which at first seemed inclined towards the foreign musicians, let schadenfreude win out over pity and enjoyed the spectacle. From behind, someone shouted to the raging harmonica player: "You're right, Franzl, throw them out. Out with the gypsies." People laughed, climbed onto chairs and tables and set the little man, who had the bite of a bull biter, against the strangers. "Am I not right," the little man shouted after each new outburst of anger, "am I not right?"

And a crowd of boys answered each of these rhetorical questions, laughing and roaring in the key of a church responsorial:

"You're right, Franzl!"

One of the musicians humbly stepped forward, while the others retreated like threatened dogs, and tentatively reached out for the clarinet. But the harmonica player waved the instrument threateningly in the air: "Nothing; get out first! Out first, ös Bagasch, out. Then I'll throw the rubbish at your head." And he ran at the man, who retreated in front of him. The stranger was wearing a uniform coat, a blue skirt with tails and red epaulettes, and a gag beard made him look like a caricature of a French general. He seemed to be summoning the harmonica player with small pleading hand movements.

"Do you think, you gypsy, that I understand your language? They speak German, vastand'n!" he shouted. And the chorus of boys, who had immediately found a contemptuous nickname for the stranger, egged him on: "Throw him out, the pig general." Then the harmonica player jumped at him and tore off one of his epaulettes:

"Now hurry up, otherwise I'll make a rag out of you."

Dismayed and pained, the man turned and received a kick from the harmonica player that sent him staggering towards his comrades. Everyone roared with laughter. The miller stood up: "I must put an end to this."

"Stay," said Eleagabal Kuperus.

A young man stood among the musicians and confronted the onrushing harmonica player.

"No, no, what is it?" he asked and stopped.

The young man stretched out his hand: "Back!" he said. And when the other hesitated: "March - now!" And his look and gesture left no choice.

"Give me the clarinet!" The harmonica player handed over the instrument and retreated into the shelter of the crowd. Suddenly the noise was over. People looked eagerly at the young man and waited to see what he would begin. But he cared little for the fuss he had caused. He beckoned the musicians to follow him and pretended to be outside

The clarinet was handed over to its owner in the garden, who received it with a beaming face.

"You've fallen into the hands of a thuggish fellow," said the rescuer. "But I don't want you to think that everyone in this country is like that."

The general approached and began to speak in his own language, haltingly at first, then more agitated and carried away; it was a flexible, sonorous language with many vowels, and sometimes the young man thought the general was speaking Italian. But much of it was foreign to him, and so the whole thing remained incomprehensible.

"I don't understand you," he said with a smile. "But maybe someone understands German. You are to take this map to the white castle on the hill there, spend the night there, get food and drink, and tomorrow you will receive money to continue your journey."

The general shrugged his shoulders and began another long speech, making lively yet measured movements, as if the words needed to be made clearer. Now that the fear had left them, it became clear that there was a stern seriousness in the strangers' posture and face. Something proud and even domineering now reappeared from the surf of excited feelings. A noble decorum and an air of importance, as if they were scions of an ancient race, intimidated only by bitter persecutions. But the saviour still understood nothing of what the general was saying. He smiled and let the other speak, who became more and more urgent in his endeavours.

"Allow me," said someone next to the young man, "I see you can't communicate. Won't you accept my services? I know enough Romanian to know what the man is saying."

Eleagabal Kuperus turned to the general with a question. He flinched when he heard his language and began again, more quickly, but without losing a certain dignified manner of speaking. When he had finished and Kuperus began to translate, he looked closely at the interpreter's mouth, as if to check that he was not hiding anything.

"They are Romanian musicians, sir," said Eleagabal Kuperus, "Poor devils who haven't eaten properly for days and are on their way home. It's going to be a long and arduous journey, and look how humble and beaten up these proud Roman tribesmen already are. They were accepted as members of an international music band in some exhibition city, but the society disintegrated after a short time. Now they have to scrape by as badly as they can. That is their story. And now I must express the people's thanks to you, the Führer has strictly instructed me to do so. They always want to remember the young German."

"Do you also want to translate what I have to say to the people?"

"Certainly, with pleasure!"

And now the saviour repeated his invitation. During the translation, the general's eyes widened and the others crowded behind him, silently looking at the young man. But his thanks were not exorbitant and effusive, but measured and solemn, like a vow. Now the general took the card on which Adalbert had written a few lines, glanced at it and then at the young man. It was as if there was a special power in those dark eyes. Then the general waved to his comrades and they left, walking at a steady pace without looking back.

"You are Adalbert Semilasso," said Eleagabal Kuperus.

"Have you seen my card?"

"No. But I've known you for a long time ..."

"I can't remember."

"You are ... let's say: 'house poet' with Thomas Bezug. The castle over there belongs to him. Isn't it?"

"Yes ... I ..."

"My name is Eleagabal Kuperus. You have behaved very well. May I ask you to come with me? I'm in company ..."

"Excuse me..."

"Come on, come on! There are moments in our lives when the threads of fate intertwine. We have to consider every step, perhaps it will lead us somewhere that we can't otherwise get to other than in this single moment. We then carry a grief within us and do not know what it is. It is the pain of what we have unconsciously lost." Kuperus looked firmly at Adalbert and he felt a great will in his gaze. The strange thing was not yet so remote to him that he did not feel its attraction, and he followed the old man into the garden of the inn. Several tables looked after them, and Adalbert felt that he was being watched with uneasiness. Now Kuperus stepped aside - there sat the marvellous girl at the table to which he had led Adalbert. That woman who had already given him much secret happiness and secret pain - and sat there and shook hands with him like the others ... and spoke to him ... and Adalbert answered, something ... words that just came to him ... and then a great emotion and a jubilant joy fell over him. In the circle of people who had been complete strangers to him a quarter of an hour ago, he now suddenly became eloquent, as if they had an infinite amount in common. Adalbert spoke insistently, warmly and felt his words like a flame. But then, as dusk fell, he became quieter and quieter again and allowed the others, whose conversation he had enlivened and energised, to speak.

Only Johanna sat among the others, suspiciously withdrawn, and sometimes looked at Adalbert's face from the side.

They spoke of the prince whose parties the forest house had once served, of the special charm of the area, which looked as if it had been artificially laid out like a park, and the girl expressed the wish to once glide under the hanging branches on the still water of the river.

"One should always fulfil wishes immediately if they are to be fulfilled," said Adalbert, "the innkeeper has a boat lying here. And if you don't mind, I'll row you up and down a little."

They sat in the boat, the girl at the helm and Adalbert, with strong strokes, endeavouring to drive the boat quickly against the strong current. Here, under the dense willow heads, on the black water of the narrow but deep river, it was already almost completely dark. The banks were like walls, and through gaps in the masses of branches only the occasional sliver of sky broke through, over which a strange, mysterious glow seemed to tremble. Far over there, in front of the hole that had been dug through the wall of the hill, a railway train whistled, shrilly, as if in fear of the darkness that lay ahead. And then everything was only quieter and more peaceful and darker, as if the cry had been a light that suddenly broke through the night. Adalbert's oar strokes became slower, then he turned the boat and pulled in the oars. They drifted quietly back the way they had come, sometimes brushed by hanging branches, with the current. They did not see each other. Adalbert held his hand in the water and felt it, as one sometimes feels running darkness in a dream.

"I don't know your name yet," he said. A voice came from the darkness: "Regina."

"Yes ... yes ... Regina." He already knew. He already knew. And then he said: "Now I've finally found you."

She didn't ask why he was looking for her and for how long. She also knew yes.

Through the branches came the lights of the pub garden, round stupid Clumps of light fell dully into the black water. Now they would land and there would be noise all around them again, Adalbert thought. And who knows if they would see each other again so soon, surely there wouldn't be such a good opportunity to speak to her soon. But what did he have to say to her? That one line in her had touched him so infinitely, those gently sloping shoulders and the set of her arms? Was that it?

"Regina!" he said hesitantly. Her silence prompted him to speak. But what did he want to say ... yes, he knew nothing, nothing at all.

"I have a sister," he said at last. "Her name is Nella, and she loved me very much. And I loved her very much too. But she went out into the world and got lost to me. How long has it been since I heard from her?"

"Didn't she write?"

"It was so strange with our youth that we hadn't been able to give each other any news. We both didn't know what it was; the world. I only learnt that when I moved in."

"You are with reference...?"

"Yes!"

"Then for God's sake don't let the old woman sitting at our table know about it. She hates references like the devil."

"She's right about that. I hate him too ... like the devil. He's the devil too ... the devil ..."

"If you hate him, why don't you go away from him?"

"If only I could get away. I'm bound hand and foot. He has me in his power."

"That's not possible. We're not slaves. We have our freedom."

"I don't have them. But don't ask any more questions. Let's not talk about it any more. Maybe I'll tell you more about it another time, when a good coincidence brings us together again. I've told you more than I've ever told anyone else. And actually, I wanted to talk about my sister ..."

They were silent, and Adalbert, who had travelled beyond the range of the tavern lights into the darkness again, turned the boat as someone called out to them from the shore: "Hello, Regina." It was as if the name had remained hovering over the waters like a faint scent and a faint hum, as if it could not find a way out of the darkness bounded by the walls of willow trunks.

"Regina ... Regina ...!" Adalbert said to himself, and then he continued: "I loved her very much. And sometimes I think back to her with pain. And so full of longing and melancholy. Once

I went to the big circus in the city and it seemed to me that she was one of the women performing there. She walked the tightrope and smiled down at the audience. Of course it wasn't her. I made a lot of enquiries. But sometimes, with certain movements, especially when she turned round on the rope with a jerk, I thought it must be her. Of course, she was much taller and more beautiful than she was then, because we were still children when we parted. I always had to watch how she walked on the rope, constantly in danger, because people have heard that tightrope walkers have killed themselves despite the nets. And I thought: if that really was my sister ... and this fear got so bad that I got up and left. I loved her very much."

Now they had been hit again by the outermost beam of the tavern lantern and were gliding through light-filled water. "And you remind me, I don't know why ... but it's because of Nella," said Adalbert, when they were already very close to the landing site.

It was more than a mere statement, it was a request that Regina understood. And when they got out of the car and Adalbert helped her, she quietly squeezed his hand in response.

They were about to leave and were just waiting for them.

"Was it nice on the dark water?" asked Eleagabal Kuperus, and Johanna looked suspiciously at Adalbert.

"It was very nice," Regina replied, and her impartiality satisfied the old woman. "If you don't mind," said the miller, "So we'd like to invite you gentlemen to join us. Come and see us sometime. Mr Semilasso too ... that will always make us happy. Just come. We'll find a pot of milk or a sip of wine. And a piece of good food to go with it."

Semilasso wanted to say goodbye in front of the garden gate, but a look from Regina reminded him not to give himself away, and then Eleagabal Kuperus said at the same time: "I would like to invite you to accompany us, and if it's not too late for you, to climb the tower of the cathedral."

"Up the tower?"

"Yes, up the tower. We live, that is, Regina lives high above the city. Her father is a tower keeper. Come with me, you'll find a rare man in Heinrich Palingenius."

Johanna grumbled a little.

"No, Johanna," said Kuperus, "this is something else, introduced by me, Semilasso will be very welcome."

"But is it still on so late...?"

"If we come in the middle of the night, you'll find your father still awake," said Regina, "that's what worries us, he hardly sleeps since he's been working on his flying machine."

And as they walked along the country road towards the town, Kuperus and Regina told them about the tower's plans and work. -

Heinrich Palingenius was sitting at his table reading the large book in which he had recorded the history of the tower. When the door opened and he recognised a stranger among those returning home, he stood up and slammed the book shut with a loud bang. Then he stepped back as if gathering himself for an attack. But Kuperus beckoned to him and said:

"I bring you a new good friend."

"Are you vouching for him?"

"I'll vouch for him."

"Young man," said Palingenius, "apart from the three people who live here, only my friend Eleagabal has been in and out of here. For thirteen years, young man. You come to an island where people live differently than down there. If you want to come to us, you'll have to forget the way people live down there."

"I can," said Adalbert, "because before I came to the people down there, I also lived on an island."

Regina, who had been looking forward to her first meeting with her father with some apprehension, was amazed at how quickly and happily everything had turned out, and now endeavoured to make Adalbert quite comfortable. She took off his overcoat and fetched a deliciously polished decanter of green liqueur from the treasures in a cupboard. In the meantime, Palingenius had put a quiet question to his friend:

"Is it him?"

"It's him!"

"You knew you'd find him today and that's why you went out?"

"Maybe."

"And Regina! Is that why you took her ... do you think ..."

"Shut up now. We'll see."

As heavy and burdensome as the first few minutes after the reception had been, the conversation now became lighter and freer as everyone sat round the table. At first it seemed to Adalbert as if he had been brought into a secret society, but he soon realised that he had been introduced into a circle of people who were deep and sensitive only to the noise of the world.

Grateful and happy that he had received the stranger favourably, Regina turned to her father: "You've done a hard piece of work today, Father ... and you've succeeded. Didn't you?"

"I think we've succeeded. The heart of my machine is finished."

"Now it will depend on whether it can handle the heavy body," said Kuperus.

"I hope so. It will dominate him. It trembles in my hand, so fine and sensitive, like a living thing. And then I will be able to fly ... fly ..."

"And the humans soon after you, if you're right."

"The people. Yes - may they learn it too. I s t i l l b e l i e v e that they will then become better."

"If they have long enough," said Kuperus.

"What do you mean?" asked Adalbert, who had been listening intently.

"I mean: that it will probably take a very long time, even if they can fly. And that perhaps the end of the world, or rather the death of this earth, could come sooner than the day when we can say that all people are good. But the dear incorrigible do not think about the end of all things and live on as if they had an eternity ahead of them. And perhaps it is just as well, because - who knows - if they think of an end

whether they wouldn't be even less inclined to improve."

Adalbert Semilasso pondered to himself, for what he heard was so new to him that it immediately stirred his imagination and spurred him on to frantic labour. These matters of such vital importance to the human race had never been spoken of in the house of reference. It gripped him powerfully to know everything that was thought here about the future of the earth. And after a while he asked: "The end of all things? The death of the world? What is that supposed to be? What can you imagine by that? Isn't this world eternal?"

Palingenius and Kuperus looked at each other to see which of them should answer. And while they communicated with glances in which there was also a kind of emotion, Regina said quietly: "No, she won't be eternal. Once it was a glowing ball of fire, then, as it cooled, it contracted and wrapped itself in the crust on which we live. And one day, in the distant future, but already foreseeable, it will be completely cold and empty and barren like the moon, on which there is no more air, no more water and no more life."

Adalbert marvelled at her: "You know all this and ... I know nothing about it."

"I would have had to be deaf not to hear some of these things in my father's flat."

"Regina is right," said Eleagabal Kuperus, "this earth will probably die the death of freezing. Unless some cosmic event occurs first that shatters it."

"Is that possible?" asked Regina.

Smiling, Kuperus replied: "Are you suddenly clinging to the world? You used to listen quietly when people talked about this possibility. Yes - it's not entirely impossible. After all, we often see a sudden flare-up in the sky in a place where we never suspected a star, which disappears again after a short time. What is that? A star that has been destroyed in a terrible collision with another celestial body. The death flare, the world conflagration of a

Earth equal to ours. But that remains a remote possibility for us. It is far more likely that it will die the slower death of freezing to death."

Palingenius said thoughtfully: "So organic life on an Earth star is merely a sign of decay. Signs of approaching old age and death. For when the star was still young and full of effervescent power, it tolerated no covering around its glowing body. But when it comes to its senses and, only occasionally, as if shaken by memories of its distant youth, wears its armour against the cold of space, then it comes to an end. The armour revives, becomes covered in green, and all kinds of creatures crawl around on it. Man calls this the creation of life. In truth, however, it is the beginning of the end. A process of decay ... yes ...!"

"I can't believe it," said Adalbert, "it's so hard to think. When the earth starts to become friendlier and more lovable for us, is the observer supposed to recognise that it is doomed to die?"

Kuperus finished his glass of liqueur and placed it carefully on the table. Then he raised it again and held it up to the light, as if he wanted to watch its play on the broken surfaces: "It's no use, my young friend. The earth is no longer young and the human race is no longer young either. All sorts of things point to that. If you take a closer look, you might say: everything. Taken as a species, we are slowly degenerating. Our Johanna has a toothache. She's holding her scarf to her cheek again. Well, that too is proof that we are going downhill. Our teeth are in a constant state of regression. There was a time when man's chewing tools had to be different from those of today, stronger, still animal-like, terribly crushing and grinding. But today they no longer seem so important to us. Food has become different, softer, finer, and eating is no longer labour. That's why the third molar, the "wisdom tooth", is atrophying more and more. It comes out late, is weak and sickly, and can offer little resistance to decay.

or it is missing altogether. It has been observed and proven from skulls from earlier centuries that this was not always the case, that our ancestors still had a complete set of teeth. It follows that this tooth will probably be completely missing in later generations. And we have a similar situation with the lateral upper incisor. This has also atrophied and is missing completely in many cases."

"What is to be done?" Adalbert asked excitedly, as if this were his own business.

"Nothing," Palingenius replied. "The process is going its own way. Culture is bringing our bodies down. The primitive peoples have not yet reached that stage. And you can imagine that one day teeth will disappear as completely superfluous. Once food is taken in concentrated form, as pills that simply need to be swallowed, why do we still need our teeth?"

"Will there ever be a time when food is taken in pill form, like medicine?" Regina asked, shuddering.

"We are on the way to achieving this."

Laughing, Eleagabal showed the empty, dark cavity of his mouth, from which the large, yellow canine teeth protruded like tusks: "Then all humans will look something like me and the poets will have to delete the article pearl teeth from their lexicon of female charms. Yes, tooth decay is on the increase, isn't it, Johanna?"

But Johanna, who had tied her scarf around her face and retreated to a dark corner, was already asleep in her chair, her head tilted back and letting out a short, rattling breath.

"And so there are many other signs that we are approaching the end," said Kuperus.

"This, for example," said Palingenius, raising his glass of sparkling golden liqueur.

"This?"

"Well ... this! The human need for alcohol. Strange instinct of the whole sex, which does not yet want to know about its end and yet already senses the inevitable deep down. Our

Organism has a mysterious tendency to preserve itself beyond its natural end. This can be recognised in the individual, and this tendency is revealed even more clearly in the general needs of mankind. Alcohol is one of them. A time will come **w h e n** the ice caps of the poles will spread over the whole earth, when organic life will be condemned to freeze to death. Man alone will prolong his existence by several hundred thousand years, when all the seas will already be frozen and the cold of outer space will begin to penetrate him. Now alcohol only freezes when it is much colder than water. What if the water in organic beings, especially in man, were to be replaced by alcohol, if the composition of the blood were to be changed in this way? What if this organic tendency were hidden in the need for alcohol? One gets used to everything, as the saying goes. Yes - perhaps people do get used to it. All organs undergo a physiological remodelling as a result ..."

"And when man," said Eleagabal Kuperus, "after a swift flight, settles down to earth and opens his toothless mouth to breathe deeply, he will smell of spirit."

"You like to joke," said Palingenius, somewhat disgruntled, took his coat and went out to look over the sleeping city from the gallery of the tower.

"And all this makes you think ..." Adalbert looked Regina in the face with excitement, "This is something to think about ... and I've never dealt with it before. I feel as if I'm a person from the past, waking up after a long sleep and now hearing about things that didn't exist in my time."

"Or maybe you are the person of the future!"

"The future? I don't understand that?"

Kuperus seemed to wait until Palingenius returned from his walk and continued after he had entered: "Where are we going with this? The sea of knowledge is becoming ever more immeasurable. To absorb even some of it is barely enough for half a lifetime. And the will

The need for man to explore the full scope of knowledge and thereby become master of the world is becoming ever more compelling. There are probably many who enclose their territory - a very small country - with all due care, who fortify its borders in order to surrender to their specialised research behind ramparts and walls, protected from the encroachment of the terrible sea. But even the smallest area here has a tendency to grow. And the more closely it is explored, the more its borders seem to expand, despite all the ramparts. But there are many spirits who strive for universality with all their longing. And that is a painful longing. And it is unrealisable before this infinite sea. Now a pale generation of people will emerge who will repeatedly throw themselves into the task of mastering the world through knowledge, who will stagger back again and again in horror and powerlessness before new moments. Alongside them, however, another generation will emerge. Its ancestors will be the despairing ones of today, the renouncers who have recognised the smallness of man. They have thrown everything away and say: it is impossible. But out of the deepest discouragement will come the highest courage to face life. Why should we agonise over trying to fathom what life is when we can see what it is like? Glorious, sovereign, blissful, if you surrender to it with the right trust. For these people, existence will seem more important than the knowledge of pure being. For all their reverence for deep questions, they will have retained the desire for all the pleasures that come from simple submission to life."

Now everyone was silent for a long time. Then Palingenius stood up and turned off the tap of the lamp above the table.

"What are you doing?" Regina asked, as they were now sitting in the dark.

"The morning is here," replied the doorman and opened the shutters. It was still grey over the town, but high above, the air was already brightened, and a single cloud, red and fleeting, brought the first greeting of the rising sun. Old Johanna was asleep in the armchair by the window, one of her skinny hands hanging down over the green-covered backrest. Now Kuperus got up, and Adalbert, like him, took his

coat. He thanked her for the wonderful night. "May I come back?" he asked.

And Regina replied with a questioning look after her father:

"Come ... if it's not too high for you, up here ..." But the tower keeper nodded graciously to her and held out his hand to Adalbert. Regina was then overcome with joy and wanted to go down with him to unlock the tower door.

"Leave it alone, Regina," said Kuperus, "the key is in it. And it can stay open, can't it ..."

As the two descended, Eleagabal Kuperus stopped and pointed to the wall of the tower, where Adalbert noticed a black cross.

"Palingenius has not got beyond this cross for thirteen years."

"He hates the world?"

"He loves her despite everything. And he won't get beyond this cross ... not alive ..." Kuperus added with a lost look, as if involuntarily.

Adalbert said goodbye in front of the house with the key-bearing hand above the gate. "If our conversations have left you with the desire to continue them," said Kuperus, "then always come to me. I will always be at home when you come. And if you have a wish, a question, a complaint, come, I'll be waiting for you."

The door opened noiselessly - Adalbert stood alone in front of the strange carving, looking up at the hand that seemed to be filled with blood in the dawn, not an artificial structure but a piece of life. An old woman came across the cathedral square and saw Adalbert in front of Kuperus' house. She squeezed past, with shy glances towards the wizard's castle; and just as she arrived at the small side door of the cathedral, the keys rattled inside, and the little church servant came out, still a little sleepy, stepped out into the square, yawning, and checked the weather.

"Morning, Mrs Swoboda, it's ..." but a yawn stifled the continuation of the greeting.

"Look over there," said Mrs Swoboda, "there's another one in front of the house. He's bewitched someone again."

"Yes, the devil still has great power in the world. Still does. And he always chooses the most sacred things to make himself at home next to."

"The police are supposed to ..."

"Go away, the police, they'll deal with the Freemasons and all the devil's evil themselves."

Then the two entered the church. Mrs Swoboda looked back over her shoulder with a cursory and anxious glance, wondering if a dark force was still pushing her back here, on the threshold of the sanctuary.

A window was opened behind Adalbert. The framemaker leaned far forward between the birdcages and flower stalks and looked out. Now Adalbert turned and walked slowly down the cathedral steps between the two saints. In the marketplace, the vendors were already beginning to set up their vegetable stalls, and in front of a butcher's shop, apprentice boys were busy impaling half pigs and enormous quarters of oxen on the strong iron hooks. Small pools of blood under the masses of meat showed that they had just been cut up. Adalbert stopped and looked back at the cathedral, whose two uneven towers were already illuminated by the sun. He could clearly see the glittering knob and the mighty helmet bulb, and below it, delicate and spidery, the gallery of the tower.

"Lovely Reseda floor," said the florist who arranged his pots conveniently next to Adalbert and laid out the colourful packets of seeds.

Adalbert walked slowly on through the streets of the awakening city, and he often looked at the towers of the cathedral, and also remained lying in the dewy grass for quite a while when he reached the forest, so that he only arrived at the villa late in the morning. When he entered the vestibule and was met by a servant, he remembered the musicians from the previous evening.

"What about the people I sent here yesterday?"

"Richard took care of them as the Lord had ordered."

"Call Richard for me."

Richard caught up with Adalbert in the stairwell just as he was putting the key in the door of his room. He greeted Adalbert with the calm manners of a well-bred servant who knows how to distinguish between the classes of the ruling class.

"Well?"

"It has been done entirely according to your orders, Mr Semilasso. They have been fed and given quarters for the night, and this morning I gave them money. They left at seven o'clock in the morning."

"Gone already? It's fine."

Adalbert opened the door and walked through the row of his rooms to the bedroom facing the park. He was a little tired and was unsure whether he wanted to rest or simply refresh himself with a wash. He looked longingly at his bed. Perhaps a dream would come and repeat to him what he had experienced or continue it. In the twilight of the half-drawn bed curtains, he saw something white at the headboard that stood out against the deep tone of the mahogany wood. Curious, he stepped over to it. It was a sheet of paper nailed to the wood with a dagger knife. With difficulty, he pulled out the deeply pierced knife and stepped up to the window with the paper. Words in a foreign language that reminded him a little of Italian and yet must have sounded quite different. It must have been Romanian. Adalbert was astonished. How had the leaf got here? What strange way of attaching it with a knife? He rang the bell and waited impatiently for Richard to come.

"Listen," he asked as the servant entered, "did you let these people into my rooms?"

Richard looked at him coldly and indignantly: "How could I do that? Mr Semilasso locked the door himself. Is the gentleman perhaps missing something? But I immediately thought that such riff-raff ..." It was a reproach and at the same time a triumph of prudent foresight.

"No, there's nothing wrong with me."

"Now I remember that one of the people asked where the Lord's rooms were."

"One of them asked? Good. Go on."

There was nothing else marvellous about it, as Adalbert found out after some searching.

From the garden, they had climbed up the trellis of vines to the first floor, opened a window that had probably not been closed properly and got in. But why had they broken into his bedroom? What was the message that had been left for him? A little worried, but too tired to think too hard about it, Adalbert stretched out on his ottoman and fell asleep.

He only woke up late in the afternoon. A cool green filled his room, and the sun laid shining round shields as yellow as brass on the topaz-coloured wallpaper. From the warm darkness of the walls, under its touch, where it flitted in narrow, fleeting streaks, light columns of smoke seemed to rise; as if the colour were dissolving back into the light components from which it seemed to have been extracted. Adalbert thought of Regina and stood up, immediately filled with a joyful and alert vigour. He felt as if his life no longer had anything difficult for him, as if all obstacles and even his terrible and agonising imprisonment had been wiped away. He looked out of the window into the park and wondered whether the news of the Romanian musicians was not a good enough excuse to go to Eleagabal Kuperus today. Perhaps he would start talking about Regina, as he was her fatherly friend ...

On one of the park paths below, between the burning flowers of lush garnet bushes flaring up in the green, he saw a white dress. Elisabeth! Truly: Elisabeth! Did she come *here* too? And Adalbert had hoped to be able to spend the days until her engagement in peace. Bezug had allowed him to be alone so that he could fulfil his task in silence. Adalbert saw the white dress between the bushes, sometimes standing still, sometimes gliding on. Next to Elisabeth walked the

The bridegroom, in a light grey summer suit, with his bare head, which he occasionally wiped with his handkerchief. Elisabeth seemed to be in a bad humour, spoke with great excitement, and then suddenly stopped, so that Hecht ran a few steps ahead. At a bend in the path a bush hooked its thorns into the lace of her dress. Elisabeth had held back, turned round, and with an angry and impatient movement tore the dress loose, leaving a long narrow strip of lace clinging to the bush. Then the two of them disappeared deeper into the park, only the strip of lace fluttering in the soft evening breeze. Adalbert rang for Richard and quickly ordered dinner. When Richard wanted to leave, he asked:

"I think I saw the missus in the park earlier. Is she here?"

"She came from the city in the morning and asked about the Lord. I said that the Lord was asleep. She told me to inform her immediately when the Lord woke up."

"Wait a little longer. If I'm not mistaken, Mr Hecht will be in the park with the lady."

"Mr Hecht arrived in the afternoon."

"She won't want to be disturbed, so wait a while longer until Mr Hecht has left."

"As you wish. I may call upon the Lord that I have carried out my mission as it was given to me."

"That's fine by me. Call on me."

Adalbert didn't take much time for dinner. He had ordered a small bowl of cold meat, but left half of it, drank a small bottle of red wine and then, after slipping the note with the musicians' message to himself, walked away up one of the many hidden staircases of this house. For the first time he found the strange construction of this house meaningful. Despite the splendour of the interior and the lightness of the facades, the house was heavy and massive, like a fort. The walls were thick and covered with iron plates, which were, of course, concealed by marvellous tapestries; but it was precisely this thickness of the walls that allowed a number of cosy corners,

cosy corners and alcoves where it was wonderfully secretive at twilight. The four revolving doors at the corners of the building resembled the armoured turrets of an enormous warship. None of the residents had access to these towers. And just like in an old fort, there were all sorts of secret and concealed doors and staircases that led unexpectedly out into the open along strange paths. Adalbert reached the park via one of these staircases and was just about to head for the exit that led out over one of the small bridges when Elisabeth and Hecht came towards him. Adalbert quickly ducked into the twilight of a large, spherical taxus tree.

Hecht looked pale and determined. He passed so close to Adalbert that he could see the small beads of sweat on his forehead. "I will force you to love me," he said.

"We'll see if you succeed!" replied Elisabeth, stopping suddenly again so that Hecht took a few steps away from her. She glanced quickly at the windows of the villa.

"Yes, we'll see about that."

Then they were over and Adalbert could continue on his way. When he arrived at Kuperu's house, it was already night, but his confidence in the warmth of the invitation was so great that he pulled the bell without hesitation. The door opened quietly, and Adalbert walked across soft carpets through the long corridor, where the glowing letters on the walls created a calming twilight. In the red-lit room where the fountain splashed, the servant with the wolf's face was waiting and led him on between two walls of books. A ball clinked brightly in a silver basin. And now Adalbert stood in the large room, above which was a dome of glass on marble walls. He marvelled at the splendour of this wondrous temple, in which all types of marble were united, the columns that bore no beams, and the exquisite play of colours on the inside of the glass dome. He marvelled at the effect of this mild light, which came from invisible sources and filled him as it were, which he seemed to breathe in and which made him freer with every breath he took. An inexplicable force penetrated him, lifted him

so that he thought he heard a voice inside him: nothing is impossible here! This calmness of the marble walls, which seemed to tremble with the liveliest life in the tangled veins, also came over Adalbert. He was tense and calm at the same time, full of expectation and yet not impatient.

Eleagabal Kuperus rose from the marble table in the centre of the hall where he had been sitting and approached Adalbert, behind whom the servant with the wolf's face stood leaning forward as if in ambush, ready to pounce. "I knew you would come today," he said, beckoning the servant to move away.

"I've come to ask you something. You gave me permission. But how can I say what I think of you, how strange it is. As if I lived on another planet. So ... so ... words fail me ..."

"And you are a poet ..."

"I am completely transformed. I breathe so easily ..."

Kuperus looked intimately at Adalbert and, holding out his hand, said: "How beautiful your enthusiasm is, much more beautiful than anything that makes you enthusiastic. If only people knew how much they lose when they lose the gift of enthusiasm! You become so clear and loud when you give yourself completely to something. And most people are denied this. They remain dull and dull, always imprisoned in themselves, self-conscious and trapped."

"The air is so bright and cheerful, it streams into me like light ..."

"Do you feel it? Yes, it's like that. What you are breathing is luminous air. These rooms are completely filled with luminous air. It ignites here at these pillars, flows from time to time, always in invisible motion, and all the effects related to light are unleashed at the same time. Not only streams of light, but also electric and magnetic waves pass through them."

"It's wonderful, it's wonderful ..."

Adalbert sat in silence on a marble bench for a long time, and Kuperus did not disturb him. After an hour, he began with a question that Adalbert

gently: "Give me the paper you brought me."

Adalbert was not at all surprised that Eleagabal knew about this paper. Smiling, Kuperus received the paper and read it with a smile; the large canines had crept out of their sheaths like knives, and although this gave him a strange appearance, the expression of mildness on his face had only become more pronounced. "You have made friends," said Kuperus, when he had finished reading,

"it is the Romanian musicians who have left you this leaf."

"And what do they want from me?"

"They don't want anything from you. They're offering you something. Listen to what is written on this leaf: 'This knife' - the knife with which the leaf was probably attached - 'is the brother of four others. Five sharp and swift brothers; the fists they wield and the heads above them are yours when you call them. Call them when you need them. They will hear you in Bucharest', and now the note gives you an exact address."

"That's a strange kind of gratitude. You ask me to make use of your knives. What am I supposed to do with such a request? I have no one I want to hurt." Adalbert tried to joke, because he was embarrassed to be reminded of yesterday's scene.

But Kuperus remained very serious: "It could be that we need them. You recruited a bodyguard yesterday. And I believe these guards will be more loyal than some who surround a king. Keep this leaf well." And then, as if enough had been said and as if he had noticed Adalbert's embarrassment, Kuperus deflected: "And now I invite you to go on. You have confidence in me; I feel and see that. I want to show you that I also have confidence in you. Come along."

He walked towards the marble wall opposite the entrance and Adalbert rose and followed him. Now Kuperus reached into the tendrils of the colourful marble veins, pushed the hanging nets over the doorway

to the laboratory, and the two went through the wall. There they stood in the room where Kuperus kept his specimens, these heads and human limbs that had retained the most wondrous semblance of life. And Adalbert walked among them, as if in a dream in which the strangest things are taken for granted, accompanied by Kuperus, who occasionally spoke a word. In front of the Egyptian mummy, he realised how hideous this way of preserving the remains of a dead person was, and he asked Kuperus whether he was not thinking of handing over his discovery to mankind.

"Mankind?" said Kuperus. "I don't think mankind will care so much about keeping their dead in this way. There are few who are allowed to take stock of their actions and omissions in relation to a dead person in such a way that something comes out for them. In front of a corpse, all that usually remains are agonising reproaches, the thought that one should have been different. And so it is good when the dead person is covered by the earth or consumed by fire. It becomes more distant and indistinct, and when some time has passed, we know little more of what once horrified us. Remorse is silent and a quiet melancholy wearily caresses us. To see the dead still alive before us would prolong our remorse."

Adalbert nodded and thought. Then he said, "You're right."

After a while, Kuperus began again: "That's why I hesitate to talk about or make use of another discovery that is even more marvellous and terrible. Life is a chemical process, isn't it? That is a very crude and materialistic way of putting it. For its essence, its real nature, has not yet been grasped. The way in which individual existence is connected with the world as a whole. But the "chemical process" is what we see of life and can judge to some extent. The outer bark of life. So a chemical process, you will understand me now. A combustion process in a certain sense. And a fermentation process in another respect. So the presence of certain fermentation substances in the lungs is necessary for breathing.

necessary. So absolutely necessary that death must occur in the absence of these fermentation substances."

Kuperus was silent for a moment, and the wrinkles on his high forehead moved, as if unconsciously participating in the work of thought. Then, taking a crystal glass sealed with a glass stopper from a wall cupboard, he said: "I've been thinking about this and experimenting for years. You see here in this glass I have artificially produced the fermentation substance that is necessary for life."

"So you are..."

"Yes, it is as you say. I can, as they say: Raise the dead."

"So you are the master of death?"

"No, death is still too powerful on this earth. Not over the dead, but over the living. There is no one who, when faced with the dead, would not have thoughts of which he would not be ashamed if the dead were to come back to life. And for deeper people, this shame would become so terrible that it would drive them mad. Once - once perhaps I must try ... once it will be necessary. And then I will gladly ... fall prey to the vengeance of death. For it may be that I myself ... will atone for the success of my attempt ..." -

When Adalbert left Kuperus, it was bright morning again. A night full of sublime conversations lay behind him, full of strange trains of thought in which Kuperus had led the way, and this night had flown by like a single hour.

The 'Society for the Utilisation of the Earth's Surface' holds a meeting. A small argument between Bezug and his son-in-law

[Table of contents](#)

Preparations for the engagement ceremony had been underway at the palace for a week. All the arts and crafts had been mobilised and the great hall, in which the main painting on the ceiling was being replaced by another, was inaccessible because scaffolding had been erected whose poles and beams took up the whole room. In between and underneath, people were at work covering the walls with reliefs painted in gold. These reliefs and the ceiling painting depicted well-known scenes from Greek mythology: Brides and grooms and weddings of gods and humans. He had invited the most famous artists to his palace months ago, entertained them for a few days and obtained their agreement to take on this work, even from those who were reluctant, through his immense kindness and high prices. He was determined on this occasion to show the world that his power was already without limits, that he knew how to use the most precious things with taste for his glorification. The whole palace had been completely remodelled at unprecedented expense, and when the Bezugs family and his staff returned from the various villas the day before the celebration, they could hardly find their way around the new rooms.

The evening before, the company held a meeting to discuss the utilisation of the earth's surface. Bezug had invited the most important shareholders to the celebration and combined it with a meeting in which he received the reports on all five continents. When the speakers had finished speaking

and thanked everyone for their efforts. "But," he said, "despite all my appreciation of what has been achieved, I cannot conceal from you that I am somewhat impatient." And he continued in English, as most of the shareholders were English or American: "I can see successes, but these successes are not enough for me. Things are moving slowly. And I still do not foresee the time when we will actually rule over all the cultural soil of the earth. How long do you estimate, gentlemen, that it will take to reach that point?"

Mr Smith from Philadelphia, sitting at the bottom of the table, between Gibson, the Liverpool matchmaker, and Kucharov, the Baku oil billionaire, said after a while, when no one else spoke, "I reckon five years ... if things go on as they are."

"If it goes on like this ... no, gentlemen, it must not go on like this, it must go at a completely different pace. Five years, gentlemen! That's quite impossible, I can't stand it."

Mr Smith raised his golden pince-nez higher and said even more slowly: "I suppose you'll have to bear it. We have also invested our capital in these land purchases and must leave them without interest for the time being."

Then Bezug turned dark red with anger: "Lord, that's not what I mean. I can leave a hundred times what I've spent so far without paying interest and not feel a thing. But for other reasons, gentlemen! What can I tell you? I'm impatient, I'm nervous."

"You've got a lot of spirit!" said Mr Smith.

And Gibson added: "You can't be nervous in business."

"You have to be able to wait," said Kucharov, the oil billionaire. Thomas Bezug bowed mockingly to the gentlemen below

end of the green table that had been placed in the study instead of the table with Danae and the laburnum. Even though he had stood up, his fleshy hands would not let go of the green snake heads on the arm of the chair and his salt-sea eyes amidst the empty spaces

his face under the hairless brows and the bulges of his forehead seemed dull and dull. "I thank the gentlemen," he said, "for recognising my temperament and for their kind advice. You can believe me that I can be cold and calm when necessary. But here it seems necessary to make rapid progress. Why? That is not a question for me. We must triumph in the swift onslaught before the nations have time to turn against us, and before the governments have realised the enormity of our plan. Once the governments have come so far in their slow thinking, or if they are forced by the unwillingness of public opinion to put obstacles in our way by legislation - then it will be too late. We must have the power in our hands before the world comes to its senses."

"Certainly," agreed Fratelli, the macaroni manufacturer from Milan, and then he said something very quickly in Italian, which nobody understood apart from Bezug and two other Italian billionaires.

"Certainly," said Mr Smith, "but we are already working feverishly. Our agents are in almost every country, and our sub-agents in almost every city. But it's not due to a lack of zeal or poor organisation, but to the enormity of the task. The earth is much bigger than we imagined. We have to overcome resistance. There are a lot of people who are, so to speak, attached to the ground they are sitting on. They first have to be tortured into submission before they give up their piece of land."

"And what about the farmers?" interjected the silk manufacturer Vernier from Lyon, who had only recently joined the society and was attending a meeting for the first time.

"This question has been raised before," Fratelli replied obligingly, "and it was resolved satisfactorily. Of course, we must be careful not to drive all the farmers out of the villages into the towns just yet. That would very soon lead to overpopulation in the centres and all the embarrassing consequences of such a situation: Housing shortages and inflation and, finally, discontent and uprisings against us. We let the farmers

for the time being as tenants on their land. As tenants with relatively low rents so that they can keep the estates in good condition, but with leases with very short terms. And when we are ready, the contracts will all be cancelled at once."

"In the meantime," continued the banker Rosengarten from Berlin, "the cities are already so overcrowded that it will be difficult or even impossible to establish a livelihood there. The terminated tenants are therefore forced to stay in the countryside, and we get cheap labour to cultivate our land."

"When we're ready, we'll already have the power in our hands," said Gibson. "But as Mr Smith said, there are a lot of stubborn people, mostly here in Germany and Austria, as I've been told. That's one obstacle. The other, however, is that there are still a great many areas on Earth that have hardly been explored or are difficult to access. The acquisition of these territories is difficult because the political concerns of the colonial states stand in the way. But it seems even more difficult to me to manage these areas rationally afterwards."

"Think," said Kucharov, "of these enormous, still barely accessible stretches in Siberia, of the primeval forests of Brazil, the many South Sea islands, the interior of Australia, as far as it can be cultivated, the wonderful, still unutilised forests and farmlands of Central Africa. Tibet, the jungles of India, the interior of China, where it will be particularly difficult to realise our plan."

"And yet we must all have these areas." Thomas Bezug had sat down again, let his hands rest on the snake heads and looked at one of the invitees after the other. "We must have them. For we have to expect that as soon as we come closer to the fulfilment of our wishes here in the already cultivated lands, a new migration of peoples will pour into these areas. All the displaced persons who cannot make a living here will think of emigrating to new countries. At this critical moment, we must

so we already have these areas in our hands. They must know that where they want to go is no different from here."

"Certainly! For sure! It must be that far."

"I am in the pleasant position of being able to inform you that my endeavours in this respect have already met with some success. Yesterday I received a telegram that the expedition to cross Africa, which I have equipped, has happily arrived on the west coast. The expedition has concluded a myriad of treaties with the chiefs in the interior of Africa. Believe me, there is cheap land for sale there. But there is one piece of news that is particularly important to me. The expedition has entered into relations with the government of the Congo State on our behalf. We have the prospect of handing over all sovereign rights to the Belgian government - of course! - the entire Congo state into our hands."

"Excellent, excellent."

"The reports from my Tibetan expedition, whose leader spoke to the Dalai Lama himself, are similarly favourable. And things are also looking good in India, provided the Indian government doesn't cause us any difficulties."

"That's what I want to do," said Lord Hamilton.

"Our trust has North America pretty much secured," Mr Smith added. "Of course, there are still some enormous fortunes there that have not yet joined us."

"Can't anything be done?" Thomas asked angrily.

After some thought, Mr Smith replied: "There's a lot we can do ... if we're not choosy in our means."

"I don't understand you, Mr Smith, of course we can't be choosy in our means. Count on my support in every respect. So you see, gentlemen," said Bezug, getting up again, "that your misgivings have not much to say. After the enthusiasm with which you have received my plan, I have

didn't expect these concerns at all. They think a bit small about the power of capital."

"And yet it seems to me," someone said, "if I look at it properly, that there's something somewhere that doesn't add up. I think it's impossible ..." The speaker broke off. It was the gun manufacturer Behrens from Aachen, a still young man, beardless, sunburnt, as he had only recently returned to Europe from hunting elephants in Abyssinia.

A dreadful silence fell over those gathered after this word, and the beating of the black vulture's wings above **t h e** clock face became audible. One ... two ... three ... four ... five ... The vulture sat with its head bent forward as if peering over the assembly, its beak crooked and its eyes glowing, its sharp fangs ready to strike. Slowly and relentlessly, its wings beat in time with the pendulum, as if it were time itself ...

At last Bezug said, and in the pale face, whose skin was reminiscent of the colour of grotto elms, the eyes began to glow: "A word has been spoken here ... a word that I don't want to repeat ... a word that we don't know, we don't want to have heard it. It would be a disgrace for us to say anything in reply, but Mr Behrens should least of all have used that word. You are one of the youngest here and one of the weakest. You have ..." Rudolf Hainx, who was sitting next to Bezug, pointed to an item on the list in front of him. Bezug leant down and then continued: "You have provided the company with the ridiculous sum of five hundred million, Mr Behrens. I don't know if you would prefer to remain silent if you remember that?"

Among those gathered was Polydor Schleimkugel, who had acquired his immense fortune by manufacturing images of saints, rosaries and pilgrimage souvenirs. Ever since he had been honoured with a papal medal, he had shown a great fondness for the purple of the cardinals. His waistcoat, which was closed to the top, was purple and his tie, which was only worn with a small piece over it, was purple.

was of the same colour. Even the head, which sat on the shapelessly thick body, was purple, with a more delicate tint at the nape of the neck, a round pale moon in a wreath of purple hair above it, and then rapidly becoming more strongly coloured towards the front; the cheeks even showed a hint of brown, while the strong nose had taken on the rich palette of old copper. Despite his girth, there was an impetuous temperament in this body; and it was Slimeball who, when the beating wings of the black vulture whipped the silence again, said what everyone was thinking. He struck the table with his fist so that a little wave sprang out of the glass of water in front of him, and said, "I don't think anyone will prevent Mr Behrens from resigning now, if he pleases. Perhaps our business doesn't seem secure enough to him. Or not profitable enough. What do I know ... He needed a word ..."

"Certainly no one will prevent him from withdrawing. In such a case, the company would probably be inclined to cancel the contractual obligation, which exists after all."

Everyone agreed. Then Behrens stood up quickly, stepped behind his chair and pushed it under the table. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said, "it just occurred to me, somewhere, in an Abyssinian bottleneck ... and it just gave me no peace. There was no doubt whether our business was healthy and profitable - what Mr Thomas Bezug undertakes or encourages is certainly healthy and profitable. But it was a doubt as to whether this business is decent. Mr Bezug is no guarantor of that."

"Making guns is more decent, isn't it ... guns to shoot the poor devils with," shouted Mr Rosengarten, who was a member of the International Peace League.

But Behrens preferred not to answer, bowed and left the room to the silence of those gathered. After his disappearance, everyone began to talk at once, and Mr Smith called across the table: "We shouldn't have released him from the contract so easily." But Mr Smith rang the bell

and asked the assembly to be quiet: "Gentlemen," he said, "we have more important things to do. Let's forget this little incident. It's getting quite late and I'd like to see you tomorrow when you're fresh and in good spirits. I have had my secretary-general here draw up a series of detailed plans from which each of the gentlemen can see what part of the work falls to him. Which of the gentlemen would like to take over Mr Behrens' job?"

"Me," said Slimeball, accepting his own plan as well as that of the excluded partner.

"And now, gentlemen, good night, let the servants waiting outside show you to your rooms." Now Bezug was in the midst of the turmoil of farewells for a while. Slimeball was the last to leave. He was ambitious and wanted to hear the leader praise him. And he asked, holding out his hand to Bezug: "Wasn't I right? ... with this Behrens ... It was for the best. That's no good ... such a wimp."

Bezug looked at him with his salt-sea eyes and smiled: "It was certainly for the best. Well - and how is business going?"

"Good! Even better since I got the medal."

"Also in India, Tibet and China?"

"What do you mean? ... what do you mean ... I understand ..."

"I mean the Buddhist prayer wheels that you sell on the side. You know: *Om mani padme hum.*"

"Jesus ... Keep quiet. Nobody knows that. Nobody can know that. My order ... And how did you find out? ..."

"You have your sources ..."

"You'll keep quiet, won't you..."

"Certainly ... I'm counting on your devotion."

"What you want ... what you want ..."

Bezug and Rudolf Hainx were alone. When the soundproof door had closed behind Schleimkugel, Hainx burst out laughing. He was sitting in the corner where the round table with Danae

He threw himself into an armchair and his body shook under the irresistible storm of laughter.

"Don't laugh," said Bezug, adding grimly:

"Idiots! You're supposed to work with idiots like that. No tension in these flabby bundles of nerves. No spirit. They've made their fortune in their sleep."

Rudolf Hainx stood up and walked up and down the room: "If only they knew that they were just tools! If they had any idea what Thomas Bezug is actually planning!"

"They'll all have to grovel before me. Especially them. That will be a pleasure for me. They'll pay for the trouble I'm having with them now. This Behrens ..." and after a moment's thought, Bezug continued:

"I don't feel like waiting. I could miss his capital. But that he has dared to openly rebel against me ... it is outrageous ... Listen, what's the situation with him? I mean, what are his circumstances ..."

Hainx took the large information book about everyone involved in the company from the cupboard where the reference library was kept. It contained precise information about the assets of each individual, their family circumstances, their habits, right down to the smallest details. Hainx opened the Behrens sheet. "Behrens is unmarried ... he is the only heir to the fortune ... there are no closer relatives, not even illegitimate children, because his only passion is hunting ... the closest relative is an uncle, Theodor Behrens ..."

"I know him," said Bezug, "he's reliable."

"Behrens has not yet made a will. When he dies, the entire estate will go to this uncle."

"Good, write an express letter to Theodor Behrens immediately. Whether he would be inclined ... you understand ... to join our company if he had the disposal of all the assets. You understand. Fine, of course, as you can. And I request

telegraphic reply: Yes or no ... no more. I must have the answer tomorrow evening. - Good night."

Bezug descended the stairs. The electricians had just finished their work and were testing the effect. Instead of the granite steps, glass steps had been installed everywhere and electric light bulbs had been distributed underneath them, which shone as if from an underground realm depending on the colour of the step. Bezug descended in a dusky red colour and it was as if he was stepping on barely cooled lava. The columns of the loggia had been replaced by alabaster trees that branched out higher up and bore golden fruit. The trunks of these alabaster trees were also illuminated from within. With the green staircase leading down to the park and the dark, massive trees behind it, the milky-white twilight of this room created a happy effect with which Bezug was satisfied. In the large hall, the scaffolding had just been removed and a hundred workers were already busy setting up the large marble tables. In contrast to the usual style of such banquets, the guests were not to be forced to sit at one long table, but individual tables were distributed throughout the room, at which the guests could gather as they pleased. These tables were of immeasurable value, as they came from all times and cultures. Egyptian, Greek and Etruscan excavations had provided stone tables; all forms were represented, from the coarse, stiff-legged manner of the Romanesque style to the graceful, richly ornamented and ornate table of the Rococo, the more prudent, narrow-chested style of the Empire and the cosy calm of the Biedermeier period. The buffets had just been set up along the two narrower walls of the hall. Bezug called the head of the work to him: "Professor," he said, "the work must be finished by eight o'clock in the morning."

"It's impossible," said the professor, "I have to..."

Then Bezug became violent: "I don't want to hear the word ... listen! ... Nothing must be impossible with me. Send for as many workers as you need. It mustn't depend on that ... You

have undertaken to be ready by eight o'clock. And you have to be ready ..."

Shrugging his shoulders, the professor left. Bezug was just about to climb the shining bluish staircase to his bedroom when he noticed Behrens among the workers, who was watching the relief panels being fitted into the front wall of one of the buffets. Bezug walked towards him:

"I'm looking forward to meeting you here," he said.

With slight embarrassment, Behrens replied: "Yes - I'm still here. I couldn't tear myself away. It's marvellous what you're doing for this party."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Bezug repeated, "I'd hate for you to go away with the impression you may have received earlier in the meeting. Business is business, isn't it? There is no kindness and no friendship. But that shouldn't cloud our personal relationships. You have to know how to make a distinction."

Behrens looked him in the face, but he saw only a sincere friendliness and undisguised blandness, so that he was almost sorry to have been the aggressor and violator earlier in the meeting: "Certainly I agree with you," he said, when he had convinced himself of the honesty of the reference, "certainly! we want to forget the incident, if you don't mind."

"And now I'm sure you won't say no if I repeat my invitation. You will still be my guest. I value you far too highly not to be sorry if you are absent tomorrow."

"However, I have already given the order to move my things to the Bristol Hotel ..."

"I'm really sorry about that. You could send for the things again."

"It's not in favour of it. Midnight is already over anyway, and it doesn't matter whether I sleep here or in a hotel room for the few hours until morning."

"You'd be more comfortable with me."

"If, like me, you're used to spending the night in forests and Abyssinian villages, you don't attach such importance to comfort. So let's leave it at that. But I'll be with you tomorrow."

"You'll have to come and shake my hand. Because I might not be able to find you in the turmoil."

"You loaded a lot of people?"

"About five hundred people. My business friends, the heads of the civil and military authorities. His Excellency, the governor has certainly accepted. Then artists, scholars and journalists."

"You will amaze the world. You won't be able to get enough of them."

"But I hope that people will eat their fill. I've prepared some nice surprises. For example, look at the two buffets that have been set up here. One of the buffets is very much in the style of antiquity. The reliefs you see here are all Attic works from the best period. The triumphal procession of Bacchus at the front is said to be a marvellous work of art, as the director of my excavations assures me. In contrast, the other buffet up there is completely modern. You can see this from the lines. There, the preciousness is based firstly on the outstanding artistic work and then on the precious materials used. All the wooden parts are made from some kind of Brazilian wood - I can't remember the name - which is of immense value. The green stone comes from a block of malachite from the Urals, which I received as a gift from the Tsar as a favour."

"It would be a bizarre idea and worthy of you to adapt the food in these buffets to the style."

Bezug looked at Behrens and replied with quiet and polite irony:

"Do you think so? Well - I really came up with that idea. In the modern buffet you will find everything that the present day considers good and delicious. You'll probably know all about it. But over there ... well, what do you think? Have you read 'Trimalchio's Banquet'? Well - all the ancient delicacies you will find there are listed in

be available at this buffet. The dishes will be prepared by an educated cook - I might say - under the assistance and supervision of two archaeologists. According to certain recipes that a small group of scholars have gone to great lengths to find. Only the moray eels fed on slave meat are missing from this menu. Unfortunately, the fish are no longer fed with slave meat. I would give anything if I could also serve this dish to my guests. Unfortunately, so-called humanity forbids it. You'll see how the scholars and artists will crowd round this buffet tomorrow."

A great triumph shone in the bottom of Bezugs's dead eyes. And all at once all these preparations for the party seemed so strange and disreputable and uncanny to Behrens that he hurried to get outside. All at once it seemed to him as if the wide, airy hall was filled with a haze that seemed to condense around the figure of Bezugs and shroud him. He endeavoured to smile: "If you demand so much from your guests tomorrow, it will be advisable to go to bed soon. Good night."

He left and Bezug looked after him with a suddenly changed face. Slowly, irresistibly, like pincers, his fingers closed as if he were strangling some animal. Then he walked up the shining blue staircase to his bedroom. But first he walked past the door to his room, to the end of the corridor, where the room lay that only Bezug of all his housemates entered. Apart from him, only one man went in and out of the room, who came and went like a secret and was never allowed to meet any of the servants or the family. He used the small hidden staircase here at the end of the corridor, to which no one but he had the key. This part of the palace was strictly forbidden, and ever since Bezug had dismissed a curious parlour maid on the spot, the others had been wary of this forbidden place. Bezug stopped in front of the iron-bound door, raised his hand, but lowered it again hesitantly, as if he was afraid to do what he had set out to do. The iron fittings of the door combined the appearance of amusing ornamentation with great solidity, as if there was something behind it.

something to guard her. In the midst of the ornaments, which approximated to the grimacing style of Gothic taste, was a slider, in front of which hung a small, delicate lock. Bezug leaned against the door, groaning deeply, and it was as if he were listening intently for sounds from within. Then he took a small key from his waistcoat pocket, unlocked it, lifted the lock out of its eyelets and pulled back the slider. Bright light burst through the small window behind it, and with the light came a sound, as if it had long been looking for a way out. A strange whimpering and, at the same distance, a loud whining ... Bezug held onto one of the protruding ornaments with a groan and pulled his head back. Inside, a dog barked, came to the door and jumped up to the window, howling. After a while, the window was opened. "Is that you, Mr Cover?" someone asked.

"Yes ... Come out."

A small struggle broke out at the door when the inner bolts were pulled back and it was about to be opened. The dog wanted to push his way out at the same time and was not at all inclined to be held back. "You go back ... Cuddle up, Barry ... back." At last the fight was broken up by a kick, the dog howled and a man squeezed through the narrow gap in the door. He was tall, broad-shouldered with hanging, flailing arms and a wild red beard that went down to his chest.

"What's the situation?" asked Bezug.

"How should it stand? Always pretty much the same." The man's tone was not very submissive, not to be compared with that of other servants who feared their master and trembled before his anger and power. This man spoke as if he was privileged to know where this power ended and as if that alone gave him a different position in relation to Bezug. "Pretty much the same for a few days and nights. A bit angrier than usual. Last week he was quiet, but now he's getting quite angry again. I think the crisis will come today and then he'll calm down again."

"Well ... and in general?"

"In general, things are getting worse rather than better. Can't you hear anything in the house? Sometimes he roars so much that I think the ceiling must collapse."

"It was good that I had the walls, ceiling and floor soundproofed when his condition worsened. You used to hear something here and there. Now everything is quiet."

"That's good." And then the man added with a laugh: "At least you won't find out what kind of wild animal Mr Bezug keeps in his house." Bezug jumped as if hit in the face by a blow and took a quick step as if he wanted to pounce on the man, who was laughing evilly at him. But he managed to control himself, took his handkerchief and wiped his wet forehead.

"I don't want to hear such words," he finally said with difficulty.

"Well, what? What?" the other replied brutally. "Isn't it like that? Is he more than a wild animal?"

"Go inside now. Good night!"

With a grumble, the man unlocked the iron-bound door and left. Bezug fastened the padlock to the slider again, stood for a while and then went into his bedroom with heavy steps and a drooping head. It was quite quiet again in the long corridor, only muffled, as if from under the earth, came the noise of the night's work, shouts that had lost their meaning, now and then a hard knock, a sudden jolt that propagated itself in the walls, so that the electric light bulbs began to sway softly in their tendrils. Through the window at the end of the corridor came the moonlight, very softly and hesitantly, as if it were creeping in somewhere where it was not loved. And it met the light of the electric lamps in the centre of the path and mixed with it to form a strange, milky brightness that lay like a luminous mist over the heavy carpet and tiles. After an hour, the iron-bound door opened silently and the red-bearded man stepped hesitantly into the moonlight. Slowly creeping along the walls, he gained the door to the bedroom and crouched down here, his ear very close to the smooth, cool panelling,

which was flooded with double light. Inside, Bezug walked up and down. Silence fell in regular pauses as he walked across the large carpet; then a few footsteps were always loud on the bare floor. So he walked up and down, from the window to the door and back again, always up and down ... up and down. And in front of the door crouched the watchman, laughing to himself and muttering, and his eyes stared at the wood as if he saw through it, as reference always walked steadily up and down ... pale, with closed lips, with wet forehead, as no one else had seen him but the man who crouched in front of his door with the smile of hatred. -

In the morning, Bezug was informed that Doctor Hecht wished to see him. Bezug had finished his toilet early and had already gone round at eight o'clock to make sure that everything was ready. He found the head of the works, exhausted by the sleepless night and the excitement, asleep behind one of the flowered walls in the great hall and woke him to express his satisfaction that the work had been completed at the appointed time. With great kindness he asked him to go to the office to receive the fee. Then he went back to his bedroom and picked up the morning paper to read the blue-coloured articles reporting on today's party at the Bezugs home.

"Have you read," he called out to Hecht, "what a great man you are?"

"So am I," Hecht replied calmly and sat down at the reading table opposite.

Bezug looked at him, and Hecht saw the look as a sneer. "You've come to say good morning to me," Bezug said after a while.

"I'm delighted and thank you. And I'm also very pleased that I can talk to you undisturbed. There will be little opportunity to do so during the day."

"What do you have to tell me?"

The subterranean enmity that existed between the two men made them both cautious and drove them to the utmost tension of all

powers as soon as they had anything to do with each other. But they didn't want to let it be known and endeavoured to give the impression that they felt completely safe and let themselves go with complete trust in each other's honesty. After they had spoken out once and for all with cynical frankness, they preferred to avoid friction by tacit agreement and to turn to each other only that side which had a nice glaze on it. But today they both felt that a moment had come when the politeness of the rogues had to be set aside.

Bezug poured two glasses full of a green liquid from the enamelled jug on the reading table and invited his son-in-law to drink. "What do I have to tell you?" he replied, sipping the liquid through a straw. "Can you really not think that? - But, drink, drink ... it's Japanese violet oil that I got from the Japanese envoy in Vienna ... a precious and delicious drink ... Yes - well, I must tell you that I'm not in the habit of making my business friends aware of the fulfilment of their contracts first."

Pike, who was sucking on his straw, opened his eyes with an expression of pure astonishment.

"You don't want to understand? So what is our contract? I give you my daughter and you share your discovery with me. Isn't that right?"

"Certainly!"

"Now then - today I give you my daughter. And I now expect you to fulfil the contract."

Shaking his head, Hecht looked at his father-in-law: "Dear Mr Bezug. You are as delicious as your violet oil! Speaking of violet oil - is it true that in Japan this oil is reserved exclusively for the imperial family, who give it to the highest dignitaries?"

Hecht had succeeded in making Bezug impatient and this only made him feel more secure and firm. "So what do you have to answer me?" asked Bezug, snapping his straw in half.

"My answer is that you have not yet fulfilled your conditions."

"No?"

"No. You promised to give me your daughter."

"Well, today I'm giving them to you."

"No: today you are repeating your promise to give me your daughter in public."

"That's as good as giving it to you today. I can't undo anything after a public engagement. Public opinion ..."

"Dear Mr Bezug, what do you want with these empty words? Public opinion. Have you ever paid any attention to it? Public opinion doesn't determine you, you determine public opinion. You know how it's done."

Bezug threw the crumpled straw onto the table. He did not feel master of his strength today and needed it more than ever if he wanted to overlook the immense feast and make it serve his purposes. And he was almost senseless with rage that Hecht seemed to be a match for him in a duel, as reluctant as a master who is forced to recognise an equal. "So tell me, what do you actually want...?"

"I will fulfil my promise; I showed you at the time by experiment that I can do it and that my discovery is not a hoax. So you are sure. But I will not be sure until you have really given me your daughter."

"You'll have to be patient. Because at yesterday's meeting it was claimed that it will take another five years before we are ready to implement our plan."

"In the meantime, we can start building the large machines. And when we have completed these constructions, you will be able to see for yourself that my discovery is also effective on a large scale. Then the time will have come to fulfil our contract."

Bezug had got up and walked up and down the room without answering.

Now Hecht also stood up: "But I didn't come here to argue about the time," he continued, "but to ask you whether you can fulfil your condition at all."

With his back turned to Hecht, Bezug stood at the window and shrugged his shoulders without giving an answer.

"Elisabeth is the only person over whom you have little or no power. - Apart from me and another person you fear."

Bezug wheeled round and looked menacingly at Hecht.

"Yes, the one you fear. You know who I mean. Well - you want to give me your daughter."

"They'll get you."

"Yes! You will give me your daughter. Good. But will I really own her? The lawyers make a fine distinction between *matrimonium ratum* and *matrimonium consumptum*. And this is also the difference here. I draw your attention to the fact that I interpret our contract in such a way that your condition is only fulfilled by the *matrimonium consumptum*. I have come to tell you this."

Bezug, who saw himself forced out of the attack and into the defence, gripped the Brussels tips of the window curtain with spasmodic fingers. After a while he said: "Strange, that will be your affair, dear friend. You can't ask the father to persuade his daughter to listen to her husband."

"I'm only telling you this so that you don't claim that I'm in breach of contract."

"Do you have reason to believe that the *matrimonium ratum* could stay?"

"I have every reason to." And suddenly Hecht stepped very close to Bezug, pale, his eyes shining in confusion and his mouth half open. He choked on a word and finally said, with a very

"Your daughter hates me! She hates me ... even more than you hate me."

Now Bezug regained full calm in the face of the agitated man:

"Is it possible? You shouldn't think ...! Ah - that must be embarrassing for you."

Hecht stood there as if he heard nothing of Bezug's words, which glowed inwardly with malicious joy. And at that moment, when he seemed to have lost control of himself, he said something that he would otherwise have kept quiet: "And I love her ... I love her ... no, I hate her ... but I desire her ... it's unbearable."

"Of course, of course ... Let me give you some advice. Be kind. And if that doesn't help, be brutal. That still works best. Once she's your wife, beat her and pull her by the hair. I have had the best success with this. First try to be around her all the time and get her used to your presence. And if that doesn't work, don't show yourself for a few weeks, neglect Elisabeth - that usually works."

Bezug had underestimated Hecht. In an endeavour to exploit his advantage and rid himself of the excess of his anger through mockery, he had given Hecht time to compose himself. His opponent listened to him coldly and calmly until the end; then he said: "Thank you, dear father-in-law, for your well-meant advice. It will depend on the circumstances what course of action I take. I just felt obliged to inform you today of my concerns about our contract. Will you excuse me now? I still have to go to the toilet."

Bezug was still looking at the door when Hecht had already left. His vigour suddenly waned and he was still sitting in his armchair, freezing and thoughtless, when Hainx entered to report. Surprised, Bezug jumped up and, not loving to be seen in a state of weakness, he shouted at Hainx: "Why don't you knock?"

Although Hainx had knocked three times without receiving an answer, he was wary of a responsibility that would have convinced him that he had not been fully prepared. It was time to leave, for the first part of the ceremony, the church blessing and the exchange of engagement rings, was about to begin; the bishop had already arrived. The scene was to take place in the closest family circle, and Bezug rose to fetch Mrs Agathe from her rooms. She lay on the sofa in full toilette, but exhausted to the utmost from dressing, a small table with medicines beside her, and turned her head towards the door with a pang of suffering, as if even this quiet movement was too much for her.

"Are you ready?" asked Bezug.

"Does it have to be? I feel more inclined to go to bed today than to endure a party."

Matt shimmering pearls lay on the bare neck, which still bloomed beautifully from lace. Bezug stepped behind his wife and said cruelly: "Everything must die ..."

Then Agathe jumped up and leant on one arm, trying to look him in the face: "Why are you telling me this? Am I really that ill? Did the doctor tell you something?"

"I mean the pearls, my dear, not you. The pearls must die if you don't wear them more often. You know that their lustre has a limited duration; it fades when they have to do without the touch of a woman's skin. You wear these pearls too seldom. Give them to Elisabeth."

Agathe had sunk back again and said indignantly: "Elisabeth has enough jewellery. She won't ask for these pearls. You're spoiling her anyway ... it's outrageous."

"She is the daughter of the richest man in the world ..."

With a glance at her medicine bottles, Agathe remembered her condition and continued wistfully, in a soft voice like an image of grace:

"So you already are ... six months ago you weren't."

"We were three billion short of becoming the first."

"So ... what does that help me? - My head must be full of boils inside. And I can feel the blood poisoning my brain."

"I must urge you most firmly to get up at last. The bishop is already downstairs, forward."

First Agathe slowly let her feet slide off the sofa and lay on her elbows with her body arched and her head slightly backwards. Then she stretched out her left arm on the backrest and gently supported herself with her right hand so that she finally came to a sitting position with her head back and her eyes closed. She sat there for a few minutes, groaning, before rising completely. Bezug stood opposite her and watched her with unconcealed amusement. His wife was the only person he really enjoyed. She alone was exempt from the raging mistrust he had of everyone. If she had been less narrow-minded, he might have confided many things to her, but he always turned away from this wish, for if she had been wiser, he should have distrusted her too.

With a mocking face, he held out his arm to her and walked downstairs with her, regally and with a serious face, through two rows of servants.

The engagement party

Table of contents

As the bride's parents entered, Bishop Doctor Franz Salesius, Count of Pöschau, rose to meet them and greeted them with a handshake and a few authoritative words. A perfect man of the world, he behaved as if he were here as a guest and displayed no unction or dignity. He had formerly been a cavalry officer and still retained the swift and energetic movements of those days; he loved the tone of distinguished society, still liked to talk about horses and dogs, and never struck the monastery bell in his conversations or let the sweet fumes of incense rise. Like many of his peers, he had no need to invoke the authority of the Church and to make a spectacle of himself using the decorative splendour available to the servants of the Church. With his tact, he spurned all this and worked everywhere through his own personality, which drove freshly into all the dullness and hidden lechery of his subordinates. If the footsteps of many priests sounded as if they were walking over the well-worn stone pavements of old, echoing monastery corridors, his step was firm and short and without echo. But with the appearance of a free spirit, he was always mindful of the advantage of the church, and neglected nothing that seemed likely to increase its power; for though he seemed to abstain from its means of power, he felt that the splendour of its bastions and lofty towers was, as it were, a good background for his slender and tall figure.

A stimulating conversation with him had put Elisabeth in a better mood. With one glance at the bridegroom, the bishop had realised what turn he had to give the conversation, and he was careful not to begin with the day of honour and other related matters. He had impartially touched on all sorts of subjects which he could assume would be of interest to Elisabeth.

and had finally lingered for some time over a few theses on art. He spoke of the theatre with great knowledge of the subject, for although he was no longer allowed to endure the excitement of the stage - he smiled as he said this - he still retained memories of the time when, when he entered the box rattling his sabre, the young girls in the stalls looked round for him. "My love of the theatre has become platonic," he said and told them that he continued to pay attention to the dramatic productions of the day, albeit only in the quiet hermitage at home and with caution, so that anxious minds would not have to fear too much for his salvation. In addition, however, he also occupied himself with the study of medieval theatre, with the mystery plays of the time when acting was still entirely a matter for the clergy. "And so I atone for the sins I commit by reading new plays," he said jokingly. But he continued with that hovering seriousness that alternated with calm cheerfulness: "No - I'm slandering the old masters ... of course you find a lot of endless, boring, suffocating things. But in between there is also a lot of tenderness, sweetness, some delightful thoughts or dramatically moving scenes, powerfully outlined characters, words with a particularly profound meaning, at which one marvels. And in the appearances of the devils, a bizarre humour, a wild humour that proves that many of the spiritual poets felt more comfortable in hell than in heaven."

In addition to Elisabeth and the taciturn groom, who took little part in the conversation, three distant relatives from the provinces were also present. A minor official and two elderly ladies, one of whom was a widow, the other unmarried. They sat shyly huddled together and intimidated at some distance from the main group, sometimes whispering among themselves and only the official sometimes made a move and ventured a question or remark. Then they all fell silent again and, bewildered by the splendour of this room, they looked around them and indulged in

Thoughts in variations on the old theme that life's goods are unequally distributed.

It enclosed the room like a huge shell. The few furnishings, a few armchairs, a table and a small cupboard were set up on the wide base. The walls, however, did not rise parallel to each other, but at a gentle incline, touching not far above the heads of those standing upright in an intersecting line. This line was not straight, but wavy, for the walls showed raised ribs, like a real shell. A rosy twilight poured over the windowless room. The light broke through the soft pink-coloured, shimmering walls from outside and filled the room with a mild, even flood in which people and objects seemed to swim.

After the bishop had enquired about Mrs Agathe's condition and listened to her tearful report with compassion and attention, he turned to Bezug: "Can we begin?"

"If it pleases the Episcopal Grace."

The bishop took the case with the engagement rings that he had fetched from the wardrobe from Bezugs's hands. With the eyes of a connoisseur, he scrutinised the fire of the precious stones, picked them up from the base, let them sparkle and shine as he turned them back and forth, and then took a closer look at the blue fabric on which their beauty was bedded. Bezug, who in the meantime had greeted his relatives, watched the bishop closely as he apparently responded with amiable condescension to the confused, incoherent speeches of the bourgeois people. He was now able to answer one of the bishop's questions before it had been spoken: "It's spun glass, Bishop's Grace," he said. The astonishment of the bishop, who was a connoisseur of fine stones and a lover of rarities, had a beneficial effect on his mood.

Without transition, with perfect composure, the bishop tied the ceremony to the expert examination. The priest developed so quickly from the man of the world that one could see how closely the two merged

and how the bishop understood his spiritual dignity only as a function of his nobility. That is why he avoided any ostentation or secrecy, simply put the rings on the betrothed and then said, without any affectation, in a conversational tone: "They are now promised to each other. The bond I have just tied is not an indissoluble one, like the bond of marriage. But the Church does not like it when the promise of marriage is not kept. With you there is no danger that you could break your vows. I see with joy the preparation of a union that promises to be exemplary. Therefore I invoke the blessing of heaven already now."

He stood for a very brief moment with his eyes raised to the sky and his arms outstretched and then immediately turned to Mrs Bezug with an authoritative smile: "I congratulate you, madam."

Elisabeth, who, the nearer the ceremony approached, had made herself more rigid and prepared to meet it with a mocking smile, was pleasantly surprised to see that the scene was already over, and nodded to her bridegroom, more kindly disposed as a result. Hecht, however, misunderstood the look, took Elisabeth's hand and pressed it to his lips. Then Elisabeth became all glassy and cold again, withdrew her hand and offered it to her cousin Bezug, who had been standing behind her for some time in a humble posture to offer his congratulations. He, who had only recently distinguished himself with a lengthy speech at a jubilee of his bureau chief, attempted to speak a few well-prepared and coherent words. But in mid-sentence he was startled by an indeterminate expression in Elisabeth's eyes, a cruel, scornful look, broke off, tried to resume the connection and finally stood, his forehead dripping, agonised and panting and at a loss. The two old women, who now approached, released him, took Elisabeth between them and spoke to her from both sides, as they were accustomed to do on similar occasions in their circles, where anxious and tearful brides had to be calmed. They made every effort to reassure Elisabeth through the divine

They tried to encourage her to take pleasure in marriage, reminding her that it was the destiny of all women to leave their parents and follow their husbands, and that Elisabeth should look forward to this important moment with composure. They supported each other, each taking up the other's theme, dividing themselves into upper and lower voices and becoming more and more urgent when no emotion was forthcoming. Elisabeth listened to the women as she had listened to the paralysed congratulatory speaker earlier, giving no sign of defence and none of encouragement, implacable in her icy politeness.

"Have you seen," asked Hecht, who had approached Bezug,
"how she treats me?"

"Patience, my dear, patience. I must have patience too."

At a hint, the shell of the chamber opened, the upper edge folding apart first; the sides receded further and further, and at the same time the bottom of the shell rose up, so that the rapid growth of an enormous flower was demonstrated, as it were. At the moment when the sides were completely folded back, the flower shell stood still at the height of an estrade, and greeted by festive music, Elisabeth stepped forward to the balustrade with Hecht to show herself to the assembly.

In the atrium, which had been converted into an Attic pery style, the guests stood head to head and, entranced by the splendour of the feast and cheered on by a few cleverly distributed agents, broke out into jubilant cheers. It was as if the feast of a beloved ruling house had brought them here. Bezug stood dominantly beside the bride and groom and on the other side Agathe appeared with the bishop, while the relatives, dismayed and fearful of the noise that was breaking over them, kept to the background. After the group had remained thus for some time, visible to all, they dispersed and the bride and groom, followed by the others, descended the steps to receive the congratulations of the guests. The crowd was quickly organised by some skilful master of ceremonies under the direction of Rudolf Hainx.

and first the most distinguished of the guests entered the open space around the betrothed and the family.

The governor approached the bride and groom with long, stilted strides. He was a tall man, leaning slightly forwards, with a beardless face, a somewhat tired expression and a protruding lower jaw. In general, the lower half of the face was strongly developed and the forehead and eyes dominated the overall impression. The lower lip was particularly striking. It was more than twice as wide as the upper lip, strongly bulging and hanging heavily downwards. Now the governor stopped with a short jerk, bent his long upper body low, kissed Elisabeth's slightly raised hand and then, straightening up again, said: "It is a special pleasure for me to be the first to wish you happiness. May the union that has been made today fulfil all your wishes." Then he also extended his hand to Hecht for a fleeting touch and said at the top:

"Congratulations."

Elisabeth, without paying particular attention to the governor, seemed to be looking for someone in the crowd of guests and replied absentmindedly: "I shall never forget, Your Excellency, that I had the ... honour of receiving ... your first congratulations."

The governor looked at her for a moment the way he would look at a beautiful horse in someone else's stable. As a connoisseur: with admiration and envy. Then he came to his senses, tried to pull in his lower lip a little, which gave his mouth a strange expression - as if he had bitten into something sour - and turned to the bride's parents with a gracious nod. He bowed to the bishop with particular courtesy: "I am pleased to meet you here, Your Episcopal Grace."

"I'm very happy too," said the bishop, smiling authoritatively.

"The secular and spiritual powers have come together here to celebrate the feast of our Lord."

"The whole country looks upon this feast with pride," said the governor, while the bishop nodded. "This general reverence for the head of this family and a special benevolence associated with the

years has only increased, His Majesty, my most gracious Lord, has decided to choose this particular day to bestow a great honour on Mr Thomas Bezug. My dear Mr. Bezug, whom I am pleased to call my friend, you know the circumstances in order to appropriately acknowledge an honour which you owe not only to the warm benevolence of His Majesty, but also to the zealous efforts of your friends" - the governor emphasised this word twice - ". Receive from my hands the Order of St Henry, first class, which His Majesty has deigned to confer on you for your unceasing endeavours to raise industry and, most recently, agriculture."

Bezug took a step back as if he could not contain his surprise and dismay. With a modestly defensive movement, he cast a quick glance around the room to check that he was now in a favourable position to be seen by all. "Your Excellency," he said, when he had satisfied himself that the scene was being followed with interest, "Your Excellency ... I am ... I don't know ... as far as I know, the Order of St Henry, first class, is only conferred on noblemen."

"Certainly," replied the governor with a smile that moved his entire lower jaw; "certainly, don't worry about that, my dear Thomas Freiherr von Bezug. His Majesty has at the same time deigned to raise you to the rank of baron. I hope that you will always prove yourself worthy of this wealth of honours and the grace of our exalted monarch."

In front of the entire assembly, the governor now pinned the diamond-studded cross of the Order of St Henry to the black background of the tailcoat. His head bowed slightly, as if overwhelmed by this honour, he allowed the reference to happen. Then there was a small flurry of surprise and congratulations around him, and when the groups separated again, Bezug signalled to Rudolf Hainx to continue the ceremony with a wave of his hand. Following Hainx's instructions, the mass of guests broke up into an unbroken line, which now

The bride and groom turned to offer their congratulations and, after bowing deeply to the highest dignitaries who had joined them in unison, passed through the floor-to-ceiling double doors into the dining room. This procession of guests lasted almost a whole hour. Elisabeth stood tall and answered all the congratulations with a nod, without speaking. She only broke her silence once, when Adalbert Semilasso approached and wanted to begin: "I also allow ..."

"I know," she interjected, "I know. I want to speak to you later. By the sarcophagus of Queen Omphale."

Hecht, who had endeavoured to thank his acquaintances with a few words and had become quite dull about it, looked up and gazed after Adalbert as long as he was still visible in the crowd that was again gathering at the door.

While Mrs Agathe soon settled into a chair, Bezug held out until the last well-wisher, exchanging a handshake or a word with this or that person and keeping a friendly smile until the end.

After the last of the guests had entered the dining room, the bride's family followed in solemn procession, preceded by the bride and groom, then Mrs Agathe on the governor's arm, with the bishop in eager conversation, and finally the two old women with their cousin in the middle, who had finally become completely silent and no longer even dared to whisper.

There was a tremendous buzz in the banqueting hall, a buzz of voices, which was now flooded by the entrance of the guests at Wartburg Castle as the guests entered. The trumpets broke out brightly and crackling just above the entrance door, from the balcony on which the orchestra had found its place high above the assembly.

As Bezug had anticipated, all the guests who had been invited because of their importance in the fields of art and science gathered in front of the antique buffet. The historians and archaeologists were no less keen to partake of the culinary delights

Trimalchios as the painters and poets. At first there was a small storm, but then the swarms of strikers broke up into individual groups, which spread out at the tables with the conquered bowls.

"Look at the Schönbrecher," said the Munich painter Dibian, who had specialised in painting cattle with great success, to his friend, the novelist Harthausen, "just look at him, he fills himself with antique food so that the spirit in his antique dramas comes out better."

Harthausen glanced at the next table, where Schönbrecher was already telling one of the servants what else he wanted: "If you could bottle the ancient spirit like the Falernian, it would be good for him."

But when Schönbrecher approached their table during the break after the next dish to greet them, they graciously invited him to take the empty seat between them.

"Thank you, gentlemen; I've found a mate over there that I don't want to leave."

"Who is the gentleman sitting there with you?"

"Doctor Störner, the critic from the 'Neues Morgenblatt'."

"So why don't you *i n v i t e* him to come here too, we'll move in together, won't we ... we'll find room." The two sculptors who were still sitting at the table nodded to the

Sign of consent.

"I bet," said Dibian, "the two blokes you're sitting there with are professors or something. Come here, you're more among yourselves, so to speak."

While Schönbrecher was delivering the invitation to the critic, Harthausen found time to remark to his friend that Schönbrecher was a low-down doer. "So please, how he wags his tail in front of the Störner. The Schönbrecher understands the hype. The Störner has torn him apart every time so far. Every time, he rides in front of him like blessed Sophocles. The Störner is as malicious as a monkey."

With a slight bow, Störner and Schönbrecher took their leave of their two table companions.

"Thank God," said Professor Hartl when the two of them had taken a seat at the next table, "these people don't really understand what they're being served here."

Professor Zugmeyer nodded: "Certainly, dear colleague. But they have the conceit that they understand everything better than we do. Intuition! Yes - they rely on intuition when they write something that really only concerns us. That's a good basis. Intuition! Ridiculous! Source research is the only thing."

"When people write something, they read three or four books and then they get started. Of course, these books are teeming with anachronisms, archaeological monstrosities."

In front of the Corinthian ore donkey, which carried white and black olives in two transverse sacks on its back, Professor of Art History Albert Schreier and Professor of the Romanesque Seminary Ernst von Kramarcz got into a debate. A few other gentlemen next to them were admiring the other showpieces on the buffet: the hare with wings that made it resemble Pegasus. The roasted pig, with small piglets made of the finest lacquer hanging from its breasts.

"Yes," said Schreier, "this reference does more for science than our Ministry of Education. These excavations in Samarkand alone cost a lot of money. But the successes ... the successes."

"Tell me," asked Kramarcz, "who is actually the head of this work?"

"The head and the hands are all young people without names. He paid little attention to merit when making his selection. But he was lucky."

"Of course ... luck. But above all patience. And he didn't skimp on the money. That's the thing. When the ministry sends someone somewhere, they say: you can stay away for so long, so much money

you may spend. But Bezug tells his people: "You must find; search as long as you want. It doesn't matter how much money you spend."

"Certainly!" And Kramarcz lifted the wooden hen, which was sitting brooding on her nest, and took out one of the baked peacock eggs. Cutting it with one of the long-handled Greek table knives, he continued hesitantly: "Say ... couldn't you ... I think you should be better off financially, too. Wouldn't you? I wonder if there might not be a place in the small private academy he runs in Rome.
..."

The professor interrupted himself; for he saw from the other's hostile look that he had gone too far in his confidence, that he had got an opponent at that moment.

"Oh, you could ..." Schreier said after a while of mistrustful lurking. "... Maybe ... although I don't know ..."

"I'm just saying..." Kramarcz interjected and began to eat his peacock egg with feigned indifference.

"And so that we may not miss the food for the spirit as well as the bread for the body," said Harthausen, "has laid out verses for us ... verses ... oh!" He lifted up a pink-coloured sheet with a few lines printed on it.

"But his buffet is better than the verses," said Störner and had one of the servants hand him a bowl of stuffed suckling pig meat.

"In front of each seat is a sheet like this and ... gentlemen ... each with the poet's autograph."

"What's his name?"

"Adalbert Semilasso. The name is hard to read ... the guy writes as if he hasn't even known this art for that long."

"Others have been able to write for a very long time - and yet it's hard to read," said Störner with a glance at Harthausen.

"Oh, please ... my writing ... the typesetters congratulate themselves when they get to read a manuscript of mine."

"I don't mean the typesetters ... I mean the audience."

"They'll never get their hands on my manuscripts, only the finished books."

"And they're hard to read."

Dibian, the cattle painter and the two sculptors had a great time chatting. It was actually uncomfortable, the six of them round the small table, and they had wanted to leave as soon as Störner arrived. But now they stayed. It did them good to watch the little cockfights in the other guild, these malicious attacks and side-swipes, all with the appearance of amiable coarseness, so that the one being attacked could never seriously retort.

Schönbrecher, who had often had a Roman drinking bowl filled with red wine, was in too good a mood to take part in the banter. He drank, set the bowl down, placed it in front of him and then inspected the chiselled work of the precious vessel. In a rocky landscape with individual palm trees, which could be seen in a strange perspective, as if from above, from a bird's eye view, a wild bull was raging. With horns lowered and tail outstretched, it ran towards an invisible enemy, throwing up sand and stones behind it. The coarse skin was taut with long folds of muscle and the eyes were menacing beneath tufts of wild hair. On the other side, the bull was depicted bound. Trembling in every limb, thrown to the ground and tied to a mighty palm tree with a rope, he was seized at the moment when blind rage gave way to contemplation.

"A beautiful piece of work," Schönbrecher said to the sculptor sitting next to him. As he did so, he opened his waistcoat, as he had a tendency to get very strong recently and was longing for more space after a heavy meal.

Hauser picked up the bowl and looked at it devoutly from all sides. Then he nodded: "Very nice ... and that motif of bondage again."

"What do you mean...?"

"I and my colleague have noticed that this motif recurs frequently here. Just look at all these reliefs on these

Tables and at the buffet; you will find something of the kind at most of them, often enough these figures are bound slaves; over there you have a triumphal procession of Alexander the Great, in which prisoners are travelling along. Do you want more? Earlier we saw the famous sarcophagus of Queen Omphale, which comes from the excavations in Samarkand. Well - that too is reminiscent of a bondage. Isn't it?"

"A pleasant bondage."

"And up there, the ceiling painting: a wedding in Olympus, isn't it?"

"It fits in with today's celebration."

"It is a bondage by marriage bonds. And see the ceiling and the walls all around are covered with tendrils, ornaments that take up the motif of the chain links, as if in jest, seemingly ... but with a serious meaning."

Dibian laughed: "Freunderl, so you know ... I really like your bronzes, but your philosophy is a bit of a misnomer."

But Störner had listened attentively: "And what do you think is the point of all these bondage motifs?"

"I mean, the reference says - not very clearly, but in such a way that finer ears can already hear it -: You are all in my hands! As you are gathered here, I hold you and put my chains on you! I must say that I feel like I am caught in a web. In a net that is still very wide, but which could be tightened one day."

"I just don't have fine ears," said Dibian and, as always when he'd had a drink, made a face of feeling hurt, "I just can't hear anything."

"And even if it is," Harthausen made a grand gesture, "the yoke is sweet and the burden light."

Somewhere, in the middle of the stream, Polydor had fished up a slime ball.

There was an immense crowd in the hall, and the two made slow progress, as they were stopped at every turn by people who, uncertain whether they were also in the general

The guests who had passed in front of him wanted to memorise them. Bezug had questions to answer, handshakes to give and words of honour to offer. The noisier and more airy the groups at the tables became, the stronger the flow of guests in the alleyways became. People walked back and forth, sought out their acquaintances, chatted to them standing up if they couldn't get a seat at their table, and then pushed on again. Despite the size and height of the room, the noise and smell of the food seemed to hover like a cloud over the heads of those gathered, and when servants arrived with cigars, the blue, sweet-smelling clouds of smoke also rose. These clouds became entangled between the golden branches of the alabaster trees, drifting to and fro, following the movement of the air, and from the garden, where some of the guests had already taken refuge, the hall seemed to be filled with a bluish, luminous mist.

After overcoming a few obstacles, the master of the house and his slime ball arrived in the centre of the banqueting hall, where the table for the family was located. It was a magnificent piece from Marie Antoinette's collection with an inlaid ebony top. Just as Bezug approached with his violet companion, Elisabeth rose and, after a brief greeting, walked across the hall. The bridegroom followed her immediately. Mrs Agathe sat between the bishop and the governor, and spoke animatedly to the former; while he listened to her attentively, he played with the glass, which had the shape of a small ship, and placed it on the ivory ornaments of the table-top, cutting various circles out of the base with his broad foot.

"Here I bring a good friend," said Bezug, "Polydor Schleimkugel, whom I take the honour of introducing to His Episcopal Grace and His Excellency."

The bishop looked up and smiled kindly at the pious man, who was becoming even more purple. After a moment's thought, he said: "Mr Polydor S l i m e b a l l ! Are you the well-known Polydor S l i m e b a l l , the

was recently honoured by His Holiness with a medal?"

The governor then put on his monocle while his lower jaw moved forward. Slimeball had bowed so low that he found it difficult to straighten up again. "His Holiness has honoured me with undeserved mercy..."

"If I'm not mistaken, you are a producer of holy images and pilgrimage souvenirs?"

"Whatever human labour is involved in these things is done by me. The most important thing, of course, is the blessing of the Holy Church. And here I must mention that in this respect I am far more careful than the competition -"

Alerted by a conspicuous clearing of the throat, Slimeball looked at the governor. His Excellency was looking at him through a glittering glass and now drew in his drooping, bulging lower lip so that it looked as if he had bitten into something sour.

"... than the competition," said Slimeball, only now startled as he uttered the word for the second time. He continued hastily: "... I mean ... very carefully ... very conscientiously. I mean ... with me all things ... are really consecrated on the spot, which with others ... with others ..." He was hopelessly stuck, and his enormous body was so bloated at that moment that it felt as if it must burst.

Under a benevolent smile, the bishop hid his amusement at this grocer's embarrassment with consecrated things. After a while, he deftly fished him out of his quagmire. "Your profession, my dear Mr Slimeball, gives you an excellent opportunity to get to know all the places of grace."

"Certainly." Now the slime ball was up to speed again: "I know all the places of grace in European Christendom. My pictures are created on the spot from original photographs and the souvenirs ..."

"Well, surely you know the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary in Schönau, right here in the neighbourhood ..."

"No - no," said the slime ball with some consternation, "... in Schönau ... no ... I don't know that."

"Oh certainly," said the bishop, "how could you not know it? Just think about it. It wasn't long ago, of course. Two years, perhaps. But the circumstances in which it was found are truly marvellous, quite marvellous! Oh, you must have been there, just think about it!" With a look that was both a kind invitation and a command, the bishop submitted Slimeball to his will.

The pious man finally understood what His Episcopal Grace wanted from him. With his head bowed, he stood there for a while, as if lost in thought. Then he touched his forehead: "Oh yes ... well ... of course. I remember now. Of course ... I was there about a year ago. But ... Bishop's Grace forgive me ... when one has seen so many such ... I mean holy places, it can happen that one or the other in memory, so to speak ... but now I remember."

"Not true! The little church is so pretty on its hill. And if you have been there, you will probably have enquired about the history of this place of pilgrimage: About the apparition that was sent from heaven to the Virgin Rosa Hüber from Schönau and about the truly miraculous healings that have been experienced there. People talk about it from far and wide."

"Yes ... yes ... really miraculous healings. I've been told about them."

With a quick glance at the governor, who was sitting there with a flashing monocle and drooping lower lip, the bishop continued: "If your memory of this place of grace has slipped away, you shouldn't be surprised. You don't hear much about it in the outside world. And yet the whole Catholic Church should make use of the extremely effective means of grace of this place. But so many difficulties were created right at the beginning and so many obstacles were placed in our way ..."

The governor cleared his throat, dropped the monocle and wiped the glass a few times with a blue silk handkerchief as he began to draw in his lower lip again.

"Oh ... you shouldn't think ..." said Slimeball regretfully.

"But that's the way it is. My honoured friend, His Excellency, the Lord Governor, has let me down in this case."

Surprised by this attack, His Excellency dropped the monocle completely so that it clinked against the edge of the table. Everyone turned towards him: Mrs Agathe with an expression of reproach, the bishop with a suave smile and a ball of slime, a little worried about how things would develop. Bezug, who had spoken a few words to his relatives sitting at the other end of the table, now turned away from them and gave their attention to what was going on up there.

After the governor had overcome a small coughing fit, he resumed cleaning his monocle and said:

"I reciprocate your feelings, dear Count, and your friendship is extremely valuable to me. But duty, my dear friend, the laws that govern us ... well, we have our rules too. We can't do as we please."

"Yes ... yes," smiled the bishop, "secular power is always at odds with spiritual power, even though the two should go hand in hand for the good of the people. I know that you basically think as I do, and that only certain circumstances prevent you from giving me proof of this."

The governor hastened to reply. "Certainly," he said, "Certainly! You're right. You could do or not do some things that you're not allowed to do now, because these newspapers are always ready to make an affair out of it."

"Yes, the newspapers. I'm not a dark horse, as anyone who knows me will confirm. But you shouldn't withhold the means of mercy from the people. But His Excellency is right, these newspapers are always after it. And the catchphrase of the Dark Ages sits easily in the journalists' pens. By the way ...

If there was a little goodwill on the part of the worldly power, a lot could be done. At least here and there. Here, for example, where it is simply a matter of drawing the attention of the Catholic world to this place of grace with some vigour."

"You don't know, dear Count, what trouble the newspapers can cause."

"But it wouldn't be impossible ... I just remembered that our dear friend Bezug maintains excellent relations with the leading newspapers. Isn't that right?"

Bezug said calmly: "I flatter myself that many of the leaves are coming towards me with particular favour."

"Quite rightly, my dear friend; you have been recognised as an important man, and it would only be irresponsible narrow-mindedness not to admit it. So wouldn't it be possible for you to use your influence on the papers in our favour?"

"If I know that I am doing Your Episcopal Grace a service, I will gladly try everything in my power."

"Well then, Your Excellency! If the baron vouches for it, the matter is as good as certain. It is only a question of cancelling certain restrictive regulations, is it not? Or rather, that they are not enforced, because we want to avoid any fuss. So will you give us a free hand, Your Excellency?"

The governor no longer resisted: "Certainly. If I'm sure of the newspapers," he said with a glance at the reference.

"It's you, Your Excellency!" said Bezug.

The bishop turned to Slimeball with a smile: "You see, dear Slimeball, you have unexpectedly witnessed how hard the Church has to fight today for things that would have been taken for granted in the past. I hope that this will not make you faint-hearted and that you will continue to put your proven strength at the disposal of the oppressed Church."

"Bishop's Grace, His Holiness has honoured me with a medal. I consider myself thereby consecrated to battle."

"Very good, my dear friend. Hold on to this brave attitude. After this conversation, you will be interested in visiting the pilgrimage church in Schönau and the miraculous image of the Mother of God once again. Perhaps you will then decide to help us in your field. I am sure that memories and pictures of this place of grace will soon be spread far and wide."

"I am burning with impatience to make the means of grace of the holy place accessible to the whole of Catholic Christendom."

The bishop nodded to Schleimkugel in a friendly manner. Then he said to the reference: "Do you know, dear baron, how we came to this topic? Your wife complained to me about her suffering and expressed her wish to u t i l i s e the power of the miraculous image."

"I am counting on salvation from my suffering," said Mrs Agathe, looking up at the ceiling of the hall.

"You can be sure to find redemption."

When Bezug and Schleimkugel recommended themselves to go and see the manufacturer's wife and were at a sufficient distance from the bishop's table, Schleimkugel grabbed the bishop's hand and squeezed it with his sweaty paw: "Thank you, dear baron."

"A blessed haul, eh?" said Bezug. "I wish I had more guys like you or the bishop on my staff." -

There were relatively few women among those invited. As a rumour of the immense splendour of the feast had spread rapidly through the town, the women who would have been admitted to it were in the most serious conflict between vanity and curiosity. Curiosity drew them powerfully to the feast, of which the most incredible things were told; vanity whispered to them that it was unseemly to attend such a splendid feast in the scanty rags they called their own. How would one look in the midst of such splendid toilets? Like a Cinderella. Oh no, you were too good for that. One could not do that to one's inner man, that he should be set back for the sake of the outer.

became. Nevertheless, it was mortifying to have to stay away from this festival, and it was outrageous to have to exclude oneself because of the frugality one was forced to impose on oneself. The inner conflicts turned into domestic battles; after all, it was only for the husband's sake that so little attention was paid to his own toilets. And now: the husband put on a white shirt and tails and left, while you could stay at home with the awareness of domestic virtues. As if this awareness would have been any consolation in such a case. These thoughts were reinforced when the rumour spread that Her Excellency the Governor had also cancelled. Of course, it was added that Her Excellency was ill, but that was probably only a pretext. She herself, even Her Excellency, was thus unable to pass with any luck the unheard-of luxury of the reference. The intimidated no longer believed the persistent assurance that Her Excellency's illness was no pretext.

And so it was that only a select group of women came together here. A selection of those women whose curiosity was stronger than their vanity, for whom it was less important to be seen than to see. They were happy to stand back, if only they were allowed to be there and take in all the splendour of the festival with hungry eyes. There were also a few women among them who were inclined to the old-fashioned view that a truly beautiful woman did not need the splendour of the toilet. And finally, there were those who were aware of their superior spirit and placed wisdom above beauty and toilets. After all, all these women had something in common, a kinship that they would never have admitted, but which now, as the elective affinities began to take effect in the confusion of the guests, united them into a large group. Bezug had greeted them immediately after they entered the banquetting hall and asked them not to withdraw from the gentlemen. He had particularly counted on their participation, for what would the most cheerful party be without the revitalising influences of beautiful women. He addressed these words, which were intended for everyone, especially to

the beautiful wife of Professor Hartl, sinking his gaze into the plunging bosom of her dress. The Professor then made a formal curtsey, the grand bow she had rehearsed when she and her husband were to be received by His Excellency, the governor. And she thanked him with the few words available to her in her excitement. When he had gone, with the expression of lively regret that he was not permitted to devote himself longer exclusively to the ladies, the beautiful women crowded round the professor, while she stood smiling in a regal attitude in the midst of the swarm, a mortal favoured by Jupiter. Behind her back, however, a coalition of the merely curious and the witty was taking place. Did the good Professor Hartl have any idea? It had been rumoured that Bezug had recently held many conferences with the professor. Hartl had been called in as artistic advisor for this festival. Of course - it was just strange that Bezug had usually sought his advice when Hartl was not at home. And one of the ladies remembered that Hartl had spoken of having to go on a study trip to Asia Minor on behalf of Bezug in the near future. They smiled.

This caused the first rift in the group of women. But they were still in the centre of the hall, not far from the table where the main characters of the party were sitting, and the mood of the party was not yet at the point where mixing with the male guests would have been essential.

One of the beautiful women, the wife of the painter Dibian, who was wearing a reform dress designed by her husband with a lot of decorum, even though she had only been a simple model with an unblemished past, was the first to sit down at one of the tables and pick up a pink-coloured sheet with Adalbert's verses. "No - look how pretty it is. Really lovely!" she said after she had finished reading .

The pink-coloured leaves rustled in the women's hands.
Delightful! Simply heavenly! It was too sweet!

"Please, how she's acting," said the critic Störner's wife to Mrs Harthausen. "Do you find anything special about these verses?"

Mrs Harthausen, who had herself published a volume of poems entitled "Purpurflammen" (Purple Flames) and did not know whether she should count herself more among the beautiful or the witty women (she had added her picture to the volume in order to have an effect on both lines), hesitated for a while. If she liked the verses, she was more likely to be counted among the beautiful women who enjoyed Adalbert's verses. If she rejected the verses, her sharp judgement might be considered remarkable as that of a witty woman. The beautiful women had recently experienced a triumph. That would have been a reason to decide in their favour, but besides that, she was tormented by the natural envy of the one who was left behind. Why had Bezug forced the verses of this stranger on the guests? Was there no other lyrical poet in Germany? Her publisher would certainly have been happy to allow ... She decided on a compromise: "Oh ..." she said, "the rhythm is abominable, so choppy and unmelodic ..., but I do find individual beauties."

The table with the Bezugs family and the guests of honour continued to be the centre of attention for all the ladies; while they spoke to one side, they did not fail to follow the state of affairs at this table with quick glances to that side. Mrs Störner laughed as Bezug pushed her way through with the slime ball:

"Just look! Cover and ... behind him ... what an adventure! ... a purple monster!"

Mrs Hartl, who had only heard the reference name and the last words, made some kind of connection between the two and turned indignantly towards the speaker. At this turn, her splendid neck came into its own. Harthausen realised this with great pleasure. Mrs Störner was startled by this look, as if she had really committed an insult to her majesty, and it was only when Mrs Hartl had turned round again that she recovered with a laugh: "Oh dear, now I've got myself a rebuke."

Elisabeth got up and left the table over there. She walked across the room, her eyes fixed straight ahead, as if she saw no one, and all the efforts of some young ladies to show that they were acquainted with her were in vain. A long cream-coloured silk train swished behind her. She made no effort to take up the train, letting her beautiful pale arms hang down long, and it was only when she could go no further, at a point where people were crowding round a servant carrying a tray, that she reached into the folds of the dress with an impatient movement, pushed her shimmering pale shoulders forward and made her way until they recognised her and backed away full of respect.

The wife of the journalist Herold, one of those women who were neither beautiful nor witty, but merely curious, had gathered some young girls around her. As she could not expect much else from this party, she amused herself with the respect that young girls are supposed to show to married women.

"She's arrogant," said the mayor's daughter. "Just look, Frieda, how she's showing off."

"Yes, she pretends we're all air, doesn't she," replied Frieda, Professor Schreier's daughter.

"It's outrageous!"

Something similar was observed around Mrs Hartl. "Now ... then ... that's too stupid ... it's not the money alone that does it," said Mrs Dibian, who never minced her words.

"She also knows too well that she is beautiful," Schönbrecher agreed, to please Mrs Dibian.

"Jesus Christ, that's her too. Children, you don't understand anything about that." The painter Dibian was very excited. "That's right. You mustn't believe it, because I only paint cattle, so I have no eyes for women. I started out painting portraits and nudes and things like that..."

Störner, who had joined the group, whispered something into the ear of the free-spirited daughter of Reichstag deputy Bräunlich, who suddenly blushed ...

"So my ambition went there too. But the cattle were more profitable, but from back then I knew a thing or two about women. You can take my word for it."

"Anyway," said Schönbrecher, lighting one of his cigars, "this pike doesn't have the right understanding for his precious bride."

All the men agreed on this, while the women claimed that you don't have to be an artist to have sympathy for women."

"Look, he's already behind her," said Mrs Dibian, pointing with her fan at Hecht, who was now also walking across the hall. "It seems to me he's afraid for her..."

"Perhaps he's not afraid without reason," said Doctor Störner and then continued talking in a whisper to the free-spirited daughter of the deputy Bränlich.

Hecht had followed his bride and met her at the sarcophagus of Queen Omphale in conversation with Rudolf Hainx. This sarcophagus came from the excavations in Samarkand and had once encased the body of some Mashtian queen. It was named after the relief on the front, which depicted the humiliation of Heracles on Omphale's distaff. The clothing of Omphale and her wives and the fur of Heracles still showed clear traces of the painting. Flesh tones had also been applied, and the Omphale's face shone strangely fresh with red lips and black lines above and below the eyes. The queen's mummy was taken to a museum on the island in the Adriatic, but the sarcophagus was given to his daughter, who had expressed a wish to own it. She kept antique musical instruments and a collection of erotic amulets in it. On a sudden whim, she had it brought down here for the festival. It now stood as a table among other tables behind a wall of flowering palm trees. People admired it, walked round it, looked at it from all sides, and a myriad of learned, unaesthetic conversations took place in its green alcove. Serious and bold hypotheses about the origin of the

sarcophagus had been erected and how it had come to Samarkand. One of the most eminent archaeologists assumed a highly developed local art, while the majority were inclined to the view that we were dealing with an extreme offshoot, a more accidental occurrence of Asia Minor art. But no matter how eagerly the significance of the sarcophagus was debated, nobody dared to use it as a table. After all, this magnificent piece was nothing more than a coffin, and it was considered bizarre that Elisabeth should expect her guests to dine on a coffin. It was only when the atmosphere had become noisier that Hauser and his friend had retreated here and had a small basket of Pommery placed next to the sarcophagus.

"Drinking champagne on the remains of a deceased queen ... so to speak ... you can't have that every day," said Hauser.

"Drink, Omphale," said Adamowicz and put his glass to the red lips of the queen, who watched Heracles' work with a victorious smile.

They were both a little tipsy and behaved with a kind of lustful irreverence, even though they were more aware than anyone else of the imperishable beauty of this work, and even though the shadows of transience that lay around the marble coffin were clearer to them than to anyone else. But they didn't want to let it show and emphasised the superiority of life over death with wild exuberance. Hauser claimed that he was far greater than Praxiteles, for the latter was only a name, and he could drink champagne, and if he pleased, he could destroy the immortal works of Praxiteles with turpentine, tar, iron paint and other ingredients. Adamowicz then asked his friend to drink a toast to Michelangelo's health. And as he was a lover of strange stories, he told Hauser that Michelangelo had been in his workshop the day before yesterday and had patted him on the back with satisfaction. But he had spat out indignantly in front of a bust that Adamowicz had been given by his former teacher, Professor Schlägl. Then he had read him a new sonnet, ordered a greeting from Dante - he said.

Adamowicz had made a bust of Dante - and had disappeared. Hauser thought it was quite all right that Michelangelo had spat out in front of the bust of Professor Schlägl. "Oh," he exclaimed, stretching and wiping his damp forehead, "when you've had a bit of champagne, how the rooms expand!"

"So you no longer feel bound by reference?"

"No ... I don't know ... it was a damned feeling ... unpleasant! You can believe me. But now I'm free ..."

But they were soon to doubt their freedom again, for just as they were about to order the second basket of Pommery, Rudolf Hainx came and asked them to vacate the alcove. Adamowicz, who had put himself in a very courageous mood, wanted to resist, but Hauser immediately felt his earlier anxiety in front of this messenger and held his friend back.

When Elisabeth came to Queen Omphale's sarcophagus, she met Rudolf Hainx, who was waiting for her half-sitting on the coffin.

"Where is Adalbert Semilasso?" asked Elisabeth.

"I don't know. Somewhere in the garden, in the hall or maybe hidden in his room."

"Didn't you tell him to come straight away?"

"I told him."

"And why didn't you bring him with you straight away?"

Rudolf Hainx had slid down from the edge of the sarcophagus and was now standing in front of Elisabeth with threatening eyes, holding the joint of her right hand tightly: "Listen ... you ..." he said, "I no longer feel like watching you two. Shall I perhaps c a r r y your messages to him?"

"You will do as I command."

"I'm not going to do that. I'm not your servant. The hell ... you want me to mediate? You're mine ... I have no desire to share you w i t h anyone else."

"And my bridegroom; surely you must tolerate that."

"Oh no, him! I know you'll never give in to him. But Adalbert! As long as you were behaving like a fish pining for a tenor player, I watched. But now that you're in heat ... That's enough ..."

"You are impertinent ... what do you think of me?" Elisabeth tore herself away from Hainx with such a swift movement that his hand flew to the edge of the sarcophagus.

"Don't tempt me," whispered Hainx, his face contorted.

Elisabeth stretched out her flexible body to look him in the eye. Her eyes were only the width of two hands away from his. He trembled at the abyss he was looking into. Hatred and anger blazed in flames, and deep down behind this blazing curtain, like a beautiful, iridescent giant snake, lay the lust that this woman was able to give.

"Do you think," he continued, "that I will renounce? I have enjoyed your body, and I will not give to another what was mine."

Elisabeth hissed: "Servant ... servant ... wretched servant."

"It happens that servants rebel against their masters. I am rebelling against you. I want to have you."

Pressurised by his impetuosity, Elisabeth backed away. But Hainx blocked her exit from the green alcove. Now he managed to change places and Elisabeth was leaning against the marble coffin, while he stood panting in front of her, his sinews tense, as if he wanted to pounce on her now, at this very moment, and rape her.

"You won't touch me with another finger," she said, now calm again.

"He won't touch you. He won't! He doesn't want you at all ... do you hear ... he detests you ... you are no more to him than some prostitute from the street, than the countess who always cries and whines because he spurns her."

Elisabeth reached back, grabbed a half-full champagne goblet and smashed it on Hainx's face. The wine ran down his mouth and cheeks while his features slowly froze. All at once he was

had come to his senses and recognised his mistress, against whom he had wanted to rebel. What madness? What had happened to him? How could he have dared to do this? She penetrated him completely with clear, cold rays, took possession of his trembling and once again fearful soul and robbed it of all strength of will. She had struck at him with a marvellous, wild predatory paw and this blow had made him realise that he was in her power. He backed timidly away from her to the green wall of the alcove, lowered his head and remained silent while Elisabeth looked at him with a twitching face. A small muscle on her bare neck jumped up and down. Then she laughed contemptuously and reached into her soft, fragrant hair with both hands to pin up a comb that had come loose. From outside, someone bumped against the little trees on the alcove wall, making the hard, dark green leaves rustle. Under the necessity of starting a covering, indifferent conversation, Hainx moved close to Elisabeth again, and, thinking of nothing better, began to talk of Queen Omphale's sarcophagus, against the edge of which Elisabeth stood leaning, while she made ponderous replies with a forlorn and contemptuous smile.

A few minutes later, Hecht arrived. Acquaintances had stopped him on his way and renewed their congratulations, while he stepped from one foot to the other and looked over to the corner of the hall where Elisabeth had been lost behind a green wall. As it was felt that to please the bridegroom one must sing the praises of the bride's father and bride, Hecht heard endless hymns to the reference and to Elisabeth. Until at last he impatiently tore himself away and disappeared from the astonished crowd.

Hainx experienced the triumph that Elisabeth, as soon as Hecht had joined them, turned her mocking hostilities against him. Now he approached his mistress again as if in secret alliance and rejoiced in the arrows aimed at the unfortunate bridegroom. Hecht hardly replied, he was exhausted and unable to take up a fight with Elisabeth, who, fresh and

brilliantly armed, did not spare her opponent. After Elisabeth had completely defeated the enemy in the manner of cruel Amazons, she made him a prisoner of war and sent him out with the message to Adalbert Semilasso that he should come here immediately. But Adalbert arrived himself, accompanied by a small, beardless man who accompanied his words with animated hand movements. He stepped hesitantly into the alcove and breathed more easily when he saw that Elisabeth was not alone either.

"Look," said Hainx to Hecht, "he's coming himself and bringing the herald of his fame with him."

While Elisabeth replied to Hainx's remark with a mocking twitch of the lips, Herold, the little journalist, bowed to her and brought her hand to his mouth. Then he immediately let loose a great torrent of words: how happy he was to be able to approach her today, and how nice he thought it was to have met her in this place consecrated by art. "Extremely charming ... this meeting ... quite marvellous ... how shall I put it ... composed. The most beautiful woman at the sarcophagus of a queen famous for her beauty ... surrounded by green walls ..."

"And surrounded by a starry wreath of men shining brightly in the sky of spirituality," said Elisabeth, and none of the four men doubted that this was malice directed against him.

Herold recovered first and continued in the same tone as before:

"If I were a poet, this would be a sonnet. A sonnet, I tell you, of enchanting sound. I wouldn't miss it if I had a right to it as your house and court poet."

"Well, Adalbert?" Elisabeth asked hostilely.

Hainx realised, with the subtle scent of the brunet, that things were not going well for Adalbert. Whether something had remained of what Hainx had said earlier, or whether Elisabeth was angry that her conversation with Adalbert had been thwarted, she looked at Adalbert almost threateningly with heavy brows.

The poet, who did not know or disdained the fencing skills and surprising tricks of the conversation, committed a clumsy offence. He tried to divert from a topic that seemed embarrassing to him.

"You asked to speak to me," he said, "what do you want from me?"

After a flash of anger, Elisabeth put on the mask of reflection: "You're right," she said, "I wanted ... I wanted to tell you something ... what? - What, by God! I can't remember ... I've forgotten ... it must have been nothing important ... obviously nothing important."

Now it seemed to Hainx that it was time to strike out against Adalbert. His mistress's mood was favourable and it was easy to send off some malice against the unprotected man. "Our friend Adalbert is all too modest," he said, "he wants to dissuade us from praising him. But his name is on everyone's lips today anyway. Do you know what I heard earlier when I was passing a table? 'Excellent verses by Heine,' said a lady, and when it was pointed out to her that there was another name underneath, she replied that it was now fashionable for the printer to sign his name to artistically executed sheets."

"I know I can't do anything," said Adalbert, looking to the side.

Herold vividly interjected: "No ... no ... that's not right. You are a real poet. And completely natural, unadulterated, so to speak. You're not an artificial patterer. You don't make a heavy wine, but a good and digestible drink."

"Well ... actually ... table wine," said Elisabeth.

"And the beauty is the complete unspoilt nature," Herold continued. "This splendid freedom from all role models. That's what makes our friend so valuable to me. There is not a word that is not born of him. Admittedly, there is still something missing: the formal moment is still little developed. Do you know that he doesn't even know what a sonnet is? We spoke about it earlier. He really doesn't know."

As Adalbert became restless, Herold hastened to add: "That's no disgrace, my dear, it only honours you."

"Certainly," said Rudolf Hainx, "certainly! The form is less important than the content. But -" he continued after a short pause, laughing: "they're actually funny, these poets."

"Weird?"

"Certainly ... as far as the content is concerned. They make every effort to conceal the deeper meaning of all poetry, but the language itself betrays them. All words that can be bound by rhyme are intrinsically related to each other. And even if the poets give the whole line a different twist, the rhyming word restores the original and unalterable relationships. Thus 'need' rhymes irresistibly with 'bread', if not countered by the harsh and inexorable 'commandment'. And the last link in this chain of terms is 'death'."

"An ingenious hypothesis," said Herold, pulling a notebook out of his pocket, "allow me to record it in a few words."

Encouraged by Elisabeth's laughter, Hainx continued, while Adalbert took an agonised step forward as if to ask him to stop: "Why do poets try so hard to deceive us that the closest and most related rhyming word to 'love' is 'instincts'? After all, that's the way it is and only an incorrigible idealist can want to deny it."

Elisabeth said with sparkling eyes, looking cruelly at Adalbert: "Marquis de Sade would use another rhyming word here - 'Blows!'"

"Bravo," said Bezug, who had stepped into the alcove with the slime ball, "I am pleased to see that the essence of poetry is being explored here. Don't let it bother you, Adalbert, it always remains an esoteric thing ... only for the very initiated, for whom it does no harm, and who, although they know about the secret, are always happy to be tricked by you again. I am satisfied with you, Adalbert, and with the applause your verses have met with from the guests."

Then he turned to Herold and said, "And you, my dear friend, will see to it that the outside world hears something of

our poet experiences."

"Of course, of course ... in addition to the report on the festival, in which I mention Mr Semilasso, I will also publish a separate feature article about him."

"Good ... good ... and now, ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to make your way into the garden ... Elisabeth, get ready, the puppet show shall begin immediately ..."

The puppet show, the ape-man and a small experiment on the effect of art

[Table of contents](#)

The guests had left the hall and made their way into the park, where they found themselves, individually or in groups as the mood took them, marvelling at the wonders. The garden had also been completely transformed for the party and all kinds of horticultural artistry astonished the most discerning of guests. The macaroni manufacturer Fratelli from Milan, who had believed that his hanging gardens were unrivalled, told the silk manufacturer Vernier from Lyon that he would destroy his crops, stamp them into the ground and turn them into a racecourse.

A large basin had been dug in the centre of the garden and filled with water. Around this pool, which was almost the size of a lake, ran a colonnade in which an ancient bust stood between two paired columns on a black marble plinth. From the colonnade, marble steps lined with gold ornaments ran down into the fragrant water, and at the foot of the steps were gondolas made of sandalwood and ebony, which made a gentle, gliding sound with every turn of the helm. High above the water level and the colonnade stretched a sphere of opal, through which the already fading daylight filtered in a hundred blurring and blurring colours. The reflection of this mysterious light on the water made its surface appear deeply hollowed out, giving the impression that the gondola was gliding towards a depth that was in a state of fermentation before any separation within fixed boundaries had occurred.

Channels ran out from the basin in all directions, star-shaped, at first wide and between wide lawns, then more and more

The canals became narrower and were encumbered by bushes until they disappeared at the end of the garden, gurgling in wide, dark cave mouths. Along these canals stood all kinds of gems of horticultural art, small temples that emerged from the greenery as if shyly, then again palm groves or groves of cypresses that cast gloomy shadows over the water. With a few strokes of the oars, you could get from a heavy, black pine forest to a place adorned with all the fantasy of a fairy tale. The most peculiar orchids of the greenhouse were clustered there in a bewildering wilderness, the hideous and the delightful in glaring juxtaposition as in dreams. Transverse and seemingly haphazard channels connected the symmetrical radiations of the central basin and brought randomness and disorder to the strict ground lines. There were no more paths in this completely transformed park. In their place were the canals, and hundreds of barges were ready for the guests. Once we had overcome our initial, somewhat timid amazement, we gladly found our way into this unfamiliar world of water. Each barge was accompanied by a ferryman dressed in some kind of costume, and when the acquaintances in the passing barges greeted each other, the ferrymen also shouted the greetings of different peoples to each other.

The stage for the puppet show had been erected on the square in front of the greenhouse. Here, a wide, amphitheatrically rising structure had been created in a semicircle, in the centre of which, leaning against a wall overgrown with roses, was the stage. "By our friend, the court poet Adalbert Semilasso," said Doctor Störner, as he read the title and characters of the play from the slip of paper printed on silk.

"Hell, not just a lyricist, but a playwright as well," Harthausen replied and laughed as if he didn't care about Adalbert at all.

"I hope he doesn't spoil your business with novels."

The barges came from all sides to the theatre platform and deposited their guests, who were then taken up the stairs of the theatre by the servants.

amphitheatre showed the way.

"Can I watch this game without harm to my salvation?" said the bishop, smiling and leaning towards Mrs Bezug.

"You can do it; it's from our gentle Adalbert."

Adalbert's puppet show was staged in front of an attentive audience. The stage was very small, far too small for the large amphitheatrical auditorium, so that the characters, who also deceptively imitated the angular, sudden movements of puppets, really did look like marionettes. They walked and sat and stood in a space that was only a few steps long and a few steps deep. While the vast, wrinkle-free night sky hung over the auditorium, in which the first stars were now beginning to flicker, very timidly, as if trembling before the blackness of the world below and the threatening outlines of the towering treetops, the tiny stage was bathed in the brightest light. The bright costumes of the characters with their screaming, clashing colours matched the puppet-like movements and the words spoken by a reader hidden behind the scenery. Because the actors were freed from the words, they were able to devote their full attention to the gestures and constantly devise new and strange gestures, movements that seemed to spring from the words and accompany them, but were actually alien to them, just as the inanimate is always alien to the living. They seemed lifeless, soulless, completely subject to an alien will, mechanical actors who were not even aware of their motor drives. They succeeded in capturing this illusion so perfectly that some naive spectators seriously believed that they had merely imitated the masks of well-known actors and placed them on puppet bodies of the highest mechanical perfection. They kept their mouths closed, and only the comic figure flapped them up and down soundlessly, just as puppets are made to imitate the movements of speech. The only female character in the play was **p l a y e d** by Elisabeth. She had the

She was treated to a rococo costume in the style of Kolombinen and showed off her beautiful legs up to the knee without a care in the world.

"I find that very inappropriate," said Professor Hartl to her neighbour, the wife of the painter Dibian, who was looking at Elisabeth's figure with the critical eyes of the former model.

"Oh, she has many talents," whispered Doctor Störner very close to the professor's naked shoulder, taking in the scent of her skin with the rapture of a gourmet.

"Just look at your ankle, that's a mistake," said Mrs Dibian, "That's a big mistake. The ankle is too thick; my husband always says that a woman with a thick ankle ..."

Harthausen, who was sitting one row down, turned round and put his finger over his mouth with a smile.

Adalbert had taken the material for his puppet show from a collection of old German fairy tales that had been published in 1594 with the privilege of the Elector of Mainz. Elisabeth herself had selected the volume from the library, had examined the sometimes very coarse and bluntly presented pieces in the collection for their suitability and had finally labelled one of them and sent it to Adalbert in his solitude with the commission to make a puppet show out of this material. Adalbert went about his work with reluctance, and it was only his indifference, which made him not favour one material over another, that enabled him to complete his task. The game was essentially the same as a hundred similar games. Adalbert's work had been finalised, and it was only a matter of devising the dramatic situations and writing the verses. The play was about a merchant in Leipzig whose wife cheats on him with a student. The neighbours warn the cuckold, and one evening he returns unexpectedly from a trip to catch his wife with her lover. With the help of the city soldiers, the student is arrested and imprisoned. But the university asserts its rights and demands the criminal's extradition. Now it comes to a trial before the academic senate. The cunning of the student, the graceful

The wife's impertinence and the husband's simple-minded awkwardness contrast amusingly with each other in front of a court of foolish and conceited judges, while the Pedell is a comic figure who brings the grotesque ornamentation of the joke into the scene. Finally, the husband is deceived anew, convinces himself of the innocence of his wife and the student, makes a declaration of honour to both and takes the student into his house as his wife's lute teacher. At first, Adalbert had put a different end to the game and had the merchant forgiven, but kept the student away from his house with a residual mistrust. Elisabeth, however, had sent his work back to him with the express order to stick to the story as it was found in the old tale. And Adalbert had complied because he didn't really care whether his puppet show turned out this way or that. He had contented himself with eliminating the frivolities of his material and, in the only scene that was able to interest him, the court appearance in which the wife convinces her husband of her innocence, he had conducted the dialogue in a delicate and graceful manner. Here he had given the woman a carefree cheerfulness, a funny way of deceiving herself and others, and had clearly shown how it was possible for someone to finally convince herself of the opposite of the truth through a series of sophisms. All erotic piquancy had been removed, leaving only a labyrinthine psychological entanglement at which one could finally laugh heartily.

But when the game had progressed to this scene, the bishop leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Then he said with his suave smile, which gave each of his jokes the appearance of a concession to those around him: "I think your gentle Adalbert is after my salvation after all!"

Mrs Agathe, who in the aquarium of her thoughtlessness had kept only glittering ornamental fish for comfort and pleasure, suddenly found herself in a turmoil, as if a predatory pike had broken in. "Yes, it's true," she whispered, terrified, "he's going too far."

The whole audience suddenly became agitated, and the men looked down at the small stage in suspense, while the women breathed faster and hotter. Professor Hartl suddenly felt two lips on her bare shoulder, and when she turned round quickly, she looked into the glowing eyes of Doctor Störner, who, leaning over her, seemed to be following the events on the stage. His gaze was threatening and pleading at the same time, and after a second of struggling, Mrs Hartl slowly turned back to the stage, while Störner's lips sank back onto her shoulder. A tremendous excitement seized the audience, and their bodies pressed against each other in awakening desires. "That Semilasso! ... no ... this Semilasso ..." said the banker Rosengarten, not taking his eyes off Elisabeth. "And this woman ... it's actually shameless ... the way she prostitutes herself ..." moaned Slimeball.

Adalbert himself was probably the most surprised of all. He was sitting in **t h e** top row of the rising semicircle, where only a few seats were occupied. Even in the second row from the top, there were only a few spectators, latecomers or those who had shown little interest in the game. So Adalbert could feel relatively safe and follow his play. But the further the action progressed, the less he understood what was actually going on down there. His own play became stranger and stranger to him. It was probably his own words that were being read out in a heavy fall and with an emphasis that happily mimicked the puppeteers; but what was happening was something quite different. Elisabeth seemed to be using the words only to mock them. The processes of the surface were faithfully preserved, in going and coming, meeting and clashing, in everything motoric his precepts were exactly followed; but underneath lay something else, something alien to his intentions, and this emanated from Elisabeth. She had shed all the harmlessness of the cheerful game and let her figure shine with a completely different, dangerous fire. She seemed to glow, a strange kind of doll into which a demon had breathed a life full of ruthless desires.

While she accompanied Adalbert's words with gestures, she gave each of these words a different, subterranean meaning, which nevertheless seemed to be its actual meaning. Without giving the slightest thought to herself, she betrayed her acquaintance with all the mysteries of love, made her body twitch with barely restrained lust, showed a cynical covetousness through small, merely suggestive movements. And all this was all the more dangerous and captivating because she maintained a frivolous grace and never crossed the line of beauty. This wicked art reached its climax in the courtroom scene. Here she played two sides, the repentant wife on the one hand and the prostitute on the other, deceiving on the one hand and promising future love feasts on the other. And all without abandoning the puppet style in which she seemed to have just found unlimited possibilities of representation.

Adalbert sat there and stared, sweat beading on his forehead. What was that? What was that? What had Elisabeth done to his game? He hadn't thought it would be like this. At first he only felt the poet's impotence in the face of the actor, a shameful and annoying feeling. But then he realised that Elisabeth was well aware that she was changing the meaning and intention of his play into the opposite. And he felt that the whole thing served no other purpose than to humiliate him, to show him a dangerous superiority. He realised that Elisabeth was not playing for the audience, but for him, to show him how she could play with him. And this feeling became so tormenting that he jumped up and wanted to shout down that he, the poet, would forbid the continuation of his disgraced play. But at that moment a shadow passed over him, a bat - flying silently, Elisabeth fell stiffly to her knees like a doll in front of her husband, someone in the lower row turned to look at him ... and Adalbert sat down again, unable to object and spellbound as if by a stronger will.

The puppet show was over. A tremendous applause broke out, so that the tops of the night-black trees seemed to be shaken by a storm. The moon had risen and looked into the semicircle of the

theatre, where the audience had jumped onto the rows of seats and kept demanding to see the actors. Elisabeth appeared on the stage with the other actors, now wrapped in a long blue cloak, as if to indicate that she had only changed her appearance for the duration of the play and had now returned from the service of art to the circle of society. The call for the poet arose. They looked for Adalbert, but he was not to be found, and so the actors had to accept double applause.

At last the storm was over, and the crowd of spectators turned back towards the palace, excitedly milling about and still heated by the impressions of this strange and dangerous play. In the throng, the poet Schönbrecher managed to obtain Frieda Schreier's consent to a meeting, a favour he had been seeking in vain for some time. When the first of the guests had set foot on the broad steps leading up to the front of the garden and were looking a little astonished at the silent colonnades and arches lying in the moonlight, which seemed to be expecting no more visitors, they were suddenly dazzled by an abundance of light. The whole palace was suddenly enveloped in a flood of brightness, light cascaded down from the cornice, emphasising all the ornaments, columns and decorative pieces, flowing powerfully and broadly over the lower floors and then fading into the dark park. The staircase shone with a deep green under the feet of the guests, so that the faces of those who entered became so pale that it was as if they were descending from a subterranean realm to the upper world. The alabaster trees that supported the loggia in place of the columns blossomed milky white and golden apples hung between the stylised branches as if in a magic garden. The guests entered the banqueting hall in a new mood, both in a new state of apprehension and receptive to new impressions. Here, the individual tables had been cleared away and replaced by a single long table, at which the master of ceremonies now assigned the seats. The mingling had taken place, the guests had become acquainted with each other, and one could dare to unite them into a single

to bind the masses. They only waited for Bezugs and Elisabeth to appear before starting.

As the two entered the large banqueting hall, the shouts of the guests roared towards them, enveloped them in a noisy wave and carried them to their seats, where Bezug bowed incessantly, while Elisabeth sat there with a cold, regal smile, with looks that seemed to penetrate the callers. People crowded round to congratulate her.

"What a pity that such a talent should be lost to the stage," said Doctor Störner, who had succeeded in having him introduced to Elisabeth. And Schönbrecher, who assumed that the whole world knew his dramas, began a conversation with her about the character of Antigone in his last work, and the painter Dibian asked her to grant him the favour of painting her: "Look, when I look at you like that, I can really forget my cows and oxen, the cattle, the useless ones. It's been a long time since I've painted any people, but I'd like to try again with you. Sacrafix, I'd like to paint a picture." He was so excited that he spoke in dialect even more than usual.

Elisabeth sat at the centre of attention, cool and indifferent, accepting the homage with a politeness that would have been hurtful had the frenzy of her admirers been less. The financiers were also among the swarm surrounding them, but as they had less power of speech, they did not succeed in displacing the art and expert witnesses. Bezug took care of them, engaged them in conversation and tried to compensate for their marginalisation. The flow went from Elisabeth to Adalbert, as if he were the other pole of the chemical effect that set this society in motion. He sat next to Rudolf Hainx at the bottom of the table, pale and wordless, and when people came to congratulate him, he rose with a clumsy bow and said a few irrelevant words. Rudolf Hainx smiled mockingly. He smiled incessantly, so that his face had already taken on the distortions of a grotesque mask. And Adalbert, sensing this smile, did not dare to

neighbour. When he was given a little peace and quiet, he would dwell on the thought that was dominating him. Why had she done that? It had been exactly the same as when she had given his songs a fervour with her singing that was not in them.

Finally, a silver bell signalled the start of the meal. The guests took their seats. The servants began to serve the first course. Now the noise died down a little and people turned their attention to the wonders of the cookery. Bezug entertained the guests of honour with the help of his wife and also drew Behrens, who was seated diagonally opposite, into the conversation. Elisabeth sat next to Hecht at the top of the table, the bishop next to her, while the governor sat next to Hecht; then Mrs Bezug came next to the bishop and the master of the house next to the governor. The bishop began a conversation about puppet shows, recalling Goethe's fondness for this touching and awkward art, which found its most excellent document in the beginning of *Wilhelm Meister*, and told of his Italian journey and the popular puppet shows in Rome, which he had often attended unrecognised. He knew a cardinal in Rome who owned a whole museum of puppets in which he had spent whole days.

They had reached the middle of the meal and it was time for the official toasts to take place. The first, to which the governor gave a special consecration, was for the good of the betrothed. His words had a similar gait to his own, stiff and stilted and leaning back a little, as if her spinal cord was no longer quite healthy. His sentences were carefully creased and had gold trim on either side. After the governor had spoken and the cheers of the guests had died down, the banker Rosengarten from Berlin took the floor and the glass to let the bride's parents and the whole family live in the widest circle of influence. And now came one toast after another, between every two courses of the meal, while the servants silently changed plates and glasses, always a little speech that ended in a toast to someone. When the very solemn and official speeches were over, it was the turn of those speakers who

were noted on Rudolf Hainx's list under the title "cheerful section". This is the kind of table speaker who makes it their duty to keep the guests laughing during their toast. Hainx had briefed his people carefully beforehand and distributed the cheerful topics to them so that no two speakers would be in danger of talking about the same thing. Now he gave them the signal and in well-measured intervals these tried and tested jokers successfully endeavoured to raise the spirits. A writer, a painter, an editor and an actor came one after the other. The last to speak was Professor Schreier, who had a special gift for this kind of speech, a gift that was all the more impressive in view of the fact that he was not considered worthy of it.

"What the hell, is he really talking such nonsense, or is it just me?" Hauser said to his friend Adamowicz. The two of them were already close to tongue-tickling, as they had not let any of the wines that changed with each course pass them by. At last they had become permanently attached to a marvellous Tokay; Adamowicz, who always became sad when he was drunk, said, as Hauser stubbornly repeated his question: "Oh ... what ... In this earthly vale of tears, the nonsense ... the nonsense ... is the blue flower."

After Professor Schreier's speech, a kind of monstrous sugar loaf was rolled into the hall through a wall that suddenly parted in the centre to form a wide opening. Now the sugar loaf stood still and suddenly it was as if it had been shaken apart by an earthquake. The sides developed long cracks and the top collapsed, and before you knew what had happened, you saw a shining white rock in front of you, jagged and cracked, rising to a radiant peak. Nine women were lying on the spikes and protrusions of the rock, instantly recognisable as the nine muses by the attributes attached to them. A spring gushed from the summit, trickling down over the boulders and collecting in a pool below. A youth of the noblest education, the Greek lyre in one arm, made the winged horse drink from the hippocrene. The gentle

The music that played around the picture seemed to come from inside the rock. After a few minutes of amazement and just as the guests were about to burst into loud applause, it suddenly became night, with only the top of the rock glowing like a volcano. Suddenly, glowing spheres emerged from this volcanic glow, rose to the ceiling of the hall and began to circle silently above the heads of the guests. Larger and smaller spheres moving around each other, they seemed to be an image of distant worlds. They moved in silent regularity, and the music became a soft and barely audible whisper, as if it were produced by the spheres' rotations. Above the circling spheres, however, another seed of starry worlds seemed to stand still in the immeasurable distance. Arranged in familiar images, they stood in some relation to the circling worlds. This continued for a while, then two of the stars in the pictures seemed to be moved by some kind of attraction, they left their companions, floated past the circling worlds, lower and lower and finally stopped above the places where Elisabeth and Hecht were sitting. The guests burst into loud shouts. For now the meaning of the intermezzo had become clear: an auspicious prophecy for the bride and groom in the guise of an astrological event.

When the light flooded back, the Musenfelsen and the constellations had disappeared.

And now Bezug stood up, and immediately everything fell silent. He looked round the table as if to see if everyone was there and had turned their attention to him. "My dear friends," he began, "for I may call you that now that I think I have shown you that this house and the landlord are friendly to you ... my dear friends, what you have just seen is more than a mere game to entertain you. It also has a deeper meaning. It is, I would like to say, a symbol of this covenant that is being c e l e b r a t e d here today in your presence ... I mean being made. What you have seen here are the nativities of the two young people, an astrological gimmick that my friend Gruber, a professor at the observatory in Vienna, gave me.

Calculated by favour. One of the greatest mechanical geniuses of modern times, Alexei Nashkovich in Odessa, devised the incredibly complicated devices that set these world systems in motion."

"Well done," shouted Mr Smith, who had now also become a little loud.

"You have seen that these luminous worlds have risen from the summit of Helicon. Well, my dear friends, that is nothing other than my profession of faith. And what do you think I was trying to say? Nothing other than that I believe that our life is connected with art, that it must always be brought together with it and renewed through it, that our life must, so to speak, experience a rebirth through art."

"Bravo," Adamowicz suddenly shouted from the other end of the table, so loudly that everyone looked round for him.

"Yes, the art! It's the art, isn't it! Don't think I'm just a filthy money man. Oh no, you would do me an injustice. I believe that it is not money but art that creates the great values of life. An ideal reality or real ideality, as you like - that is art. It is not a luxury, but a necessity ..."

"And an excellent decoy." That was Hauser. Bezug bent down, searched for the caller with his eyes, and when he found him, he smiled at him and continued:

"Our friend Hauser says: a means of attracting our friends. Of course it is. How many things separate us, professions, world views ... but in this medium we all meet. What has embellished our celebration today and given it its best jewellery? Apart from your own presence, my dear friends, art. I have not yet thanked you for all your warm, serious or joking words. I do so now by promising you something that will benefit you all again: to cultivate art. So I shout: long live art."

There was an endless clamour and the clinking of hundreds of glasses. "What a high, pure, ideal attitude," Schreier, the professor of art history, shouted into the ear of Ernst von Kramarcz, the professor at the Romanesque seminar, who nodded with a face like a philosophically-minded marabou. At least that's how Dibian, who was sitting three seats away, found him.

"Well, my dear friends," continued Bezug, when the noise had died down, "I am ambitious on this point. I have discovered a poet, Mr Adalbert Semilasso, who had the honour of introducing himself to you today in a favourable manner. You will hear something important from him. But that is not enough for me. I have been considering a plan for a long time, which has finally become a firm decision today and is sure to meet with your approval. I have conceived the idea of founding a city, an enormous city somewhere in a blessed region at the foot of the mountains. And this entire city is to be inhabited exclusively by poets, artists and scholars. In order to allow them the freedom to create, all material worries shall be kept away from them. It will be my sole concern to provide them with everything they need, including the superfluous. In return, I ask only that all the works that emerge from this city bear my name on their foreheads ... I mean that they are dedicated to me."

Reference was unable to speak any further. Everything that somehow belonged to art and science jumped up, flailed their arms in the air and shouted ... people hugged each other, shed tears, called out to each other without understanding a word. Bezug saw himself surrounded and was suddenly lifted up in the chair. The actor who had played the betrayed husband in the puppet comedy pushed the others aside, pushed his way through and called up to Bezug, who was swaying on the height of his living throne: "And for actors too ...?" Bezug smiled down at him: "For actors too ..." Then he asked to be let down to earth again. But he had to put up with being enthroned on the shoulders of the excited artists for a while longer. But when he returned to

When the Helikon was standing on solid ground, he signalled and the wall through which it had come earlier opened up into a wide opening. We could see into the neighbouring ballroom and the music began with a polonaise.

"To hell with it," Hauser said, puffing as if to test the efficiency of his lungs, "dancing too."

But it didn't depend on the individual, because there was an abundance of gentlemen, and the usual hunt for dancers could be omitted this time. The couples lined up for the procession in the hall. Mrs Bezug and the governor were the first couple to enter the mirrored stalls, followed by Elisabeth and Hecht. Bezug was just about to ask Mrs Hartl for the honour of dancing the polonaise with her when he was stopped by Hainx.

"The telegram has arrived," Hainx whispered to him.

"Is it there! Well ... and ...?"

"Yes!"

"So let's move forward. Set the oath keepers in motion."

"Where?"

"In the hotel! But skilfully ... please."

"Certainly."

It had all happened so quickly and quietly that those standing next to him had hardly withdrawn, because they saw that Bezug had something to discuss with his secretary-general, when the conversation was already over. Bezug continued on his way to Mrs Hartl, who, having turned Störner away, was waiting for him. Smiling, he held out his arm to her and entered the ballroom with her.

At that moment, something very strange and unexpected happened. The small door in a corner of the ballroom opened and a strange creature pushed its way in, which at first you couldn't tell whether it was human or animal. It might have stood erect at the door and opened it. But when the door opened, it immediately fell back on its hands and ran monkey-like into the hall, followed by a large Scottish shepherd dog, who was chasing it with

circled around the dog, barking loudly and boisterously. For a few seconds the guests were in doubt as to how they should react to this apparition. They had seen so many strange things at Bezug that they didn't know whether this was yet another special surprise for them. Some cheeky and overzealous people began to applaud loudly. But then someone cried out and Mrs Bezug was seen to stagger and fall into the arms of the governor, who caught her with a distorted and utterly horrified face. He had lost his monocle in the collision, and nothing upset him more than that. Mrs Hartl was no less stunned, for Bezug tore himself away from her without a word of apology and ran towards the ape-like creature. It was a human being, as was now quite clear, with a pale, sick face and inflamed, deep-set eyes. He had immediately run into the centre of the hall on all fours and was now sitting with his legs folded under the large chandelier. He sat there with his shoulders shrugging, biting his nails, while the large sheepdog stood behind him and occasionally nudged his ear gently with its muzzle. The creature looked around suspiciously, then interrupted its gnawing, stroked its hand softly and as if cosily over the smooth parquet flooring and let out an amused grunt. The dog watched every movement of the hand attentively, its ears pricked up. Suddenly, the creature raised its head again, saw Bezug approaching and jumped up with a loud squealing cry. Pursued by Bezug, it ran on all fours towards a window recess, where it hid behind the heavy curtains. When Bezug tried to tear the curtains away, the dog attacked him furiously, forcing him to retreat.

The guests stood frozen. Now they knew that this was not a prepared surprise. A large crowd had formed around Mrs Bezug, who was still in a faint.

"Stop the dog, stop the dog," shouted Bezug to his servants, some of whom immediately pounced on the animal to tame it. In the meantime, the creature had pulled back the curtain a little, and when he saw his pursuer some distance away, he reached into the folds of the curtain.

Damastes and began to climb up. At more than man's height, a fairly wide cornice stretched around the entire hall. There it crouched down and, in the manner of monkeys, began to yap and yelp. The dog had torn himself loose and jumped up the wall below, quite desperate that he could not be with his companion. As he came nearer again, the creature began to run along the cornice, running round the whole room, always followed by the dog below, and uttering a sort of laughter.

"Terrible, terrible," Schönbrecher said to Mrs Harthausen, who was holding on to his arm, trembling in all her limbs.

Bezug leaned against the wall, unable to move, and only ever looked at the creature, which ran round the room like a monkey, again and again ... again and again. Suddenly the creature interrupted its run, sat down on the cornice and looked down into the hall with a completely changed face. The dog immediately stood still as well, backed away so that he could see his master's face better, and, raising his pointed snout and pricking up his ears, watched his every move carefully. The change that was taking place in the unfortunate man happened so quickly that those at a distance could not follow it in all its phases. At first the pale face twitched a few times, as if still shaken by the last spasms of a convulsion. Then the animal expression disappeared and the face of an awakened man emerged from beneath the distortion. And suddenly, as if he now realised his misery, the flame of a pitiful horror flared up. Trembling, the man raised himself up against the wall, feeling behind him with outstretched fingers, and gazed fixedly into the hall, where the guests stood silently in groups, looking after him. The music had stopped playing and it was completely silent in the hall, only a groaning in long, heavy puffs ... the rattling breath reference. And suddenly the person up there on the cornice put his hands in front of his face, and you could see from the shrugging shoulders that he was crying. Then, as if in a swift decision, he took his hands away, sat down again and slid along the wall into the hall

down. Barking loudly, the dog ran towards him and jumped towards him in joyful excitement, trying to touch his master's face with his muzzle. The human stood there and seemed to be expecting Bezug, who came shuffling towards him very slowly, as if his feet were heavy as lead. When Bezug reached him, he burst out crying and laid his head on his chest. But Bezug wrapped his arm around him gently and softly, as if protecting him, and led him out through the small door. The dog trotted after him, barking.

The guests remained in the ballroom, highly agitated. Mrs Bezug had finally been brought to consciousness; she was sitting in one of the small grottos that had been installed around the ballroom instead of the usual alcoves, in the red light streaming from some hidden source, and her first question after a deep breath was: "Is he gone?" When she had been reassured of this, she sank back and allowed the three doctors who were attending to her to treat her further.

Outside, meanwhile, the most daring explanations were being devised, wild rumours and conjectures were circulating, carried from one group to another, swelling like an avalanche, thwarted by other rumours and conjectures. In a corner of the hall, the financiers stood together, and through Behrens, who had successfully approached the artists, they had found a reinforcement from the groups of writers.

"Think of a motif for a novel, Harthausen," said Doctor Störner, "show that you have imagination, as some of your critics claim you have."

"It's a madman, that's for sure," said Rosengarten.

"Yes, but what is his relationship to the reference?" Harthausen pondered hard.

"It's a madman who has sprung up and has now come to his senses in the face of the crowd of guests. Didn't you see how he came to? It was terrible to watch."

"So you think he's related?" asked Kucharov.

"In very close relationships, actually. But it's romantic, what I think ..."

"Just say it," said Störner, "a poet is allowed to do anything."

"Did you see how upset Mrs Bezug was? And Mrs Bezug fainted. Why? If the person is not closely related to them, perhaps even very closely ...?"

"You mean?"

"I didn't say anything. You asked me to let my imagination run wild ... I let it run wild."

"With success ... you see, the gentlemen have become thoughtful."

Everyone present had really become thoughtful. They were silent and looked at each other suspiciously, as if suddenly they no longer dared to speak their thoughts because they had become dangerous. Only Behrens said: "It's possible that..." But he didn't finish his sentence either, because everyone turned to look at him expectantly. In this awkward silence, the group disintegrated and broke up to make new connections.

After a quarter of an hour it was generally said that the madman was a son of Bezugs. No one doubted it any longer, and they only added to the proof, step by step. And another rumour was added to this, an explanation and a broader explanation ... this rumour recalled that Bezug had laid the foundations of his fortune by making mechanical toys. He had succeeded in displacing the competition, particularly with his extremely ingeniously constructed climbing monkeys. This fact was brought into relation with the event of this evening, and it was further remembered that when Bezug had moved his residence to this town some years ago, he had been careful to cover up all traces of his past. Little was known about his origins and the history of his family. They had only learnt that he was

had previously lived apart from his family for most of the year. While his wife and daughter were somewhere in the south, he had been restlessly engaged in his business, and it was only when his fortune had become immense that he had reunited with them. When this rumour came to Mrs. Herold, she knew at once that her son's madness was a punishment from heaven. Her simple mind instantly found the connection between the climbing monkeys, the mechanical children's toy, and this monkey-like wretch. So this was God's punishment for this man whom she hated, with an unspoilt instinct, because he subjugated everything and because he had also forced her husband into a degrading dependency.

After an absence of more than a quarter of an hour, Bezug re-entered the room. Everyone looked towards him.

"Look," Störner whispered to Mrs Hartl, and even he couldn't hide his excitement, "just look ... he's smiling, he's smiling ... what a person! What a person ..."

His salt sea eyes were dead in an empty desert, but his mouth was smiling as he adjusted his tie with hands reminiscent of grotto olm skin. He looked around the room for a moment, as if he had to remember something, and then came straight up to Mrs Hartl to offer her his arm. "Why is there no dancing?" he asked, and at the beautiful woman's silence he added: "It's a poor devil, a distant relative of mine, whom I've taken in out of pity. You know how things stand with our public care of the insane." He raised his arm towards the music gallery, and the band began the polonaise again. A superior will forced the guests to continue the ball as if nothing had happened ...

It was around three o'clock in the morning when Hauser and Adamowicz stepped out of the ballroom into the large banqueting hall and were led by a servant with a silent bow into a neighbouring room. Here they found a small gathering of guests. Only a very subdued

the melody of the waltz came from the ballroom. People were still dancing, and of the crowd of guests only those whose reputation did not permit them to stay any longer had left. The bishop walked away on the governor's arm and travelled home with him in his carriage; they talked cautiously about the official interpretation which the present incident had received by reference. Those who remained behind, however, became heated in the waves of the dance, the conversations held in the colourful grottos grew hotter and hotter, and the affinities found today became ever clearer.

When the two sculptors, who had sobered up a little after the dance, entered the small room, Dibian came to meet them: "Did you get such a strange invitation too?" he asked.

Hauser showed the round card, which could be easily concealed in the hand:

"Well, I'm curious to see what this is again..."

"A mysterious story ... this reference ..." Hauser looked at the card again: "A select company of artists and art lovers is gathering in the small room next to the ballroom. Their appearance is certainly expected," was written on the round paper. "What else does he want from us ...? I won't be able to take any more ... I'm full to the brim with impressions, if anything else comes along, I'll go over."

"It will be a special surprise again. We've been there for almost fifteen hours and he won't stop ..."

Adamowicz, who had already become quite drowsy, suggested that he go away without making a fuss and forgo the mysterious surprise. But the curiosity of the others was too great, and, fighting back his sleep, Adamowicz had to decide to stay. About fifty people were present in this room, all men who were somehow connected with art, practising artists, scholars, but also some rich collectors who were known for their valuable possession of art objects. The fatigue that sets in at the end of such a long party was combined with

The feeling was one of tense expectation, and most of them, like Hauser and Dibian, felt that expectation was stronger than fatigue. One was sure that some momentous experience was imminent, and the cautious and prudent could not help feeling a kind of fear that, now far less resistant than at the beginning of the party, they must succumb much more easily to a strong impression. Added to this was the strangeness of the chamber in which they waited. After all the marble and gold they had seen around them today, it now seemed strange to them that the walls of this room were made of iron. Without decoration or ornamentation, the smooth walls closed around them, and only at the very top of the ceiling ran an unbroken row of light bulbs, a glowing string of pearls all around. There was a red curtain at one end of the room, but it was so attached to the wall and the floor that no one could see what was behind it.

After half an hour's waiting, the music from the dance-hall suddenly ceased, and those assembled saw that the wall of the room where they had entered had shifted, and was now so fixed in the solid part that a narrow gap could scarcely be noticed. They were now locked in a room that seemed to have no exit, in an enormous iron box, as it were, in which they could do nothing against the will of the master of this house. From that moment on, the tension and excitement of those gathered grew, and at the same time a slight feeling of fear set in, as if they had walked into a trap from which there was no escape. Even the tired and sleepy were overcome by the anxious expectation that seemed to turn the whole assembly into a body dominated by a single emotion. After a few minutes, the red curtain at the end of the hall was raised. One saw a row of marble figures of the noblest formation, virgins in long, flowing robes with the short Greek peplos over them. And at the same time as the curtain was raised, a number of larger and smaller window-like flaps in the long iron sides of the room slid back, behind

where paintings became visible. And at the other end of the hall, opposite the marble figures, there was an arsenal of iron rods, wooden shakes, axes and hammers. Nobody noticed the appearance of this arsenal of destructive tools, however, because everyone's attention was focussed on the marble figures or the paintings.

"It's easy to see," Störner said to Behrens, "that he's locking us in here to force us to take a closer look at his most valuable acquisitions."

Behrens approached the group of scholars standing in front of the statues in animated conversation: "Well, gentlemen, what judgement do you pass on the virgins?"

"Undoubtedly," said Professor Schreier, "these figures are related to the caryatids from the Parthenon."

"They are Greek works ... that much seems certain ..." added Professor Hartl.

"Seems to be?" said Hauser, who had carefully examined the caryatids with Adamowicz. "It really and certainly is. It's just embarrassing that Bezug has imprisoned us to find out," he said uneasily, looking from one to the other.

Other groups had gathered in front of the paintings. Here Dibian was the spokesman, and he explained to an eager audience, addressing Harthausen, the Lyon silk manufacturer and Professor Ernst von Kramarcz in particular, why he considered two of the paintings to be particularly valuable works by Rembrandt and Velasquez. "I have a feeling, I tell you, that's more certain than any source history ... look, I know it's a Rembrandt. I'd like to take my chances that it is one. The reference won't hang any rubbish on us if he locks us up to admire his secret gallery. Look at the flesh tones, the chalky whites and the discarded lights. And don't you think that this Susanna in the bath looks a bit like Saskia. That spot of light on her back ... well, if that's not a Rembrandt, I'll hang myself."

"But art history knows nothing about this Rembrandt," said Harthausen, who had written a monograph on Rembrandt that scholars claimed was a novel and novelists claimed was a disdainful treatise.

"The art class! Ridiculous, as if it knew everything ... the art world knows nothing. Who knows where the reference tracked down this Rembrandt. He's clever, he won't allow himself to be kitsched up. That's a Rembrandt, as sure as that's a Velasquez ..."

Vernier could not believe this, as he owned a fine collection of originals by the Spanish master and had searched all the galleries in Europe and America for his favourite. This motif, a half-naked woman plaiting her hair in front of a mirror, was alien to Velasquez's circle and did not fit in with his other work. Dibian, however, became enraged, rattled off arguments and finally invoked the infallible feeling of the self-creator, which was more certain than all the results of art history.

"That's right," suddenly said a voice behind the debaters. Bezug was standing among them. Nobody had seen him coming.

"Quite right," he said again, "Mr Dibian's feeling is right. It's a Velasquez, that's a Rembrandt, over there you see a Luca Signorelli, the naked woman there is a Titian. All unknown paintings that I found."

"Gentlemen," he said, raising his voice so that everyone turned to look at him, "gentlemen, I have asked you here to finish my little speech on art, which I began earlier, in front of you." As he said this, Bezug rose above the heads of the assembly, so that he could now be seen by all. Those nearest noticed that a small pedestal rose from the ground with him to give him the elevated position of the speaker. "What I have to add is not suitable for the great multitude, but only for the small band of the select and consecrated. Only for men who have grown up with art, who have given their lives to art, either as creators or as perceivers of the great. You remember that in the

in the course of my public speech that our lives must experience a rebirth through art."

Bezug waited a moment until a murmur from the congregation convinced him that his words had been remembered.

"I would now like to build on this. A rebirth ... that actually means an increase in life values through art. That's how it is. But: every thing has two sides. Let's take a look at the other side. Which is more important: life or art? I would say: life ..."

"Of course!" cried Hecht, who was leaning against the wall because his legs were no longer supporting him properly.

"Life is certainly more important. For what do we gain from art if our lives are not solid ground on which we can stand and enjoy the wonders of art. And as soon as we have come to this realisation, we must no longer close ourselves off to the other realisation that art is a danger to life. Take a look around you. How many people there are who, completely devoted to art, forget life and its glories. The poets forge themselves to their desks, the painters and sculptors shut themselves up in their studios, the art scholars dig shafts and tunnels in the immense mountain ranges of books; even the harmless collectors are under the rule of their fixed thought and place everything else under this despotic impulse. Life rushes past them, but it has no power over them, for they are possessed by art. Art is a demon, a dangerous demon, so beware of falling completely prey to it. For what do we want from life? What has always been the ideal of life? The freedom of personality!"

"He locked us in here to tell us that," Hauser whispered to his friend. As if Bezug had heard Hauser's interjection, he looked at him penetratingly and then continued. "Yes, the freedom of personality. Isn't it as if art is waiting to rob us of our personality? If we are enraptured by a work of art, filled with it, what is it but that we are robbing our personality?"

have given up. We think someone else's thoughts, we are forced to see a process, a landscape, a person as the master saw them. We are possessed, my friends, our ego has been stolen from us, we have lost our freedom. Art is a demon. And look at our galleries. Shouldn't our creators in particular despair when they see the masses of what has already been created, these endless quantities of art to which so many thoughts and feelings of past centuries have attached themselves? And must our writers not fall down in despair when they step into a library where nothing but word art is piled up in hundreds of thousands of volumes. Galleries and libraries are home to terrible demons, ghosts, vampires that attack us."

Reference interrupted itself. The assembly breathed heavily and uneasily, no one approached, it was as if the ceiling was lowering down on them, as if the walls were moving closer together. A fear, a hot trembling fear that had been lurking somewhere, took hold of them all. It communicated itself to them like a current flowing through all their bodies. What did Bezug want from them? Why did he speak to them like that? What was the aim of his speech? And at the same time there was another feeling, something inexplicable, which took root in them alongside the fear and grew ever more powerful. A side effect of fear that they didn't know what to call it, hatred perhaps, a half-pleasant, half-horrible feeling.

"We want to preserve our freedom," Bezug said, and he spoke with strange urgency, "life is above art, we want to assert life victoriously. Whoever speaks of the sanctity of art and never dares to touch its wonders is not free. Only he is strong who is able to cast off all reverence when it comes to asserting his personality. We want to cultivate art, but we also want to be able to destroy it. Yes, destroy it like an enemy. Why, my friends, preserve all the art that past centuries have left us? I wanted to set a great example and set fire to an invaluable collection like the Dresden Gallery

can leave. I am only a private individual and can only work on a small scale. I invoke the spirit of Herostrat. He thought my thought for the first time: he is the true free man. He and here and there another in the course of history, like that Arab general who had the library at Alexandria set on fire. In the course of a day, you have paid your respects to art in my house. I now invite you to show your true freedom. Here you can see a number of important works of art. I need not tell you that these statues and paintings are of immeasurable value, and that if I were pleased to present them to the world, a storm of delight would go through all countries. But it pleases me to destroy them. Forward, gentlemen, there hang the instruments of destruction ... forward ... destroy them, smash them into ruins, show your freedom."

With a semi-circular motion, he pointed to the statues and pictures on the wall. The congregation stood and stared. They still didn't understand what Bezug wanted from them. He was asking them to destroy the treasures? Was there any trace of reason left in such a request? The reasons had been put forward clearly and reasonably and even had a certain evidential value. But they were still resisting the monstrous, the brutal madness. Nevertheless, they felt that they were beginning to succumb in the narrow space that the will of reference filled, so to speak.

Only one person was not lost in the general stream. It was Adalbert Semilasso, who had distanced himself a little from the packed crowd and squeezed into a corner, unnoticed by the others and also unnoticed by Bezug, who had his back turned to him. Soon after entering the room, Adalbert had seen a painting that captured his attention. It might have been painted by an Italian master and showed a girl's face of such gentle sweetness that Adalbert stopped in amazement and could not get away from it. A soft, round face with a clever, good expression in the eyes and a delightful mouth. The neck was free

and led in wondrous lines to the delicate bare shoulders and the smooth, calm base of the breasts. But here the picture was cut off. In size it was the smallest of all the pictures, of such holy, chaste purity that it must have been touching. But what immediately captivated Adalbert was a resemblance that made him tremble with happiness, a resemblance to Regina. At first he smiled at himself. He remembered the mural at Eleagabal's house, where he had also found this beloved resemblance in the features of the one woman. Did he really see nothing other than Regina? He scrutinised the picture again, more closely, with as much critical prudence as his excitement would allow. But he came to the same conclusion. It was like a picture of Regina that the painter had reproduced from memory years later. And at the same time as this realisation, he came to the decision to protect this picture from frivolous glances and shameless remarks. He felt as if it were a sacred duty to his love, for he feared that the chastity of the picture might suffer from the sultry sensuality that seemed to him to be in this room. He listened calmly to the speech and stood like a guard beside his picture. But when the guests were asked to destroy it, to destroy it, he was terribly frightened. Was he to lose this picture? Through a chain of rushing thoughts, he saw one thing quite clearly: he had to save Regina. At the moment, a superstitious idea was linked to this decision: if he succeeded, it was a sign that he would in truth win his beloved.

Bezug looked over the meeting and realised that it was not quite as far along as he wanted it to be. A final push had to come. With an amiable smile straight into the face of Behrens, who was standing next to him, he pressed a button on the pedestal. The glowing row of pearl lights went out and a dark, ruby-red light spread through the room, streaked with black shadows. Behind the marble statues, the glow became denser and more incandescent, as if they were standing in front of a curtain of fire. Suddenly, two crescent-shaped pendulums descended from the ceiling

One of the pendulums came down in front of the row of marble maidens, the other behind her, and began to swing. They were narrow, sharp pendulums, crescents with thin tips, and it was so quiet that you could hear them hissing like snakes darting through the air. Red lights leapt like living flames onto the shiny steel and immediately flickered back again. The pendulums swung back and forth in a constant alternation, sometimes dark like wild birds and then again like dangerous flames, one in front of, the other behind the row of white figures, evenly, incessantly, at first with no other meaning than that of a threat. Anyone caught between these pendulums was doomed, as everyone who was exposed to the terrible fantasy of reference in this room knew.

And suddenly there really was a person standing between the whizzing pendulums. A woman, dressed like the stone maidens between whom she stood. No one knew where she had come from. But now she was there, stood still for a moment and then began to move. They recognised Bianca, the tightrope walker from Kutschenreuter's circus.

The girl left her place between the statues and began to bend her body back and forth. As the pendulums continued to swing evenly, she ventured into their dangerous path, dodging at the last moment when it already looked as if the shimmering red sickle would tear her body apart. Between the serious, white figures she moved safely in serpentine lines, circled the statues, jumped forward to kneel down and let the pendulum swing over her head, backed away and only let the veil flutter, which the pendulum immediately cut in two. Now she bent down, picked up the cut end and danced back into the next space in front of the pendulum, only to immediately venture back into the path of the crescent swinging behind the marble figures. The spectators stood transfixed. Nobody moved; it was as if they feared that a single movement or word would put the dancer in danger.

"To the doubters!" said a voice, "to the doubters! See how much greater life is than art."

The dancer flinched and threw herself to the floor in the middle of her wild rhythms. Just as suddenly as she had come, she was gone. And now the audience's breath burst out in hot gasps. The whole crowd seemed agitated, foaming at the mouth and about to break loose to do something nonsensical. Suddenly, a bright, fluttering, bright light fell into the dark, ruby-red light. Living flames sprang up from the floor of the chamber at the feet of the marble statues, flickering up the stone walls with pointed bodies, with light, drifting clouds of smoke that immediately blackened the arms and faces of the virgins. As if the stone bodies were animated by the touch of the flames, they seemed to twitch and writhe; their features were wracked with endless agony. Hecht stood there, bent over, staring at the martyred virgins. The heat flowed through him. If she stood there like that ... if she stood there like that ...

The flames shot higher, across the chests and shoulders, reached for the statues' necks and chins, flickered across the stone foreheads, and smashed over the heads of the martyred. A cracking sound went through the stone, and now it was clear to everyone what the hour demanded of them.

With a scream, Hecht leapt forward and now stood darkly before the flames, swaying with his arms spread wide as if he wanted to throw himself into them. He struggled in the air, clenched his fists against the statues and screamed incessantly. Now it broke out behind him. The guests rushed towards the tools, armed themselves and stormed towards the marble virgins. At that moment the flames died out and the furious men fell upon the glowing blackened stone, striking at it with axes and clubs, beside themselves and without any sense of pain if anyone touched the hot marble or was struck by a blow. In a senseless frenzy they smashed the figures with axes and iron bars, not satisfied with the fact that the marble lost all signs of a human body after a few minutes,

they also beat the shapeless blocks, smashing them into small pieces and trying to outpace each other in the work of destruction. Suddenly it occurred to some of them that the statues were not the only works of art in the room. With a cry of rage and lust, they pounced on the naked women painted by the hands of the masters. This nudity incited them, made them even angrier, seemed to scream at them and invite the lust associated with destruction. Hauser, armed with an axe, ran ahead and was the first to throw his tool against the resting, shimmering white body of Venus. The axe tore a large hole in the canvas and broke off a piece of the heavy gilded frame as it fell. Now the others had also approached, and the sharp crackling of the canvas and the hard, dry breaking of the wood were mingled with the gasps and suppressed cries of their rage.

Adalbert Semilasso stood huddled in his corner, hiding the small picture he had taken down at the beginning of the commotion under his skirt. He watched in horror at the inflamed fury of the others and was determined to defend his picture with his life if the destructive rage turned against it. And he saw how Bezug stood there and watched the raving of his guests and how he laughed. A silent, terrible laugh, a blazing, flickering triumph in which his whole body seemed to be involved as if in a fever. One wave after another ran down his back from his shoulders, and his fingers seemed to be frozen in a spasm. Suddenly he turned to Adalbert, saw him in his corner, the picture pressed against his chest, and nodded to him almost favourably.

At that moment, the iron wall slid back and the entrance curtain became visible. A servant lifted the folds. Fresh night air came into the hot room and at the same time the sound of the ball, a swaying, cheerful waltz melody. The frenzied men paused, looked at each other as if awakening, with a disturbed expression on their faces, an astonishment turned to horror, and the tools of destruction slipped from their hands. Then they turned away and

crept out without saying a word ... like dogs, like ashamed, beaten dogs.

Elisabeth wants to go to Antothrace. A farewell

[Table of contents](#)

The day after the engagement party, Elisabeth slept until the evening. She only got up at dusk and had Anna dress her.

"Well, Anna, how was yesterday?" she asked as the girl pinned up her pigtails.

"A bit great!"

Elisabeth looked at her with smouldering eyes: "Not great enough yet."

When Elisabeth had finished, she asked, "And what have you heard? What are they saying about my brother?"

Anna hesitated with her answer: "Just what you say ... mixed up ..."

"You're right, after all, what do I care about this gossip?" Elisabeth stepped into her boudoir and over to her desk. Two letters lay there on a silver tray. She knew the format and handwriting and threw them away with a dissatisfied and impatient expression. A third letter, which she had expected today, was missing. After looking down from the window into the park for a while, she turned round and went to see her father. In the study, the servant told her that the baron was downstairs with the madam.

When Elisabeth entered her mother's room, a conversation was interrupted that seemed to have upset both of them. Bezug was leaning back against the fireplace, in which a log fire was burning despite the warmth of the summer evening, and Mrs Agathe was lying on the sofa, pale and exhausted, with a compress on her head. Elisabeth approached her mother and kissed her fleetingly on the cheek.

"Did you sleep well?" asked Bezug.

"It's on."

"Hecht has already been here three times today to enquire about you," her mother said with a groan. "He's finally written to you."

"I know it. I've seen the letter."

"Seen it? Not read?" asked Bezug.

"No."

"Listen, Elisabeth, you're treating him badly. He's beside himself. Yesterday he got drunk out of grief. There was almost a scandal when he left. He cried and wanted to see you. Fortunately, no one else was there apart from Hainx and Adalbert."

Elisabeth gave no answer. Mrs Agathe groaned on her sofa and adjusted the compress: "What is it with you, my child? I have worries ... I don't know, forebodings or something like that ... sometimes I feel like I'm running out of breath." And suddenly she burst into sobs: "Oh, you'll be to blame for my death, I can feel it, it can't be long now."

Neither Bezug nor Elisabeth made any effort to comfort Mrs Agathe. They were familiar with these fits and knew that they left as suddenly as they came. And after a few minutes Mrs Agathe really stopped crying. "There were no favourable signs about yesterday ... Arnold ... Arnold ... that he broke out! I thought I was going to die. How could this have happened?"

"How could this happen?" said Bezug angrily. "I've already told you. The guard, that bloke, that miserable bastard ... that Weithofer has been gone since yesterday. And his last act was to open the door for Arnold so that he could walk around freely. The servants were all busy downstairs, and then they don't know anything about it. Perhaps the Weithofer even brought him to the hall. Why ... why did he do that?"

"You should have given him more pay," said Mrs Bezug.

"He had a minister's salary. A bloke who ... should I give him more? And I didn't dare say a word in reply when he got cheeky."

Who is with him now?"

"Richard! He's the most reliable of them all. I quickly sent for him from outside."

"And what will happen now? Now everyone knows about our poor Arnold ..." Mrs Bezug groaned and adjusted the compress again. "Now they'll all be talking about our misfortune."

"I indicated that it was a distant relative," Bezug said.

"You don't think they'll believe you. They were already on the right track yesterday." Elisabeth looked her father in the face, cold and superior.

"Of course! Of course ... they don't believe it ..." Bezug was so despondent that Mrs Agathe looked at him in astonishment despite her suffering. "But something must be done. You are right. Otherwise they'll spread the rumour that I'm holding my son prisoner. Something must be done ... That scoundrel, that Weithofer ... but he shall pay for it." Bezug said this, pale with anger, and clutched one of the lapis lazuli vases on the mantelpiece as if he wanted to crush it in his hand.

"But that's not the only thing," Mrs Bezug continued, lamenting. "There's something else that scares me. It's not a good sign ... it's not a good sign when one of a company gathered for a party is dead the next day. It doesn't bode well."

"Has someone died? Who did?" Elisabeth asked indifferently.

"Behrens, the amiable young man, you know; the factory owner from Darmstadt or Cologne or somewhere like that."

Elisabeth shrugged her shoulders, but Mrs Bezug continued in a tearful voice: "That can't mean anything good, can it? And what's more, it's so horrible: he was murdered in the hotel."

"Murdered! Ridiculous!" she interrupted. "Murdered? Who said that?"

"Well, I think: murdered ... From what Hainx told me." Bezug said grimly, looking at Agathe with a distorted face:

"If only you wouldn't always talk like that. There's no trace of him being murdered ... No trace, I tell you. I was in the hotel myself

and looked at everything. And there are no signs of murder. Not the slightest sign."

Elisabeth had become alert, leaned against a tall cupboard where Mrs Agathe's medicines were kept and looked her father firmly in the face. The bottles in the cupboard clinked softly. Somewhat confused, Bezug said: "There can be no question of murder. It's suicide. That's for sure. His revolver was lying next to Behrens and one of the bullets was lodged in his temple. He must have committed the crime soon after returning home from the party."

"And why do you think he shot himself?" Elisabeth asked slowly and insistently.

"I don't know. Maybe he had the bug. It happens that these young people who have enjoyed everything kill themselves in a fit of weariness."

"I spoke to him yesterday. But I didn't notice any spleen or weariness of life in him. He was lively and eloquent and talked about wanting to go bear hunting in Transylvania next week."

"Perhaps his circumstances were not as splendid as one might think. The money ... the money, my dears ... it's round and rolls out of your fingers ..."

"It could be that his death is somehow connected to things of this nature."

Without any idea that a struggle was going on between father and daughter, in which the daughter was endeavouring to penetrate with conjecture what the father was trying to conceal, Mrs Agathe fell back into her lamentations over the evil omens. Whether Behrens had shot himself or been murdered, his death was a terrible fact and weighed heavily on the impression of the party. And already some of the bad things that this event seemed to indicate were showing themselves in a worsening of Mrs Agathe's health.

Elisabeth had settled down in one of the fragile armchairs and was talking to a little Sevillian donkey

nodding her head incessantly. When Mrs Agathe was forced to pause for a moment, Elisabeth put another matter before the continuation of the moaning. "I have come down," she said, "to tell you that I am going away for a few weeks next week."

"Where to?"

"To Antothrace."

"After my island in the Adriatic Sea?"

"Yes. I feel attacked. You, father, have no time to rest. Your business is all too important. And mum, I can't expect her to go to the trouble of travelling ..."

With a gesture of horror, Mrs Agathe confirmed this view.

"But I urgently need a rest. We're in the middle of summer now. Am I supposed to spend the whole beautiful season in the city? How long has it been since we've been to Antothrace? And it's so beautiful there."

"What kind of sudden idea is that?"

"Not a sudden idea ... I've been thinking about it for a long time. But yesterday, during the ball, the longing became so great that I decided to leave quickly. But now I don't want to put it off much longer. I'm leaving the day after tomorrow. I want to see the sea again and the beautiful lines of the mountains on the coast ..."

"You want to travel alone ..."

"Alone. That means I'll take Anna with me for company ... and Semilasso ..."

Mrs Agathe half sat up on the sofa: "You want to go with Semilasso? But that's impossible ... It's most inappropriate ... It must provoke people's gossip." She was truly horrified and took as lively an interest as her condition would allow.

"Why should it be impossible? What do I care about people? Semilasso should read to me and entertain me."

Bezug also dared to reply: "But what will Hecht say? You don't think he'll tolerate it, do you?"

Elisabeth crossed one leg over the other with a graceful cheekiness that was deliberately indecent to her parents, and leant back in the delicate little armchair so that the flimsy backrest cracked: "What has Hecht to tell me? He has nothing to say to me ... nobody has anything to say to me ... 'tolerate' ... ridiculous! ... he has to tolerate what I decide ... everything."

"You will admit to me that the engagement gave him certain rights ..."
Once again, Bezug had dared to fight Elisabeth's decision.

She remained sitting in her armchair for a while and looked at her father, mocking, superior and completely disrespectful of his will. Her eyes gleamed darkly. How like him she is, thought Mrs Agathe. Then Elisabeth rose and, as if no objection to her wish had ever been expressed, she said, "So the day after to-morrow ... you will have the goodness, papa, to inform Semilasso tomorrow that he has to go with me."

There was nothing left to do but carry out his daughter's order. After breakfast the next morning, he took Adalbert aside. Hecht had come to Bezug very early to discuss some urgent matters with him and had then been invited for a meal. He behaved very modestly, almost timidly, for a dim memory told him that his departure from the party had not exactly been glamorous. Rudolf Hainx had brought him home in the carriage, and he had retained an unpleasant impression of the journey, as if his companion had used his condition to say things to him that were upsetting and embarrassing. But he dared not inquire into the substance of the conversation, if it had been a conversation. Mrs Agathe did not attend the breakfast because her condition was getting worse and worse and she was constantly surrounded by a doctor and several female guards. Rudolf Hainx was the only one who spoke constantly and in strangely mocking tones. He uttered splinters of thought that were hard and angular like flints that could be used to make dangerous weapons, daggers and spearheads. But when he asked for the

When he scrutinised the effect of his words on Elisabeth's face, he saw nothing but a cold, stony indifference to his efforts to inspire her to reply. In front of Hecht and Hainx, Bezug did not want to bring the conversation round to his daughter's decision. So he held Adalbert back when they got up from breakfast and took him into an alcove.

"Tomorrow you will accompany my daughter to Antothrace, to my island in the Adriatic Sea. Elisabeth would like you to accompany her. You are to read to her there."

From Adalbert's shock, Bezug could see that this order was as unwelcome to him as it was unexpected. And now, awakened by this fright, Adalbert threw himself against the order. "I won't go with you," he said quietly and turned pale.

"What's that supposed to mean? I don't want to hear another word. You're going to leave."

Adalbert's courage was already at an end. He bowed his head and remained silent. But Bezug realised that he was hardly complying with his daughter's wishes by giving her a disgruntled and unwilling companion, and continued in a tone of persuasion: "She needs it. For the last few days have brought much noise and excitement. And then the party itself ... you have seen what has happened ... this terrible thing ... it has certainly attacked and shaken Elisabeth too ... she only wants to hide it ... but it will be the cause ... she wants to forget it ... this terrible picture ..."

Adalbert looked up in surprise. What was that? Bezug had never spoken like that before. He was literally frightened by the trembling in Bezug's voice, as if he had suddenly glimpsed the depths of a poor, tormented soul. Was that really Bezug, the implacable master of his feelings? How it suddenly burst warmly out of him. Was there still a spark of humanity at the bottom of a self-control that had been heightened to the point of cruelty? Adalbert looked at Bezug. The ruler's face twitched, and his eyes had a completely different expression. He seemed to have forgotten that he was speaking to Adalbert, and he looked straight ahead, fearful and agonised, as if he saw again the grotesque and

exciting spectacle before him. Then Adalbert was overcome with pity for the man, a pity born of his good nature, which was all the more urgent for expression as it was the first time he had been allowed to feel it towards his master. He took a step towards him and said: "A terrible picture ... I know that this poor madman is your son

... oh ... I know it! There is only one way to save him ... Eleagabal Kuperus ..."

"What do you say?"

"I mean, if you want to save him ... if you want to lead him back to the light ... Go to Eleagabal Kuperus ... he'll tell you what to do ..."

But Bezug had regained his composure and kept Adalbert away from him with a penetrating and cold gaze. And now he found a cold calm for his answer: "I did not ask for your advice." And bitter that Adalbert had seen a moment of weakness in him, he continued: "I will give you only one maxim: never offer advice that is not asked of you. And get your things in order today. You'll be travelling tomorrow."

Then he turned away from Adalbert. In the meantime, Elisabeth herself had informed Hecht and Hainx of her decision. Hecht accepted the announcement in dull surrender; it seemed as if the events of the party had broken his strength. Rudolf Hainx, however, relieved his agitation with an ugly laugh.

"Why are you laughing?" Elisabeth asked.

"How lucky the poets are. They are truly the kings of humanity. We must do our work here. And he will see the sea and the blessed islands, in your company ..."

Elisabeth turned away from him to tell Adalbert in a stern tone that he must be ready for tomorrow's noon train.

Towards evening, Adalbert found time to go to Heinrich Palingenius. When he entered the doorman's room, he found Regina alone. Johanna had gone out to do some shopping and Palingenius was in his room.

his workshop, from where a strange purring sound foreshadowed his activity. When Adalbert entered, Regina stood up from her sewing table and shook his hand.

'Come on, Regina,' said Adalbert, 'come out to the gallery. The evening is so beautiful. I want to see the city ...'

It was free and breezy outside, and the evening was soft and transfigured like a good promise. The city breathed calmly, almost childlike, at the foot of the tower, as if all contrasts had been silenced and all passions turned into a great serenity. In the west, the sky was woolly, hairy, reddish-brown in colour, covered in a layer of countless flakes, almost like fur. But now, as the sun sank below, the fur was transformed into a golden fleece, flowing with streams of living gold and subject to incessant changes of shape and colour. As if some sorcerer were uttering his spells over it ... The fleece hung in the western sky, golden flakes and tinged at the edges with blazing fire. Beneath this fleece the land rose with a soft wave high against the sky ... And now the golden fleece suddenly tore at a point so that one could see behind it the green atlas on which it was stretched. And just into this hole rolled the smoke of a distant fire that might be burning in one of the fields outside, a heavy and massive plume that first stretched along the horizon and only at the very end dissolved into individual, lighter flakes that now rose upwards, liberated.

Regina had looked out with her hands on the parapet and remained silent. Adalbert said nothing either. He stood behind Regina and saw the infinitely moving line of her gently sloping shoulders against the burning, silently blazing sky. In the tower behind them, the work of the great clock went on, regular, calm, like the pulse of this old wall. One of the jackdaws that nested on the steep roof of the church flew very close to Regina, suddenly changed direction sharply and swooped down. Time passed, and Adalbert, almost violently pulling himself away from all these things, wondered why

he had actually come. But when he was about to speak, he held back at the last moment. He felt as if he must not end these blissful minutes prematurely, because they could never return in such perfect beauty. He was still silent and postponed his decision until the next sudden shock drove him forwards. Now, however, a rattling and scraping in the old clockwork, which had been going on for some time, as if in warning, broke out into mighty strokes that shook the masonry. The bells hanging above their heads struck. First the smaller one, which announced with four rapid strokes that another whole hour had passed, and then the larger one, which announced the end of the eighth hour with eight slow, long resounding strokes. The thunder, released directly over the heads of the two, fell upon them in a deafening way, so that they stood there completely enveloped in the sound, as if united in unity. With the last stroke of the hour, Adalbert said into the long-lasting reverberation: "I have come, Regina, to bid you farewell ..."

Regina turned round. Her eyes were moist. Adalbert could still hear the very fine, ever thinner hum of the vibrating metal. He took Regina's hand: "You've been crying?"

But she shook her head: "I don't know what it is. I haven't cried. But when I see something as beautiful as I do now, or when something very dear happens to me, it comes over me ... I feel as if the highest beauty and the deepest pain were closely related ..." But now she really burst into tears and covered her face with her hands ... "You are going ... you are going ... oh, I knew it ... I suspected it ... now, before you had even spoken ... as if someone had already told me ... just now ..."

"I'll be back, Regina, it's only for a few weeks..."

"Why are you going to such lengths?" said Regina, shaking her head, "You won't be coming back..."

"It could be that I die. If I stay alive, I'll be back here in a few weeks ... I just have to go with the daughter Bezugs to her island ... A whim ... and I'm an unfree servant, a servant of their whims, whom they push here and there as they please ..."

Regina raised her head and looked fearfully at Adalbert: "She's beautiful and dangerous, isn't she?"

Adalbert remembered with a sudden shock what the countess had said, and the transformation Elisabeth had made with his puppetry, and answered evasively: "Elisabeth is beautiful, and she may also be dangerous ... for men who are not filled with another great love ..." and he added: "And she is also engaged, we celebrated the great feast two days ago ... I told you about the preparations." But as soon as Adalbert had said this, he was ashamed of his insincerity, for he was convinced that the relationship with Hecht meant no bond for Elisabeth.

The sky had also become dark in the west. A single, elongated cloud of heavy purple, its lower edge like iron still glowing from slag, floated above the horizon. A pale glow emerged from the city. Adalbert saw Regina's shoulders twitch. Suddenly she threw herself against his chest in an outburst of pain: "You're not coming back to me, I know it ... I know it ..."

Adalbert embraced her and held her tightly. And he said, trembling, very close to her ear: "I will come again ... because I love you ... I love y o u . . . you hear ... you alone. And through you I will find the strength to free myself ..."

Regina lay quietly in his arms for a while while Adalbert kissed her hair. Then she looked up, smiling blissfully through her tears: "I love you so much ... and I would die if you left me ... I would die ... because I love you so much that I don't want to live without you." And they kissed in the weaving twilight, in the face of

of the whole city and the infinite sky, in which a few tentative stars had already twinkled.

From the window behind them, a bright yellow glow flashed across the tower gallery, cutting part of the railing out of the darkness and then disappearing into the night. When they entered the living room, they found old Johanna busy setting the table. Johanna interrupted her occupation, looked at them first in astonishment and then suspiciously, and after a while continued to arrange the clattering plates, humming softly. Adalbert was so free and easy-going that he was able to strike a cheerful note when he took leave of Johanna. The old woman looked at him almost angrily from under bushy eyebrows and then said spitefully: "It's boring in our tower, young sir, isn't it?"

Heinrich Palingenius came out of his workshop, took off his blue apron and greeted Adalbert with the distracted expression of a man alienated from his surroundings by a single dominant thought. At first it was as if he didn't even hear what Adalbert was saying to him. And it was only when he concluded with the wish that he might find Palingenius at the end of his work when he returned that the doorman became attentive. "Yes, it will soon be finished," he said, "I hope so, for it is already beginning to come to life ... it will be organically animated, I tell you ... when you come back ... when you come back? Yes ... you want to go travelling? Did you say that? But you will come back. And then you shall see how the problem of the flying machine is solved ..." And now he began to discuss a myriad of technical details, as if he welcomed the opportunity to put his thoughts into words after a long silence. Adalbert listened to him. Regina stood behind him, one hand on the back of his chair, and he felt her proximity like an unspeakably soothing touch. When Adalbert finally stood up, the doorman held out his hand and looked him in the face in a friendly and almost affectionate manner: "Goodbye, my dear friend. You will be welcome again ..."

Regina accompanied Adalbert out, down a few steps, and they kissed wordlessly in the dark. Suddenly the door opened behind them, and

Johanna stepped into the bright opening. "Good night," Regina said quietly, and Adalbert's reply came from the darkness below: "Good night ...". Then his little candle lit up, and Regina saw the glimmer glide along the winding staircase, fading and finally being swallowed up by the darkness.

As Adalbert walked across the cathedral square full of urgent thoughts and jubilant bliss, he almost bumped into Eleagabal Kuperus. He took the old man by the hand. "I'm on my way to see you," he said, "I wanted to ..."

"You were with Palingenius to say goodbye ... I'm just going to see him."

"You know it ... how do you know it?"

Eleagabal Kuperus smiled good-naturedly: "You are travelling to a laughing country ..."

"I'll be back ... I'll be back. Do you know what I was just thinking? I thought: it is a gift of happiness to leave at a moment of greatest bliss. Because that way it is kept pure and we earn it anew through some pain ..."

"It is a good and beautiful thought ..."

"I'm happy."

"You can be happy. Because Regina loves you more than she can tell you."

"Aren't you giving me a word to guide me?"

"What for? We must find such words within ourselves ..."

Adalbert grabbed Eleagabal's hand once more, squeezed it and walked between the two disgruntled stone saints down the wide staircase leading from the cathedral hill into the city.

A luminous haze floated over the dark roofs like steam rising from a boiler.

On Antothrace

Table of contents

Elisabeth had a great escort to the southbound midday train. Apart from Adalbert, Bezug, Rudolf Hainx and Hecht went with her to the station. Mrs Agathe was lying in bed with an unbearably increased headache, had held out a hand to Elisabeth, withered and damp from the warmth of the bed, and whispered a farewell greeting in a failing voice. The platform was full of people, but as soon as they had recognised the reference and his daughter, they cleared a space around her and her companions, separated them from the nameless mass of other travellers by an empty zone created by respect, and watched them with rapt attention. The rumours of the engagement party in the house of reference had hypnotised the whole town. Those who had had the privilege of being present at this celebration did their utmost to make their own personalities shine through the significance and splendour of their accounts. All the events gained in scope and force, and what was told of the terrible scene with the madman was no less likely than the description of the feast to increase Bezug's awe. It was with satisfaction that Bezug saw from the reverent retreat of the crowd that he had been raised a good deal. Even the porters, who normally pushed their heavily laden trolleys through the thickest crowd with reckless shouting and jostling, avoided the sheltered island.

The farewell took place at the centre of attention. A servant with a large bouquet of roses was seen pushing his way through the crowd and the bouquet was taken from him by Hecht, who seemed to have been expecting the man. Then, with a little bow, Hecht handed the bouquet to his bride. Elisabeth took it and felt the warmth of the hand that had carried the bouquet until now through the light yellow glove. It nauseated her and

She would have liked to throw the flowers down again straight away if she hadn't seen everyone's eyes on her. It was with a wicked smile that she thanked Hecht for his gift. Meanwhile, the stationmaster had approached and started a respectful conversation with her. The carriage he had ordered was already waiting on a side track, and if it was convenient for the gentlemen, they could board immediately. Once the express train had pulled in, the carriage would be pushed onto the train.

"But not as the last car," said Elisabeth, "I can't stand that."

"Please, as you wish," the station chief hastened to prove his willingness.

Under the direction of Anna and a servant, who was to be taken along with her, the loading of the luggage began. Those stowed on the platform were amazed to see how many suitcases and boxes, cartons and parcels were needed to keep Elisabeth comfortable and organised for a few weeks. In addition to these items, which were loaded into the special carriage as hand luggage, a whole barricade of larger suitcases and boxes was erected on the platform. These were to be stored as freight in the baggage car of the express train. "Listen," said one of the porters to Elisabeth's servant, who was now supervising the work, "that huge, heavy thing that's going with the lorry ... it's a coffin, someone said ..." The man was from the same village as the servant and showed off his old familiar relationships to the public with a certain pride. Karl, however, looked at him with all the arrogance of a successful man meeting someone who had remained in a lower sphere and was once a peer. While the wearer took off his cap and dried his sweating forehead with the red cloth, Karl watched him with the corners of his mouth turned up contemptuously and then, after a sufficiently long pause, said in a measured tone:

"It's not a coffin, it's a sarcophagus ..."

"Aha!" said the porter, and asked no more, for he felt darkly that any further question would plunge him still deeper into Karl's estimation.

had to be reduced.

The wire netting, which is lowered to protect the public immediately before the train arrives on the first track, fell down and outside, behind the roofs of the warehouses and boiler houses, a series of billowing clouds of smoke, which seemed to come from a monstrous pipe, announced the approach of the express train. Then the locomotive turned the last bend and, dragging the long line of full carriages behind it, entered the station with a thunderous roar and the deafening hiss of steam. The wire mesh was raised and the travellers hurried to find a seat. Guided by the stationmaster, Elisabeth and her companions made their way through the turmoil, even now, in the excitement of boarding, respected by the willing retreat of the travellers. At the end of the train, the shift Elisabeth had requested took place. The last carriage was uncoupled and the separate carriage that had been ordered was pushed in. Anna and Karl stood in front of the open door. As Bezug embraced his daughter, he said quietly, close to her ear: "I just want to tell you that he has taken a picture with him." And when Elisabeth looked at him questioningly, he added: "A picture that doesn't look like *you* ..." Without answering, Elisabeth got into the carriage, followed by Adalbert. The hustle and bustle of boarding was already over. Those who had stayed behind had separated themselves from the departing passengers. Conversations at windows ... Shaking hands under difficult circumstances ... last orders and greetings. The station chief stood at some distance from the group around the reference, as a tactful man who does not want to appear intrusive in a more intimate relationship. Now everything was ready for departure. A whistle blew at the front, the conductors raised their hands, one foot already on the running boards, and the train set off with a sudden jerk. Elisabeth stood at the window, Adalbert had taken a seat on the side facing away from the platform. Elisabeth waved carelessly to her companions. At that moment, Elisabeth saw Hainx whispering something to her groom. Hecht jumped as if struck by a blow and looked round wildly

It seemed as if he wanted to lunge at the carriage. But Hainx held him back by the sleeve of his coat, looking towards Elisabeth with a cruel and triumphant expression. But then he was met by her fierce and commanding gaze, and suddenly turning pale, he lowered his eyes before her power. Slowly, the train left the station at a faster pace.

Elisabeth was alone with Adalbert. She stepped into the carriage compartment and, after pushing forward the gangway door, pulled forward the curtain with the casement wheels. Then, holding on to the luggage nets above her head, for the train, which had just travelled over the station's large interchange system, shook, jolted and swayed, she came to the window and sat down opposite Adalbert. She sat there with her face turned away, looking out as if she were all alone in the carriage. She had crossed her legs so that the crossed leg, free to move in the knee joint, dangled with every bump of the carriage and the tip of her foot sometimes bumped against Adalbert's shin. She looked at Adalbert with narrowed eyebrows, but without being aware of this expression of disapproval and defence. A stray ray of the high sun fell into the carriage. And Adalbert saw a very light layer of powder on Elisabeth's soft cheek, reminiscent of the fuzz of a peach. Beneath this layer shimmered a slightly reddened, delicate skin. Adalbert couldn't see much of her eyes. Only the slight curve of the profile line that led to the clear, not too high forehead. And in this cove, a heavy, black shadow, the last part of the dark lake that lay beneath his eyes. He remembered what the countess had said. And then he remembered Elisabeth's frivolous arts at the puppet-show, which seemed destined to spin round him, whose meaning was directed against him, to confuse and entrap him. And this strange whim of taking him along as a companion ... Adalbert reluctantly moved away from Elisabeth. But then he smiled. He was strong and firm in himself. The time of brutal desires lay as far behind him as his father's cave, and the time of terrible confusion, of an unclear and mysterious urge that would destroy the orchid beds.

was distant and alien to him. With Regina, he had found the axis and centre of his life. And smiling, he thought of the rescued picture that he carried with him at the bottom of his suitcase, like a talisman whose owner no evil spirit is capable of harming.

Several hours passed without the two of them speaking a word. Elisabeth took a book out of her handbag and began to read. As she lifted the handbag down, she had had to stretch towards the luggage net, which was a little high up, and her slim, supple body showed a beauty of line that did not escape Adalbert's notice. He had made a movement as if to help Elisabeth, but she had looked at him so unwillingly and almost angrily that he sank back. Then she sat with the book in her corner and read until the sun was low in the sky. She came into the carriage with a reddish glow, but the curtain drawn in front of the corridor door prevented her from entering the compartment itself. So only the curtain was bathed in the brightest light, almost like a banner put up for some kind of celebration. When Adalbert had satisfied himself that Elisabeth had no intention of utilising his services as an entertainer, he had also taken a book. Station followed station, and as Elisabeth's carriage was moved at the transfer stations, there was no need to get off anywhere. Only when they stopped somewhere, where the hustle and bustle of station life unfolded right outside her window, did Elisabeth cast an indifferent glance at the people passing by. It happened that one or the other of the travellers, who were walking along the carriages in search, caught this glance and, astonished by a moment's hesitation, paid homage to Elisabeth's beauty. At such moments Adalbert felt immensely proud that he was the only companion this woman had to attract attention, and by standing close to the window he courted the tribute of the strangers. One or the other of them tried to enter the carriage with the boldness of an adventurer, but after a brief exchange of words with the conductor he had to refrain.

Towards evening, Karl knocked on the door and enquired whether the lady would like something to eat at the next station, where they had a longer stay. Elisabeth ordered two small meals and a bottle of wine without looking at Adalbert or asking. They ate, at a small table that had been taken from under Elisabeth's luggage between them. Their knees touched between the slender legs of the little table. Elisabeth still hadn't spoken a word and Adalbert had defiantly decided not to break the silence first. Gradually, Elisabeth's silence had become annoying and he interpreted it as a sign of contempt. Soon after the meal, the lamp was lit. Elisabeth looked into the flame and the light streamed over her face, her beautiful, straight shoulders and seemed to gather in her lap as if in a basin, washing over her folded, still hands. Adalbert, sitting in the dark, could not take his eyes off his mistress. The expression on her face moved him; something was drawing her closer to his Regina. What could it be? She looked into the light with such infinite longing and all the hardness was gone from her, all the wildness and licentiousness that often flamed on her face. Suddenly she rose and said softly, "Good night. Then she left the compartment and went into the sleeping cupboard, where Anna had meanwhile prepared everything for the night.

Adalbert sat in his corner for another hour, smoking one cigarette after another. He watched as the blue smoke rose, first in restless swirls and then caught by the draught from the open window and swept out into the night. Sometimes sparks flew by quickly, above or below a reddish moon that had finally broken free from a tangle of branches on the horizon. Then the memory of Regina would suddenly return, as powerful as if she had been suffering from an inhibition all day and was only now, in the stillness of the night, coming to life. Sometimes the train rattled through small stations where only a few dim, sullen lights looked after the train as if blinking. At last Adalbert stood up and breathed a kiss into the air. "Good

Night," he said, smiling as he remembered that Elisabeth had used the same words an hour ago.

He went to his sleeping quarters, was pleased to find everything ready for his comfort, undressed and went to bed. Suddenly he remembered that he was lying next to Elisabeth. He held his breath to see if he could hear another sound. But the rattling of the train, with its heavy, increased beats, shattered all perception. Nevertheless, it seemed to him that he could hear a light, steady breathing in between and beyond. She was probably already asleep. And all at once, as he lay there pondering and listening, he realised that he felt sorry for Elisabeth. But then he looked at her again and remembered the brutal way in which he had warded off his pity. Should he also allow himself to be repulsed by Elisabeth? He decided never to reveal what had come over him ... Then, as if he had come to the end of a long line of thought with this decision, he fell asleep.

Early in the morning, he woke up to a knock. "Please," Karl said outside, "we'll be in Trieste in an hour." Adalbert pulled the curtain from his window. There was a light mist over the landscape and only the nearest things were visible.

He dressed slowly, and as he stepped out of the door, he met Elisabeth, who had just left her sleeping quarters. She was wearing a different outfit from the day before, a kind of sailor's blouse with an open neckline and loose pleats. "Good morning," she said, offering him a cool hand, "how did you sleep?"

Adalbert said that he had stayed up, smoked cigarettes and looked out of the window, and Elisabeth didn't seem dissatisfied.

"But you weren't very entertaining yesterday," she said, looking at him.

Adalbert was hurt: "You should have told me that you wanted to use my services ..."

They pulled into the station and were greeted by the yacht's crew. The carriage was parked in front of the station entrance and took them through the soon awakening life of the harbour to the ship reference, which was

was waiting for his master's daughter. Elisabeth was very talkative and chatted about all the things and people they passed. With a keen eye she took in the types of the southern harbour and tied her observations to memories of earlier journeys, harmless as a young girl looking forward to getting out of the house for a few weeks. The light, thin mist still lay over the water, but the morning wind was already beginning to brush against its veils and had already cleared the sky high above the ships' masts. The pennants fluttered as if to greet them. The captain and the two ship's officers in their gala uniforms greeted the arrivals at the halyard. The captain, flushed with eagerness and eagerness, shook Elisabeth's hand, helped her up the last few steps and then gave a short speech in his ponderous German, laced with Italian words. Elisabeth replied in Italian that she was pleased to be able to entrust herself to his guidance once again and that she hoped for good weather.

Adalbert stood to one side, paying little attention, and was glad that he wasn't being paid much attention. When they had approached the ship, he had read the name on the stern. It was written in golden letters: *Regina maris*, Queen of the Sea. This name sounded like a reproach to him, and yet he did not know how he had earned it. He said it to himself a few times and was almost startled when Karl approached him and announced that the Fräulein was waiting for him down in the cabin for breakfast.

The captain was present, a still young, black-haired man with commanding and fiery eyes, who, as often as he had had the good fortune to receive Elisabeth on his ship, had fallen in love with her again and again. He felt obliged to attend breakfast as master of the house and sat opposite Elisabeth. While he ate and took part in the conversation with his cheeks full of food, he devoured Elisabeth with his eyes. Suddenly, with a half-turn towards Adalbert, he asked if that was the bridegroom of the gracious lady.

"No," Elisabeth laughed, "just an interim groom; I left the real one at home."

The noise of departure began over the heads of the diners. The captain asked Elisabeth if she wished to leave the harbour, and when she declared that she would like to watch the departure, he immediately gave the order to stop the preparations. After breakfast they went on deck. Elisabeth led the way, with the captain, who pushed Adalbert back almost violently, close behind her. Ever since he had known that Adalbert was not Elisabeth's bridegroom, he had treated him as a most superfluous third party, an unpleasant companion who could not be made to understand clearly enough how annoying he was. Whenever Adalbert made any pretence of coming to Elisabeth's side, the captain manoeuvred so skilfully that he always cut him off. At last Adalbert gave up his endeavours and remained a few paces behind, without further anger at the fact that he was now forced to follow his mistress like a footman. The sailors and officers did their best to carry out the work of sailing quickly and skilfully in front of Elisabeth. While the tangled ropes were loosened and the anchor rattled up, the captain explained the individual manoeuvres as far as he was able to explain what he took for granted. At last the wind took hold of the sails, and with a gentle tilt to one side, the yacht glided out through the ships lying in the harbour. The light fog still lay over the sea, but it was so thin that they didn't even think it necessary to give signals. Adalbert stood there with his hands on the side of the boat and looked out. The feeling of gliding on a smooth track entered his body and made him miraculously happy, increased his sense of life, so that he began to shake the ship's side with both hands. The sun now laid a long, shining path across the sea, and on both sides of this path the mists receded. The open, glittering expanse grew wider and wider. Adalbert marvelled out at it.

"You are seeing the sea for the first time?" Elisabeth addressed him. She had first looked round for Adalbert, and when she saw that he had been displaced by the captain, she left the overzealous admirer standing there

and approached Adalbert. With an apologetic movement of her hand, she said, "I was so interested in the departure that I almost forgot about you." Adalbert was strangely touched by the softness in Elizabeth's tone, and was quite raised to his feet when the captain tried to approach and was unequivocally rebuffed by Elizabeth. She let him speak and meanwhile looked into the water, and when he had finished, she turned back to Adalbert to continue the interrupted conversation. The captain grew angry and became more and more agitated until finally, after a threatening look at Adalbert, he left the two of them alone.

"Be careful," Elisabeth said with a completely changed expression, almost fearful, and took hold of Adalbert's hanging hand, "now he hates you, and the man is dangerous."

When Adalbert made a movement of disdainful defence, she continued: "No, my dear, be careful. Don't go anywhere alone where a quick push is enough to throw you into the water. I beg you, don't be careless. The man has more than one life on his conscience. My father saved him and gained an absolutely devoted servant. But he knows no mercy against strangers. It was careless of me to provoke him like that. But you will not leave my side as long as we are on the ship."

Adalbert's hand was still in Elisabeth's, and it seemed to him as if the warm current coming from this hand was somehow related to the sensation of gliding that he had felt earlier. Now he gently disengaged himself. But he could not conceal the fact that for a moment he had felt this touch as a great, almost painful happiness.

The yacht sailed between islands where white houses and green patches sat like splashes of colour on the brown and grey of the rocks. Sometimes the coast came into view again. The sun began to get so strong that Elisabeth and Adalbert had to seek the shade of the unfurled sail. At midday they had to do without the captain's company. He had sent the first mate in his place, excusing himself on urgent business

let. The officer was a taciturn man, a German, but Elisabeth knew how to stimulate him with her kindness so that he came out of his shell and began to tell amusing sailor stories.

After the meal, Elisabeth lay stretched out on a comfortable chair under the awning, and Adalbert sat next to her, looking out to sea and feeling as if he had been entrusted with the protection of this woman. They stayed like this until the evening, when Elisabeth, apparently waking up from a long doze, began a conversation.

"Tell me," she asked, "what do you actually think of me?"

"What do I think of you? How can I tell you that?"

"So it's no good?"

"Not because of that. But I'm not smart enough to make a judgement about you."

"Don't avoid me. I want you to speak. We women like it when people talk about us. We want people to think about us."

"So if you want me to speak ... I don't think you're in your seat."

"What do you mean?"

"As I say ... you should not have been born a daughter of reference. I think your soul is sick with the excess that surrounds you. You should have grown up in a stricter climate."

Elisabeth had closed her eyes and remained silent. But Adalbert continued, growing warmer and warmer: "I mean, you've never learnt about work, and that's why you lack balance; perhaps you sometimes long for a job."

"Isn't it a profession," said Elisabeth, looking at Adalbert with a look that seemed to him to have a strange mixture of infatuation and deceit, "isn't it a profession to be beautiful? The flowers, look at the flowers ... what is their profession? None other than to adorn."

"I read in a very learned book that the reason they are so beautiful and fragrant is to attract insects. They fly from one

and take care of the business of reproduction by transferring the pollen."

Adalbert was startled by the change in Elisabeth's features. The rapturous devotion disappeared and she looked at him angrily, filled with hatred. At that moment the first officer came and announced that Antothrace was in sight. Elisabeth got up and went to the bow, where she stood black against a bright yellow horizon until the yacht lowered her anchors. The captain came solemnly to the steps again to say goodbye. He tried to control himself, but only with difficulty did he restrain himself. Elisabeth let Adalbert climb aboard first and followed him after she had improved the captain's mood somewhat with a few friendly words.

It was already night when the boat pulled into the island's small harbour. A double row of torches lit the way from the beach to the villa. Adalbert walked behind Elisabeth and saw the two shadows she cast in the two-sided lighting gliding across the shell gravel. The servants were waiting for them on the steps of the villa, and Elisabeth gave orders for dinner to be served for them in their rooms. She gave no instructions about Adalbert's board and lodging, and when the castellan informed him that they had set the table for him in the great hall, Adalbert left it at that.

The large hall was open to the sea with a row of pillars and a terrace in front of it, which hung high on steep cliffs. In front of the openings of the pillared arches lay the sea in a luminous shimmer, as if lit from within, in which each of the long-backed, slowly rolling waves ignited a spray of sparks. The narrow white crests of the waves ran slowly through the green glow. Adalbert felt as if he had been transported into a realm of the strange. His path had led from the cheerful open portico through narrow corridors bordered by wet, massive walls. He had been led up narrow staircases through several storeys until further and more open rooms opened up to him, which were reminiscent of the portico in their style. A large chandelier hung from a strong chain from the high ceiling of the hall,

A wrought-iron chandelier hung from the table, its holder decorated with many candles. Two candles were burning in wrought-iron candlesticks on the table.

The castellan who had accompanied Adalbert here stopped in front of him, his black cap in his hand, his bald head illuminated by the chandelier hanging above him, with an expression of obsequiousness that Adalbert rarely enough got to see in the servants' quarters.

"Show me to my room now," Adalbert asked, and the old man took one of the candlesticks that had been standing on the table and walked ahead. They went back through some narrow corridors and up some narrow stairs until they suddenly saw the sea in front of them again from an alcove. But now it was much deeper below them.

"We are in the tower," said the castellan and opened an iron-bound door in the wall of the last superstructure. Adalbert entered and found a cosily furnished room with carpets and pictures to make him feel at home. A small room next door contained the bed, the washstand and a few open doors revealed a number of wall cupboards. Adalbert said goodbye to his guide with a greeting and a thank you.

Adalbert's travelling case stood in a corner of the room. When his gaze fell on the grey, inconspicuous companion, his thoughts turned in a different direction. He looked for the key, knelt down and began to unpack. As the one candle gave him too little light, he interrupted his work after a while and lit all the candles in the two rooms. They were stuck in iron sea monsters hanging from the ceiling, polyps with a myriad of upward-curving tentacles whose suction cups served as dills for the candles. The iron beasts seemed to swim menacingly above him, and as he knelt in front of his suitcase again, he felt like a diver searching for treasure at the bottom of the sea. He held his breath apprehensively and looked up, wanting to conquer a feeling of fear, a fear that seemed to betray a danger looming behind his back. The polyp hung calmly above him, carrying the burning candles in the

Suction cups. Adalbert forced himself to carefully remove his things from the suitcase and place them in the wardrobes in the bedroom. The closer he got to the picture hidden at the bottom of the suitcase, the more secure he felt and the freer he felt from fear. But he held back so as not to take out the picture prematurely, as if he wanted to prove himself worthy of his talisman anew by this test of his steadfastness. At last he took off the last layer and looked into the beloved face.

Delighted, he lifted it out of the case and held it up in front of him so that the features were in full light. At first it disturbed him a little to see the cracks in the canvas and the brushstrokes that had formed this work. But then it was as if a breath passed over the picture and took away all its imperfections. He saw the blossoming life, and it was as if the woman was looking at him with dear, familiar eyes. Now he set about putting it somewhere safe. He wanted her to be close to him and yet she must not be seen by the servants who entered these rooms in his absence. After searching both rooms, he finally decided to hang it on the wall next to his bed. A carpet had been pulled across the wall here, which made it possible to make a cut unnoticed in heavy folds. Adalbert didn't think twice and used his penknife to cut the strong fabric with great force. He then pulled the carpet apart a little and hung the picture on a nail that he had pulled out of the wall in the anteroom. With his eyes fixed on Regina's face, he fell asleep.

When he woke up in the morning, his first thought was to pull the carpet in front of the picture. He managed to push the folds over each other in such a way that no one could suspect that they were hiding anything. The candles in the suction cups of the iron polyps had burnt down, and a heavy haze filled the room. Adalbert discovered that his rooms had no windows, but that the light came in from above. The rooms were closed off by glass panels, above which he could see the blue sky. Every now and then a single shiny white cloud moved from left to right across the round fields. After searching for a while, Adalbert found a pole that was

attached to the frame of the window panes with a hinge, which served to lift the panes. He pushed open the windows and soon felt the effects of the fresh air.

After dressing, he tried to find his own way back to the hall. He thought he recognised the stairs he had been led up that evening, turned into passages, crossed corridors, and passed through galleries from which he had sudden glimpses of the sea or of gloomy inner courtyards, until at last he had to admit that he had gone astray in this maze of corridors and rooms. Now he tried to find his way around and began to look for his way again, more systematically than before. At one point he thought he heard a voice somewhere, a laugh, the sound of doors being opened, and he quickly followed the sound. But this sudden turn of events threw his system into disarray, and when he couldn't find anyone to set him straight, he was completely confused and went blindly on his way. This feeling was not at all unpleasant; an adventurous mood took hold of him and made him believe that some pleasant and rewarding surprise awaited him at the end of his wanderings. The alternation between dark arches in the walls, narrow winding staircases and cheerful, free altars, open porticoes and projecting bay windows seemed to loosen something in him and make him ready for unforeseen experiences. When he stepped into open spaces where the sea breeze could prevail, he felt grateful for the refreshing air, and when he caught sight of the sea, he nodded to it like a good friend.

At last he came to a room with large windows. He stepped up to the parapet and overlooked part of this mighty castle beyond a deep ravine. A terrace rose above the cliffs, and behind it a wide hall with gleaming columns stretched upwards. Even further back was the tower with the superstructure that housed his flat. Curious, he turned round and walked towards a curtain at the back of the room that seemed to close off the way ahead and at the same time give it away. When he pulled back the curtain and entered, he saw himself

Elisabeth, who was lying on a colourful low divan in a white morning dress.

She nodded to him with a smile: "Well, how do you like my castle, Adalbert?"

Adalbert bowed, approached her, and for some reason he did something he had never done before: he took Elisabeth's hand and kissed it.

"A strange castle," he said cheerfully, "as if enchanted. You can't find your way around."

"You found your way to me. I was expecting you."

"You were expecting me?" Adalbert followed Elisabeth's gaze and was astonished to see Omphale's sarcophagus standing behind the divan. All sorts of strange things lay on top of it, roots it seemed, small figures and jars, and in the centre stood a glittering sphere, which was set in a bed with its axis askew. From time to time, whitish, cloud-like formations drifted across the opalescent surface of the sphere, always changing, so that it seemed as if the thing was filled with inner vapours. And Adalbert was no less astonished when he saw that the breakfast table in the centre of the room was set for two people.

"In this castle," Elisabeth said with a smile, "only my will rules."

"Hopefully," said Adalbert jokingly, "he has more servants among him than I've seen on my way."

"The servants ... I have removed them from your path. They're not very well behaved, the people here. Otherwise, you must know, the castellan lives alone in this castle. Only when someone comes to visit are a few people in the neighbouring fishing villages notified. Sometimes it's good not to see the smooth faces and polite manners of the overly well-to-do around us." Elisabeth rose with an inviting gesture towards the table. "Shall we have breakfast now?"

Adalbert sat opposite Elisabeth, and during the meal she kept up a lively conversation. From the sea, which seemed to rise halfway up the frame in front of the room's only window. With an outstretched arm, she pointed to some fishing boats cruising outside with white sails and showed Adalbert the long plume of smoke from an invisible steamer. At this movement, the light morning dress opened and Adalbert saw a piece of the white breast. He closed his eyes. Elisabeth stood up from the table, laughing. "Go now," she said, "and see my island." -

From the Greek portico, Adalbert turned towards a small pine grove, which attracted him because of its beautiful location on a broad rocky ridge. He lay there in the shade of the trees, letting small stones slip through his fingers and following the path of the sailors, who seemed to be trailing darker stripes on the blue ground. Then he walked inland. The sun was already high and the rocks, between which a narrow path led further and further into the solitude, radiated a glowing heat. The path seemed to climb steadily towards a summit from which Adalbert hoped to have a view of the whole island. Under the scorching southern sun, Adalbert's thoughts grew dull and drifted towards rest. At last he felt that he could not continue on his way amidst the hot bare rock. He wanted to turn back and stopped. But something drove him on, and reluctantly he staggered along the increasingly narrow path between the rocks. The walls piled up next to him in ever more bizarre shapes, seeming to suddenly cut off the path and enclose him in cauldrons in which the boiling air took his breath away. The path, which crawled on barely recognisable, finally became completely lost and Adalbert forced himself to turn back. But he had hardly taken a few steps in the direction of the beach when he was seized by a terrible fear. A voice seemed to whisper to him that he would miss something if he did not continue on his way. Again he had to obey this commandment and pushed himself with difficulty over the steep slopes, lowered himself over ledges and slid down in narrow furrows from heights he had barely reached.

A large dark bird flew over him. It was like a sign to him to follow this flight. Breathless, with roaring, burning blood raging in his head and his pulses, he came to a height again. All around him were jumbled, jagged rocks, naked and glowing cracks above which the air trembled. Exhausted, he sank down. Then he saw a patch of green meadow in a basin at his feet, with a narrow, bright stream flowing through it. That was his destination, he felt, and he slowly began to climb down the slope, fuelled by an agonising thirst, which at that moment seemed to him to be the driving force behind his hike. By clinging to the flexible tendrils of individual bushes or long stalks of dry grass, he managed to reach the green patch of meadow and, breathing a sigh of relief, he was about to head for the water when, in a place where he had seen no one a moment before, he caught sight of a girl who was standing with her back turned towards him and seemed to be listening to something. Adalbert immediately stood still and didn't dare take another step. The same feeling that had driven him forward earlier, a fear mixed with dread, now held him in place. He looked at the girl, and something about her seemed familiar. The touching line from head to neck and shoulders drew him in a direction in which there was something very dear, familiar, friendly. But it was as if Adalbert's thoughts and memory were blocked here. He was unable to penetrate to the name that would have broken his enchantment, and only kept wondering how the girl had come here so suddenly. He had seen quite clearly that the little green oasis lay empty before him. And he hadn't realised that anyone but him had climbed down over the rocks.

Suddenly the girl turned to Adalbert as if she had heard a call from where he was standing. It was Regina. The name suddenly came to Adalbert's mind, and a wild joy poured through him, hot and roaring. Everything that was connected with this name and the whole series of previously inhibited thoughts and feelings was suddenly

there. He did not ask himself how it was possible that Regina had suddenly come here, he only enjoyed the unexpected happiness of seeing her. An expression of joyful astonishment on Regina's face and a movement towards him seemed to indicate that she had also seen him and was delighted at this meeting. Adalbert, overcome by a feeling of heaviness, was about to go towards Regina when a second girl appeared beside him, who must have approached from behind and was walking towards Regina. And this second girl - Adalbert was so startled that his jaws began to drop - was Elisabeth. Neither she nor Regina seemed to have noticed Adalbert, even though he was standing very close and Regina's gaze seemed to have been directed at him. What did that mean? Why were the two of them pretending not to see him, and how had Elisabeth got here? What strange coincidence had brought them all three together here in this wilderness and solitude? Adalbert saw how the two girls greeted each other like friends, at least he saw a friendly smile on Regina's face turned towards him. He also saw her lips move as if she were speaking. But he heard no sound. Only the murmur of the stream ran like a broad ribbon through the silence. How did the two girls know each other? All these strange and peculiar things weighed heavily on Adalbert's mind, and his fear, which for a moment had been replaced by sudden joy, grew again. To put an end to all the questions and this pressure of fear, Adalbert wanted to go up to the two girls and ask for their answers. But he could not lift his foot from the ground, as one is often paralysed in all limbs in anxious dreams. He wanted to call out, but his tongue lay heavy and immobile in his mouth, and his throat had no sound. He was completely mesmerised, unable to move, a captive spectator of the scene unfolding before him as if he were not there.

Elisabeth had put her arm in Regina's, and the girls were walking up and down the bank of the stream in an eager conversation, not a word of which was audible. They passed very close to Adalbert at regular intervals, and he watched the movements of their conversation with horror,

which were not accompanied by any sound. Regina seemed unselfconscious and cordial, but Adalbert saw a look in Elisabeth's face that seemed somehow dangerous and threatening. It lurked, as it were, beneath a disguised friendliness. While she spoke to Regina, a decision was hiding in the background that was not of a good nature. During these days Adalbert had scrutinised Elisabeth's countenance with such attention that he did not think he was mistaken. Elisabeth appeared to him next to Regina like a dangerous predator toying with its unsuspecting victim. Out of his mind with fear, he tried again and again to approach the two of them and, by intervening, prevent the disaster that was preparing to befall Regina. But he was spellbound and could not move. Elisabeth seemed to speak more and more insistently, and Regina, who had listened patiently at first, became more and more dismissive the longer Elisabeth spoke. She was obviously trying to persuade Regina to do something, and she firmly and resolutely refused to do so. The expressions on the faces of the two girls were so expressive that Adalbert thought he recognised all the stages of a struggle. When Regina's refusal now consisted of a defensive shake of the head, Elisabeth became more and more violent and agitated. She no longer spoke to her in a friendly manner, but in a demanding and commanding way, and the threatening and dangerous expression on her face became more clearly recognisable. But Regina's answer was the same rigid and determined No. Suddenly Elisabeth, as if overcome with rage, seized Regina by the shoulder and shook her violently to and fro. Regina turned pale, grabbed Elisabeth's hands and pushed her away. Adalbert saw a fire flare up in Elisabeth's eyes, in which a dark and terrible resolve had hardened.

Furious with despair, Adalbert raged against his spell. And when he realised the futility of his struggle against an implacable power, he froze in deadly fear and felt himself become as heavy as lead.

Meanwhile, a transformation had occurred in the scene before him. Elisabeth's face had taken on a different expression, she seemed to be asking the other for forgiveness for her vehemence and was once again putting on a new look.

She put her arm cajolingly around Regina's waist. And Regina quickly smiled, mollified and deceived by Elisabeth's hypocritical expression. The girls walked up and down the bank of the stream a few more times, then settled down on the grass with their backs to Adalbert. Regina sat down first, put her arms around her raised knees and looked in front of her. Her back was slightly curved and the touching line of her shoulders sloped gently down to her arms. The moment Elisabeth sat down beside her, she took an object from her sand-coloured belt and quickly concealed it in the hand on her back. Adalbert saw the sudden glint of a small dagger.

He wanted to cry out, to shout a word of warning, but he couldn't do it. He only brought his head back with a jerk. The rocks around the green patch of meadow stood there, looking down with grey, furrowed faces. Wild, stony grimaces stared, weathered rock heads stretched out over rough shoulders ... Adalbert saw old acquaintances from his early days, the gallows birds from the Hexenstein, and knew he was surrounded by friends. They looked at him attentively and seemed to be waiting for a word from him. Suddenly, two cracked, monstrous arms detached themselves from the side of one of the crags and lifted themselves up to the head. Adalbert saw how the rocky fellow lifted his heavy head and held it suspended, as if he wanted to crush Elisabeth with it. The empty stone eyes, aware of his command, kept looking at him. But in the fear that the falling block might also kill Regina with Elisabeth, Adalbert put all the strength of the ban into his gaze. The rocky fellow shook his head a little and put it back on his shoulders.

The two girls were still sitting on the bank of the stream, seemingly engrossed in a friendly conversation. But Adalbert saw the glint of the dagger on Elisabeth's back and saw her fingers spasmodically playfully detach themselves from the hilt and close around it again. His horror was so terrible that he saw a veil descend before his eyes. Suddenly the light-coloured fabric of this veil became two blood-red, rapidly enlarging spots. Elisabeth had, by turning

raised her dagger twice into Regina's back, as if she wanted to fix something in Regina's hair. The victim's upper body slumped forwards and blood gushed out of the two wounds in gushes. Elisabeth had jumped up and was standing tall next to Regina, who had rolled to one side and was looking up at her with a horribly distorted face. Slowly, the murderess's fingers opened and the dagger fell to the ground beside her.

At that moment, the spell that had held Adalbert in place broke. He cried out, staggered and ran towards Regina, throwing himself to the ground beside her. But as his hands groped for her body, her form dissolved, melting into the air, and Adalbert saw the place where his beloved had just been lying empty. For just a second he felt as if he could still see her indistinctly, as if she had sunk a little into the ground beneath the green grass. He looked up; Elisabeth was gone too. Groaning, he rose, looked round wildly, cried out once more and then fell down unconscious.

When he regained consciousness, it was evening and the cauldron was filled with the shadows of the surrounding rocks. Adalbert's head was heavy and his thoughts were slow to return. On his knees, he tried to remember what had happened last. A terrible deed and here ... here she had been lying beside him, bleeding, her face disfigured, while the murderess stood beside her in defiant triumph. But now there was nothing left ... and there was no patch of meadow and no water ... More under someone else's will than his own consideration, Adalbert rose and tried to walk with great difficulty. Something clattered at his feet. Adalbert bent down and picked up a small dagger with a silver handle. He put the dagger in his pocket.

Across the cauldron flew a large black bird, like a shadow across the still bright sky. Following the direction of its flight, Adalbert passed a ledge of rock that concealed a narrow crevice. Here the rock cauldron had an exit, and Adalbert, who pushed his way through the narrows of the winding crevice without a second thought, reached a small plateau after a few climbing sections, which he overcame as if in a dream. The sea lay before him, and in not

He could also see the castle in the distance. On one of the smaller towers, a mighty open fire was burning under the rapidly darkening sky. It reached towards the sky with blazing arms. The castellan was standing under the portico with a servant holding a torch and seemed to be expecting Adalbert:

"Are you coming at last?" he called out towards him. "The young lady has already asked for you ten times."

"When did the young lady come back?"

"Came back? She hasn't come back ... She's been in the castle all day."

"Don't lie," Adalbert shouted, "I saw them outside, listen..."

"I'm not lying, Mr ... I was around the young lady for most of the day. She stayed in her room. Then she took a walk through the castle, stayed in the great hall for a long time, sat on the terrace with a book, but she didn't read much, I don't think, held the book in her lap and just kept looking at the sea. Towards evening she asked to be shown to her room ..."

"My room ... and what did she want?"

"I don't know. She sent me out and probably stayed in there alone for a quarter of an hour. What is the matter with you, sir? How do you look?"

"Nothing, nothing," Adalbert replied, leaning against a pillar because he felt that he could no longer stand alone.

Elisabeth was sitting at a laid table in the great hall and looked up when she heard Adalbert's footsteps. She rose quickly and went to meet him. She was wearing a marvellous gown, like an Indian queen, richly decorated with pearls and a small golden elephant on the front of her chest. The dress was transparent from her neck to her breasts, and her arms were bare, wreathed in light, fluttering veils. "You've had a good look at our island," she said, "will you always extend your walks into the night?"

Adalbert stared at her and backed away from her.

"What's wrong with you? Am I a ghost?" she smiled with a touch of self-admiration that gave Adalbert the creeps. "And what do you look like?" As Adalbert was still silent, Elisabeth suddenly snapped at the castellan, who had entered behind Adalbert: "What are you still standing there for? If I need you, I'll ring the bell." Adalbert looked after the old man; he felt as if he were facing an immense, ever-growing danger alone. He was unable to move and offered no resistance when Elisabeth took him by the arm and led him to the table. "Come," she said in a tone of mild annoyance, "why are you standing there like that? Have a glass of wine if you're not feeling well. Just don't stand there like that." Adalbert's fingers lightly touched the cool skin of Elisabeth's arm and he shivered. Elisabeth poured a dark, heavy-smelling wine from an old jug depicting a man's bearded head into the cup that stood in front of Adalbert's seat.

"Drink up!"

He drank. And he drank a second time; for no other reason than because Elisabeth wanted him to. The effect of the wine was almost instantaneous. All at once Adalbert saw objects with double sharpness and all the veils that had fallen before his senses were torn away with a jolt. He heard the surf of the sea, fuller and louder than yesterday evening, and in between a fine whistling sound, as of an incipient storm.

"The sea ... the sea," said Adalbert, pointing outwards with his arm.

"It's going to be a wild night," said Elisabeth. "Stay ... where do you want to go? To the terrace? No, stay ... and eat first."

Adalbert obeyed and ate the food that Elisabeth placed on his plate. The individual bites sank heavily into him, he felt how they accumulated inside him and increased the warmth of his body. And tormented by a sudden thirst, he drank a few more cups of the heavy, almost black wine. To his astonishment, he felt himself growing lighter. "Do you think," he said at once, looking at himself.

leant forward and looked Elisabeth firmly in the eye, "do you believe in this doubling of our bodies? Not in dreams, but when we're awake ..."

"What do you mean...?"

"I mean, do you think it's possible for a person to be in two different places at the same time?"

"How did you get such stories into your head?"

"So answer me," he shouted angrily and grabbed Elisabeth's wrist. She willingly gave him her arm and looked at him silently, her eyes flickering in a way that frightened Adalbert. Trembling, he let go of her and muttered to himself: "But no, but no ... how could such a thing be possible ... and why not? why not? if it was in a dream ..."

"Listen: I think you're sick. And I hate sick people ... I hate them. I don't want you to get sick ... I don't want it. My brother, I hate him ... he should just be beaten to death ... such an animal ..."

At that moment, a thought occurred to Adalbert. He felt incredibly clever, and it was as if this thought had been waiting for him somewhere for a long time. If he could not get Elisabeth to speak in a straightforward way, he would have to take her by surprise. By apparently changing the subject, he wanted to prepare this surprise.

"Your brother ..." he said, "I feel sorry for him. I can't help myself. And how did this actually happen ... people talk so much ... strange stuff ..." and he felt for the dagger in his pocket. It was there, it was there.

Elisabeth looked him in the face attentively at this new turn of events. Then she narrowed her eyes, reached for a plate of fruit and pulled it towards her. It seemed to Adalbert that a strange gleam flashed across her face, like a mocking smile.

"How that came about ... it's a long story. It's actually an eerie story if you like to find oddities in unusual things. People made so much nonsense back then

... that was the reason why Dad moved away from the city. I'm sure you'll have heard something about it too

... at the feast when the brother broke out."

"Nonsensical stuff ... but I think ..."

"It always depends on the connections. People are inclined to put a juxtaposition or a succession into relationships, to somehow connect them as cause and effect. By the way, it's too late and you'll be tired ... won't you? So less contemplation and more history. So I'll tell you everything side by side and one after the other and you can then find and connect relationships as you wish. So, as you may know, my father started out as a toy manufacturer. He laid the foundations for his fortune with mechanical dolls and animals. It was a favourable time for this industry. It was a new thing and you could often see that even adults, when they visited our toy stores, stopped to look at the moving things with particular pleasure. There must have been a curious playfulness in the world at that time, a remarkable lack of seriousness, an almost criminal harmlessness and an indifference to all more important matters. A few days ago I picked up a book, a cultural history of the century, whose author says something similar about that time. My father always seems to have had a good eye for the trends of the times, especially for their weaknesses. He was always very accommodating and always stood up to them. When I think back to those days, it seems to me that my father contributed a great deal to making those times so lapping and playful. Every great man, every special and mighty deed was immediately utilised by him for his industry. This impression may perhaps have been reinforced by the fact that as a child I saw these things all around me. The world in which we live as children is forever unlosable to us, and I believe that there are no experiences that equal childhood experiences in their effects. Incidentally, I myself was always afraid of my father's mechanical gadgets. These

Moving dolls and animals that mimicked life were scary to me. I didn't understand how others could find pleasure in things that horrified me. And I couldn't be persuaded to include these toys in my nursery. I preferred a lifeless doll, a dead piece of wood to the most perfect mechanism. One day, my father came to the lunch table with a pensive face, even more sullen than usual, and gave my mother, who was not yet ill at the time, no answer to her questions. It was only after much urging that he spoke in broken words about a thought that was taking up all his time. He had seen a climbing monkey at a fair in a small town he used to visit in shops. Some fairground vagabond had displayed the toy. It was a small monkey that climbed up a rope with incredible agility and life-like movements. My father was delighted with the toy and immediately wanted to buy his invention from the vagabond. But at the time, my father was still at the beginning of his career and couldn't easily pay any amount. The vagabond demanded a considerable sum, my father didn't want to spend that much, and so the two of them couldn't come to an agreement. My father went away in a huff and forgot all about the climbing monkey and his stubborn inventor. But when he remembered the toy again towards evening and, as an ingenious businessman, calculated the great profit he could make with this article, he thought to himself that it had not been clever not to pay the man the sum. He immediately ran to the market, but the stalls were closed, the alleys between them empty, only the night watchman was sleepily staggering around. Now, fearing that he might have missed something, he ran to the inn where the fairground people were staying. The vagabond was not to be found here. Father spent half the night asking at all the inns in the town and, when he had finished, went all the way round again. Nowhere did anyone know anything about the owner of the climbing monkey. My father was furious and reproached himself bitterly. 'You will see,' he said to my mum, 'that I am an excellent

I let the business out of his hand. Or ... you won't see it ... ' Suddenly he got up from the table - I can still see him in front of me - and said:

'And I will do it ... I will do it ..., this business'. You know my father. The more difficult a thing is, the more it excites him. He had set his mind on producing climbing monkeys and all his energy was focussed on this goal. My mum, who was pregnant with my brother at the time, was very unhappy about his complete immersion in this work. She had always felt the need to be the centre of attention of the whole family and to see everything around her; and she believed that her condition gave her a special right to this attention. Her father, however, locked himself in his room and often did not come out for days. Only the factory mechanics were admitted for long consultations. I was naturally curious to see what my father was up to in his room, and one day I managed to catch a glimpse of my father leaving the room and leaving the door open. There were long tables all round the walls, with tools and parts of mechanical figures, a workbench and a small stove on which some kind of porridge or glue was boiling. It smelled miserable in the closed room. And as I looked, I felt as if these things were all moving and crawling towards me ... Then my disgust became stronger than my curiosity again, the horror overwhelmed me and I ran away. My father's futile attempts lasted for weeks, he became more and more sullen and fell deeper and deeper under the spell of his desire. Once an idea has taken hold of him like this, it can escalate into a kind of madness. Even I, who saw the events around me with childlike impartiality, realised that my father was deteriorating. My mother cried about her neglect. - One fine spring day I went for a walk with the governess and came to the suburbs, where a menagerie had been set up on a large lawn between newly built houses. I kept asking until the governess went in with me. Still full of impressions, I came home and told her about the elephants, lions and monkeys. My father, who was at the

The man sitting at the table, who hadn't listened at first, pricked up his ears when I told him about the gorilla. Suddenly he jumped up, wanted to say something, but changed his mind and went out the door. The next day, some men on a cart brought a large object wrapped in cloth, a box or something like that. I looked out of the window and, as the cloths shifted a little as they were unloaded, I noticed cage bars underneath. The square thing was brought into my father's study with great care. I was beside myself, because I thought I knew for sure that there was something special and mysterious inside. That evening, in the kitchen, I learnt that my father had had a large monkey brought into the house. A female monkey, said the cook, for whom one of the men had lifted the cloth of the cage a little, and it was even more hideous than a male. He had looked at her with *such* eyes. When I asked her why her dad had brought the animal, she shrugged her shoulders. Then she suddenly pulled me close and murmured, kissing my forehead and hair countless times: 'If only no misfortune happens, if only no misfortune happens. I memorised this scene exactly because it was so unlike the nature of our Marie. She was broad-shouldered like a dragoon, had a loud, masculine voice and, as fond as she was of me, was otherwise little inclined to be affectionate. I never noticed that she muffled her voice. Even when she found fault with anything going on at home, she did it in such a way that you could hear it quite clearly outside the door and down in the yard. That's why I noticed her shy nature at the time. I think she was afraid. It wasn't long before she had infected me too. Our parlour maid helped to excite me to the extreme. She told me one evening at dusk that the monkeys were the devil's favourites. Every now and then he would choose a monkey to drive into. He used to like to drive into people, but since Christ had forbidden him to do so, he stuck to the monkeys. The next night, I heard a very loud scream. I woke up and heard another scream, followed by a prolonged howl. Now I remembered

I realised that my room was above Dad's study. That was the monkey screaming, I told myself. The governess slept with me in my room. I called her, but she didn't hear me, she was sleeping a sound English sleep. So I pulled the covers over my ears and lay awake all night. In the morning, with my fear and my excitement, I fled to my mum. She looked at me, shook her head, felt my forehead, and took my pulse; for she was cold-bloodedness personified, calm as a pillar, and attributed all mental agitations to affections of the stomach. Papa had a monkey with him; well, what was the matter, the monkey sometimes cried at night; well, perhaps he was bored, or he was dreaming of the jungle. I would also do better to sleep and dream. Now I went to mummy and began to cry out my fears. Mum already knew about it, she covered her ears and shouted: "Stop it, stop it ... I don't want to know anything about it." Now I was alone again and left to my fantasies. I lay sleepless for two more nights, always dreading the scream, but I heard nothing, only the occasional low grunt, like an animal that is letting something bother it. Finally, after almost a week, father came out of his study for the first time. He looked very poorly, as if he hadn't slept the whole time. I ran up to him and asked him to take the horrible monkey out of the house. Mum stood by and looked at Dad strangely. After a while, Dad stroked my hair and said: "Yes ... yes ... very soon ... I'll be finished soon." Then he went away again and didn't show his face for a whole day. On the second day, I was sitting in my mum's room playing. Then the cook, who always had to bring my father's food - she was only allowed to pass it through the narrow gap in the door - came in and started: "Madam, I have something to tell you." When her eyes fell on me, she approached Mum and whispered the continuation very close to her ear. Children usually observe far more keenly than adults are inclined to assume. I could see that the cook's message made a terrible impression on Mum. She fell into a kind of convulsion, but after a while composed herself and got up. So I had mum

never seen before. She stood there like a heroine. "Come on," she said, "but how..." "He forgot to lock up again today," said Marie. Then they left and, despite my fear, I crept along quietly behind them. Mum stood still for a moment in front of the door to the study, then she suddenly yanked the door open. I was still too far behind to get a look into the room. I only heard Mum let out a scream and saw her fall down a long way. The cook quickly dragged her from the threshold and threw the door shut. Now there was a commotion, people ran to and fro, endeavoured to bring her to consciousness and, when this failed, carried her to her room. The doctor came, a few hours later a strange woman. I wanted to see Mum, but they wouldn't let me see her. She was ill and needed to rest. So there were lots of strangers around Mum, because Dad didn't turn up. Two days later I learnt that I had a brother. And as if Dad had just been waiting for this moment, he came out of his study. Beaming, happy, and as I walked towards him, he picked me up and kissed me. "I've got a brother, Dad," I cried, because I took it as happily as if I had been given a long-awaited toy. He sat me down quickly, looked at me, stroked his forehead, mumbled something I didn't understand and then went to mummy. When I finally got to see my brother, I was disappointed. There was nothing to be done with such a stupid, helpless thing. I told my dad that. He comforted me and brought me a monkey that could climb up a rope. With a pride that spoke from every word and every look. But I screamed and ran away. The thing gave me even more horror than all the other mechanical toys from Dad's factory. But other people didn't think like me. Dad conquered the world market with his climbing monkeys and became a rich man thanks to this invention."

The soft, delicate whistling outside had increased to a loud roar. The wind had shifted and was sweeping waves across the open sea. Adalbert, who had conjured up the story of Elisabeth in order to

In the meantime, he had almost forgotten what he had wanted. He sat there and pondered what he had heard.

"And the monkey?" he finally asked.

"After a few years, the cook took me on her lap again at dusk. "He's dead," she said, "they killed him today." "Who's dead?" "The monkey." I shook with horror and yet felt liberated. And then I learnt that he had been buried in the garden. Then I was seized with the desire to look at the monster. I didn't sleep again for a whole night. Something urged me on, as one is often driven will-lessly towards the very horror one wants to avoid. Since then, I have come to know this attraction of horror often enough. All heroism is somewhat related to this drive. Towards morning I crept into the garden. My governess was sleeping her English slumber again and didn't hear me searching among my toys for the little spade with which I used to dig in the sand. It was still quite dark under the old trees. But I didn't have to search for long before I found the place where the monkey had been buried. It was easy to see where the earth had been freshly churned up. I went to work with my spade. They hadn't made it too difficult for me. After a few stabs, I came across an object. I threw the earth away and reached into the pit. I caught hold of a piece of hairy fur. In a fit of madness, I tugged at the thing and suddenly I produced an arm with a human-fingered hand on it. Then I screamed as if a ghost had me by the clothes, left my spade and ran away."

Adalbert drank a glass of the heavy, black wine, and the roar inside him was one with the pounding of the surf on the rocks below. Suddenly he threw the glass, which still contained some of the wine, in an arc so that it shattered on the floor, and shouted: "Why are you telling me this? ... Why? ... Why? ... What has this got to do with your brother?"

"With my brother?" Elisabeth had crossed one leg over the other and closed her hands around her knee. She looked in front of her without noticing Adalbert's bluster. "With my brother? ... He became a welcome playmate for me when he entered the happy years of drollery. But that didn't last long. In his fourth year, he had his first seizure, which ... well, you've seen it. It increased over the years, came more and more often and in the end rarely left him. He is unhappy, because I think that in his bright moments he realises his appalling misery. The doctors cannot help him. But rumours began to circulate in the town until his father decided to move the centre of his activities."

Adalbert sat slumped over with his head on his chest. Elisabeth slowly removed her hands from her knee, stood up and went out onto the terrace. There she stood on the parapet and looked out over the sea. Adalbert only saw her for brief moments, when the storm tore the dark curtain in front of a strangely illuminated sky. Then she suddenly emerged from the darkness, her veils billowing around her, so strange and not belonging to her body, as if they had grabbed the long arms of melting figures and were trying to pull her down. Now the moment had come, Adalbert thought. He quietly took the dagger out of his pocket, placed it on the table and pushed it through the tangle of plates, bowls and glasses until it was right in front of Elisabeth's seat. There was a very bright, light sound as the steel struck the ribbed base of a greenish wine goblet. For a moment, the sound hovered over the table like a small silver cloud. It was as if he had called Elisabeth. She turned and came back from the area of the storm. Her hair was dishevelled and individual strands hung tangled in her face. She took one of them and stroked it behind her ear as if caressing her. Adalbert thought of the head of Medusa, which he had once seen somewhere, and it seemed to him as if Elisabeth's hair were also living, lambent snakes, which she calmed and tamed with tender movements. He looked into her face. Her eyes were glistening. Snake tamer! he thought. Suddenly

she spotted the small dagger next to her plate. She picked it up.

"My dagger," she said, "how did it get here?"

"Your dagger?" Adalbert asked, gripping the edge of the table with both hands.

"Yes ... I've been missing him since noon. Where did you find him?" Adalbert pushed the table away from him with a jerk. It was a kind of spasm that lacked the calculation of the applied force. Just a sudden movement that released the tension in his nerves. And at the same time a manifestation of instinct that wanted to ward off imminent danger. The heavy table lifted, tilted to the other side, stood on two legs for a moment and then toppled over. All the crockery and glasses, the bowls with the remains of the meal clinked and shattered on the stone floor. Adalbert stood there, pale as the wall, and held out a hand to Elisabeth. One of the plates, which by chance had remained intact, shot out of the pile of rubble in a short arc and began to dance in circles in front of Adalbert. It whirled around a few times on the gilded rim; then its spin became flatter, and at last it came up short, to rest with a clumsy clang.

Adalbert and Elisabeth were still silently facing each other.

Suddenly she cried out: "Adalbert!" and it seemed as if she wanted to go towards him. He retreated step by step, his eyes always fixed on her face. When he reached the door, he tore it open and leapt out in a single bound. He ran through the corridors and halls, up and down the stairs, driven by a terrible fear, not knowing what he wanted.

Adalbert quickly entered his tower room, closed the door behind him and locked it. Then he groped for a chair in the dark and sat down so heavily that his feet cracked. His body was an inert mass over which his will no longer had any power. He felt that he was at the end of his strength. Now he sat in the dark, not daring to turn on the light. The storm beat against the masonry with heavy, wet wings and, as if it had rested for a moment on the platform, swung itself up with

and howled with laughter. All the gallows birds of the Hexenstein raced through the air. After a while, which Adalbert had spent as if in chaos, he felt a ray of strength and brightness. Here was salvation. Here was his protection from the horror that lurked all around him: Regina's picture. And now he was able to stand up and light the lights in the polyp's suction cups.

Then he went into the bedroom and pulled back the curtain in front of the picture. With a cry, he staggered against the bedstead, gripping the headboard with both hands and staring at the blank wall.

The picture was gone.

The nail on which it had hung was there, but the picture had disappeared. There was a red stain on the wall under the nail. He stroked the wall with trembling fingers to make sure his eyes weren't dazzled. The red stain felt damp, and when Adalbert looked at his fingers, he found them red in colour. Blood? ... Wasn't that blood on his fingers? ... Blood in the place where the picture had hung? ... Adalbert threw himself down on the bed, half-mad with fear. He lay there panting, as if after a terrible rush ... his gaze fixed on the ceiling, where the night stared above the glass panels. He was completely deprived of his senses, and it seemed only right to him that the night had a round, black eye, with whose unwavering gaze it held him. Suddenly life came into this eye ... a whitish veil with green veins pushed itself forward ... and pressed itself firmly against the glass pane of the eye ... but it wasn't a veil, it was a toad's belly, whitish, with green veins ... a toad's belly that pressed itself against the glass pane.

And suddenly he regained some of his senses. The thing above him was not in the eye of the night, but he was in his tower room, and had the glass panes of the roof above him ... and what was pressing itself against the panels outside was the most terrible of all night creatures ... the storm toad ...

The storm toad ...!

He got up and ran away ... the key of his door turned heavily in the lock, desperately he used all his strength, finally tore the door open and raced along the stairs and corridors ... to her ...

To her!

She had to save him ... a brightness enveloped him, he saw the curtain in front of him, reached wildly into the folds and rushed into Elisabeth's room ... Breathless, blind, he stood there, still holding on to the folds of the curtain.

In front of him, at the edge of the sarcophagus, sat Elisabeth ... naked ...

For a moment Adalbert heard a shout: Back! A loud, shrill call, and it had such an effect on him that he made a movement to turn away. But then Elisabeth raised her arms, he saw the little tufts of blonde hair under her armpits, he saw the trembling of her breasts ...

"Come on," she said.

A flame shot through him, and the storm of a terrible impulse made him stagger. Blindly he rushed forward and clutched her bare thighs.

"I knew you would marry me in grey," said Elisabeth, leaning over him so that her hair fell on his shoulders.

"You played for my mind ... you played for my mind," Adalbert shouted.

"And have won your sweet body ..."

Adalbert felt Elisabeth's thighs pressing against him. He fell upon her fragrant flesh with wild kisses, burrowing his head into her lap ...

Elisabeth pulled him up, wrapped herself tightly around him and then sank with him in a firm embrace into Queen Omphale's sarcophagus, which was filled with soft cushions and precious blankets ...

Part two.

Journey to hell

[Table of contents](#)

Two enemies approach. Sea and woman. Elisabeth receives a visitor

[Table of contents](#)

The death of the young Behrens caused some inconvenience. While the whole town was filled with fabulous stories about the engagement party at Bezugs's house, the murder of the factory owner was too close for anyone not to want to connect the two events in some way. Had he also been at the Bezugs party? Certainly, he had been there.

People were looking for any motive that might have arisen from this celebration. One rumour claimed - it could be traced with some certainty to the vicinity of Frau Herold - that Behrens had not been murdered, but had killed himself. Why? It was whispered mysteriously that Elisabeth's wondrous, magical attraction had also taken effect on him, and that he had preferred death to a life destroyed by hopeless passion.

He thus became a martyr of love for all backfish, and the "Illustrierte Tageskurier", which featured his picture on the front page, had to organise three editions in the course of the day.

Now they also had an unconstrained explanation for Elisabeth's departure. Although she was blameless and had not encouraged the young man - or had she encouraged him? - she wanted to blur the gloomy impression of the deed by changing places and distractions. That was why she did not take the bridegroom with her. After all, it was strange that she had another young man to accompany her instead of him. And here, at this corner, a different view of the matter emerged. Elisabeth was not as blameless as one was inclined to believe. She was one of the great coquettes, and a certain circle, centred around Doctor Störner, claimed that she should have been born during the Roman Empire in order to fully develop her talents. She was

dangerous, and were all too aware of their power to be acquitted if they had caused a disaster.

The press left the question of Elisabeth's guilt untouched and, under Herold's leadership, fought steadfastly in favour of the view that Behrens had died by suicide.

Despite all this, a counter-opinion could not be quelled, insisting stubbornly and with a certain malice that Behrens had been murdered. It was a gloomy chorus that finally forced the authorities to do something. There were several interrogations and recordings, a whole host of witnesses were summoned, and Bezug and Hainx also had to give their accounts. Then, after public opinion was believed to have been satisfied, the matter was forgotten.

During this time, Bezug displayed a nervousness and haste that was otherwise quite alien to him, and some believed that this change in demeanour was connected with the murder affair. Others, however, linked this nervousness to the third major event, which had an effect at the same time as the other two: the discovery that Bezug had a mad son. This circumstance shifted the image of Bezug in the eyes of the public. The billionaire also had to bear his human suffering. What good was the money ...? And even those who had previously feared and hated Bezug began to pity him a little.

They were right. The main cause of his unrest was concern for his son. There were other things too: the trouble with the authorities made him disgruntled, Hecht was grumpy and seemed inclined to be indignant, the negotiations with Behrens' uncle were not going smoothly. But above all it was the agony of not being able to help his son.

"I've avoided seeing him for years," he said to Hainx. I need my peace and stability; I can't let myself be shaken by the sight of him every day. And that was good. But since I saw him

again ... it's ... it's terrible. What should I do? What should I do?"

He could not come to Agathe with such complaints, for she fell into convulsions at the first word. And even if her condition had allowed it, he would have refused to come to her; he had accustomed her and himself to appear before her as a man of stone and iron, and his main concern was to maintain the faith of others in his strength.

Hainx marvelled at his master's sometimes sudden lack of strength. In the midst of work that required acumen and presence of mind, after rehearsals of unweakened mastery of all things, Bezug would suddenly slump, and it was as if he was listening somewhere. His attention was focussed on a faint sound that sometimes became audible, a very distant and muffled noise coming from the depths of the house. This absorption could last for quarters of an hour, then it was as if he woke up, straightened up and continued his work at the exact point where he had interrupted it.

But nobody knew that Bezug also spent hours at night pacing up and down his room and sitting up in bed to listen to the terrible shrieking that reached him despite all the soundproof walls and doors.

He had Richard report to him every morning. And his report was always the same: there was no change in the young gentleman's condition. Richard was followed by the court counsellor, the head of the psychiatric department, who had been in charge of Arnold's treatment for some time. His report, although clearer and embellished with a few expert expressions, was no different from that of the servant.

One morning, however, Richard arrived with such a strange, disturbed expression that Bezug immediately noticed. He got up and went to meet him. "What is it ... what is it?" he cried, taking him by the wrist and shaking him.

Richard, who otherwise never lost his composure or presence of mind, was unable to speak.

"So talk ...", Bezug shouted fiercely.

"Gracious sir ... gracious sir!"

"Like what?"

"The young gentleman has come round ... it's as if he was quite sensible."

"What is he doing?"

"He is quite calm and looks in front of him ... and looks so pale and miserable ... He also talks quite sensibly. He wants to speak to the gracious Lord."

"Me?"

"Yes!"

"What does he want?"

"I don't know."

"Come on ..."

But Richard stopped in the middle of the room and made no move to follow his master. "Sir!" he said when he had already reached the door.

"So forwards ... what do you want?"

"I would like to ask the gracious Lord to release me ..."

"Dismissed ... why?"

"If the gracious Lord does not want to send me back to the castle, then I would rather leave completely ... out of the service I mean ... completely ..."

"Are you crazy?"

"I can't watch that! ... when he rages and screams, that yes ... that still ... but not when he sits there like that ... I can't do that ..."

"We'll see ... Come on now ..."

And Richard, after a brief resistance, returned to his usual obedience and walked behind his master to the iron-bound door, which he opened with a small Vexi key. The anteroom was completely dark. But the small room behind it was not very bright either, as a high wall opposite the only window did not let much of the light of the dull day into the room. The simple but comfortable

Furniture was fixed to the floor, a table, several chairs and cupboards, two sofas ... all anchored by iron clamps and screws and therefore strangely motionless and rigid, as if dead. But the strangest thing were the swings hanging from the ceiling, long ropes with rings or crosspieces. And in one corner, a climbing tree that was completely worn down from use.

At the barred window, Bezugs's son sat on a low chair, bent forward so that his lowered head almost touched his raised knees; his hands hung limply down along his body to the floor. Next to Arnold sat the dog, who now, at the entrance of the two, rose up growling and with stiff legs and glittering eyes seemed ready to pounce on the enemy.

Bezug heard the servant's loud, panting breath behind him and took a step forwards. Only now did Arnold raise his head. "Father ...!" he said and stood up slowly. It was as if his joints were badly put together, because he buckled several times and only managed to stand up completely when he was holding on to the wall. Bezug tried to help him, but at the first movement the dog jumped forward and showed his bare teeth. At last Arnold was face to face with his father. "Back off, Barry," he said; the dog obeyed reluctantly and moved to the side, where it stood irresolutely, its eyes wandering between its master and the enemy.

"What do you want from me, Arnold?" asked Bezug; despite his horror, Richard realised that he had never heard that tone in his master's voice before.

"Father," said Arnold, "I have something to ask you." The words came out very slowly; it was as if Arnold had to form them with great difficulty. His articulation was muffled and guttural, like that of a mute who has had an operation to give them speech.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for you..."

"Then I beg you ..." Arnold staggered forwards and took his father's hand ... "then I beg you, let me die." Bezug saw his son's face close before him, saw the whitish, pale skin, the

his bloody, scratched forehead and the crazy gleam in his eyes. His hands squeezed his father's hand with terrible strength.

After a short silence, Bezug said, and he also seemed to find it difficult to form words: "Anything you want, my child, but I can't do that ..."

"I beg you, I beg you ... let me die. What kind of life is this? Am I a human being? Today I walk and talk like another ... and tomorrow perhaps still and the day after tomorrow ... but then it will come again ... again ... you don't have to kill me yourself, just leave me a knife or give me a pistol ... I want to do that myself ... I could also ... with the rope ... not true ... but I'm afraid of the rope ..."

Richard, who was standing behind the cover and had his hands clenched so tightly that it hurt him, saw how his shoulders began to twitch and his whole body swayed from side to side. Now the father bent down to his son, who had thrown himself on his knees before him, and said, "No ... you poor fellow ... you shall not die ... you shall live ... there is one who can help you ... I will do it, I will go to him, for you ... for you I will do it. You will get well ..."

With a kiss on the forehead, Bezug picked up his son.

Arnold smiled bleakly. It was a terrible smile, just a distortion of that devastated, disfigured face. "No, father ... no," he said, "I can't be helped after all. Let me die," and then he suddenly cried out, "don't torture me any longer."

"I don't want to torture you, you'll get better ..."

"Oh, you'll just keep torturing me; and I won't get better after all; I can't believe it ..."

"I will tell you what is written on the house of the man who will help you: 'Believe the miracle' is written over his door ... Believe the miracle, my poor fellow; you will get well. Surely you will get well."

Arnold had taken a step back again; Barry, realising the moment, pushed himself protectively in front of him again. "Father," said Arnold, "if you know a man who can help me, why didn't you call him to me long ago? Why not?" he repeated again, almost threateningly, and a blush rose to his pale face.

Bezug was silent for a while. "Because I ... I've ..." and after a pause he said hastily, "I've only just met him ... only now ..." He tried to approach Arnold once more, but Barry growled again and showed his teeth. Arnold sank onto the low chair by the window, as suddenly as if his joints had lost their support.

"Go now," he said, waving his hand.

"I'm going to see him today ... I'm going and you'll get better." Arnold just shook his head wearily.

At dusk that day, Bezug made his way to Eleagabal Kuperus. At the door of the old house, Hainx, who had accompanied him, said emphatically once more: "Be careful, he hates you ..."

"I've made my plans," Bezug said and dropped the knocker.

"By the way, inform the oath keepers. If I'm not back in an hour, get me out."

The door opened, Bezug entered and was led into the large room with the glass dome by the servant with the wolf's head. The servant stood wordlessly behind the visitor, but Bezug knew that his every move was being watched ... After a few minutes of waiting, Bezug turned round: "Where is your master?"

Wordlessly, the servant pointed to the opposite wall. Eleagabal Kuperus stood there and looked at him in silence. His large, yellow tusks were protruding and his rigid face resembled a mask. Bezug also stood motionless, endeavouring to suppress a feeling that made him self-conscious and weak: the feeling that his enemy was superior to him. It was not fear, it was only a feeling of unease that he cursed angrily. Eleagabal Kuperus went to the marble table

under the large dome and dismissed the servant. Then he said: "L e t ' s sit down, Mr Bezug."

With quick steps, Bezug came to the table, pulled up a chair and sat down. Without saying a word, he took the revolver out of his pocket and placed it in front of him. "What are you doing?" asked Kuperus and the tusks came out again.

"I know you hate me, and I just want to show you that I've provided for myself, in case it should occur to you ... and then I just want to tell you that if I'm not back in an hour, my people will come for me. I can rely on my people."

Kuperus nodded: "I know it ... they are probably the same ones who murdered young Behrens ... reliable fellows ..."

Bezug rose from his seat, his hand closed around the grip of the revolver. "Leave it alone," said Kuperus, "I just want to show you that I don't hate you. Because I could hurt you if I wanted to. But I don't. Do I hate you, then? I want to tell you something - I want nothing more than for hatred to disappear from the world!" Kuperus looked his visitor so calmly and openly in the face that he cast his eyes down and stood there undecided. It was impossible to doubt that look. Kuperus spoke the truth, and Bezug had nothing to say to him. That he hated him nevertheless and hated him precisely because Kuperus pretended to know nothing about hatred - no, not pretended, but really didn't know ... he couldn't tell him that. Perhaps he didn't even need to tell Kuperus ... perhaps he knew all that ... After a minute he looked up again.

"Let's sit down," said Kuperus, gesturing towards the chair. "Let's sit down and talk about what brings you to me."

In the meantime, Bezug had come to a decision. He let his hand fall hard on the marble slab: "You are playing the great man, Kuperus, and want to embarrass me. But you shall not experience the triumph of my disguising myself before you. It is not wise of me, for it may be that I ... enough, but that shall not happen, that you should say that Thomas Bezug has played comedy before me to make me friendly.

I am in tune. I despise you ... listen ... I despise you with your love of mankind ... For these beasts deserve nothing but hatred ... I despise you! What have you achieved with all your arts? Nothing. No one listens to you ... there you sit in your hole, but I am on my way to rule the whole world ... and even if you refuse to help me now; I hate you ..."

Bezug had gone pale, his eyes were deep and a dangerous fire was playing in them. He leant back in his chair and the fingers of his hand glided searchingly over the marble of the table. It took him a while to realise that he couldn't find what he was looking for. Suddenly he jumped up from his seat with a cry and stared at the table. The revolver that had been lying in front of him was gone.

Kuperus smiled. It seemed as if all the brightness of the vast space was concentrated on his face.

"Pickpocket!" shouted Bezug.

Kuperus did not stop smiling. The yellow tusks were all over the venerable full beard. "When you leave," he said, "my servant will give you back your weapon at the exit."

"I didn't come here to have you do silly tricks for me."

"I know it. But don't despise these things. They are not mere gimmicks; for I do not play with the laws of nature, which also govern these things. I only want you to see that I have not renounced hatred out of weakness."

Bezug looked wildly around him. Then he threw himself back into the chair and was silent for a few minutes.

"You have come," said Kuperus at last, "to question me about your son."

"So you know? You know..." muttered Bezug.

"I know it. But, listen, Bezug, before we talk any further, I have to tell you one thing. The man who used to be your son's carer ..."

"He will not escape me. I will reach him ..."

"You will have to refrain from punishing him. Weithofer was with me and asked for my protection. I promised him I would protect him."

"You won't succeed."

"I will succeed, because you will promise me not to persecute him. I know the story of Emma Rößler and I tell you that I will not allow a second such story. I know that no one is too small for your hatred. But you see how hatred only breeds hatred again. You paid the man who had to look after your son a princely sum. And yet he betrayed you and left you, why do you think? The man served you for years. You made him a rich man. And yet? Why do you think he did that? Did you not feel how his hatred of you grew from one day to the next? Shouldn't he have been grateful to you?"

"I think he had every reason to."

"Really? And where was he supposed to get gratitude from? Didn't you turn his life into a life of imprisonment for years? You paid him handsomely for it. But isn't that what must have outraged him? With your money you succeeded in blinding him to such an extent that he no longer saw that what he gave up was far more than what he gained in return. He had to renounce the sun, the light and freedom, the man was married and had two children. Both died on him and he could not be there when they died, nor when they were buried. Because he was in your service, day and night. He was quite fond of your unfortunate son, as fond as one can be of a person who doesn't have too much of a human being in him ... I don't want to hurt you, but it has to be said. But he could have endured all this if you had shown him a little love. But you kept your son hidden from the world for no other reason than hatred, yes. Not out of hatred for your son, but out of hatred for the world. You did not want this world, which hates you, to know that your power and glory are not without abyss. Whence

once he had realised all this, should he gain anything against you but hatred? Before we talk any further, you must assure me that you will not persecute Weithofer."

After a short silence, Bezug said: "Good ... I promise you ..." He said it without looking up.

Kuperus nodded: "And now tell me what you want from me?"

"If you already know everything ..." said Bezug, running the flat of his hand over the marble slab as if he wanted to wipe something away.

"Just speak ... it is necessary that you speak."

A few words came with difficulty: "My son ... is ... ill ... has been for many years. You know ... how ill he is ... nobody can help him, nobody, no doctor is able to ... it's terrible ... when he comes to and realises his misery, that's terrible. Only you can save him ..." Suddenly something strange happened. Bezug's hand, which had been stroking the marble incessantly, began to tremble as Bezug leant back in his chair and closed his eyes in silence. Now the trembling from his hand travelled down his arm, spread to his whole body and tossed him to and fro until Bezug jumped up with a muffled sound. He took two steps towards Kuperus, stopped with a jerk and held on to the edge of the table. "You must save him," he shouted, "you must save him ... listen, Kuperus, save him ... save him ..."

Kuperus also stood up. "You love him, you love him," he said quietly, shaken.

A wondrous play of colours shone down from the high glass sphere, a mild, white glow, muted by softer rosy tones. Bezug stood with his head bowed and his arms hanging down. "You can do it ... if you want to, you can save him ..."

"I want to do it, Bezug, but whether I can do it, I don't know. But I want a reward for it, because I've learnt so much that you can't do anything for nothing to great merchants. I, too, have someone to save from

You, reference ... Will you release a prisoner whom you have shamefully bound?"

"Who do you mean?"

Step by step, Kuperus thought. It runs deep. As I'm about to name a price, he realises that he's not being taken advantage of. He is firmly in his circle. Then he said: "I mean Adalbert Semilasso."

"You want me to release it?"

"Yes, Adalbert Semilasso. His disgrace has lasted long enough!"

"And you want me to release him immediately?"

"Yes."

"Will my son be saved straight away?"

"I don't ... know!"

"What do I have to do with him?"

"I have read that he will recover at sea. The immensity of the horizons may well do the most after the terrible loneliness. But I also read that it will be good to give a woman influence over him."

"The sea and the woman ..." said Bezug thoughtfully, "that may be ... And he will be saved ...?"

"That's how I read it. He will be saved, the only salvation for him is at sea. You have enough ships on all the seas. Take one of them and treat the unfortunate man to the sight of the eternal, shining sea ..."

Bezug straightened up: "Yes!" he said, "yes!"

"And Adalbert Semilasso?"

Blinking, he replied, adopting a businessman's expression: "I'm releasing him until I return with my son ..."

The spark seems to have gone out, thought Kuperus, but I know it's there, smouldering under the ashes. "So we are united ..."

"I'll do as you advised: the sea and the woman ... good. And then, when Arnold is well, I'll release your Adalbert Semilasso." Reference had straightened up: on the basis of a solid

business, his strength returned. "Thank you," he said briefly and turned to leave, while Eleagabal looked after him with the smile of a winner.

The mute servant with the wolf's face stood at the front door and gave Bezug back his revolver with a bow. The door slid silently shut behind Bezug. Rudolf Hainx approached him from the shadows of the houses opposite, a watch in his hand. "There are still ten minutes to the hour," he said, "in ten minutes we'd have smashed the door down."

"Listen," Bezug said, taking Hainx by the wrist and squeezing it, "he'll be saved."

"I don't trust the old man."

"He speaks the truth ... I know it, he speaks the truth ..."

"You believe him?"

"I believe him. Tomorrow telegraph to the captain of the *Regina maris* that he is getting ready, order a separate train for the day after tomorrow, we are leaving."

"With Arnold?"

"With him! And then ..."

"You may have forgotten that you promised Professor Hartl a week of idyllic solitude. The poor woman is looking forward to it. Remember, you sent the man to Abyssinia." Hainx looked terrible at that moment. The light of the lantern fell on him from above and cut diagonally across his face. While the upper part was in shadow under the brim of the hat, the lower part was the black cavern of an open mouth.

Bezug stopped and looked at him: "Shut up," he said, "what do you mean? I'm talking about getting my son back, and you're telling me about this woman ... By the way," he continued thoughtfully after a few steps, "you could ... no ... she's certainly not the right one ... certainly not ... you have to think of someone else ..."

As they walked across the cathedral square, the two men were silently followed by a number of dark figures emerging from the side alleys.

and the shadow of the front door. Now, as Bezug and Hainx turned towards the stone staircase in front of the cathedral portal, several more men approached them from the thick darkness behind the Gothic pillars. Two men suddenly rose from behind the pedestals of the statues of saints at the end of the staircase. Bezug saw himself surrounded by ten to twelve of his oath keepers. As one of them took a step towards Bezug, Hainx said: "Oh ... I almost forgot, Zareck has made a nice discovery. He doesn't seem to love our famous Adalbert very much. Now he has found out, I don't know how, that Nella is our Adalbert's sister."

The discoverer, who had expected his message to have a special effect, was astonished to see that this effect failed to materialise and that the words slipped past him. With a blank look he glanced over Hainx and the oath-keepers, then he said, as if only this one word had awakened a sound in him: "Nella ..." and hastily he continued: "Nella ... yes ... she ... she ... it may be her ... certainly it is her ... Nella ... what her nature is ..." He turned to the crowd that surrounded him reverently at a distance: "It's fine ... go home now."

While the men, one disappointed man in the centre, moved silently behind the cathedral, Bezug and Hainx went down the stairs. On the bottom step, Bezug stopped again: "And one more thing, Hainx, you will inform Nella that she will embark with us on the *Regina maris*. Do you understand? You will compensate the director for the time she is absent."

Hainx wanted to ask Mrs Hartl a question, as he couldn't find any connections between the orders from Bezugs, and she was pestering him, the bearer of the messages from Bezugs, with requests every day. But he remained silent, for he felt that it was not now appropriate to come to his master with things he did not want to hear about.

In the morning, Bezug brought his son the news that they would be setting off on a journey the very next day, that a ship would be taking them out to sea. Arnold, who had been sitting on the chair by the window almost exactly as he had been the day before when his father entered, the dog

looked up, looked his father in the face, then shook his head and leaned against the wall. "What are you doing? Can that help me? I know I can't be helped."

"He said it, Arnold, and he speaks the truth ..."

When Bezug, accompanied by Richard, came to the door, he asked how his son was. He learnt that Arnold had spent the whole of yesterday calmly and had also lain quietly in his bed during the night. Of course, Richard could not say whether he had slept.

A little later, Mrs Agathe also found out about the planned journey. She began to moan that she was being abandoned by everyone and that she could perish here without anyone looking after her. Bezug looked at her mockingly: "Do you fancy getting seasick?"

"No, for God's sake, no." She had forgotten about the seasickness, but she didn't want to travel at all, she just wanted to have someone around her to complain to. The new cure she had started a few days ago - she had returned to the old wives in repentance - was not really working. The dead frogs, which, overcoming her disgust, she had tied round her body in an envelope, did not restore her health. "I suggest that you send for your son-in-law; he will pass the time a little," said Bezug.

But Agathe felt that Hecht treated her with too little respect. He was always grumpy; and his deceitful malice, she claimed, only made her sicker. Shrugging her shoulders, Bezug moved away, and he bade her farewell with the same gesture the next day when she renewed her complaints. He had asked her if she wished to see her son before she left. Agathe, who had half sat up on her sofa, immediately fell back in horror. "No, no," she cried, holding her hands in front of her face, "you want to kill me."

"But I'm telling you that he's quite reasonable, you won't see anything terrible."

"The mere sight of him upsets me. I can't, I can't, what an unhappy mother I am, not hug my child

to be able to. But it's impossible. I can't do it."

Bezug picked up his son, who was still fully conscious and had shown no signs of his madness returning. Arnold stood in the middle of the room, ready to go. As they went out, Barry pushed his way between Arnold and the servant who was following him. He stood in front of his master, looked him straight in the face and twitched his tail a few times excitedly. The expression of expectation, which was already close to despair, was so clear that Bezug asked: "I suppose he wants to come with you? - Do you want to take him with you?"

"He's the only one who never ..." Arnold interrupted himself and bent down to Barry: "Come with me, Barry!"

In unbridled joy, Barry jumped up at his master, ran ahead, turned back, circling round Arnold again and again with a short bark. From time to time he bumped the young man's drooping hand with his wet muzzle. Not a word was said about Mrs Agathe.

As Arnold was behaving so well and seemed to be getting better, no special precautions had been taken in his carriage. The separate train consisted of only three carriages, one of which was intended for the luggage and servants, the second as a sleeping compartment, while the third, built in the style of the American carriages, was extremely comfortable for staying in during the day. Bezug sat down opposite his son at the window and tried to start a conversation. Arnold, however, was monosyllabic and introverted and only occasionally gave short and self-conscious answers. Nevertheless, they were so composed that Bezug was astonished to see from them that Arnold was not ignorant despite his misfortune. In his earlier youth, when the attacks of his illness had been less frequent and less violent, the breaks had been used to teach him the rudiments of schooling. At that time he had learnt to read and write, and it seemed that in the following years of his incarceration he had not read the few books found in his cells without benefit. The best thing about him was probably a rich imagination, which could form vivid and pictorial pictures of all things, even if he had not yet seen them.

ideas. So it happened that the astonishment at all the new things that Bezug had expected failed to materialise. While Bezug spoke to him and gave him explanations for everything they saw from the speeding train, Arnold looked out of the window, nodded from time to time and said a few words to show that he understood everything perfectly well. Even the hustle and bustle of the city, which he saw on the journey to the southern station in Vienna, did not confuse him, although one could see that it did not pass him by and that it did not leave him indifferent. At the Südbahnhof, a second separate train, arranged in the same way, was waiting for him and the journey could be continued immediately.

As dusk fell, Bezug noticed a strange restlessness in his son. He began to shift back and forth in his seat, glancing anxiously at his father and then repeatedly at a particular spot in the opposite corner of the compartment. After a while he stood up, paced back and forth a few times, and then stood facing the open window with his back to his father. Bezug realised that he was opening his waistcoat and collar. When he turned back to Bezug, he looked distraught, his face distorted and ashen with terrible fear, something strange struggling to take control of him. His breathing was heavy and, gasping, he dropped back to his former position. Barry, who had been lying all day in a corner of the carriage, rose, came to his master, and, looking intently into his face, laid his pointed head on his convulsively compressed knees. Now it seemed that Arnold had become apathetic to any efforts at conversation. He made no more reply, and, laying his hand on his dog's head, stared into the gradually growing darkness outside the windows.

Exhausted by the efforts to build bridges between himself and Arnold, Bezug rose and went to the neighbouring ward where Rudolf Hainx had spent the day without it having been deemed necessary to summon him.

"Come inside now," said Bezug, "I'm at the end of my tether. Give me a hand. I don't want him to start brooding again."

"What about him?"

"I think well. But now it seems that he's starting to think about his misfortune again. That must not be. It makes him desperate and ... that is not to be seen. You know ... this poor man is not a stupid, indifferent idiot, but a clever and capable spirit, it seems. That I should have to see all this now! And perhaps he would be an heir to my reign ... Come! You are lively and agile and will rouse him ... I think he lacks the impressions of the day, the night is ... come."

Hainx followed him into the next compartment, but they looked round in vain for Arnold. At last Barry, his head raised, whimpering softly, pointed them in the right direction. There was Arnold, lying on top of the luggage net, squeezed under the ceiling of the carriage in a terrible crooked position, clutching one of the iron support bars with one hand and looking through the meshes of the net at the men. His eyes had the strange glow that is found in the eyes of animals, a greenish glassy glow, and the mixture of fear and anger that characterised their expression was also animalistic. Bezug stood, trembling in every limb, and had lost all vigour in his muscles, so that the shaking of the carriage threw him to and fro without resistance. But Hainx, who was standing beside him, shouted loudly and vehemently in a commanding tone: "Come down at once and behave yourself sensibly! What kind of ideas are these?"

Arnold then moved a little on his bed, sighed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the animalistic green glamour had disappeared; the expression had changed to horror. Slowly the hand released its convulsive grip, and with awkward movements Arnold climbed down to sit down immediately in his former place. He was very pale and didn't say a word, even when Hainx endeavoured to start an impartial conversation. Not a syllable was uttered about what had happened, but the horror lay over the three of them, and also over Hainx's ideas, so that they seemed dull and colourless.

At last Bezug rose and suggested that he should go to bed. When Arnold had closed the door of his ward behind him, Hainx held Bezug back and, moving towards the door, made the gesture of turning the key. "There's no lock," Bezug whispered, "the doors can only be locked from the inside."

"Then we must keep watch. I'm afraid he'll hurt himself otherwise ..."

Hainx and Bezug each stayed awake for half a night. But nothing stirred in Arnold's cabin. Towards morning - the train had travelled more slowly during the night, so that they only reached Trieste after daybreak - Bezug opened the guarded door. He found it unlocked. Arnold lay dressed on the bed and immediately opened his eyes. "Are we there yet?" he asked.

"We're about to drive in."

An impatience seemed to come over Arnold, like a sick person who knows the longed-for cure is close at hand and is still being held back from using it.

"Is this the sea?" he asked disappointedly, as they were rowed through the narrow waterways of the harbour on the *Regina maris* boat. Bezug saw that a hope had arisen in his son, a hope that seemed so stormy and wild that it horrified his father no less than the sick man's despair had earlier. It was clear that the belief had taken root in the young man that a glance at the sea would be enough to make him well. How was Bezug to reduce this hope to its possible level without making him suspicious? Only now did Bezug think he understood Eleagabal Kuperus. It was not some mystical influence, but quite natural forces that would save Arnold.

The sick man impatiently awaited the ship's departure. He saw the neighbouring sailors weigh anchor, hoist the sails and leave the harbour. Every now and then a steamer would pass in the distance, at first still travelling slowly, a thick cloud of smoke above the funnel, which grew longer and longer the faster the steamer progressed, and which finally drifted behind as a narrow black band.

"Why aren't we travelling yet?" he turned to the captain.

"We're expecting someone else."

Arnold was most delighted by the colourful pennants that had been hoisted in honour of the Lord. He looked up the masts into the confusing tangle of ropes, and when a sailor climbed up the rope ladder to the first yard before his eyes, he took hold of one of the ropes as if to test its strength. But he immediately let it go in fright, for he had become aware of his desire to do as the sailor had done. The ship remained in the harbour for most of the day. At last the boat that had left with Hainx at noon came back. Next to Hainx sat a lady in a white dress.

"Pull yourself together," Hainx said to Nella when they got close to the ship.

"And what does he want from me?"

"I don't know. He'll tell you himself. Just remember, the sick man is his son."

Nella received an unfriendly greeting from Bezug. "You took your time. That one always has to wait for you women."

She humbly apologised: "I had to make preparations ..."

"If you had hurried, you could have been there this morning. On the scheduled train, almost at the same time as us."

Arnold was standing not far from those who had arrived. Nella saw him between the reference and the captain, and she immediately sympathised with him. What Hainx had told her of his life was so horrible that every other misfortune disappeared beside it. The nature of his madness was so hideous, his appearance spoke so clearly of the agony he had undergone; she was determined to help him as much as she could.

Before dinner, while Nella was toileting in her cabin, there was a knock at her door. She recognised Bezug's voice, quickly took a cloth over her bare shoulders and hurried to open it, for she knew her master's impatience and feared it. Bezug entered, looked at Nella scrutinisingly, and when she hesitated to continue her toilet in front of him, he said commandingly: "Forward." Nella let the scarf slide down and, shivering, stepped in front of the

Mirror. Wincing, she realised that she was being approached from behind and fell into the excitement she was never spared when her master raped her with caresses. She felt a fleeting kiss on the back of her neck and shuddered. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she turned and looked at him fearfully. The smouldering salt lake eyes showed flames at the bottom: "Beast," he said, "you still haven't learnt? Still haven't ..." Bezug forced something down, and then continued in a different tone, almost flattering: "You are beautiful ... yes, you are beautiful ... that's good ... don't be afraid of me, I didn't make you come for me. Not for me. But for him. Hainx will have told you everything. So don't laugh at him ..."

"I'm not laughing. I pity him."

"Good, that's good. And you'll do anything for him. Everything! Do you understand?"

"I want to make an effort for him."

"Good ... good. And when you're finished, come into the dining room."

The sea was a little choppy, and as the ship left the harbour, the swaying set in, that rhythmic rocking that gives a feeling of perfect bliss when it doesn't cause seasickness. The captain, who had taken a seat next to Bezug, joked with Nella after he had overcome his initial awkwardness in his master's company. Encouraged by Bezug, who was keen to get a cheerful conversation going, he described the horrors of seasickness in vivid colours. His life brought him little to do with women, the orders of reference often made him available for scientific expeditions, and once he saw women on his ship, his deepest powers were stirred. Of course, no woman came close to Elisabeth, for whom he retained a wild and consuming passion, a dormant lightning bolt of immense power. Today he was extremely happy. A woman was sitting next to him whose beauty did not come close to Elisabeth's, but still made him lively and cheerful. And then Bezug had told him on the way out that he should first call at Antothrace, where Bezug wanted to visit his daughter. So it was

There was hope of seeing Elisabeth. His soul trembled like a tense string touched by a gentle finger. Rudolf Hainx, who had been standing by when Bezug gave the captain his orders, had not missed the happy glow that flashed across the captain's face at the mention of the island. He observed his behaviour suspiciously and turned his malice on the unsuspecting man.

"The sea either makes you very happy or very unhappy," he said when the captain had finished his description of seasickness. "It either gives you the full peace of comfort in clear weather and the feeling of flying in a storm, or it plunges you into the hell of illness. By the way," and here he turned to the captain, "I count this seasickness among the many ghosts that have come into the world through fear."

He was encouraged to continue by an astonishment mingled with unspoken questions, and Hainx did so, taking his fork at the extreme end between two fingers and swaying it slightly to and fro, as if to mockingly imitate the manner of certain officious teachers: "You see, I believe that this seasickness is a malicious invention of sailors. It may be that here and there someone is particularly prone to it. There are sensitive people who really can't stand the motion of the ship. Good! But the sailors, who are hostile to us because of an unacknowledged antipathy to land people, have exaggerated the matter in their delight. And there is another thing. Those who have survived a danger tend to portray it as horribly as possible afterwards. So it is with those who have survived seasickness. So ... all this, I beg you, must be terribly upsetting to anxious minds worried about their salvation. They come onto the ship, trembling with fear, and watch for any stirring of their insides to see if the ghost is already there. What happens? The seasickness is really coming ... It's just like epidemics and infectious diseases. Those who are afraid of them really do get them. Seasickness is one of the spectres that haunt the sea. There is some truth to it, just as there is to the

Sea serpent and a lot of invention ... by the way," he interrupted himself with a smile, lowering his fork, "I'm sure our captain has seen the sea serpent somewhere before."

The captain, who was unfamiliar with the fencing skills of pointed dialogue, also missed the malicious direction of the question. Incidentally, Hainx was not particularly satisfied with himself; he found himself weak and feeble, and not particularly skilful or lucky in attacking in an area he knew next to nothing about. But what was he supposed to do about the captain? It was difficult to attack with scepticism and scorn someone armoured with unshakeable convictions. The captain looked at his master and then at Nella and said: "The sea serpent ... no, I haven't seen the sea serpent yet. I had an old sailor ... he died last year. And he saw it himself. He travelled between Hong Kong and Hawaii for twenty years, and he saw it once. But there are no sea serpents here in our sea. That's from the Venetian times. They drove them away. Because they were here then too. And once it came up near Crete, and there was a terrible tidal wave on all the Aegean islands and on the African coast ..."

"Great," said Hainx, and he wanted to say something else, but he **c o u l d** see by the look on his face that he didn't want the captain to be interrupted.

"You can read that in very old books. And it also says how the Venetians helped themselves. They sank a large cross into the sea in the area of Crete where the sea serpent came up. The cross was so enormous that it was carried there by four galleys. Each end was on a galley. And when the galleys were in the right place, they simply rowed away from each other and the cross fell into the sea. For three months the sea was bloody, and they found scraps of flesh as far as Jaffa."

"So our sea has been cleaned up by the Venetians?"

"But not quite. One of them refused to be driven away. And I saw him."

"And who is that?"

"The sea monk. He looks like a monk, in a grey cloak, with a hood, but underneath he's like a fish. This happened once after a storm near the Lipari Islands. The strange thing was that three hours after the storm, a thick fog fell. I was on the 'Agathe' at the time," the captain bowed towards the reference, "on a deep-sea expedition with some learned gentlemen. After the storm ... well, they were very weak, the gentlemen, and were in their cabins. And that's why they couldn't see what I saw. Namely ... the steam steering was damaged and you had to be very careful. We were being thrown around and no one really knew exactly where we were. We were just holding some sort of course, because otherwise we would have been thrown even more, and there was a man at the bell at the front ringing the bell with all his might. But the sound certainly couldn't be heard a hundred paces away."

With his upper body bent forward, the captain leant against the table and searched the faces of his listeners for the degree of tension. He had a lively, agile way of telling stories, a striking certainty of structure and great fluency of expression, the heritage of his people, who produce storytelling talent in abundance. Dallago intensified the mysterious expression on his face and continued with a kind of conjuring gesture: "I go forward to tell the man that he may break the bell if he can. He strikes and strikes ... suddenly he stops ringing, his hand sinks down, and he looks, pale as a wall, straight out to sea ... I look. A thing that looks like a human being is standing or floating or swimming on the sea just in front of us. It has a grey coat and a hood, pulled so close to its face that you can't see any of it. It is half out of the water, rising and sinking with the waves at the same time. So it can't be a man, because a man can't stay in the water like that ... Suddenly the man next to me cries out and falls over lengthways: 'The sea monk - the sea monk', he shouts. Because people told each other the most terrible stories

of the sea monk ... whoever sees him must die. At this moment, however, the sea monk raises his hand towards the 'Agathe' and beckons me quite clearly: back! I look again. He waves: back! There can be no mistake. I don't know what inspiration prompted me to follow the order. But I did. I jump onto the bridge and shout into the engine room: full steam ahead! The time it takes for a command to be carried out has never seemed so long. The engine finally stops, gives back steam, the ship stands still for a moment and then starts to go back. From the bridge I can still see the sea monk in the fog, rising and falling with the waves. We've barely gone back two ship lengths when there's a roar in the fog, a huge grey hull appears, and a huge steamer passes in front of our bow, perpendicular to our course."

"So the sea monk saved you?" said Hainx, breaking his own tension with a mocking laugh.

"The 'Agathe' would certainly have been overrun," the captain replied in all seriousness.

"When you tell the story like that, you almost want to believe it."

"You can believe this story as I tell it." Now Dallago had finally recognised his opponent and confronted him.

Bezug, who had remained silent until now, said after glancing at Arnold: "The sea is full of strange things. Who can know what secrets it holds. Of all peoples, I admire the seafaring nations the most. And the old Venetians in particular, they were blokes ..."

Dallago, whose mother was a Venetian, stood up and, taking hold of his glass, exclaimed: "The old Venetians - yes! To their memory. And to their successor in the rule of the sea, our gracious lord!"

His face twitched. The captain's unaffected enthusiasm, which delighted him, had also given him a thought.

"They had a beautiful ceremony, the old pompous gentlemen ... didn't they, Dallago ... the marriage of the Doge to the sea. They went out on the ship of state and the Doge threw a ring into the sea. The ceremony should be renewed." And after a while, during which everyone looked at him expectantly, he added: "Of course, why shouldn't I renew it? I have a right to do so ..."

"Certainly, you have a right to do so ... who else, if not you?" shouted Dallago excitedly. And Hainx hastened to say, as a look of entitlement prompted him: "Certainly ... who else, if not you."

Bezug stood up and took the men out with him. When Nella wanted to follow, he held her back with a wave of his hand. Now she was alone with Arnold. Arnold stood in the middle of the parlour and did not take his eyes off her. He had only heard half of the men's conversations and the captain's story, as his attention was completely absorbed by Nella. Although Nella had resolved to treat the unfortunate man well, a quiet horror prevented her from being cordial. Couldn't the terrible transformation into the animal happen at any moment? At last she plucked up courage and began with timid kindness: "This is your first time at sea ...?"

How awkward this question was, and how the realisation of this awkwardness confused Nella!

Arnold just nodded. His eyes, which now seemed to have a glimmer of his father's eyes, were wide open and staring at her.

Anxiously, Nella withdrew. "We want to go to sleep, that is ..." she tried to smile, "I might, I have to. I'm very tired from travelling. Good night...!" She shook hands with Arnold and almost cried out, she felt the iron grip of his fingers.

They landed on Antothrake in the afternoon of the next day. Nella had been around Arnold a lot during the day, and when she wanted to retire exhausted, she was immediately sent back to her place by Bezug. Her endeavours to draw the young man's attention to the beauty of the sea and to give him the happy absorption which had so enchanted her on her first sea voyages had been

unsuccessfully. While Nella spoke, she looked at Arnold incessantly, and it seemed as if he wanted to memorise every feature of her face. He hadn't spoken ten words himself, and when Nella finally asked him, somewhat impatiently after hours of being together, why he wasn't talking, he replied in his clumsy, ponderous way: "Because I can't speak." The longer she was in his company, the more uncanny he seemed to her. She paid him all sorts of little attentions that aroused Barry's suspicions. Although she told herself that she had been taken along as a nurse, and although she herself had the will to show her pity for the poor young man, she sometimes resisted being tied to him. Her pity was mingled with impatience and sometimes with horror; and these conflicting feelings brought into her behaviour that unevenness which is felt more keenly by no one than by the sick and by animals.

Now she was sitting next to Arnold on the bench of the boat that was following the boat in front with Bezug and Hainx. Elisabeth and Adalbert Semilasso had gathered on the beach to greet them.

"I was astonished," Elisabeth said when her father had reached out his hand to her, "your telegram was very unexpected ... I only received it three hours ago."

"I suppose you'll put us up for the night ...?" Bezug said timidly, as if permission really depended on his daughter.

"Why not? But just tell me what your purpose is?" Bezug avoided looking at Elisabeth: "I want ... I have to give your Brother, the sea ... you know, the sea ... I think it will do him good ... he'll be there in the second boat ..."

"Arnold!?! ... And who is the woman ...?"

"A ... a companion I took for him ..." When Arnold and Nella got out of the boat, Elisabeth walked down the She took a few steps towards the arrivals, but then suddenly stopped, as if it was impossible for her to take another step. While the others formed a group, Elisabeth stood opposite Arnold.

"You're my brother?" she asked.

"You're my sister?" ... They fell silent again and looked at each other to.

Another meeting between brother and sister took place in the Group around reference. Hainx took great pleasure in seeing their astonishment and the agonising question that no one was answering. With a cold and indifferent face, Bezug introduced Adalbert. He avoided mentioning Adalbert's name: "Our house poet," he said, "a very capable young man ... he is on his way to becoming famous; the newspapers have long articles about his art. And here is Miss Bianca Semonski, famous in another field. You will know her ..."

"I had the opportunity..." Adalbert realised that he had to continue speaking and gave himself a jolt: "I had the opportunity to admire your art ..."

With some astonishment Elisabeth had recognised in her brother's companion Bianca Semonski, the woman whose art had made her wish to achieve something similar during a visit to the circus. Of all the visitors, Bianca was the most welcome to her, and in quickly awakened familiarity she joined her, put her arm in Bianca's and led her towards the castle, while Arnold walked at Bianca's other side.

"Have you given up your art ... I mean because you have time for a sea voyage?"

"No, Miss ... I have been given a holiday. Your father arranged it for me ... he knows our director very well and ... people like to do him favours here, your father ..."

"So..." said Elisabeth, stretching and looking backwards, "Favours ... yes ... but do you know that I admire you. The grace and boldness with which you display your artistry, the certainty of your movements, the harmony of your appearance ... all that, it's probably the highest feeling, isn't it, to stand on the rope above the circus ring like that with all eyes on you ... And a thousand people admire the power and suppleness of your body ... one sees

the play of the muscles under the taut jersey ..." Elisabeth interrupted herself and looked at Bianca almost rapturously. "Then the frantic run on the two-wheeler through the loop ... the moment when you're almost certain you're going to fall ..."

"You don't have time to think about the others, Miss. You don't know the ... how should I describe it to you. You only ever think about the next second ... how are you going to set foot and what are you going to do now? You only see the very next part of your task. And when you come down, you don't know whether you've been up there for an hour or just five minutes. My art ..."

Suddenly Arnold joined the conversation. The sounds came out muffled and ponderous: "What kind of art is that - your art?" he asked.

Elisabeth took over the answer: "The young lady is ... how can I tell you, you've never seen her before, an acrobat and tightrope walker ... she walks on a rope stretched high above people's heads, she flies from one corner of the house to the other ... she rides her bicycle over the rope and ... you know," she deflected, "that you made me all want to take up your profession. I have no profession, and one must have some profession ... said the poet my father keeps, he is a fool, by the way," she laughed, glancing back, "a fool

... but aren't all poets fools? Aren't they? Of course they are! He reproached me for not having a profession. That would have been a profession for me." She endeavoured to get a look from Adalbert, who had come very close with Bezug and Hainx.

In the meantime, they had reached the great hall, where a richly seated table had already been prepared for the evening. From the terrace you could see out to sea. The shadows of dusk had already taken control of the playing lights. Only a rosy gate was still open in the west over the gently moving sea and it was as if one were looking into another land where there was still serenity and light, while night and darkness spread over this world. A long red path ran from this gateway across the sea, and it widened in the harbour of the island into a sharp

limited blood-red sea. The *Regina maris* was anchored in the middle of this lake, with a black hull and cobweb-fine masts and yards. A boat could be seen pushing off from the ship and heading for land.

"I also invited the captain," Bezug said, "he just wanted to finish his work and then come."

"It's beautiful here." Hainx had a reflection of the open gate on his face as he said this; it was as if this evening itself was able to transfigure him: "It is beautiful. And," he turned to Elisabeth, "what have you been up to these weeks?"

"What is there to do here? Nothing. It fills the day. Walks, a book that Adalbert reads to me, a boat trip outside ... you don't want anything, that's peace and quiet ..."

"You wish for nothing?" Hainx asked, his voice trembling as he repeated his question even more forcefully: "You wish for nothing?"

"No," replied Elisabeth and turned her back on Hainx.

Bianca had found a seat next to Adalbert on the balustrade. She felt inexplicably drawn to him, and when she turned her face towards him, she saw his eyes fixed on her with shy admiration. Their conversation also centred on life on the island, and as she wished to know how people lived here, Adalbert gave information in a low voice, as quietly as if he did not want to be heard by the others. Suddenly someone pushed his way in between them, shoving Adalbert aside with brutal force and taking his place. Arnold stood next to Bianca and seemed to take possession of her with an expression of defiance and anger. Without a word, he leant forward, looked her in the eye and placed his hand, cold and damp to the touch, on her arm, which was resting on the parapet. That look ... Nella knew it ... was burning like his father's look when those desires arose in him that Nella feared more than his anger. Shuddering, she tolerated the touch of his hand for a second, then pulled her arm away with force.

In a low voice, the castellan announced that the table was ready. The captain had arrived and was now standing under the chandelier of

Wrought iron. He exhausted himself in homage to Elisabeth, somewhat impetuously and thoughtlessly, as if he had a right to it and as if there was no one there who could refuse him. During the meal, Nella, who had been ordered to Arnold's side by a beckoning reference, kept looking at the young man who had been introduced to her as the house poet. What was his relationship to Elisabeth? How strange that it was admitted that she was allowed to live alone with him in this island castle? Accustomed to making quick judgements about all people who approached her, in order to know whether she should be hostile or friendly to them, she was confused here. So many relationships unknown to her intersected here; all the people sitting around the table were connected by a common network in which the individual threads were interwoven in many ways. She didn't even know where she was in this network? Who among these people should she trust? Elisabeth's kindness had come as such a surprise to her that she was unable to join her. What had her daughter's interest in her been? Was this interest in her art not merely a mask, a pretence to achieve something unknown? Nella felt herself surrounded by dark forces, and the fact that she had kindled a passionate desire in her neighbour lay upon her like a paralysis. She could almost physically feel the waves of excitement emanating from his body. In this confusion, it seemed safest to stick to the poet, who sat opposite her and sometimes looked at her questioningly with dark, sad eyes. She immediately had a heartfelt trust in him, his serene manner attracted her, and she felt as if she had to do something kind to him.

After a strange fish dish, which Hainx called "baked sea monk", Captain Dallago rose to propose a toast. While he was expressing his homage to Elisabeth and his fanatical admiration for her, Adalbert looked at him and remembered that Elisabeth had told him about this man, that more than one life had been cut short by him. Yet Dallago looked so cheerful and amiable, radiant with youth and ardour. Why had Elisabeth not given her love to this man?

turned to her? How well would he have suited her? Why did she torment Adalbert with a passion that destroyed him?

The captain ended his toast with a turn of phrase that came back to Elisabeth. He called her the "Rose of the Sea" with a theatrical gesture and asked those present to raise their glasses to the blooming of this rose.

They clinked glasses and Hainx, settling down again, said in a somewhat dry tone: "Yes, the lady really is blooming like a rose. Fresh and healthy ... But," he continued thoughtfully, "the sea air doesn't seem to be doing our friend any good. Are you not quite well, my dearest? You really do look a little pale. Won't you embark on the *Regina maris*? We'll drop you off at the next harbour and you can go home ..."

Nella recognised by the look Adalbert cast at Hainx: "Here sits a prisoner. This is the look of someone who has been in prison for a long time and who has been promised that his doors will open soon.

They rose from the table. Nella was happy, for she had felt Arnold moving closer and closer to her, and she had had to tolerate it, for otherwise she was afraid that Arnold would do something that would have repercussions for her. But she couldn't get rid of him; he kept at her heels, was always around her and pushed his way between her and others she was talking to. Apart from Adalbert and Elisabeth, everyone present was blind to this clumsy approach, which Nella dared not resist. The unleashed instincts of the unfortunate man burned around her and surrounded her like a wall of fire that she was not allowed to cross.

As they exchanged good-night greetings on the terrace, Bezug, who had been silent all evening, said: "Just a moment longer, gentlemen! Tomorrow my marriage to the sea will take place ... I invite everyone to this party ... Elisabeth and you, Adalbert, you will be brought back in your boat."

So his name is Adalbert, thought Nella - Adalbert, like my brother. Then they parted company.

Adalbert and Hainx stood opposite each other.

"So we're going to sleep too," said Hainx after a pause, during which he tried to read Adalbert's expression.

"Let's go..."

"Do you need the lantern? ..."

"No, just take it ... I can find my way around like this ..."

"Good night..." Hainx stepped closer to Adalbert: "What do you say to his ... party?"

"To the marriage with the sea?" Adalbert shrugged his shoulders.

It was as if Hainx felt the need to talk more about this matter. Moving away from the door and drawing Adalbert further into the corridor, he said quietly: "Do you know what Xerxes did when the Hellespont disobeyed him? He had him scourged and chains sunk into the sea. It is believed that he was already insane then. I think Bezug is not far from acting like Xerxes ..." He looked inquiringly at Adalbert's face. But Adalbert had become too mistrustful to return an apparent confidences. Deep in the darkness of his suspicions, he sensed that Hainx was not seeking his trust for any good purpose, and he resisted this approach.

"I don't know the story of Xerxes," he said levelly.

"You'll find them in Herodotus."

"Thank you ... good night ..."

He left Hainx standing there and walked into the darkness. After a few turns and a grope to find his way through the now familiar corridors, he soon came to one of the small halls with a view of the sea. The moon hung between wild clouds and its light drew bright arcs on the stone floor. Adalbert stepped up to the parapet and looked out to sea. In the middle of the silver sea lay the *Regina maris*, and a light burning on board was like a peering, watchful eye. Tomorrow the ship would set sail again, and even if its journey took days and weeks, there was still the prospect of an eventual end. But where was this prospect for Adalbert ... he felt as if he was lost for his whole life.

Life in this castle, where he had fallen prey to a terrible power.

A noise behind his back drew Adalbert's attention and reminded him that in this castle, where so many surprising and strange things seemed to wait for the moment of appearance, one must always be on one's guard. It was like a heavy breathing, and it seemed so close to Adalbert's neck that he turned round hastily with a clenched fist. Leaning against the parapet, his upper body bent back, he quickly surveyed the small hall. There was nothing threatening to be seen in the moonlight. Under strange laws of perspective, the shadows of the pillars slanted side by side and the clumsy, heavy shadow in the centre was his own ... Now he tried to penetrate the darkness that clung between the pillars and projections beyond the moon's twilight. There, he knew, was a door. And as he took two steps closer, into the curve of one of the sharply torn arcs of moonlight, he realised that a man was crouching there in the darkness at the threshold of the door. It was only a lump of shadow, even blacker than the darkness that lay in the doorway. The head rose from the tangle of limbs and torso, and two eyes with the greenish gleam of animals looked sharply at Adalbert. During one of Adalbert's encounters, he saw the glimmer glow brighter and saw a tightening and stretching in the entangled ball. He knew that the person at the door was his son, and, overcome by the horror that had now taken control of his soul, he continued on his way, slowly, so as not to irritate the unfortunate man and to reassure him of his intentions. As he did so, his heart beat wildly. And suddenly it occurred to him that this door might lead to Bianca Semonski's rooms.

Desponsamus te mare

Table of contents

When Elisabeth had offered Bianca her hand in farewell after the meal, she felt the pressure of wanting to keep the young lady back. So she hesitated until everyone had gone and only Arnold was left in the great hall apart from Elisabeth. Richard stood in the doorway, ready to show Arnold to his room. With her arms over the back of one of the high chairs and her hands crossed in front of her face, Elisabeth looked at her brother.

"What else do you want, Arnold?" she asked after a while.

Arnold stammered a few unintelligible syllables.

"Go!" said Elisabeth, "go now. I have to speak to the Fräulein." Her words had a compelling power that even affected Arnold. He turned round with difficulty and followed the servant after glancing at Nella from the doorway. Elisabeth had maintained her position. The light from the candles on the wrought-iron chandelier cast a warm cloak around her shoulders, only her forehead and eyes were in shadow.

"You are my father's mistress?" she asked without introduction.

Nella reached behind her. All the shame that an unworthy relationship had never been able to destroy in her now burst forth. No one had ever told her so crudely and nakedly since the headmaster had threatened some of her colleagues, who had once tried to tease her about it, with immediate dismissal. And this disturbed her completely: that it was her daughter's reference who told her this. The feeling that she stood before the purity of this girl as a reprobate was an agony to which she feared to succumb. There was nothing for it but to deny it. With an amplification of voice that was not intended, she said: "I don't know ... what shall I say to that? If it were not you, Miss ... I should suppose ..."

Elisabeth's arms sank down from the back of the chair and she raised her head with a mocking look, as it seemed to Nella:

"Why don't you ... I beg you ... why won't you tell me?"

... You can do it ..."

"What can I tell you? It's nothing ... You're offending me ..."

"It might offend you if I did it out of mere curiosity ... from high above, full of gloating that you are so low down. But you see, it's not that. Do you notice anything that offends you? ..."

Nella shook her head and said, half-turning away from Elisabeth: "You're his daughter ... Elisabeth!"

"That's why I know all his villainies and bad pranks. I know more about him than he thinks." She softened the tone of her agitated voice and said calmly, as if she were talking about a third person: "I have something of his myself, and that sometimes makes me furious." And again, quickly breaking off, she repeated her question: "So you're saying you're his lover?"

Nella bowed her head and remained silent.

"It's you. I knew as soon as I saw you. That's why he took her away." And when Nella seemed to want to speak, Elisabeth defended herself: "Don't say anything ... I'll let you have it. You mustn't talk ... I know it now. And I just want to tell you this: I'm warning you about him. Take care ... listen ... take care." With a hasty movement, Elisabeth put her arm around Nella's shoulders, pulled her close and kissed her on the forehead. Then, before the stunned woman had had time to reply, she moved away, the wide, light sleeves pressing against her arms as a result of the quick movement.

Outside, she ordered Karl, who was waiting for her with the light, to take Miss Semonski to her room. She herself took a path that led her through the outer halls of the castle, where the moonlight was her companion. She walked very slowly, pausing now and then to listen to the sounds that occasionally emanated from the depths of the spacious building. Filled with a hum in which all the sounds

The whole castle seemed to come alive as the moonlight flowed into the night. Over on the ship, someone was singing an Italian song with a marvellously sweet sound that might have been related to the moonlight. Elisabeth stayed there for quite a while until the song was over.

Smiling, she entered her bedroom and looked around the room. Queen Omphale's sarcophagus was closed today and the entire collection of her love amulets lay on the stone lid. There was the phallus that was carried in front of the procession of women at Carthaginian love feasts, the string of red coral with the dedication to Istar on the golden clasp, a small idol, as the Sumerian women attached it to the head of their bed in order to fulfil all their husband's love desires; Between small leather pouches containing dried bull testicles, which the Egyptians used to fasten around the bride's neck before the wedding night, stood cans and jars that had played their part in the wicked orgies of the black mass. There were also a number of the strange flaps of skin that the ancients called hippomanes, those outgrowths that are sometimes found on the head of the filly and the mare, and which must be put into a new glazed earthen pot and dried in an oven from which the bread has just been taken. Next to a bowl of pomade made from the marrow in the left foot of an ox, mixed with grey ambergris and Cyprus powder, lay a gilded hyena bone.

Elisabeth slipped off the ring with the large nephrite, on the inside of which the word Sheva was engraved, and placed it with the other talismans. Then she bent over the sphere, whose opalescent glow had dimmed to a deep, burning red in recent weeks. Today, the lustre had become somewhat paler and cracks appeared on the surface, as if the sphere was about to disintegrate. "One night," she murmured, "one night of rest."

When she looked up, she saw Rudolf Hainx in front of her, who had entered silently and had drawn the curtain, the folds of which he still held in his hands, behind him.

"You are satisfied!" he said. "I hope you are satisfied!"

Leaning on the edge of the sarcophagus, Elisabeth looked at the intruder: "I won't ask you how you got here," she said, "but I'll tell you to go!"

"I have greetings for you."

"It's good."

"He is desperate, in a frenzy. And he works like an animal to anaesthetise himself."

"You've come as a messenger of love for someone else? That's news to me ..."

"Still better the ... than the other ..."

"It could be all the same to you. At least to you. And by the way, I've received enough letters from him whining and complaining."

"He could stop moaning for once ..."

"You must have opened his eyes, as they say."

"Yes, I did ... I told him that you love this person."

"Well ... and you see what happened next. He has written to me that he knows, and that he allows it ... you hear, allows it! If only I wanted to belong to him for once. But that will never happen. There are insurmountable currents."

Hainx had let go of the curtain and come closer: "He's a fool," he said tremulously. "A fool."

"He'll come to terms with the idea. And he's smarter than you, you fool!"

With Queen Omphale's sarcophagus in front of her, Elisabeth watched her opponent's every move. While she insulted him and tried to irritate him with the contemptuous tone of her words and the hostile expression on her face, she was careful to protect herself from him. In the drawer of her console, next to the dagger, lay a small revolver. She knew Hainx too well not to realise that he would pounce on her at the first movement that could make him guess her intentions. Nor did he observe an irreproachable demeanour for all his excitement, but it was too plain that, from some thought or other, from

supported by a still veiled violence, was determined not to obey her spell today. Elisabeth noticed a strange change in his face. Muscles that usually contributed nothing to his expression were now clearly and conspicuously prominent, and features that usually characterised Hainx had disappeared. Without Elisabeth being able to make out the details of this change, she was convinced that it would not be too easy for her to tame Hainx today.

Taking another step closer to the sarcophagus, he said:

"Well, I too am a fool. For I am mad, I am consumed by you. Give me your body. I don't want your love. But I only want to have again what I have already had once."

"I can't help you, my dear. I can't. I think it would be mean to get involved with you again now."

"So ... and that's not mean if the man you're giving yourself to finds your gift annoying."

Elisabeth laughed. She had often thought what Hainx was saying when she recognised Adalbert's tiredness and his lust, which had only been kindled with difficulty and was akin to horror. But for her passion, these concerns were just chaff, thrown into the air as flickering sparks by a raging heat. Laughing, she replied: "There is no man who would be annoyed by my gift. Let me tell you something: don't you think that even my father desires me?"

"It may be so. But Adalbert ... I have reason to believe that he loves another woman and that he ..."

From the hasty movement Elisabeth made, Hainx realised that she had been hit. But quickly recollecting herself, she realised her carelessness:

"Perhaps! ... But he forgets her with me ... that's what matters ... By the way," she added as if indifferent, "do you know this woman? ..."

"Not yet ... but I will know her soon. I want nothing more from you, Elisabeth, than that you remember what happened between us."

"Sentimentalities! You're getting tasteless, Hainx."

"Because of me. But today you have to be mine for once ..."

"No ... you're trying for nothing ..."

Hainx turned even paler than before, and thick strands of muscle swelled on either side of his neck: "Anyone can have you, Elisabeth, why not me ... there ... what trouble you go to in order to hold him. No nonsense in the whole realm of human stupidity is too remote for you. And I ... look, I fall to you without any magic ..."

"That doesn't increase your value to me."

And then came the outburst that Elisabeth had long been expecting. Suddenly, Hainx screamed and leapt towards the sarcophagus.

"Bloody hell," he shouted, slamming both fists into the glasses, bowls and jars and sweeping the debris down with his arm. The opal sphere shattered on the floor with a clatter, and a small red flame shivered and went out in the shards. Elisabeth had to use this delay, and when Hainx tried to lunge at her over the rubble, she stood opposite him with the revolver and raised it, aiming it cold-bloodedly at his face.

"Out!" she shouted.

But Hainx hesitated for only a moment, then he rushed forward in a bloody fog. He heard a shot and felt a heavy blow on his cheek. But, blindly tearing forwards, he had grasped Elisabeth and held her close to him. Then he heard a calm voice very close to his ear, which penetrated his consciousness even through the rush of blood: "If you don't let go immediately, I'll shoot you.

..." As he came to his senses, he realised that Elisabeth had managed to free his right arm from its strangling grip and put the revolver to his temple. He could see from her eyes that she would not hesitate for a moment to carry out her threat. So close were those burning yet cold eyes to his that he felt the spasmodic dilation of the pupils almost as pain. He heard:

"I'll count three ... one ... two ..."

Elisabeth felt the terrible grip loosen. On the count of three, Hainx released her and stepped back. His arms hung limp and she saw, as she glanced over his form, that his hands were red and swollen and the veins lay like blue ropes under his skin. A thin streak of blood ran from the wound on his cheek down his torn shirt collar and white waistcoat, which was dotted with yellow. After a minute, Hainx found his way to the words:

"You would have shot me?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"Fine, I'll go. But I'm going for it ... I just want to tell you something. Do you know the club of Babylonian virgins?"

More cautious than before, Elisabeth managed to appear impartial: "I don't want to talk to you ..."

"I'm going already. But just so you know ... watch out!" He pulled out a handkerchief, pressed it to the wound and left the room, while Elisabeth sank onto the sofa, still holding the revolver in her hand, listening to the distant footsteps. -

The bright morning, which stretched a blue sky over the glass roof of Adalbert's bedroom, found him awake early. His night had been restless, and of all the thoughts that beset him in the silence of the castle, enlivened by strange noises, one kept recurring: the thought of escape. Finally, this thought wove colourful and frightening images into his dreams, and when he stood in the morning before the wishes and plans of the night, they looked at him strangely and coldly, like the thoughts of a stranger with whom he had no relationship. It was impossible to escape from here. All the adventurous resolutions and fantastic events that he had seen clearly and simply before him now carried a strange heaviness. The plan that remained most familiar to him was that if he got on board the ship today, he would hide and join the voyage somewhere in the hold until he **f o u n d** an opportunity to escape. When he had risen from his bed, he pushed the tapestry aside and looked at the place where Regina's picture had hung.

had. The red stain was still on the wall, and when Adalbert ran his finger over it, he thought he could feel its dampness.

After he had dressed, he went down to the great hall. How ridiculous these plans were, he thought on the way. Elisabeth would not leave her father's ship until he was found, even if he hid in the darkest corner of the room. From the parapet of the terrace, he looked out over the sea, which was so calm today, and the ship, whose lively activity signalled the imminent departure. He was delighted to see Bianca Semonski next to him. She greeted him with a smile and gave him a cool hand with a firm squeeze.

"I suppose we're the first ones awake in the castle?" she asked.

"I haven't met anyone."

"You see, even the servants are later than us," she called out as some servants entered the hall and began to prepare the table for breakfast.

"And ... how did you sleep?" Adalbert asked hesitantly.

Bianca searched his face for the meaning of his question. "Good," she replied at last. "Quite good. But I had to go out early ... I c o u l d n 't rest. I wanted to see the sun. It's so marvellously beautiful here ... This old castle by the sea. How I would love to stay here."

"Why can't we swap? I would like to be on your ship there ... on the *Regina ... Regina maris* fort."

"Why? I don't understand you ..." but suddenly Bianca abandoned all caution: "but why am I not sincere with you ... I feel that you mean well by me. Why shouldn't I tell you that I understand you? I am so anxious here and I realise that you want to leave this castle ... it is uncanny. Now, even in the sunshine, I feel as if I were haunted by dark forebodings ..."

Adalbert nodded.

"And the night..." Bianca continued, "I think something terrible must happen here every night. It permeates the walls and s e t t l e s everywhere ..."

"There was a person lying outside your door..."

"So I did ... I heard it. He wasn't taken away until late after midnight ... there was a long murmur before silence fell."

"You know who did it?"

"Yes!"

They both looked out to sea in silence: "I'm a prisoner here," Adalbert said quietly, "you can't make this up. My whole soul is elsewhere ... But I'm being held here with no way of escaping ... You're free ..."

"Do you think so?"

"Like what?"

"That I'm free?"

"Aren't you free?" Bianca's face showed Adalbert the lines of a noble profile against the backdrop of a gleaming white marble wall that seemed to drink in the sun's radiance as it rose above the edge of the morning clouds. Adalbert saw the face of a captive. It was as if he saw the face of his own soul as it had appeared before him in the hours of pain, only more perfect and pure than it had appeared in his imagination. He felt very close to this stranger, belonging to her, like a piece of her life, connected to her somewhere by mysterious ties. And grasping her drooping hand, he said without searching for words, as they came to his lips of their own accord: "I think I can tell you what is troubling me. For I feel as if I had always known you. I also have a request for you. And I know ... you will refuse me nothing ... I can say that you ..."

The profile had long since been turned from the marble wall into a full view, and now Bianca reached for Adalbert's other hand:

"Just speak ... Tell me everything ... I want to do everything."

"I'm trapped here. Perhaps through my own fault? I don't know. How is it given to some people to become masters over others? How does that happen? We hate them and want to free ourselves from them. We would rather have misery and hardship than the splendour and wealth they bring us.

come. But in the decisive hour, our courage sinks and we stay ..."

"You know that too ... you too," said Bianca, breathless and excited. "Yes ... that's it. We're outraged and want to free ourselves, but they seem ... how can I put it, even from a distance, even when they're not there."

"Yes ... yes!" Adalbert was also excited. "There have been moments when I thought I was free after a long struggle. But the next moment I had sunk back again. And the whole struggle was in vain. We will endeavour in vain to solve this mystery ..." After a short pause for reflection, he continued: "Someone might be able to tell me ... I'm sure he can. And I will ask him, yes - I will ask him."

Hainx approached the two of them with a greeting, and the mocking look Adalbert thought he saw on his face immediately made him turn away from him. "Oh, you don't like me today," laughed Hainx, reaching for the disfiguring bandage on his swollen cheek. "Yes ... I can't help it. This vile castle is so full of corners and sharp edges in the corridors. And the lighting is so stylishly medieval, too. I'm just surprised I didn't crack my skull in the first place. After all, it's lucky to just tear open your cheek when you have a chance of breaking your neck."

And turning to Bezug, who had entered the hall shortly after Hainx, he told him that yesterday the lantern had fallen out of his hand when he tripped over some threshold or beam. And immediately afterwards he had driven himself head first into a confusion of edges and corners. His story was a complete success, and Bezug, who today wore a solemn and imperious expression, listened to him graciously. Elisabeth and Arnold arrived almost simultaneously, and the captain was the last to appear at the breakfast table. He reported that he had been on the *Regina maris* early in the morning and that everything was ready for departure.

Immediately after breakfast, when Hainx had volunteered himself and his accident as the subject of a cheerful conversation, they set off. The small sailing boat belonging to the castle was moored on the beach next to Regina's two boats. Adalbert endeavoured in vain to get a place in Bianca's boat; Arnold, who had immediately seized the reluctant woman at the breakfast table, did not leave her side, and at Adalbert's approach he showed the expression of an irritated animal. Shuddering, Adalbert refrained from speaking to her and followed Elisabeth's call to the sailing boat. His thoughts turned to Bianca, and he realised that her captivity was no less oppressive than his.

The mast of the sailing boat lay on the ground, wrapped in the reddish-brown sail; Elisabeth was just making room for Adalbert on her bench so that the roll lay between them when the captain wanted to get into their boat.

"No, Captain," she called out with a laugh, "we're latecomers, we come last. You belong at the front. In the first boat. With the leaders ... You have to show us the way."

Dallago stood with one foot on the edge of the boat and looked at Adalbert with narrowed eyebrows. Then his arm, first raised as if in an eloquent gesture of subservience, sank down heavily in a clenched fist. It was the gesture of a hammer blow. Then he turned away and went to the boat in which he and Hainx were sitting and which was now the first to leave the shore.

The belts fell into step.

The boat with Bianca and Arnold followed, and Elisabeth's boat was the last to arrive.

A tent had been erected on the deck of the *Regina Maris* not far from the bridge. All the treasures that had been piled up in the cabins had been dragged up there, and the castle had lent its heavy fabrics, brocades and gold-embroidered velvets, Persian and Indian carpets. The walls of the tents had been climbed over poles of fragrant wood up to a golden vulture perched high on the roof.

The top of the chair seemed to hold the folds of the tent fabric in its claws. Under the centre of the tent, a throne-like chair with a high backrest stood on a carpet-covered estrade.

"Isn't it like being on stage?" asked Elisabeth Semilasso, when they had come closer with their boat and noticed the arrangements on the ship: "I think it's ridiculous. And it's ridiculous too. What does that mean again? Who is he trying to deceive again? Or is there no point to it all? Is he already at the end? ..."

Adalbert remembered what Hainx had said during the night, but he kept silent and moved his knee away from Elisabeth, who was pressing him with hers without paying any attention to the sailors.

At the ship's steps he received his son and Bianca, who followed at his heels. As if he had remembered that he had neglected Arnold a little yesterday and today, and as if he now felt remorse, he surrounded him with double tenderness. He tried to rouse him by asking him how he was feeling and repeatedly pointing out the magnificent coastal scenery and the colourful wonders of the sea. But Arnold listened to him dully, with his head bowed, and kept his eyes firmly fixed on Bianca, whose movements he followed with suspicion, as if he were called upon to guard her.

After taking a few steps with Arnold, he returned to the ship's steps, where Elisabeth and Adalbert had just come up.

"Don't you think," he turned to his daughter, holding out his hand to help her, "don't you think it will affect him favourably ... you know, I think it will affect him favourably. After all ... a splendid spectacle, in view of the sea ... that's what matters: he must be pulled out. In every possible way ..."

He broke off and walked towards the tent. "Let's get started, Dallago," he called to the captain, who was already standing on the bridge.

Conjured up by the boatman's shrill whistle, the manoeuvres of departure followed, this time with particular speed and agility. With the Sunday garb in which the work was carried out, the sailors also seemed to have a very holiday-like efficiency.

to have put on. The captain had made sure that a fantastic plan was publicised. The master wanted to marry the sea, as had been the custom centuries ago. That got everyone excited. Among these sailors, most of whom were Italians or Dalmatians, fragments of Venice's illustrious history circulated in the guise of myths and legends, and the dullest of the crew knew something of the new doge's first, solemn voyage. Venice had ruled over this sea and these shores, had determined their destinies and even changed their nature by stripping the land of its timber to make it float on the sea. The most solemn act of the great age was now to be renewed, and this thought revitalised all these men, who still retained in themselves buccaneering instincts, together with a sense of pomp and grandeur of gesture. When the work of departure was finished and the *Regina maris* was sailing smoothly before the pleasant morning breeze, the captain's call gathered the crew together for the ceremonial act and placed them on either side of the tent in two rows up to the bow.

Bezug sat on the high chair, a little pale and - as Bianca wanted to seem - almost excited. He took a small box from Hainx's hands, in which lay an ancient ring on blue velvet. The lion of San Marco was carved into the green stone, and the gold of the setting was delicately pierced with a dance of dolphins. It was a ring from the collection of antiquities in the castle of Antothrace, and in age and style it was very similar to the rings that had slipped into the sea from the Bucentoro. Now, while Bezug was putting the ring on his finger, Dallago, who had given his place to the first officer, approached the tent. He bowed one knee to Bezug and said: "The sea is ready to receive its master." Dallago was also unable to escape the solemnity of the moment and spoke the words stammering and excitedly. Then the old, eternal sea shone in the sunshine before the path of the ship, and the one man, who held more than the monstrous

power of the great Venice, stood up to symbolically subdue the sea as well. Slowly, Bezug walked down the steps and on the carpets to the bow. He stood silently for a while in the yellow sunlight, while nothing could be heard but the sound of the waves cutting through the keel, in his black tailcoat a strange-looking modern embodiment of the ancient thought.

"I have gathered you here," he said, "so that you may be witnesses to how I am taking the sea. I take upon myself the inheritance of Venice, and you shall know that from now on the sea shall serve me and be subject to me as it was subject to Venice. Listen, sea," he now turned to the sea, "you will obey me and submit to my will. You will obey my commands, carry my ships and fulfil my wishes. And as a sign of my rule, I will marry you, as my predecessors have done on these seas ..."

Bezug pulled the ring off his finger and held it up high. A green and a golden ray were like a final greeting of his beauty to the light. And now Bezug spoke the great and significant formula of the marriage: "*Desponsamus te mare in signum veri perpetuique domini.*"

The ring slipped from his hand, the Lord of the Sea stood for a moment with his arm raised, then he turned and walked back the way he had come. He was pale, and there was a fanatical gleam in his eyes. The sailors, who had understood little of the words of reference, but were enraptured by the symbolism of the ceremony and felt everything within them stirred, tore the caps with the fluttering ribbons from their heads and shouted an enthusiastic: "*Evviva*". Surrounded by Dallago, Hainx and the officers of the ship with congratulations, Bezug looked after Elisabeth and Arnold. There was no reflection of any effect on Arnold's face, and Elisabeth stood apart from Adalbert with a mocking smile; with the poet's eye, he had taken in the beauty of the scene and, despite the disharmony in the details, had recognised the great trait of the whole. In response to Elisabeth's quiet and mischievous

He preferred to remain silent, because some feeling that had not penetrated his consciousness connected him at that moment with reference rather than with her.

Dallago approached Elisabeth with a frown on his face.

"Let's turn round," she called to him; she had become disgruntled by Adalbert's taciturnity: "We want to go back."

There was a flash of light in Dallago's face, a weather glow that Elisabeth interpreted as painful regret: "Already? ... so soon already? ..."

"I think we've seen enough, we're satisfied."

"Didn't you want ... why don't you want another piece? ..."

"I'm telling you ... I've had enough. There are too many people here for me too. I'm used to solitude now. And we find," with a glance at Adalbert, she teased Dallago anew, "that nothing else is preferable to solitude. Our blessed island has taught us that."

Dallago approached Bezug and informed him of his daughter's wish. He hesitantly gave his consent and then came to Elisabeth to express his regret that she was about to leave the ship. Suddenly Adalbert, who had been standing a few paces to one side, undecided and struggling with his question, said: "And how long do you think your journey will take?"

"I don't know," Bezug replied with an astonished look,

"I can't know that. It's a journey that has to last until a ..." he interrupted his sentence and finished briefly: "That could take weeks."

Adalbert resigned. Weeks to go? So there was no escape on the ship! A smoke of thoughts rose from the seething nettle of despair. One of them, the maddest and most desperate, took hold of Adalbert, took hold of him and overcame all inhibitions.

As they stood saying goodbye at the halyard, while the boat manned by three servants from the castle lay below, Adalbert turned to the captain. He endeavoured to be amiable and impartial.

Smile. "I would have loved to go to school with you, Captain!" he said.

Dallago flashed his hatred at him from his black eyes.

"Really," Adalbert repeated urgently, almost pleadingly, "I would have liked to have learnt a few things. Sextants, compass, steering ... and so on ... I don't know anything about these things. The sea is so ... you think, for example, I don't even know where the nearest island is ... how to get there ..."

It was necessary to give an answer. "There lies Corfu," said Dallago, raising his arm. Then he turned and shouted an order to the people in the boat. Elisabeth was just getting into the boat from the last step of the halyard ladder. Adalbert shook Bianca's hand.

Then the boat pushed off, and Adalbert moved away from the ship, even though it bore the name of his beloved, almost with a feeling of hatred. He had pinned his hopes on the *Regina maris*, and she had betrayed him.

A man goes overboard and a boat is capsized

[Table of contents](#)

The sunny, cheerful weather of the last few days continued. The *Regina maris* continued its haphazard journey, surrounded by the blue infinity of the sea, veined with gold and silver, from which an island occasionally emerged on the horizon. There was still no change in Arnold's condition. There was no new outburst, but there was also no sign that he would awaken from his rigidity. He was always around Nella, never leaving her for a moment, watching her incessantly with burning eyes. "It was no use," he said to Hainx, "I thought it would work..." Hainx doubted that Bezug had only performed the marriage ceremony out of consideration for his son, to snap him out of his stupor. "He lacks the sense of history," he once said to Bezug, "Only those who have this sense will recognise how great you were at that moment. He knows no other story than that of his suffering, and that only incompletely. A series of bright moments separated by stretches of darkness." "Oh, what ... history," Bezug replied angrily, "history! Ridiculous! Do I have any respect for history? I make history myself, how can I have any respect for it?" Hainx remained silent, but he found his opinion proven by the almost idolatrous veneration that Bezug had enjoyed among the sailors since the day of his marriage. These simple folk saw in their master a renewal of the great past of these seas that was in their blood. Hainx drew a comparison with the success of Rienzi, who, by calling up old historical memories, had gained his suggestive power over the Romans.

After more than a week, when the late summer heat was beginning to make even the sea uncomfortable, the *Regina maris* turned her back to the sea.

Course out of Egyptian waters back northwards.

Nella had found an image for her fate these days. She anxiously avoided being alone with Arnold and resorted to the solitude of the night. When she sat under the sunroof with the sick man during the day, she tried to interest him in some book she took from the ship's small library. And there she had found a volume of ancient legends. She read the legend of Andromeda. Her fate was that of Andromeda. Forged on a rock and guarded by the hideous, staring eyes of a monster. With every movement she saw the growing suspicion of his gaze. She could no longer conceal it: her pity had turned to loathing. Only her fear of her master kept her in her place, where every day she felt herself more closely enveloped in the coils of a hideous power. Sometimes it seemed to her that Perseus, who liberated her in her dreams, took on the features of the young poet. Completely caught up in the life of her image of Andromeda's fate, she saw him storming down, deathly sad but brave, and slaying a hideous water dragon. Then he held out his hand to her and said something that cut into her soul. Once in broad daylight, when a seagull flew high above the ship, she thought she saw, far away, high in the air and thus diminished in size, a winged horse descending. Then she realised that it was a seagull, and she was startled. Was she about to go mad? Her nerves were exhausted by the keen vigilance she had to maintain against the lurking sick man, and an incessant fear tormented her. Even the nights, which she had at first welcomed as salvation, became hells of torment. There were minutes when she feared to lose her senses in his presence, but she always pulled herself together again, for she was sure that when her rebukes no longer dominated him, he would pounce on her like an animal. And once an iron defiance came over her. She was determined to read him the story of Andromeda and Perseus. Even if he didn't understand it, it seemed like a liberation to her to speak the clear, wise words of the old legend to him.

That day the sky was a little overcast and a cooler air was coming from the north, so that people on board began to talk about a bora that might have prevailed somewhere further north. Leaning one arm against the side of the boat, Nella sat with Arnold in the bow, where they were protected from the increasingly strong wind. With difficult sailing manoeuvres, the *Regina maris* cruised upwind. Almost everyone was at work, and Bezug and Hainx watched the sailors closely. Now and again Nella looked up from her book and winced when her eyes fell on the face of Arnold, who was crouched close beside her on a low stool so that his forehead was not much higher than her lap. But then she went on reading the legend of Andromeda, and it seemed to her as if the singing of the wind in the rigging and the shouts of the sailors belonged to this grotesque and violent story. Suddenly she felt Arnold's hand on her knee. He had a firm grip on the curve of her bent knee and was pressing his fingers together with all his might. She looked up in horror ... his face was distorted, flushed with a green glow. Panting, he pressed his mouth to her dress.

Then she jumped up, freeing herself with the sudden jerk, so that Arnold tumbled over behind her and hit his head against one of the large hooks securing the running ropes. Without paying him any further attention, Nella ran off, past Bezug and Hainx, beside herself with horror and shame. Bezug looked after her in astonishment, and as he turned in the direction she had come from, Arnold was already coming towards him, staggering, his face covered in blood.

"What's happened?" Bezug called out to him.

Arnold pointed at Nella and struggled for words until, as if in a sudden fit of suffocation, he reached for his neck with both hands and tore his shirt collar in two. "She must... she must..." he finally uttered.

Bezug communicated with Hainx with a glance. "You mean..." he said. But Arnold was at a loss for words for something he had never experienced before. Hainx saw how it was churning inside him, how he wanted to give his

He saw how his whole body was shaken by a furious storm of passion that must have driven him to despair, like a man suddenly transported in the darkness to a distant, unknown star. He had seen it coming. For this young man, who had spent more than three quarters of his life in absurd animality, lacked the slow education, the familiarisation with the secrets of love.

After Arnold had been washed in the cabin, he lay down on the wide sofa. Arnold took it all in his stride and drank the cognac from the small glass his father had placed in front of him. Then he looked up at Bezug, took his hand and murmured: "She's

... I want her ... I don't want her to push me back ... I don't want her to push me back ... not ..."

"She won't do it anymore ... count on it, poor chap ..."

"Father ..." the sick man's grip on her hand became convulsive and wild, "she shouldn't push me back ..."

"No ... No!"

Reassured by the confident tone of the reply, Arnold lay back and fell silent. But his lips still formed soundless words. He took Hainx out and asked him at the door: "Do you think I dare ... He said then ... what did he say? ... it will be good to give a woman influence over him. Do you think that is what he meant? Don't you think it might do him harm? ... it is a great shock ..."

"Maybe it takes away his rigidity."

"You could be right ... Yes, you're probably right. Believe the miracle! Why shouldn't a woman also perform miracles?"

"If only you can get Bianca to do it. You remember that she is the sister of our famous Adalbert. The same blow ... unruly ..."

"She'll have to do it..."

But when he made his way into Nella's locked cabin in the evening, Bezug realised that Hainz was right. At first she had

She didn't want to open the door at all, and it was only when he used the harshest threats that a crack opened in her door, which she immediately wanted to close again, as if she had thought of something else. But it was too late, Bezug had already pushed his foot into the crack and tore the door open with all the brutality of a gentleman. He found Nella ready to resist, even though he immediately recognised the hint of fear behind her armour. With a few blows to her face and shoulders, he broke her defiance and pride and transformed her into the slave he had made her into. But when he commanded her to do his son's bidding and followed it up with scornful remarks about the nature of women, she rose up again. He would never bring her to that, she declared, and he saw plainly on her face that at that moment she saw before her the last way out of every confusion of fate. He understood enough of this woman's nature to know that she was capable of jumping overboard. Now i t w a s t i m e to go back and think of other means.

Breathing deeply, he stood before her, his hand still clenched into a fist, then he said in a low voice, which he tried hard to give a painful tone: "You're not keeping ... you're not keeping your promise. Didn't you say you'd do anything for him? Did you say it?"

"I said it. I was full of pity for him. But I didn't think about that. God knows, not that."

"What else do you women have so much more than that ...?"

Nella was silent. Then she said: "I can't ... I can't do it ..."

"It's all right. But I want to tell you one thing. It's over between us. How can I tolerate the fact that my will means nothing to you? I tell you, it's over ... do you hear ..."

Nella was unable to conceal her happiness, and Bezug, who did not miss the joyful ray, added this to her other offences. She had learnt enough to know that she must not betray any of her feelings to Bezug, but the sudden exultation of hope was

so strong that the mask broke. By pretending not to notice, he made her feel more secure: "When we return, I will take my hand off you ... You will have to dissolve your household, and I will see to it that the director dismisses you soon. You can then go wherever you want. I no longer care for you ..."

She happily accepted this threat as a promise that gave her new strength.

"And now I ask nothing more of you ..." - Despite everything she had learnt, Nella was still not suspicious enough. After all, she was careful enough to check the situation first and not leave her fortress until then.

Hainx, who came the next morning, not on her behalf, but - as he assured her - on his own initiative, to enquire about her condition, was told by Nella that she was seasick. The door remained closed, so that Hainx could not know whether he had been told the truth or not. And the assertion had some probability, for the sea remained rough and the *Regina maris*, which was not allowed to seek harbour on orders, rode the foaming waves before the storm, alternating with plunges into black-green chasms of water. Nella did not show her face for three days, and her meals were slipped through the narrow crack in the door. With the ingenuity that necessity drives to action, she had devised a safeguard against unexpected attacks. She had used the ropes with which her travelling basket was wrapped to place strong straps at the top and bottom of the door, allowing it to be opened only slightly. This invention, modelled on the security chains of city flats, gave Nella so much pleasure that she felt comfortable in her prison, like children who have made a house for themselves in some corner. Being completely on her own was almost a new feeling to her after her recent experiences, and the fear that lurked somewhere darkly only added to the comfort of the secure presence.

But on the third day, when these feelings had lost their charm, a paralysis spread. The stay in the narrow room oppressed her mind; she finally grew tired of looking out through the round cabin window at the sea, which was sometimes so close that she could have reached into the foam with her hand if she had been allowed to open the window. Then another wild wave would crash against the pane, white curls of foam and air bubbles sliding down like large opalescent pearls. The endless possibilities of this game filled half a day. Then came the restless wandering between the washing machine and the small cupboard in the adjoining room, but even this movement finally lost its effect. Nella tried to sleep the days away. After half an hour she jumped up, rummaged in her travelling case and got to work picking up the artificially created mess. With a shudder she thought of the countless myriads of people who had spent their whole lives in even more cramped rooms in the dark and with miserable, half-rotten food. She realised that after a few months she would have fallen into raving madness. And suddenly Nella felt a burning longing for a book whose influence would set her free. She was too much left to herself in her loneliness, and the desire to lose herself to others took over. After some thought, she came to the conclusion that it would not be dangerous to go into the saloon, where the ship's small library was housed. After all, Bezug had refrained from forcing her obedience. After all, it was better to choose a time when no one was likely to be in the lounge. Nella waited for a quiet afternoon hour and then quietly and carefully left her fortress. She crept along the corridor, which was still filled with kitchen fumes, past Hainx's and Arnold's cabins and into the parlour. Very carefully she opened the door, ready to throw it shut immediately and flee. When she noticed no one in the parlour, she entered more confidently, crossed the room and entered the small adjoining smoking room, where the library stood in its mahogany cabinet. Without choosing for long, she took two

She was about to return to the parlour when a noise in there pierced her like a hot jet. She knew at once that someone had entered, that there was another person besides herself in this room, which had only one exit. With bewildering speed she considered all the possibilities of rescue; it still seemed best to her to face the danger immediately and, if necessary, to force her way out. She rushed forward into the parlour, as one throws oneself against the dreadful certainty in order to escape the more dreadful doubts.

Arnold was standing in the middle of the room.

And now, at this very moment, the last moment of rescue, she heard a sharp crack behind his back. The door had been locked from the outside, she was locked in here with Arnold. But the horrible thing at that moment was not so much this realisation, not even Arnold's physical presence, but the image of him in a mirror hanging sideways. After the first horrified scream, Nella's gaze slipped away from Arnold's face; she was unable to bear those glowing, smouldering, shimmering green eyes. And then, in the mirror above the console, she saw a profile that was no longer human; here, where her attention was directed not to the expression of the eyes alone, but to the whole of the features, she could recognise all the details: the protruding lower jaw, the baring teeth, the lips of which had half retracted, creating the grimace of a terrible grin; it seemed to her that the animalism was also expressed in the blunt nose and the receding forehead. There was still something human on the surface, but volcanic forces were raging underneath, as if beneath a thin crust, in an extreme tension that could erupt at any moment.

Suddenly Nella noticed that the picture in the mirror had shifted and moved back to the frame nearest to her. Arnold was creeping towards her. It was certain that he would throw himself over her and overpower her with brutal force. If she showed fear and fled, she was lost. And where should she have fled to, since they had waited so carefully for her to enter the

had fallen into a trap? There was nothing left but to make an attempt; to intimidate the enemy with superior courage.

Nella turned her head and looked straight at Arnold. Despite her fear, she tried to find the mesmerising look with which she had often rebuked him before. In an instant, Arnold stopped creeping forwards and looked past Nella, hanging his head and waving his arms. A kind of smile appeared on his face, a terrible and frozen smile. Nella thought: that must have been the smile of the first humans, who rose above the dull world of the animal far back in the darkness of time. And now Arnold tried to speak. But only gurgling and gurgling sounds came from his throat. A rattle that rose from a wheezing lung.

Arnold fell silent and looked at Nella again as he continued to swing his arms quietly. And now he began to move again, advancing very slowly, as if he were stalking a watchful enemy. Nella knew that she must not take a single step backwards. She stood her ground and put all the strength of her healthy will into her gaze. It was a terrible struggle, but Nella brought the enemy to a halt once more. Now she was determined not to give up her advantage and to hold Arnold. She saw him avert his eyes from her, turn them back to her again and again and then avert them again.

They stood opposite each other for an endless time. Nothing could be heard but the scraping of the waves against the planks. Once it was as if there was a noise outside the door. It moved away again, and Nella, who had had a vague and very distant hope of some kind of change, stood rigid and helpless again. She felt her strength ebbing away ... left alone with her fear, she floated on a sea of horror. Time was without intervals and merged in a strange way with the undulating rhythm of the sea, so that it seemed as if the sea was only repeating the pulse of time. Suddenly she realised that Arnold's face was blurring before her eyes. What had happened? Was her vision blurring? Was she losing her strength? It was a

grey veil spread out before her, and now she realised that dawn was breaking. A new horror seized her. When the darkness came, she would be defenceless, her gaze robbed of all power, and Arnold would fall upon her. Again she heard a noise at the door, the pushing of a large body, a sniffing and a blowing at the crack in the door, then the ringing of a collar. It might be Barry, but for Nella, whose senses were beginning to become confused, this impression was combined with the fear of the creature opposite her, and she felt as if all these animal sounds were coming from him.

Suddenly she saw Arnold begin to sway. In the twilight it seemed to her at first to be an illusion. But when she forced herself with all her willpower to see clearly, her observation was confirmed. Arnold was swaying back and forth, with completely different vibrations than she could tell from the rocking of the ship. And all at once he collapsed, quite suddenly, as if he had been deprived of the support that had held him up until now. He crouched on the floor, his limbs strangely twisted, and began to suck on the fingers of his right hand, smacking his lips. Large bubbles of drool welled up at the corners of his mouth.

It was getting dark and Nella heard nothing but the contented smacking of an animal. Every now and then a greenish glow hit her. Under the cover of darkness, Nella backed away silently and leant against the wall. Her knees trembled and she fumbled for a foothold with her arms outstretched.

Outside, footsteps came down the stairs, whispering voices approached, then - at a brief command - the heavy body rose up in front of the threshold. Now a key was inserted into the hole ... another pause to think and listen, then the door was carefully opened. Nella, who, from the first sound, had been straining all her senses to escape, had crept along the wall to the door, as silently as possible, always expecting Arnold to jump up and pounce on her. But it seemed as if she no longer paid any attention to Arnold. He was sitting in the middle of the room, smacking his lips. Nella

waited in the dark until the door was wide open, then threw herself with all her might against the two men peering into the room, burst between them, bumped into Barry, who made a clumsy leap to the side and ran up the stairs. No more in her cabin ... it would have been impossible for her to cage herself again ... she wanted to feel the storm and see the sea; she was sure to p e r i s h if she didn't get on deck.

There was a commotion behind her at the foot of the stairs, then a shout ... was it anger? was it horror? And then something came up the stairs behind her. Was it following her? Before she had time to make a decision, it passed her. It was Arnold, running up the stairs on all fours with tremendous agility. Barry followed with awkward movements. And down in the dark, someone was screaming. Terrified, Nella ran up the few steps that were still in front of her. Then she saw Arnold, followed by Barry, running across the deck, grabbing one of the tautly stretched ropes and climbing up. Barry stood up on his hind legs and hit the rope with his front paws as if he wanted to get up there too. Then he ran frantically back and forth, ran to the side of the boat, pulled himself up against it and, with his snout turned up into the darkness, emitted a pitiful sound, halfway between a bark and a howl.

"Where is he, where is he?" shouted Hainx, who was now coming up the cabin stairs with reference.

Nella pointed up into the darkness.

"Up there?" Hainx grabbed Bezug, who was leaning against the top of the stairs without being able to speak a word ... "Listen ... up there!" But Bezug only made signs with his hands, so that Hainx realised he had to act in his place.

"Captain, are you there?" he called in the direction of the bridge.

"Yes ... what's up?"

"The searchlights! Have the masts searched ... where is he?" and he ran towards the bridge. After a few minutes, a reddish light glowed and quickly became brighter, the first scattered beams travelling

The glow of the second mast was then reduced to a narrow cone which, starting from the deck, moved along the mast. Then the bright light slid down again and began to search the second mast. And now - the searching cone of light stood still. A figure could be seen in its solid, physical neighbourhood on the raa of the Bram sail. It was squatting on the raa and holding on with one hand to a rope running over its head. As this figure was sharply cut out of the surrounding darkness with a piece of the mast and cordage, it seemed to be completely unrelated to all reality, taken entirely from a space where things have nothing in common with our reality.

People shouted in confusion, orders were given and cancelled, people ran back and forth and collided in the darkness as everyone's eyes were fixed on the swaying and bobbing mast. Nella saw Hainx and Dallago near the source of the glaring cone of light in the dim glow of the lantern mounted above the bridge. The light of the compass fell on them from the side. Dallago was in a state of intense excitement; with his arms thrown up he pointed towards the mast, where Arnold, alarmed by the searchlight, was preparing to climb higher.

A wet muzzle brushed against Nella's drooping hand. Barry turned to her, as if seeking help, signalling that he still had the most faith in her. At that moment Nella realised that she was to blame for Arnold's relapse. But was it her fault? She absolved herself at the same moment. She took Barry's head between her hands, and spoke to him soothingly, as one soothes an excited child by all sorts of words in which the meaning is less important than the tone in which they are spoken. The dog pressed up against her and tried to lead her in the direction of the mast. Then, as if all prudence had recently deserted him, he ran off, jumped with his front paws onto the ship's side and howled up into the air.

Nella heard a gasping breath behind her. Bezug had pulled himself together and came past her, pale as a corpse, staggering, hands outstretched. "Dallago," he called towards the bridge,

"People up there ... They should get him ..." The captain's order immediately sent some sailors into the shrouds. Now the moon emerged from the broken clouds and a wide, open expanse of sky lay before him. All of a sudden, the scene was overlooked. While the sailors quickly climbed up, Arnold moved higher and higher, pausing from time to time to look back at his pursuers. Now a deep silence had fallen, no one called out, all eyes were fixed on the strange chase; Nella felt as if she were being forcibly stretched, as if physically tense, so that her cramped lungs threatened to run out of breath. Only Barry wandered restlessly to and fro, between his place on the side of the boat and Nella, whom he kept nudging to urge her into action.

Now the first of the pursuers emerged from the moonlight into the yellow glow of the light cone. Arnold held on to a rope a few feet above their heads and began to shout down at them in screeching noises. Unconcerned by his anger, they advanced and the first one grabbed Arnold's legs. Then ... Nella saw Arnold pull himself a little higher and then, just as the top of the mast tilted sharply sideways, let go of his grip with a scream. The pursuing sailor reached into the void.

Someone shouted behind Nella. She saw Bezug standing next to Dallago on the bridge and raising his clenched fists. And now a tremendous commotion ensued.

"To the boats ... to the boats ..."

It didn't take more than two minutes for the two boats to be manned and lowered and pushed off the ship. Nella didn't know how she had got to the ship's side. She had grasped some rope with a convulsive grip and looked out, where the glaring circle of the searchlight glided searchingly over the waves. Some kind of manoeuvre was going on. The impressions became confused and roared wildly. Suddenly she heard a whistling sound. A body went over the side of the ship and fell clumsily into the water. Nella saw Barry's head in the foam of a wave crest. He was swimming between the boats, heading for a spot,

which lay outside the illuminated circle. The spotlight followed its path, and now Arnold had been found.

"Out there ... out there," someone shouted down from the bridge.

A body wrestled with the waves. An arm came up, a head, and just as Barry, leading the boats, had reached his master, the body disappeared. And now the boats approached, struggling hard against the swell.

Barry swam in small circles around the spot where Arnold had sunk.

Although the people in the boats knew that the sunken man would not come up again, they kept to the same spot.

"The dog ..." said the coxswain of the first boat ... "at least the dog." One of the oarsmen stood up and, kneeling in the bow, waited for the boat to get close to Barry. But when the man stretched out his arm, Barry swerved away. Again the boat followed his circles until the sailor managed to grab Barry's collar. Struggling with all his strength against the rescuer, Barry almost pulled the man out of the boat. The sailor had to let go of the dog, but, now even more inflamed by the animal's resistance to his rescue, the helmsman made the boat follow the dog's movements incessantly. A second time, the man in the bow grabbed Barry's collar and tried to pull the heavy body into the boat. But he was left with only a torn collar in his hands, and the dog had to be left behind as a shrill whistle from the ship called for a return.

Nella saw him swimming in the same circles in the same place, when the ship had already given up its difficult battle against the storm and was once again ahead of the wind. The light of the searchlight went out, and now the night was once again left to the moonlight alone. It was like an extinguishing of hope, like giving up the last thoughts of rescue. The moon remained in the sky, and the open space around it grew larger and larger. A few sailors were talking in whispers near Nella. She did not dare to turn round to

not to see what was going on. Finally, like the fear that overtakes us in dark rooms, she was driven to look towards the bridge. Just then, Bezug came down the stairs with Hainx. Bezug led the way, all erect; in the moonlight his face was a greenish pallor. At the bottom of the stairs he stood still for a moment and put his hand on the hook to which the rope was attached.

Then he came straight towards Nella. She saw him coming and something inside her screamed at her to flee, but she was unable to take a single step. He had reached her ... he stepped up and raised his clenched fists to her face. She expected a blow, a terrible word ... but all she saw was a distortion of his face, a numbness even more terrible than the wildest outburst. His mouth was wide open, and suddenly she found again that resemblance to Arnold which had often troubled and tormented her. His fists dropped and he looked her once more in the eyes with such a look of hatred that Nella trembled. Then he strode past her towards the bow.

Once more she saw him raise his arms there, with the same threatening and wild gesture, and she knew that he was cursing the sea, the element to which he had wedded himself and imposed his rule, and which refused to obey him tonight. Hainx, however, who was standing one step behind her, heard his crazy words:

"Eternal ... eternal! We want to see ... we want to see ... when the earth is mine ... a day will come ... the ridiculous infinity ... we will see ... my power is over ... is over you ..." - And Hainx had to think again of Xerxes, who had the Hellespont chastised and beaten in chains.

Towards dawn, as a grey light floated over the waves, the captain noticed a small sailing boat in the distance. The wind had died down and a clear sky, in which a few stars and the low crescent moon still stood out against the first glimmer of dawn, heralded the most beautiful day. The *Regina maris* was able to steer its course towards the land without any particular difficulty, as Bezug had ordered when he left the deck. Hainx, who stood next to Dallago

had spent the night on the bridge, followed the captain's guiding hand with his gaze.

"What kind of boat is that?" he asked.

The captain looked out for a while, straining: "I can't say that outright. A fishing boat? It doesn't look like a fishing boat ..." And after using the telescope, he continued: "It's not a fishing boat ... it's as if it's been badly battered by the night

... I see the stump of a mast ..."

"Is anyone inside?"

"I can't ... I don't think so ... if it's not on the ground. It's drifting rudderless. Strange ... I almost think ..."

"Like what?"

"It could be, after all, we're roughly near Antothrace again ... I bet ... yes, it's probably the boat from our master's castle."

"You can recognise that?"

"You get an eye for it. Once you've seen a ship or a boat, you don't forget how it differs from others. I bet it's Antothrace's boat ... it will have broken away ... stop ... wait!" He quickly picked up the telescope and said, "A man ... I see a man ... he's straightening up and looking over at us ... it's ... do you know who it is?" he asked, lowering the telescope.

"Who ...? Who could it be?"

"It is this young person ... this poet ..."

"Adalbert?"

"Yes ... you see, you must see it now with the naked eye ... he is waving ... he has seen us and is waving. He's in distress ..."

Turning to face each other at the same moment, each tried to read the other's face, and they saw the same thought arising in the other at the same time. After a moment's hesitation, Dallago gave the helmsman the order to set a course for the drifting boat. In the

brighter light, Hainx now recognised the man in the boat, who was on his knees and waving a scrap of sail or a handkerchief.

"Listen," Hainx said suddenly, putting his hand on the captain's arm, "what do you think about this night? What will Bezug do?"

Dallago looked suspiciously at the questioner: "I don't know."

"This much is certain, that he will take revenge on all those who have destroyed his hopes. I have heard him curse the sea ... the sea ..."

Shuddering, the captain repeated: "To the sea!"

"And he placed no less hope in this woman ... in Bianca. She has not fulfilled his hope. He will punish her ... for everything she loves ..."

"He is the Lord! He has the power ..."

The *Regina maris* had come closer to the boat, and Adalbert, now certain of his rescue, had stopped waving. After a short silence, Hainx continued in a hoarse voice: "Do you know, Captain, that this man, that Adalbert is Bianca's brother?"

"Really ... her brother? And she doesn't know ...?"

"She doesn't know. But do you think that Bezug would be heartbroken if the *Regina maris* hadn't accepted Adalbert today ... or let's say with grammar in mind: accepted ..."

The thought stood there, transformed into words by Hainx, it had come to life and exerted its power. But the sailor's instinct was still powerful in Dallago, and he had not yet been completely won over by Hainx.

"Are you sure about your people?" asked Hainx.

"I can order them to do whatever I want."

"And not a word gets past this ship ..."

"Not a word ..."

"Let me tell you something: Adalbert is Elisabeth's lover ..." Hainx saw a flame on Dallago's face. Then something followed, which Hainx had not realised. Dallago, who first took a step

The man who had stepped back suddenly lunged at him, grabbed him by the neck and began to choke him. Surprised, Hainx defended himself against this attack, and when he had managed to catch his breath, he shouted at the furious man: "How dare you? Are you mad?"

The captain stood opposite him, panting: "What are you ... what are you saying?"

"I say that he is her lover ..."

Everything that Dallago had had to endure from his passion assailed him in this one second in glowing, rapid flashes of memory; he tried in vain to gain his footing in a mad whirl. Clinging to the railing of the bridge, he shouted at Hainx: "Your lover?"

"And it's in your hands," Hainx said more quietly.

Then Dallago turned to the man at the wheel, pointed to the boat, which was now less than shouting distance in front of the ship, and then placed his right hand vertically, at a right angle with the edge of his hand on the back of his left. The helmsman looked at the captain, startled, and only overcame his hesitation when he saw the sinister repetition of the order in Dallago's eyes. With a small jerk of the wheel, he changed the direction of the ship slightly. He took the straight line on Adalbert's boat. Some sailors from the deck watch slowly approached the bridge. They had noticed the boat and wanted to get Dallago's orders. But he waved at them angrily, with a gesture of his hand to indicate that they had nothing to worry about and should go to their places. Adalbert had stood up in his boat and, holding on to the stump of the mast, looked towards the ship.

The *Regina maris* kept her course, which just overlapped the boat.

Now she had approached, but instead of turning round and launching a boat or gliding gently towards the small wreck, she sailed towards it at the same speed. It was only for a second that Hainx and Dallago were treated to the marvellous sight of the terrible transformation from joyful hope to horror on Adalbert's face. They both stood bent over and savoured the spectacle.

"Shall I order a greeting?" Hainx shouted down.

Then something crunched under the keel of the *Regina maris*, a small jolt went through her whole body ... a stifled scream came up, and then the ship steadily pursued its course again. When they looked back, some wreckage was bobbing on the waves, with what looked like a human body stuck to one of them.

Hainx smiled.

Suddenly that smile froze. Bianca was standing on the steps to the bridge, seemingly about to c l i m b up, but had lost all her strength halfway up. She had spent the night on deck, huddled in a corner behind ropes, always afraid of being sought out and judged by Bezug. At last, towards morning, she had lapsed into sleep, from which she was only awakened by a conversation between two sailors who were talking in a low voice near her. Without understanding the words, she could see from the gestures and expressions of the Italians that they were in a state of excitement. Had something happened again? What had happened again? She saw that the people's attention was focussed on the sea; confused and frightened, and in her sleepy state still relating everything to the accident of the night, she ran to the ship's side. She was just in time to see a boat with a person disappear under the keel of the ship and to hear a stifled scream.

What had happened? Clinging to the rope of the staircase, she stood there and Hainx read the terrible question in her eyes.

"A second accident," he said, "it's been a bad night.

Ahriman was released."

"What happened?"

"A boat ... it's ours ... we sailed over it ... an accident ..."

"An accident?" It was a threatening question.

And she received a threatening reply: "I advise you to think of nothing but an accident ..."

Nella suddenly saw the figures of the captain and Hainx move into the distance, blur and merge into a lump.

unite. Then she saw nothing more.

A missing person returns. *Looping the Loop*

[Table of contents](#)

During her absence, Mrs Agathe had had a number of high-ranking visitors. His Episcopal Grace, Doctor Franz Salesius Count von Pöschau, had driven up and enquired about her condition. Delighted by this attention, Mrs Agathe always felt a little better in her physical condition and did not doubt that these favourable effects were due to the influence of the means of grace, the administration of which was the responsibility of the bishop. After the third visit, when she was no longer able to receive the Count lying on the divan, but sitting, she spoke, as he took his leave, of the improvement in her health which she owed to him.

The bishop listened to her with a suave smile and, returning to the parlour, which he was about to leave, he asked: "So it wasn't about the dead frogs?"

Blushing, Mrs Agathe confessed that she had given up this cure, which had brought her no relief, more than a fortnight ago. "Dead frogs," she said ... "I can't understand how I could believe in such nonsense."

"I am of the opinion that everyone should be allowed to find their own conviction. And now I have the pleasure of seeing my view confirmed again in your case. What use is it to try to persuade people or force them to do something. He will follow unwillingly or only be half convinced. And the most healing powers are always the spiritual powers, especially the complex of feelings that we call religion. But if religion is to be beneficial, we must not force anyone to believe."

"The spiritual powers ... of course! You, Episcopal Grace, r a d i a t e such power."

"I know," the bishop continued, without initially emphasising his personality, "I know that after-belief or superstition is also closely related to faith. But one must distinguish between them. You know me, madam, and you know that I am not a fanatic. My past speaks against it. But think of Shakespeare's words about the things between heaven and earth. Faith often attaches itself to an image of grace. Think of the faith of thousands, hundreds of thousands ... all pinned to an image that is only the representation of a redeeming thought, a salutary, spiritual night. Isn't it as if these wishes and pious feelings of hundreds of thousands were stored up in this picture, just as electrical power can be stored up in a Leyden jar? It is like this. In such an image, to which countless people have focussed their hopes for centuries, to which they have opened up their innermost being, there are secret forces to which we know no name. We sense them, and from their effects comes the certainty of their presence."

"You're talking about the miraculous image in Schönau?"

"I am thinking of this picture. I am pleased to tell you that we have succeeded in obtaining favours and that its reputation is beginning to spread throughout the world. Polydor Slimeball, you remember the fat guest at your daughter's engagement party ... he has earned merit. And now all who suffer and are burdened will visit the holy place."

"I want to ... I may also try, am I worthy of mercy?"

"The path to salvation is open to all people. But you must visit the image in its place. In Russia, you know, it happens that the images of grace are brought to the houses of the rich so as not to trouble the nobles. But that is not the right thing to do. We must not demand that the holy come to us. We must seek it out ourselves."

"As soon as I'm in better health ..."

"Certainly; wait until you feel strong enough to come to Schönau. You are to be received with all attention

become ..."

"And in the meantime, bring me a reflection of heavenly light ..."

"Gladly ... as often as you allow." And after a long look into Agathe's brightened eyes and a kiss on the hand, the bishop left.

But the improvement in Agathe's health was to be followed by an abrupt relapse. She received the telegram informing her of her son's death while talking to Hecht. Elisabeth's bridegroom had recently thrown himself into work with wild zeal, busy from early morning until late evening on the building sites, where thousands of labourers were busy preparing for a work unknown to all, he hardly took an hour a day to rest. But then it happened that he was not to be seen at the construction site for days on end and could not be found in his flat either. The business of the billion-euro company came to a standstill, work was delayed and finally came to a complete standstill, because there was no one to show them where to go and where to go. During this time, Hecht ran around in the woods and stopped off at village inns, where he got drunk with farmers and day labourers. When this romp, in which day and night brought no change, had exhausted his strength, he slept for a day in the forest behind a hedge, in the hayloft of a farmhouse, in the dirty bed of a village inn. Then he returned to work with renewed vigour and a rush to catch up on everything he had missed. From time to time he also came to see Mrs Agathe to enquire after Elisabeth. That was the only long interruption he allowed himself during his days of fervour. He had adopted a manner of behaviour towards his future mother-in-law that was very far from respectful. He entered her boudoir with the question of news of Elizabeth, sat indifferent and bored when she told of her condition, and at once turned the conversation to the only subject that attracted his attention, wherever there was any opportunity for such diversion.

When Mrs Agathe received the telegram, he stood up and, half rising from his seat, he looked over at her eagerly. He saw how she had

He opened the telegram, unfolded it and then fell back with a cry. The sheet was lying on the floor next to the divan and, when Hecht picked it up, it also told him the unfortunate news.

"Hm!" he said, "dead! Drowned ... there's nothing to be done ..."

Mrs Agathe lay silently for a while, so that Hecht approached her with a coldly scrutinising gaze. But only now did the wailing begin. First in incoherent syllables, then in cascades of words. Hecht stood beside the wailing woman and looked at her without making any attempt to comfort her.

"I don't understand you," he said at last, "why are you shouting like that? Whether the unfortunate young man is down in the water or locked up in your house, it's all the same to you. You've hardly seen him for years."

"My son, my poor son," sobbed Mrs Agathe ...

"What do you want? Your son ...? Certainly ... your son ... good. What else?"

What connected you to him ..."

"Motherly love ... You don't realise what lies in the word motherly love ..."

"Don't talk such nonsense," said Hecht brutally, "as if I hadn't had a mother myself. She died, and I wasn't able to surround her end with the love she deserved. Because in the meantime ... motherly love? I know what that means. But you? Were you a mother to this unfortunate man?"

"I ..." Agathe started indignantly, "me? I'm not supposed to have been a mother to him?"

"No! You gave birth to him, that was all. But that's all you did. No more!"

"My fear, my worries about him ... my horror ..."

"Why don't you keep quiet? Don't play a comedy! What are you trying to fool me? He gave you the creeps. You are strange people in this house. I almost suspect that there is some ghastly secret in these things."

Agathe jumped up with a cry and looked at Hecht in horror, her eyes animated as if by a memory that had suddenly burst forth, by an idea that had long been held back with difficulty and all kinds of tricks. "What do you want to say?" she cried, holding out her hands in defence.

"I know nothing and I don't want to know anything. I've had enough of what I've had to experience and am forced to know. But you ... you are a mystery to me. What kind of woman are you? You have a terrible pain in your life and you give yourself over to small pains. The shock that must once have thrown you has turned into the most ridiculous sensitivities. Other people become deeper and more serious through such events, you have become a spoiled child. You are worthy to be Elizabeth's mother, and I do not doubt for a moment that Bezug is her father."

"Go away," Agathe cried, staggering, "you're killing me ... go away!"

But Hecht stood up and looked at her; for a moment it was as if he wanted to step over and support her, but even the first little movement made Mrs Agathe tremble, and she cried out, clasping her hands in front of her face.

"Go away ... have mercy, go away! I can't see you any more ..."

After a moment's hesitation, Hecht turned and left. How strangely confused was the world and how strange were people's fates? And how presumptuous of him to want to stand in judgement of another person when his own life was no less confused and strange? Shaking his head and as if in a daze, he went back to his work.

When Bezug returned home with Hainx and went to see his wife, he found her in bed with a fever and the bishop with her as a comforter. Hecht was also there, *s i t t i n g* on a chair with a morose expression. On entering, the bishop rose and came to meet him. The man of the world had completely disappeared behind the priest. "The counsel of God," he said sternly, "we should not quarrel with God, but be devoted to his will."

Bezug looked at him. There was a deep, smouldering hatred in his gaze. "Your God," he said, "has nothing to do with this matter. There were other forces at work ... A man who ... but I will crush him ..." He raised a threatening, clenched fist so that the bishop stepped back, shuddering. Buried in her pillows, Agathe did not want to hear the report of Arnold's death. When, in spite of her reluctance, she continued to tell of that terrible night in broken words, hurriedly, hurriedly, she suddenly screamed and looked at her husband with unfeigned horror.

"Go easy on her," the bishop said with a barely restrained reproach. Since he had assumed that more than half of Agathe's condition had again arisen from her overflowing pity for herself, he had thought he didn't have to show any particular consideration for her. Now he saw that she was really worse off than usual.

"Leave it alone," the bishop continued, "I have every reason to believe that as a spiritual counsellor I will cause the least pain."

When Hecht came home, he walked countless times through the twilight of his study, where the lamps above the desk were waiting in vain to be lit today. How mysterious were the people around him? But wasn't he even more mysterious than they were? He knew that Elizabeth was deceiving him, and tolerated it, though he was in agony, only sustained by the one hope that he, too, would one day see himself delivered from his passion. The terrible word that Hainx had whispered to him was still in his ear as the train with Elisabeth and Adalbert set off. The first impulse was to jump up, fall down and be crushed by the wheels. But something pulled him back: maybe you can do it too. Also ... it was an insane thought, but it saved him. In the confusion caused by Arnold's death, he had only dared to ask Hainx about Elisabeth. Hainx knew nothing about her, but he had made a promise to Hecht that filled him with a vague but improving hope.

"If you come tomorrow," he had whispered to him, "I'll tell you something that will make you happy."

The next day, Hecht arrived at the palace after finishing his work. He had imposed this delay on himself, just as one postpones the arrival of a joyful event in order to prolong the pleasure of anticipation.

He found Hainx at work, with the help of two undersecretaries, organising the documents that had arrived during his absence and preparing them for completion. When Hecht entered, Hainx stood up and took him out, grasping him confidentially under the arm.

"Well, what is it?" asked Hecht, now no longer able to control his impatience.

"I think it will be welcome news to you."

"What? What?"

"Adalbert Semilasso is dead."

Whether the state into which Hecht sank lasted a few minutes or just a moment, he never realised later. He whirled around, suns rose and set with explosive force, and bright streaks of light cut through a deep darkness. "Dead?" he asked at last, grabbing Hainx by the shoulder.

"He's dead."

"How - how do you know?"

"I saw it myself ..."

"Seen what?"

"That he drowned ..."

"Drowned ... you saw it?" The doubt that had suddenly arisen in Hecht's mind gave way to the other man's cold and confident smile. "And she ... does she know?"

"I don't think she knows. It will be your triumph to break the news to her."

"Shall I say it...?"

"Don't you dare?"

Without answering, Hecht left Hainx and ran down the stairs. Drifting through several rooms and corridors, he suddenly found himself in the great hall, facing Elisabeth, who had entered through the other door. She was in her travelling dress, and in her pale face the resemblance to her father predominated over everything that was peculiar to her nature. Without paying any attention to her fiancé, she approached him, who was standing in front of the light-coloured arched windows of the garden terrace. "Good evening, Father," she said.

Slowly Bezug turned round: "Good evening, Elisabeth; are you back yet?" He spoke with difficulty and labour, and something in his tone reminded him of Arnold's way of speaking.

"I have come back. Yes ... because ..."

"Well ... and ..."

Elisabeth approached her father almost tenderly. It seemed to her as if it was a bribe from fate to abandon herself to softer emotions at this moment. As if she should be rewarded by a favourable turn of events for herself. "I read it in the newspapers

... it's terrible. And you were there and couldn't help him."

"Before my eyes, Elisabeth, before my eyes. Barry was there earlier than her ... but what could Barry do to help ..." He had grabbed her hand. Hecht was astonished, he saw Elisabeth in a different light. What had happened to her? And he was lurking here to give her his message, triumphant, hoping to use a corpse as a bridge to her. He saw himself in full darkness, black, an unborn dwarf, and Elisabeth stood in all clarity and the divine splendour of compassion. Something quite new touched him.

"Father!" said Elisabeth, "I think that's a comfort ... he would never have got well. What do you want? He would have dragged on with his miserable life; if he had become human, always in the terrible fear of falling back into his animal nature. Isn't it better this way ...?"

"He's been murdered, Elisabeth."

"Murdered?"

"Yes ... an advice I took murdered him. He will laugh, the scoundrel, that his attempt succeeded so well. This bourgeois and philanthropist ... this swindler and deceiver ..."

At that moment, all the lamps in the large chandelier lit up at once and the twilight had receded into the park. Each of the three people stood in the full light, and next to each of them lay a clumsy, heavy shadow on the ground. As if the sudden brightness had been a stimulus for Elisabeth, a release from the original impatience that had driven her, she now suddenly asked abruptly: "And Adalbert ... where is Adalbert Semilasso?"

Bezug did not answer. And Elisabeth repeated her question, insistently and unwillingly, like someone who has listened favourably to someone else and is now demanding attention for his own interests: "Isn't Adalbert Semilasso here?"

"I think..." said Bezug, shaken, "I think he's with you after all. Don't you know ...?"

"No ... he left ... he left Antothrace before me. He has ... I sent him ahead. Isn't he here yet?"

"He hasn't come yet. I haven't seen him yet ..."

"Not come yet? So where is he...?"

In Hecht, too, the twilight of emotion and shame gave way to a sudden brightness. This transformation of Elisabeth ... how dull and stupid had he become, where was the sharpness of his observation? How could he have allowed himself to be so deceived? What else had brought about this change, this gentleness, tenderness and human sympathy that had given him hope, other than fear? Only fear for his beloved. Now he resolutely raised his weapon to strike.

Elisabeth stood silently with her father for a while, pondering. Then she left him and walked quickly towards the door where Hecht was waiting for her. "Good evening," he said, stepping into her path.

"Is that you? How are you?" she asked, indifferent and impatient at the same time, eager to get past him. It was as if she had

never received his letters in which his pride humbled itself before her, in which a heart revealed all its twitching agony.

"I think you know how things stand with me." He gave her way, but walked beside her. Suddenly she stopped. "What do you want from me? Leave me alone. I want some peace and quiet."

It was in the small room that separated the music room from the dining room. There were a few busts on the walls, which betrayed themselves with a scattered glimmer. The park rustled behind the portals of the open window. Hecht quickly considered whether he should say what he had to say here. It was too dark to fully savour the impression of his message. But in a lighted room he might not have found the courage he thought he had here, where he could not see Elisabeth's threatening face.

"I don't want to bother you," he said, "I just have something to tell you."

"Morning!"

"It's your own business. You enquired about Adalbert earlier."

"Yes! Do you know anything about him?"

"Yes ... I know something ..."

After a moment of silence, the question came:

"Well?"

"He's dead."

Just a wheezing breath in the darkness. Then Elisabeth said:

"Take care of yourself. Take care of yourself."

"It's the truth. He is dead. I am happy. You know I'm happy. And I've become suspicious of anything that promises me happiness. But I believe it: he drowned."

"Have you seen it...?"

"I got it from someone who saw it for himself."

"Who's that?"

"Rudolf Hainx."

"Hainx! Hainx!" And after a while a soundless murmur: "Then it's true ... then it's true ..."

Tense to the extreme, Hecht listened into the darkness, trying to penetrate it with his eyes, always expecting to be destroyed by a sudden outburst. But nothing happened. He heard footsteps moving away, the sound of a door and was alone, unable to rejoice in his victory and more uncertain than ever about his future.

When Hainx learnt that same evening that Elisabeth had returned, he took the work up to his room. After he had double-locked the door and put the iron shutter in front of the windows, he scrutinised every corner of his three rooms, looked under the beds and behind boxes and stoves. Only then did he resume his work and sat at it until long after midnight, somewhat distracted and devoting most of his attention to the slowly dying sounds of life in the corridors. He met Elisabeth at breakfast. He had not expected to see her, for he knew for certain that Hecht had not hesitated an hour to break the news of Adalbert's death to Elisabeth. And before he had gone into the breakfast room, he had also gone to see Bezug himself and told him that Adalbert's boat had been overrun by the *Regina maris* on that unlucky night. Without question, Bezug had listened to the report, only with a glimmer in his eyes and then, as if in agreement: "It's good ... it's good." At the door of the breakfast room, he had held Hainx back once more:

"Tell me ... he's her brother? ... didn't you tell me that? Your brother?" And to Hainx's affirmative answer once again: "It's good ... it's good."

Hecht had also come to this breakfast, driven after a sleepless night by the desire to see Elisabeth, to observe the effect of his news, to realise what he now had to expect. But after a long time Elisabeth was back at this table performing the duties of a housewife as if nothing had changed in her life. At one point, Hainx thought he felt the touch of red-hot steel. He saw Elisabeth's eyes on him and knew that she was determined to get through what had happened. Defiantly he endeavoured

to continue in the light-hearted tone he had adopted, as if to show that he feared no threats.

As Elisabeth rose from the table and was about to leave the room with a slight nod of her head, she suddenly stopped and, swaying slightly, reached behind her as if for a support. Her gaze had fallen through the window into the park and she saw a man coming across the gravelled path and walking up the steps to the great hall. She recognised Adalbert Semilasso despite his lowered head and changed clothes. She stopped and, without saying a word, turned back into the room, looking from one to the other. Hainx was astonished to recognise a change which he could not explain. All he could see was that Elisabeth had risen above him again, that she had struck him down with some weapon that had not yet become visible.

The next moment, Adalbert Semilasso had entered.

In the midst of the confusion, Elisabeth stood radiantly, regally. "Good morning, Adalbert," she said, holding out her hand to him, "you're a little late."

He looked at her. A tired look from veiled eyes. Hesitantly, he replied: "I took a diversion."

"I have heard of it." It was a victory of love and hate at the same time, a play of all emotions amplified by a thousand forces; it filled Elisabeth like a roar in subterranean caves and she felt as if her inner being was being shaken by violent, rhythmic shocks. She could have laughed now. Laughing and dancing. A wild, bacchanalian dance, naked ... under a glowing light. An irresistible urge lifted her hands in a twisted gesture of rapture.

Hainx was the first to compose himself and find a word. Looking firmly at Adalbert and showing in a cold gaze his willingness to fight to the utmost, he asked with an open challenge: "And what has stopped you on your way?"

But Adalbert was no longer inclined to flinch from Hainx, even though he felt oppressed and tired. With cool calm he replied

he: "A minor accident ... of no further significance ... it was really nothing more than a loss of time."

"You will wish, the breakfast on your room," said Elisabeth.

"If you want to be good enough to give the order..."

As Elisabeth followed Adalbert, she stopped at Hainx and said quietly: "Thank the God you believe in that he did not drown."

But Hainx managed to smile again and looked her in the face with a shrug.

Once in his room, Adalbert immediately locked himself in and only opened the door to the servant who brought him breakfast after knocking several times and being assured that no one was at the door except the servant. He trembled at the prospect of being alone with Elisabeth. What could he expect from her? Breakfast remained untouched on the table, although an agonising hunger called him to eat. But a tremendous inertia made it almost impossible for him to move. He sat at his desk with his arms propped up and was unable to move. Only when the servant brought him his midday meal, in covered silver bowls, prepared with all the care of a sick man's food, did he eat two meals at once. Elisabeth had still not come, but he could expect her at any moment, and as dusk fell he left his room, went quietly down the back stairs into the park and reached the street through a small door in the park wall.

The countess, who was sitting in front of a tiny library cupboard in a sumptuously furnished and scented room, jumped when the chambermaid brought Adalbert's card.

The girl wanted to switch on the electric light.

"Leave it alone and show the gentleman in..." She went to her flirtatious desk and picked up some object, put it down again and was still standing there with her arm half raised when Adalbert entered.

He didn't say a word, stopped in the middle of the room and looked at the countess. She approached him, took his hand and kissed it.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"It's the first time you've come to me. You ... to me? What is this? You come to me ... forgive me ... I don't know what I'm talking about ... do you love me?" She sobbed.

Adalbert stroked her hair, as he had done in the past. But he dropped his hand, because it suddenly seemed to him that he no longer had the right to make this fatherly and reassuring gesture. "It's hard to get to you. You hide yourself so strangely. I went to the flat you told me about. But they didn't want to know anything about you. And only when I said the word you once said to me: Is he ... there, they sent me to another place. And only there, after I had said your watchword once again, did I find out your real home. Why these strange detours?"

She asked in agony: "Don't ask ... I can't tell you."

"And this house ... it looks poor enough from the outside ... but you live splendidly ..."

"Don't ask ... don't ask! You'd better tell me why you're coming."

"You are my friend. I felt it and ... I recognised it too. You warned me about Elisabeth ..."

Wordlessly, the countess pulled Adalbert next to her onto a sofa covered with cushions.

"What has become of my life? Am I still doing what I want? Others decide about me. Where is my destiny being prepared? I am weak, I must accuse myself. I come to you, my friend ... I can tell you everything. I have no one to speak to ..."

"And you come to me ... Dear, dear!"

"I have to give her up ... and I had already won her. It's over ... Now it's over ... can I still stand in front of her like this? She trusted me, and how did it happen that I had to betray her?"

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

"From her ... whom I love ..."

"You love ... you love ... who? Who is it?" The countess had got up, she could no longer bear the darkness and called for help from the pale light of a traffic light above the sofa.

Adalbert had followed her: "It's the daughter of Palingenius the tower keeper. I love her ... and yet I have fallen for Elisabeth. By what power; I do not know. It was a disastrous night, and how many wild nights followed this first one!"

"I know it, she has a terrible power."

"And now I've lost Regina. Can I step in front of the Reine like this?"

The countess said softly: "Do it ... do it ... great love knows how to forgive."

Shaking his head, Adalbert sat in a chair at the desk and forlornly picked up one of the letters lying there.

"Leave that ... leave that ..." said the countess, taking the letter from his hand, "you mustn't touch that."

"And yet ... yet," Adalbert continued, "I could never stop thinking about Regina. I fled."

"Escaped ... And you succeeded? But Elisabeth ..."

"Hear me out. It's a strange adventure ... strange, and I've been saved by a miracle ..."

"You were in danger?" the countess grabbed his hand again, shuddering.

"Danger? It was just a different kind of danger than the one I was condemned to sink into every day. The sea ... you see, it crashed over me, but it carried me up again."

"What was that like? How did that happen? Why don't you tell us?"

"Well ... that's how it was. One night I made the decision to flee. I came from her. For days I had noticed a suspicion in her, despite her mask. She had either intercepted Regina's letters or learnt about her in some other way. I thought about it. You can believe me that I had trouble thinking. For it was as if Elisabeth was endeavouring to deprive herself of me. She heaped an excess of lust around me, drew me in, anaesthetised me, so that I clearly felt that the power of resistance was leaving me. Inwardly

hollowed out, I was like a rotten tree only held up by its bark. Although I saw through her plan, I was hardly able to counter it. I thought I sensed that something was being prepared against Regina, that nets were tightening around her, that she was being threatened from ambush. Now it was high time to carry out a plan that had been in me for a long time. That night came, and I was strong enough not to betray myself in front of Elisabeth. Leaning against the sarcophagus of Queen Omphale, she watched me."

"I think she loves you too. After her own kind, like a predator..."

"The old castellan of the castle had shown me a lot of kindness. But he held me like a prisoner and guarded my steps. In order to escape, I had to win the keys that opened up the castle's underground corridors and rooms. Eerie rooms, I tell you, in which gruesome ghosts seem to lurk. It was fortunate that I was able to lure the locksmith into a distant room on a pretext the night I came from Elisabeth. We enter, and the old man leaves the bunch of keys on the outside of the door. I diverted his attention ... he turned his back on me ... I gave him a push so that he fell ... I was out in one jump, turned the key and pulled off the whole bunch. The old man began to scream, but I had to hope that no one in this remote room would hear him any time soon. Deep down in the rock is a cave with a window in the wall leading out into the open. And outside the rock, the sea ... freedom. A small bay sheltered the island's small sailing boat behind an outstretched natural molo. After countless unsuccessful attempts, I climbed with difficulty up the rock and out of the window, letting myself slide down the wet wall outside, washed by the surf. Twice big waves went over me, because it was a rough sea that night."

"And you dared to do it after all?"

"I tried to learn the fishermen's moves on my trips with Elisabeth, and I knew which way the land lay. That was all. I was not allowed to enquire any further."

Elisabeth would probably have been suspicious straight away. Despite these inadequate preparations, I thought I was sufficiently equipped to take on the sea. But when I came out of the more sheltered bay in my boat, I had to realise that I was no match for the sea. After half an hour I was ready. I had lost control of my boat. The mast was broken off and went overboard with the sail. Fortunately, because otherwise I think I would have sunk with my boat already half full. It was a terrible night. Towards morning, when I had given up all hope and was already stretched out in the boat, something roused me. It drove me to get up and look out. Then I saw ... a ship coming towards me. They had already spotted me and seemed determined to rescue me. As the ship came closer, I recognised *Regina maris*. The ship that bears her name. It is a sign, a sign, I thought and laughed and cried at this miracle. But then came a moment that I would not wish to experience a second time in my life. A sudden change from joy to mortal fear. The ship is there, but it doesn't want to take me in, it wants to destroy me. I see a steep wall above me, hear a mocking shout

... cry out ... but in a whirl I am pulled down ... Regina has never been so clear and bright before my eyes as in the seconds I spent under the keel of the ship in danger of drowning ..."

"Always them ... always them," murmured the countess, as Adalbert now paused a little. "And you think they overran you on purpose?"

"I know it for sure. The last man I saw at the moment of my downfall was Rudolf Hainx. And I'll never forget the look on his face, that malicious and cruel joy ... I think he hates me because he knows that Elisabeth ..."

"The villains! You've finally figured it out. He possessed Elisabeth before you ..."

"I have won ... I have had the triumph of seeing his fright and then his boundless rage, maybe that was part of it too ..."

that I came back to life. Because if I had simply disappeared, people would have thought I was dead. Wouldn't they? They wouldn't have investigated me ... they had seen my demise. I was dead ... and could have started to live somewhere. Anew ... and shake off the torment of my servitude ..."

"And how were you saved?"

"By a miracle. Or a coincidence. Don't you think that chance and miracle are one and the same? I drifted around until about noon ... clinging to a few planks of my wrecked boat, the waves tossing me back and forth ... more and more gently as the sea calmed down. Finally, fishermen picked me up. They took me to the nearest harbour, and I found them full of compassion and active helpfulness towards me. I immediately got myself some clothes and started my journey home ..."

The countess had wrapped her arm around Adalbert's shoulders and brought her pale, slightly powdered face close to his. They sat cheek to cheek, and Adalbert let himself be enveloped by her tenderness, with a quiet, marvellous feeling of happy security, childlike trust, without any movement of the senses despite the closeness of this trembling, longing body. Finally, out of a deep sense of gratitude, he said: "You are so good."

A soft blush glowed under the whitish hint of powder.

"Don't say that. I'm no good. What do you know about me! ... And what do I know about you? You see, I don't understand you. You were free. Dead to Bezug and his vile helpers. And yet you came back to him. Why? Why? I don't understand ..."

"I don't quite understand that myself. It was a dark compulsion ..."

"She has withdrawn you ..." said the countess with barely restrained anger, "you are poisoned by her."

"Poisoned? By Elisabeth? You're right. I am poisoned by her, sick, unclean and must no longer go near Regina. But it wasn't that. She didn't pull me back ... not in the way you mean. I don't know ... I don't know ..."

The countess calmly took the agitated man's hands between hers. Adalbert let it happen, then rose and walked up and down the room. "I had to come back here ... I had to ... otherwise my escape would have been pointless. That's why I fled, to finally find out how Regina is. If nothing had happened to her. Above all, my fear had to be silenced."

"Well, so what? What about Regina? How is she?"

"It was my first journey when I arrived. I wasn't allowed to go to her. I had made myself unworthy of the friendship shown to me by Eleagabal Kuperus, her father's friend. I had to take a roundabout route to get news. The old woman who lights candles in the cathedral for the salvation of the deceased knows what is happening at Palingenius. I went to see her and questioned her. Palingenius has been a little ill again, but Regina is well ... nothing has happened to her."

"She will have had a lot to do with her sick father."

"It may be a lot to do. But still ... the mystery of her silence remains. She could have answered my urgent letters with one line. She should have replied."

"But you could be quiet now. Wait until you can approach her again. But why did you return to Bezug? You said it yourself, that you could have freed yourself."

With his back turned to the room, Adalbert stood at the window and looked out into the night. There was nothing to be seen outside, complete darkness lay in the small courtyard surrounded on three sides by high, windowless walls. "It's strange," he said hesitantly, "I had to come back here, that was the purpose of my escape. But the closer I got to him, the more the spell that binds me to him came over me. I learnt that nothing had happened to Regina. And then, as if I had to, I went back to him. After a fight. But he was stronger than me. There was something else. I had already said it. The desire to step up and show Hainx that his attack had failed. A triumph ... a victory after so many defeats. And yet ... another victory that I don't owe to myself. But to chance ..."

Flatteringly, the countess placed her arm on his and slowly led Adalbert towards the sofa. "And now?" she asked, pulling him down beside her. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Go to her, Adalbert ... go to her and tell her everything ..."

"No, no ... no! I can't do that ..."

"Why don't you want to do it? Great love forgives everything. Everything. Do you know what a woman's great love can overcome? Any woman, even the most miserable and despised. Go to her."

But Adalbert shook his head. There were obstacles and no way to get over them. With increasingly harsh reproaches against himself, he repeated what he had said.

"Listen," said the countess, after sitting in silence for a while, "I want to tell you something. I'll go and prepare the way for you to see her. I will speak to her." Her whole body trembled.

"You?" He looked up and gazed into her eyes, astonished, like someone who is surprised by something new that is not in the realm of his thoughts. "You?"

"I want to do it for you."

"No ..." he said after a moment's thought, "no ... not you. I don't want you to go to her."

The countess sat beside him, turned away, her foot twitching under her lace dress. The hand that held his right hand slid down. "I understand ..." she said, "I understand. I am not pure."

He saw how much he had hurt her, and compassionately he laid his hand on her hair, as before, without withdrawing it again, pitying, loving and full of pain at the strange confusion of their fates. There was a soft knock at the door, and the countess's chambermaid entered. The countess looked up and saw the girl standing at the door. Startled, she stood up. "You must go now," she said hurriedly,

"Go! There is only one warning you should not forget. Be careful that she doesn't find out your secret. She is capable of anything. She is dangerous and knows

No worries." And then, as Adalbert turned to leave, she asked with painful longing: "Will you come back?"

"Forgive me!"

The countess smiled, her mouth twitching: "Come whenever you feel like it. I will listen to you if you trust me. And I thank you."

The girl led Adalbert out another way. Again through a maze of dark rooms and corridors, across a courtyard and a staircase that first ascended and then descended again. He felt a warm and revitalising sensation radiate through him, a glowing wave to which he owed a sense of happiness and returning strength. It pained him to have hurt the countess, but he admitted to himself that he would refuse a similar offer if she should repeat it. After a long wander through remote streets, he came to the cathedral hill. Opposite the house of Eleagabal Kuperus, pressed into the shadow of a front gate, he saw the immense mass of the cathedral stretching into the night. A light was burning in the doorman's flat, so far away, so high above him, that it seemed to him like a dream that this light might ever have been burning for him too. It seemed to him that the deserted square in front of the cathedral was filled with an unspeakably sad melody, a monotonous, mournful melody, as if the restrained mourning of the stone had dissolved into sounds that floated over the square in wide, flowing robes like ghosts. But despite the shivers that seemed to come to him from the closed gate of the cathedral, the happy feeling of hope that he owed to the countess would not be suppressed. One word had stayed with him; her word of the great love that overcomes and forgives everything. This word stood above his reluctance, and a glamour emanated from it that Adalbert thought he felt even when he closed his eyes. How gladly he would have sought out Eleagabal Kuperus to confide in him, and he stood timidly at the carved door, where the demons and animal figures seemed to swarm in the uncertain light of the lantern. But at last he turned

and walked slowly home, still elated by that strong feeling in which he also believed he had a weapon against Elisabeth.

The fight he had prepared himself for did not take place. No reproaches, no threats, no embarrassing questions. In fact, it was as if Elisabeth avoided meeting Adalbert anywhere. At first, Adalbert trembled at the command that would summon him to her. Then he longed for this call, because it was even more sinister not to have spoken to Elisabeth at all. He suspected danger behind her silence.

But Elisabeth had no thought of setting any traps or lying in wait for him. She had become insecure in her possessions and endeavoured to regain what she had already lost. What kind of man was Adalbert? He had enjoyed her and was able to renounce her. For the sake of some other woman, that was certain, and Hainx had told the truth at the time. Who this other woman was remained a question that burned in her heart. But for the time being she refused to seek the answer, leaving all the means at her disposal unused and focussing exclusively on the one goal of winning Adalbert back. She suppressed her anger against the stranger and her curiosity to get to know her, for she feared that, succumbing to a passionate hatred, she would then spoil what could still be saved. And it was important to her to save Adalbert for herself. Therefore she surrounded him with all tenderness, without becoming intrusive, with little attentions, which only caused Adalbert consternation, because he did not know how to interpret them and how to adapt them to Elisabeth's nature. But Elisabeth did not understand herself, she had lost herself and was transformed, she was courting Adalbert, as she admitted to herself in hours of impotent rage.

In the days that followed, Adalbert was left to his own devices and was able to continue his solitary labyrinthine walks, the centre and destination of which was the cathedral, where he gathered daily to receive a charitable donation from old Swoboda for the salvation of the souls of the

to exchange news about Heinrich Palingenius and his daughter with the deceased.

Bezug devoted himself completely to work during these days, tightened all the screws and springs of his enormous machine, made sure that everyone was in their place, and conducted the business of the billion-dollar company with double zeal. Hainx saw that he was more determined than ever to carry out his plan.

"At first," Hainx said to Hecht, "it was as if he was going to collapse. I've never seen him like that. It took a terrible toll on him. But now ... now he's picked himself up again. His strength is growing day by day ..."

"They all fear him. More than ever. It's as if he's become an automaton. Nothing human anymore. Just iron, drive wheels, ball joints, maximum precision! And he forces them all, all of them."

Two weeks later, the conversation turned to Hainx's news of Adalbert's death. "Tell me," he asked suddenly at the end of a lengthy and laborious compilation of statistics on the company's last land acquisitions; "tell me ... Bianca was on the ship at the time ... did she see anything of Adalbert's boat being overrun?"

"She saw it."

"Good, now tell me what you know about this girl's relationship with Adalbert. Her childhood ... everything ..."

Hainx had until late after midnight to report on the details that had been passed on to him by the oath keepers.

That was the night before Bianca Semonski's performance at *Looping the Loop*. Since her first appearance, the young tightrope walker had made friends with audiences all over the city. Her touching beauty, the poised grace with which she presented herself in the enormous amphitheatre of the circus, had succeeded in winning everyone's favour in an instant. And this favour was more enduring than the audience usually grants acrobats. While interest in her colleagues usually evaporated quickly, they always kept the same favour for her.

Friendship, greeted her with loud applause when she entered the ring and called her out countless times after her act was over. It even seemed that the longer her engagement lasted, the more she was favoured. She was not affected by the constant changes that usually took place in the personnel of a large circus, and Kutschenreuter, the capable manager of the large company, found it so easy to fulfil her wishes. At first, the city's lively men, who saw a fresh and attractive prey here, had tried everything to get close to her. But Bianca treated them all with equal kindness, accepted their visits to the cloakroom, did not refuse even small gifts, but always stood behind a glass wall. Finally, somehow the rumour leaked out that Bianca was in "steady hands". Reference was made. The name alone scared the more timid away. One had to give way to Bezug, he was an opponent against whom there was no fight. "So ... for the time being ... cease fire," said the governor's counsellor von Pensinger, "but we need not give up hope, perhaps her heart will speak ... and when disappointment comes ... it could be." The governor's council of Pensinger expressed the opinion of most of them. They had experience in this field and doubted that it was Bezug for whom their hearts had spoken. It was strange, however, that even when the greatest optimists had to bury their hopes, the attention for Bianca continued unabated. It turned out that this woman, who lived like a prisoner under careful security measures, was surrounded by a kind of love. Nothing was known about her, and the mysteries that they themselves invented about her made her seem even more attractive. The suicide of a young first-year medical student, who had shot himself because he saw no way of winning Bianca, was the acid test of the public's affection. While usually the shadow of such events always falls on the woman who has gone out of life, especially dense and heavy when the woman is merely an acrobat, Bianca remained in the brightest light. What could she do about it? She hadn't encouraged the stupid man at all, so was it her fault if he took it particularly to heart?

what was the common fate of all? On the evenings after the young man's suicide, the applause was even louder and more tumultuous than usual, as if to show Bianca that she was untouchable in the public's adoration.

The city's steady, warm interest in Bianca's art rose to a very special height when the news spread that she intended to present the breakneck experiment of *Looping the Loop* to the public. People were astonished and amazed. Until then, Bianca had favoured the charms of graceful movement rather than the element of danger. The way she performed her tricks on the rope was inimitable. She playfully overcame all difficulties and left her spectators, who were completely reassured by the sight of the net stretched under the rope, with nothing but the pleasant sensation of the easy and effortless mastery of a foreign territory. So it struck all those in the know that Bianca suddenly wanted to show herself with a new act that was exciting only because it was dangerous. To drive a car at breakneck speed through a double loop, to cover a distance in the second part of the loop with her head downwards, and then to jump over a break in the track with the heavy car, seemed somewhat violent and alien to Bianca's very nature.

"I don't understand it," said the governor's counsellor von Pensinger to his constant companion, the owner of the racing stable Tintler, on the evening of the performance ... "I want to dance on the rope myself as soon as I understand it."

"A strange idea. I wouldn't have put it past Semonski."

"I've been with Sirius for almost twenty-five years now," said the governor's counsellor with no small amount of pride, "but I've never come across anything like this."

Doctor Störner was also among Bianca's friends who were expecting her. Despite a happy marriage, he could not deny himself the occasional foray into foreign territory, just so as not to lose the sense of freedom that was indispensable to him. His clever wife,

who knew about these excursions, remained silent and never stopped loving him.

He had previously listened attentively to the school rider speaking kindly to her always somewhat excited horse and now turned round: "It's just as if a cheerful lover had suddenly decided to act as a heroine."

Although the governor's counsellor did not like the critic of the *Morgenblatt*, he always considered it appropriate to smile authoritatively at his remarks. "Certainly," he hastened to say, "certainly!"

"So one person will certainly not be dissatisfied, Director Kutschenreuter ..." said Tintler.

"Hello, Director," Störner called to Kutschenreuter, who had just stepped out of the stables into the artists' room, "they're asking if you're satisfied."

"A great house ... just take a look for yourself. Sold out!" Pushing back the curtain a little with his left hand, the director invited the chosen ones to come closer with a movement of his right.

Outside, the enormous round of the amphitheatre was filled up to the highest rows. In the centre of the ring, the scaffolding for Bianca's ride was erected right up to the roof. With immense satisfaction, the director explained the ingenious construction of the iron structure and emphasised with a small sigh that it had cost a great deal of money. Behind him, the curious crowded round to see where the part of the loop was where the car had to overcome the earth's gravity, thrown out by the terrible speed.

"You wouldn't think," said the governor's counsellor, "that such a weight could stay in this position for even a moment ..."

"It just doesn't hold up," Störner replied, "You'll find it in the physics textbooks under the chapter on centrifugal force."

"Certainly, certainly."

"And ... is Semonski doing this for the first time today?" asked the young Mühlrich, who could not renounce the excitement and pleasures of circus life, even though he had been placed under curatorship six months ago as a spendthrift. He had only had to decide in favour of cheaper conditions in accordance with his diminished means and now took on the exotic ladies. At the moment he was endeavouring to win Tamaru, one of the three Japanese geishas, in whose love he was trying to forget that he was no longer considered a full man in this world.

"For the first time?" said the director ... "No ... that's not possible. She's done it at least three times. The first time was the hardest."

Doctor Schwartzkopf, who had just entered, greeted the gentlemen, shook hands with Tamaru and the school rider, nodded to the clown and Rolf, the pyramid man, and then intervened in the conversation: "The danger lies not so much in the outward appearance, in the ride itself, but in its effect on the organism. You have no idea what terrible pressure the body has to withstand at this breakneck speed."

"The Semonski was dead after the first journey. It took us half an hour to bring her round again."

The doctor had taken off his glasses and was now looking at the director with his short-sighted eyes. The bald, bare skull shone like a metal cap. "Listen," he said, "if it had only been your wish, Director, I would never have admitted it. I advised her against it. But she insisted. Why? I don't know ... but she wouldn't let go. What can you do? And I know that she has to go through all the agonies of the fear of death every time. She's terrified herself."

"Dear doctor, the second time and the third time it went much better."

"Yes, it was better ... but still." Shaking his head, the doctor turned away to answer a question from the school rider.

Doctor Störner read the monumental poster on which it was announced in Kutschenreuter's pompous style that Bianca was at the end of her

dizzying death ride would make a leap through the void. He was very excited and endeavoured not to let anyone notice. He felt an unpleasant, cold shiver on the back of his neck, which spread and seemed to sink into his limbs, freezing them. Fear? Rather a feeling of the uncanny, of extreme tension, of the expectation of a terrible event. Didn't the others feel the same? It was almost palpable in the air, a fog that seemed to be thickening, so that the lamps burned dimly and all movements became unreal and grotesque, all words stale and meaningless. Why was it that he, of all men, had been given the finer and more sensitive organs, that he had to use all the weapons of his scepticism and summon up all his cynicism in order to betray nothing of his apprehension? Like everyone else, he had a strangely warm feeling for Bianca, and he felt as if it had been his duty to hold her back with words of warning.

The show had long since begun with the usual parades of school riders, and we had just reached the first comic interlude of the American clown with his three trained elephants. Director Kutschenreuter came back from the ring. "They're not laughing today. Everything is falling away. They're too excited about Bianca." The Indian snake dancer approached the director and put her hand on his shoulder in warning. She had the next number and was used to getting half a bottle of cognac beforehand. The director had to arrange that himself, because she was ambitious to get the bottle from him.

Just as he was opening the wardrobe to hand the bottle to the dancer, Bianca came out of the dressing room, followed by Bezug. They moved back a little, so that she suddenly stood at the centre of a circle in the new costume that the attentive director had given her for this first appearance. A kind of ball gown made of blue silk that left her arms and shoulders free, and it seemed to Doctor Störner as if the pure lines of her body had become harder in the last few weeks. Doctor Schwartzkopf, to whom Störner communicated his observation, took his cigar stub out of his mouth with tapered fingers and

nodded, looking at Bianca with a worried expression. At the same moment, Bianca turned her head and caught the doctor's gaze. Störner saw her shoulders tremble.

"If you don't feel quite well," said Doctor Schwartzkopf, stepping towards her, "you mustn't drive."

Bianca smiled tightly: "How dare you? Who told you that I'm not feeling well?"

"I can see from your face that you need to pull yourself together."

"Ridiculous! I'm a bit excited ... of course! A new number ...!"

Welcomed by Director Kutschenreuter with countless bows, Bezug came forward and stood next to Bianca. "Don't worry, Doctor," he said, "everything is fine. Bianca is stronger than you think." For the first time since Bianca had been engaged by Kutschenreuter's circus, Bezug entered the artists' room. He had been here often enough in the past, and Kutschenreuter had found his absence a bitter insult. Now he was all the more excited to be able to greet the mighty man again. And as is usually the case when a ruler enters, the lesser, the small and inconspicuous had immediately withdrawn modestly and now stood at a respectful distance. The circle around Bezug consisted of the director, the governor's counsellor, Tintler, Störner and the doctor. Even Mühlrich could not bear to be near the powerful man. Ever since he had been deprived of his money by the imposition of curatorship, he had felt a tremendous respect for all people who knew how to handle money. He stood languishing in a corner next to Tamaru and tried to attract her attention. He knew how to languish in a peculiar way, with his eyes closed, like a rooster, and at such moments he gave the impression of standing on a dung heap.

Not far from him stood Rolf, the pyramid man, with one of the red-frocked stable masters, looking over at Bianca.

"She has money and everything," he said, "but I think she used to be completely different."

"You were with her?"

"Yes, with old Biancini. A crazy bloke. He was hungry often enough. But it was nice."

"I know, Bezug found her there and brought her to us. What happened to the Biancini?"

Instead of replying, Rolf crossed his arms so that their wrists touched. Then he made the gesture of turning the key: "Krr ... krr!"

"Sitting?"

"Yes ...!"

"Why is that?"

"Well ... little girls ... under the age of fourteen."

"So ...? The old men! And then that's it for you, isn't it?"

"Of course! What were we supposed to do? As long as he was there, we laughed at him. Then we realised that we were nothing without him. That's when we went our separate ways. I don't know what the others did. Luckily I remembered Nella, that was her name at the time."

"And she put you up here?"

"She has the best heart. I don't think that guy there is for her."

"Shut up ... the reference ..."

"Oh no, I like her. I feel sorry for her. Look how she looks again today!"

The electric bell above the black board with the sequence of numbers indicated that Miss Elliot, the swimming artist, had finished. The stage manager called up the Indian snake dancer. "Sixth number! Prepare seventh number."

The seventh number was Bianca's *Looping the Loop*. The last number of the first section. She had asked to start her performance here because she found it difficult to wait until the end of the programme. Swaying a little, the snake dancer rose from the small table where she had placed half of the cognac bottle, each glass with a small

had emptied it with a quick jerk. Her eyes gleamed and, throwing the director a kiss, she followed the heavy black box in which her snakes were being carried.

In the meantime, Bianca's car had been brought in from the next room. Adorned all over with flowers, its unstructured forms had become graceful and light. Only the plaque indicating that the machine had two hundred horsepower peeked out from the flower strings. Surprised, Bianca saw the rich jewellery her friends had donated and looked from one to the other. She read the answer to her question in the doctor's eyes. Moved, she approached him and shook his hand. "You are lovely people."

The doctor raised his black moustache with his left hand and mumbled, half turned away: "Ridiculous! what's the matter? if only nothing happens to you."

Störner was sitting at the small table that the snake dancer had just left and was finishing the other half of the cognac. Tormented by the embarrassing anxiety, the hovering suspicion of danger, he wanted to save himself in a confident mood. Somehow his agitated feelings were connected to the reference, he had known that the moment Bianca had entered with her master. The movements of the machinist at the car, the busy preparations had something evocative, uncanny for him, and on some secret path of thought, perhaps under the influence of the cognac, he came to the realisation that it would have been his task to save Bianca. But then he should have organised his own life differently. He realised with some astonishment that he had had similar thoughts several times since he had seen Bianca's dance between the swinging pendulums at the big party back then. He was still looking for the woman he was meant to be with, a melancholy idealist who had donned the mask of cynical pessimism. Was it not she, Bianca, whom his unconscious longing had pursued ... from time immemorial

... and now? He resolved to surrender himself to her, despite his power and his

when she came back. When she came back ... it made him feel so heavy and anxious again ... and he searched in vain for a remnant of his strength.

The stage manager poked his head through the curtain. "Number six is coming to an end."

"Get in, Bianca, it's time."

With a glance at the reference, Bianca climbed into the car, sat down and arranged the train of her dress. Then she leant her head back.

"Well?" she asked with frosted lips.

"In a moment ... before you set off," he replied, and she saw a wild glow at the bottom of his salt-sea eyes.

As the chauffeur started to fasten Bianca with the wide leather belt, Störner suddenly jumped up and ran towards the man.

"Don't fasten your seatbelt, don't fasten your seatbelt," he shouted, grabbing the chauffeur's hand, "don't fasten your seatbelt."

Astonished, Kutschenreuter asked: "Why not?"

Störner gave the impression of a drunkard: "Why not? Why not? It's terrible."

"Don't talk; it's a fuse."

Doctor Schwartzkopf gripped Störner's shoulder firmly:

"Keep quiet ..." he whispered, "you'll only make them anxious."

Bianca looked from one to the other, and the fear she had so far struggled to control now distorted her face. While Störner turned away, the doctor approached Bianca: "You artists shouldn't be congratulated," he said and held out his hand to her: "Well ... goodbye!"

The electric bell shrilled. Followed by faint applause, the Indian snake dancer came out of the ring, and as the curtains were drawn apart, an excited murmur could be heard as the audience prepared for the main number to follow. With an angry look at Bianca, the dancer walked past the decorated car towards the table where she had left the cognac bottle. And when she found the bottle empty, she threw it angrily

to the floor so that the sharp clink of breaking glass startled Bianca out of a kind of stupor.

"Where is the cover?" she asked, reaching around like an awakened woman.

She caught hold of the hand of Rolf, the pyramid man, who had stepped in and now, pressed close to her, whispered something to her. She felt only pain in the hand clasped by his iron fingers, but she understood nothing of what he said. She had to adjust herself to him by forcibly straining her will. "Have you not forgotten," he said for the third or fourth time, "the best thing for dizziness; put your thumb in the pit of your heart and say 'Jehuboa' three times. Do you hear me? There's nothing better."

Bianca nodded, but her eyes searched for Bezug, who was talking to the doctor and seemed to have deliberately withdrawn so as not to give the news on which her life depended any sooner than the last moment.

"Ready?" asked the stage manager, and the chauffeur approached the valve. "Why don't you put your hands on and get ready," he said. Bianca obeyed, but she looked around anxiously for a reference.

The car slowly approached. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, it can start right now."

A laugh of terrible triumph flashed across his face as he leant over to Bianca. She looked at him, frozen, unable to speak another word. "Well ... your brother? Wouldn't you like to know," he said, so quietly that only she could hear.

A nod and a pleading look ...

"I promised you ... now, at this moment ... but I'm sorry that my message isn't better ..."

Another short pause, during which Bianca's hands slowly descended from the controls.

"Because he's dead."

Everything around Bianca was in a sliding, threatening motion, and she suddenly felt something inside of her, sharp and unbearable, hitting her ribs.

"Yes, dead!" repeated Bezug. "Your brother is the young man in the castle of Antothrace, the poet, Adalbert Semilasso. And he is the same one who was overrun by the *Regina maris* in his boat. He drowned." For another moment, Bezug looked into Bianca's petrified face, then he jumped back and shouted: "Go!"

"Come on," the director repeated and raised his hand.

"What's the matter? Open your hands," the chauffeur shouted and jerked the lever round. And as if Bianca was only alive because of the will of the people who were shouting at her and rushing her out for a frenzied ride, she put her hands up, gripped the controls and the regulator, and now the car shot past the two servants who had pulled back the curtain and into the ring.

At that moment, a roaring applause arose from all the tiers of the enormous amphitheatre. Hands clapping, feet stamping, and Bianca's name repeated a hundred times in a roar of enthusiasm. The whole building seemed to shake as the car now drove rapidly round in circles along the walls of the ring.

"Look," said the sculptor Hauser, who had come with Adamowicz and Dibian to see Bianca's new number, "she's not vain at all. She doesn't even say thank you ... not vain at all. She acts as if she doesn't want to hear anything."

Dibian, who had folded his arms on the backrest of the front row of seats and rested his head on them, looked back: "She's just got enough work to do with the little car. Just look at the way she's tearing at it."

"It's as if she's not quite sure. As if she doesn't know what to do."

"Ridiculous ... the Semonski? She knows what she's doing. She'll do the number for you with glamour."

"Well, I know," said Adamowicz, "I don't want to sit down there right now."

Bianca's car, meanwhile, was driving ever more wildly down below, and the faster it circled the ring, the heavier the silence became in the entire stone circle of the theatre. Only the puffing and rattling of the

Motors ... the crowd seemed one big body without breath or movement. For the twentieth time Bianca shot past the lower mouth of the scaffolding, as if the speed of her drive had still not been sufficiently increased, but now ... now the direction of the car changed almost imperceptibly, and with terrible force it drove into the lowest loop of the scaffolding so that it trembled all the way to the top. Driven upwards by the momentum, it sped through the first loop, raced into the second, and it seemed as if its speed was dragging it out. At the same height as the upper tiers came the first moment of the ride, which made all the spectators freeze. It was barely a second before the car and Bianca swept round the loop in reverse. But in that second, all the laws of life seemed to be completely suspended, the horror that strikes everyone during an earthquake, for example, threw down the most calm-minded, and a silent scream seemed to go through the crowd.

Now the car had passed through, reached the height of the scaffolding at a slightly slower speed, passed through the topmost spiral and immediately began its descent, accelerating its momentum through the now wider spirals. Drawn out again, it approached the break in its path, whooshing and gasping, a raging, maddened monster with a life of its own.

And now it had reached the wide gap ... shot beyond it ... the leap through the void had been successful ... it had succeeded ...

Then the compulsion that had held the crowd spellbound broke apart, the individual detached his own feelings from the collective feeling of fear and horror, and the applause roared under the dome of the amphitheatre. People climbed onto their seats and shouted and waved down into the ring, where Bianca was again travelling in circles with undiminished speed. Some of the women began to cry, and someone in the top rows of seats kept shouting some word they couldn't understand.

Leaning limply backwards, as if she was completely exhausted from the excitement and exertion, Bianca crossed the ring. Her

Hands were down ...

"I think she's fainted," Hauser said, letting go of the hand of his neighbour to the left, a stranger, a hand he had gripped as if in convulsion.

Doctor Schwartzkopf said the same thing to Kutschenreuter, who then ordered the chauffeur to bring the car to a halt. The group standing at the entrance to the ring had become restless. When Bianca passed by, they called out to her, but she didn't move.

"Stop the devil's wagon already," the doctor shouted to the chauffeur.

"In a moment, Doctor ... he's already slowing down." The chauffeur had climbed up onto the weir of the ring to jump into the carriage as soon as it was safe to do so.

A veil of embarrassment descended over the audience's applause, which seemed to muffle the cheers and clapping of hands. Somewhere, a murmur arose, first timidly, then louder and louder, which cut through the noise of the still unsuspecting. Störner, who was holding on to one of the folds of the red curtain, looked towards the upper rows of seats in the amphitheatre, as if he was expecting an answer to a question he didn't dare ask any of the bystanders. He was careful not to look at the carriage that kept whizzing past, in which Bianca sat with her head tilted back and her arms hanging limply. For a moment he had felt as if he had been looking into an open, staring eye. And he was expected to say something, a word of confidence, perhaps of mockery, about a ridiculous and exaggerated concern.

"Talk like that," said Tintler excitedly, waving his riding crop, "talk like that. Why don't you talk?"

Finally, when the car's momentum slowed down and the initial speed was reached again, the chauffeur signalled backwards.

"Is he jumping yet?"

"It's just waiting," explained Kutschenreuter, "the petrol supply is precisely measured. It's about to slow down even more."

The whole amphitheatre had gone quiet again. Even the dull and unconcerned realised that something was going on down there, that an event not foreseen in the programme had occurred.

Now the car came round the ring more slowly ... now it approached the entrance, and when it was just below the chauffeur, he jumped onto the seat next to Bianca with such beautiful agility, as if he were performing a well-prepared trick. A second later, the car had come to a halt. Doctor Schwartzkopf was the first to arrive, and two servants in red skirts with silver cords lifted Bianca out of the flowers. Störner saw the motionless woman being carried past him and, as if in a sudden red light, he saw one of the people pushing behind him, a reference whose face was animated with wild joy. Slowly he followed the others.

In the artists' room, Bianca was lying on the sofa, her head on the cushion Tamaru had pushed under her, her legs covered with a gold-embroidered blanket made by the snake dancer, who had forgotten her anger and jealousy over her colleague's accident. With trembling hands, Doctor Schwartzkopf had pushed back the clasps of the ball gown and was examining the body of the victim. Störner saw him sit up and look around. He heard the heavy word ...

"Dead," said the doctor.

"Like what? For God's sake!" The director was beside himself, he saw beyond the loss an endless chain of trouble with the police.

"A heartbeat."

There was a terrible commotion outside. "Cancel the break," the director shouted to the stage manager, "next number."

"They don't want to see anything. They want to know what **h a p p e n e d .**

Come out, Mr Director."

"You want me out! The hell ..."

"Yes, listen to me."

A stamping and shouting, a confusion of noise called for the headmaster. "All right, I'm coming!" Director Kutschenreuter ran both hands over the hair plastered to his skull and stepped into the arena. With quick steps, he made his way to the centre, where the scaffolding for Bianca's death ride towered above him. They shouted to each other to be silent, hissed at each other to be quiet. "Ladies and gentlemen!" he began again when it had quietened down, "Ladies and gentlemen! A little accident has happened. Miss Bianca Semonski has suffered a fainting fit. She is in the best of hands, and the doctor says that it is of no further significance. You can hope that Bianca Semonski will be back on her feet very soon." Kutschenreuter ended his speech with a bow.

Part of the audience, the rare visitors who were not familiar with the customs of this world, seemed reassured, but the other part could not get rid of the unpleasant feeling that something serious had happened. And without waiting for the second part of the programme, several hundred people left the circus, while all those who had any connection with the performers rushed along the back corridors and stairs to the source where they hoped to make enquiries. But they found a strict barrier. Two guards stood at the door to the dressing rooms and let no one in.

Out of the back door of the building, which faced a lonely street not far from the beginning of the fields, came Bezug, the collar of his overcoat pulled up high, his top hat pressed deep into his forehead as if he did not wish to be recognised. The only lantern illuminating this exit of the initiates flickered in the breeze of a cold, autumn night. As Bezug was about to dive into the shadows of the small, already sleeping houses, a man stepped into his path. He looked up: a broad, flowing beard and two strong, commanding eyes under the concealed brim of an old black hat.

"Oh, it's you!" said Bezug.

"Yes, it's me," replied Eleagabal Kuperus.

"And you dare to get in my way?"

Without heeding the threat, Kuperus said with heavy emphasis: "You killed Nella today."

Bezug stepped back and let the stick with the heavy lead button slide downwards in his hand far enough to give him enough momentum and force to strike. "If you know that," he said after a while of hard resistance, "then you know everything that happened on the *Regina Maris*."

"I know it."

"She killed my son. And now I've killed her."

"Were you allowed to ask that of her? Did you never know that she couldn't give it to you? You are her murderer."

"And who advised me to try the influence of women? Who gave me this great advice to go to sea with him? The infinity of horizons! Who said that? You!"

"I said that he would get well at sea. That's what I said."

"Oh, you're clever. Shame on you. Those are parochial tricks."

"How could I tell you otherwise? Did I know otherwise myself? That's how I read it. I couldn't have known more. It was probably the only way he could get well."

"You yourself are a murderer. And I will destroy you. You can believe me that I will destroy you. All the arts will do you no good. Nothing at all."

"At last, Thomas Bezug, we've come this far. This is where it had to come." Eleagabal Kuperus stood dark and erect beside the lamppost, and Bezug felt angrily that he could not escape the effect produced by his enemy's calm and confident demeanour. "That is why I have come," continued the adversary, "to hear you say this. It is the declaration of war."

"Yes, the declaration of war!" said Bezug. He gritted his teeth.

"And I will do everything I can to render you harmless. I'm not going to kill you, I'm just going to take the power from you."

Bezug wanted to laugh, quite scornfully, rattling, like an invulnerable. But Kuperus stood before him so terribly and menacingly that he could only manage a shrug. Then he merely said: "All right, it's all right ... we'll see ..."

"We will see. Just this first, reference! I am innocent of your son's death. What happened was destined to happen, and you only did everything you could to hasten the outcome." With that, Kuperus turned and walked along the mighty outer wall of the circus to the right, while Bezug, after watching the enemy for a few heartbeats, turned into the quiet alley of low houses.

A flight of death

[Table of contents](#)

Regina had had to guide a stranger who pestered her with questions. It had become difficult for her to keep him away from her father's inner sanctum. There was something she didn't like about this man, even though he was clearly trying to gain her trust. His garrulous trustfulness seemed to her to be at odds with the expression on his face, an English-cut face with hard features and lurking eyes. He told her about his life with exuberant eagerness. He had been a lively student and now lived as a steward on one of the large estates near the town. Regina had looked furtively at his hands and realised that he was not telling the truth. They were well-groomed city hands, not the rough paws of a farmer. Why was he lying to her? Her mistrust made Regina resistant to his questions, and she confined herself to showing him what she was obliged to show him and adding the necessary explanations. It was not taxable to give information about her personal circumstances, as the stranger evidently wished. After an hour, the stranger left again.

Now Regina stood at one of the embrasures in the old walls and looked out through the narrow opening, which showed a few roofs and the tops of some autumn-brown trees. A light, fine mist mingled with the twilight and blurred the outlines down there. Now that the stranger had gone, Regina realised how beneficial it had been for her to be taken away from her thoughts for a while. Always turning round and round, she had sometimes been seized by dizziness. A bad time lay behind her. Her father had been ill and her lover far away. At first she had barely found time for a few fleeting lines to him, little more than a brief report on her condition and a question about his love. Then the

She obeyed this strange prohibition because it came from Kuperus, but without realising what purpose it was supposed to serve. If her trust in the old man had not been so absolute, she would have broken this ban every time she received one of Adalbert's pleading letters.

She sometimes reproached herself for the fact that her concern for her sick father took a back seat to her own affairs. Surrounded by love and good care, he overcame his attack this time too. "No," he had said with a smile, "I can't go until my work is finished." And with that he had risen from his bed. But he had wished that the mirror might be covered, for the greenish glass showed him the face of a doomed man, so that he staggered back. This sight was not likely to support his will, which had been built up from his last reserve of energy.

All these events of the last few weeks had sunk heavily into Regina's soul in their uniformity, had made her dull and despondent, broken her strength and subjected her to strange ideas. Only Kuperus was able to give her back some confidence when he pointed her to a brighter time beyond the heavy darkness.

In the town below, a reddish glow radiated from unseen sources into the mist-filled darkness of the early autumn evening. Regina, who had been looking out with her arm propped up and her chin in her hand, shivered. Was it the cold of the evening, or was it a shiver from the depths of her soul that had taken hold of her? Suddenly she felt strangely tense, as if someone was commanding her to listen to the sounds that seemed to animate the old tower behind her. There was a trickling sound in the walls below her, as if a crack had opened up ... and suddenly the whimpering and crying of a small child came very clearly from the stone. Deep from below, very subtle, but still clearly recognisable. It was a terribly pitiful sound, the horror of a creature capable of only the simplest emotions, a childish sobbing and whimpering.

Regina stood, mesmerised by the horror and unable to move. Then there was another noise that seemed to come from the clock case behind her. Interrupted in its steady, noisy motion, the clockwork began to groan as if a foreign body had fallen between its metal teeth. The pendulum beats stopped, doubled in size, falling in after pauses at breakneck speed, and in between there was a crunching sound so piercing that Regina felt it as pain in her own body. It was like the cracking of crushed bones, and a groan was poured over it, as if a living person was condemned to terrible torture in there. All these noises merged into a mash that surrounded Regina and seemed to rise higher and higher, so that she thought she was suffocating. Leaning against the wall, she felt defencelessly exposed to the horror. From somewhere, out of the darkness, two large, glowing eyes kept looking at her. These eyes sat in a formless body that she did not know whether it was near or far away.

Upstairs, a door opened and a broad, sharp lightsaber cut through the body of the monster. "Regina, are you there?" shouted old Johanna.

"Yes, I'm coming," Regina replied with difficulty, and then she climbed the stairs under the protection of the lightsaber.

"What took you so long?"

"The stranger has me..." in a fit of weakness, Regina sank into her father's large armchair at the table. She closed her eyes, for she still felt the horrible gaze upon her, and her body still trembled under the shudders of horror. But she didn't want to give anything away and gathered all her strength under the old woman's enquiring gaze ... "He asked me an awful lot. Did it take a little long?"

"Weren't you dreaming again? Thought about that guy who never came back, who left you."

"Please, don't talk about him like that! You don't know ...!"

"What don't I know? I know everything! He's a son of hell. A son of the devil. A servant of the cover. Oh ... if you had confessed to me earlier

... It should never have come this far between you."

Regina gave no answer. Ever since she had told old Johanna everything she knew about him in a lonely hour in need of consolation soon after Adalbert's departure, the old woman had hated the intruder. And whenever she had the slightest opportunity to do so, she would come down on him with harsh words and curse him, for he was poisoned, like everything else that had ever had anything to do with him. But these appearances always came to an end, as they did now. The old woman cautiously approached the girl, who was slumped back in her armchair, and placed her wooden leg on top of her as carefully as possible. And then she placed her hard, bony hand on the crown of Regina's head: "Leave it alone, child," she said, "I'm not saying anything more. It's true, what do I know about it ... I don't know anything. Perhaps, as Kuperus says ... he is mistaken. We all err ... and have our goals. He has his and I ... I have mine ..." Here again was that dark suggestion of a resolution; that mysterious power which seemed to have helped old Johanna to overcome the fit of madness to which she had succumbed for a time.

Regina gratefully took the old woman's withered hand and squeezed it. As she did so, she remembered that she was still clutching the coin the stranger had given her for the tour of the tower. She got up and threw it into the tin box hanging next to the door. When she returned, her eyes fell on the chronicle opened in the bright light of the lamp. And she saw that a final entry had been made in fresh ink. Sinking back into the armchair, she read her father's clear handwriting, not yet distorted by age and illness:

"I, Heinrich Palingenius, have finally finished my machine. And I believe with all the strength of my immortal soul that flying will be a blessing and not a disaster for people. They will learn to gain heights and from there to view all wretchedness with a smile. And that is happiness.

I, Heinrich Palingenius, the tower keeper, have won this good fortune. And tomorrow I want to fly, first of all. Perhaps it will confuse them at first, but then they will become bigger and better. Tomorrow I want to fly. My machine has a soul. What is man not able to animate? If only he devotes himself wholeheartedly and with all his thoughts. Is it true what Kuperus says? Inanimate matter resists being animated. And it bears hatred for the spirit that has torn it from its torpor. That is why the body is hostile to the spirit, because God made the body out of earth. I don't believe that. And it seems to me that Cuperus doesn't believe it either. As if he knew of a higher unity of the body with the spirit, of the inanimate with the animate. He only says it to stop me from flying. But still: I want to fly tomorrow. I am completely calm, because I trust completely."

This was the end of the notes that Regina had been reading with increasing anxiety. She looked up; over in the corner sat old Johanna, her knitting stocking in her lap, looking ahead of her. Sounds came from the workshop, telling Regina that her father was at work.

The old man had just taken apart the innermost mechanism of his machine and was carefully cleaning and then oiling each of the countless parts when Regina entered. He greeted her with a nod of the head and then, with amused seriousness, took a tiny screw and cleaned its coils with a soft brush. "You wouldn't believe," he said, "what's attached to these little things, this screw for example ..."

"Tomorrow, then!" Regina interrupted him.

Palingenius looked at the door and immediately understood: "You read it?"

"So it's true?"

"I'm finished. She's alive. Tomorrow I will fly."

"You want to do it?" And then Regina penetrated the tangle of rods, screw blades, wires and wheels in which her father was standing and threw her arms around his neck: "Father ... Father!"

The old man gently freed himself, looked at the screw he had kept in his hand and placed it on a glass plate. Then he led Regina out of the area of his machine and sat her down on a large black box containing one of the electric batteries.

"You see ... child," he said, "you're scared?"

Regina nodded and laid her head against his chest.

Palingenius looked at the blonde crown and the gently sloping shoulders with emotion. "I believe you," he continued, "because you can't have the confidence I have in my work. Who among you knows it? None of you? Eleagabal talks such nonsense too. As clever as he is otherwise."

"Follow him, father, he knows..."

"He knows more than I do, are you saying? That's possible. But he doesn't understand any of that. And then! That has been the task of my life. Should I now draw a line through my whole life? It would be as if I had never lived. Now that I've reached my goal?"

Regina remained silent. Her shoulders trembled. Then she lifted a pale face in which fearful eyes pleaded. "Father!" she said haltingly, "don't do it! I heard ... I heard the ... the walled-in child crying ... And ... and ... the bones broke in the clock case. A groan ... it was terrible."

"When did you hear that?"

"Today. Earlier. In the dark on the stairs ..."

"So." Palingenius stood up and walked up and down the room, the narrowness of which forced him to turn round soon. "Today. And what? What do you mean? Is that supposed to mean something? For me?"

"A warning ... Father!"

Palingenius stood triumphantly before his daughter: "No, my child! Not a warning! It can only be an encouragement! Do you know what's moaning and groaning in that old tower? That's the past! The past! Because it has finally and definitively been overcome. Because the future belongs to my machine and flying." The father stood victorious before Regina.

"Father! You are all -"

"Blinded? No, Regina! Not blinded. Just full of confidence. Tomorrow my work will pass the test. Look, child ... even if she were still alive ... your mother! ... and asked me to say no." The old man tenderly put his arm round his daughter and led her to the door:

"And now go to sleep, child."

She pulled him along with her: "You too, Father ... you need the peace and quiet."

"You wish?"

"It makes me calmer."

"Good, I want to go to sleep."

After a supper eaten in silence, Regina went to bed with a warm kiss from her father on her forehead. But she could not bring herself to sleep; she felt as if it were her duty to watch over her father, and from the little noises that came to her from the next room she deduced that her father was also lying awake in bed. It was only towards morning that she fell into a heavy sleep, from which she later awoke with the unpleasant feeling that she had missed a duty. It was completely quiet in her father's bedroom. But above her and outside, on the walkway of the tower, she heard pulling and pushing, heavy objects banging against each other and a hammering on steel and wood. She quickly got dressed. Old Johanna woke up, watched her in amazement, then became aware of the noises and rose without asking. It was still early in the morning, and a dim light above the washstand illuminated the hurried bustle of the women. When Regina stepped out, followed by the old woman, she saw her father busy assembling the machine by the brightest light of his strongest lamps.

She didn't say a word, because she knew that nothing could hold her father back, and watched him work. The inner part of the machine was already hanging from two steel rods attached to the railing of the gallery. Leaning half-body over the balustrade, Palingenius kept adding new components with perfect certainty. In the fervour of his work, he hadn't even noticed the two women at first. Now he stepped up

Regina and held out his hand to her. "In half an hour," he said, "you can take them completely apart. And you can put them back together in an hour."

"Nonsense," grumbled old Johanna, "utter nonsense."

Ignoring the interjection, Palingenius went back to work. Now he attached the strange wing, the linkage of which could be folded and stretched out, stretching a shiny thin skin between the narrow ribs. The fan-shaped linkage connected to a ball-and-socket joint that was closely connected to the innermost casing. Fine wires ran from the mechanism along the linkage to the wing tips. Palingenius took special care to give these wires support and tension.

Regina turned her gaze away from the winged creature that was emerging under her eyes. She remembered another day when she had been standing in the gallery of the tower, a setting day ... back then with Adalbert. And in this hour, she felt even sorrier than before she had recognised Adalbert's love. In all her melancholy, there had been a hope back then, very deep, a still unborn hope that was already stirring and growing. Today, however, the fear and pain were without comfort, and she had no support, no resistance within her. Where was Adalbert? What had happened to him? She had had no news of him for weeks. Had she lost him? And now she was going to lose her father too. Full of fear, she looked again at the winged creature hanging over the abyss, which her father had spoken of as if it had a soul, as if it were alive.

The morning was cool and promised a beautiful autumn day. In the east, a reddish glow broke through banks of clouds, and it was as if a delicate hand was reaching into the veils of night to pull them away. Regina remembered a word that the ancient Greeks had used to describe the dawn: rose-fingered dawn. She had heard the word from Adalbert. And although she had tried to divert her thoughts away from Adalbert, they had returned to him.

"Good morning," said Eleagabal Kuperus, who entered the tower gallery behind her. Heinrich Palingenius turned round and greeted his friend with a puzzled look: "It's you?"

"Yes ... I want to watch you fly." Kuperus was very serious, and the tone of calm and cheerfulness he tried to give his words contradicted the expression on his face: "You didn't invite me ..."

"Because you always have reservations ... always have something to object to ..."

"You're strong enough to put up with concerns and objections. No? By the way, I no longer have any reservations today."

Palingenius asked happily: "So you agree with me?"

"Yes!" - And while the doorman endeavoured to conceal his joy at Eleagabal's approval behind an assumed indifference, his friend turned to the lamps and extinguished the lights. "By the way ... if you want to keep me in the dark about your plans, you mustn't light such an illumination."

"You've noticed?"

"Of course! And others too. There are already a lot of people downstairs."

"Good, good! You'll see how to fly."

It had already become light enough, the sun had broken through and was glowing red over a hazy sea. Heinrich Palingenius set about inserting the other wing into his machine. Suddenly Eleagabal, who was watching attentively, felt his hand grasped. He looked into Regina's pale face. "I've tried everything," she whispered ... "he doesn't want to go back." With a gesture, Eleagabal signalled that all his efforts were in vain.

"Nonsense ... complete nonsense," grumbled old Johanna.

The hammer blows of the turret became heavier and faster, as if he was hurrying to finish his work. Screeching and crunching, he inserted a screw into the thread.

Now the day had come. The city below took the deep breaths of an awakening and seemed to stretch towards the hills. From the countless chimneys above the multi-coloured

The bluish swirls of smoke twisted into the clear autumn air; where they emerged from the mouth of the chimney, still massive and heavy, tightly clenched as if they wanted to sink back again, but looser and lighter further up and, where they began to dissolve into light clouds, already illuminated by the sun. The last flakes flowed across the pale blue sky, brown-red and golden. Down on the cathedral square, however, there was a dense cluster of people gazing unblinkingly towards the tower gallery. Early risers by profession and inclination, who had gathered here and now knew no answer to their curious questions.

"Wos g'schiegt denn durten?" asked a butcher who had just crossed the cathedral square with his dog cart loaded with a quarter of a calf and several large pieces of beef. He put both hands in the front of his blood-stained apron and stood behind the last row, while the dog, just as curious as his master, sniffed at the skirts of the milkmaid standing in front of him. At the centre of the clump, the most excited of all, was Mrs Swoboda and her morning friend, the sacristan. The two of them were best able to provide information. But even they didn't know anything precise. They could only say that the doorman was up there, his daughter Johanna and - here they muffled their voices each time - "the magician from over there". But what happened? What happened up there?

"He's going to fly a kite," said the Trinity cobbler to the butcher, who had repeated his question several times, more and more insistently. But the frame maker, who also stuffed animals and kept the passion flowers behind the window, shook his head. The old man up there was too clever for that, it must be something else. And now the old people, who had lived up here for decades, dug up old memories. All the oddities of the tower were brought to light, and anyone who knew of a new addition to the strange picture hastened to add it with some pride. The excitement of the crowd increased when it became unmistakably clear from the second wing that it must be an adventure in the air.

At that moment, Adalbert Semilasso came down the cathedral steps, entered the square between the two grumpy, dislocated saints and followed the many pointing arms with his gaze. Was it time? Was Palingenius getting ready to fly? Had it been the premonition of this event that had made him so restless tonight and driven him here so early in the morning? And now it weighed heavily on his mind that he was not allowed to be with Regina at this hour, which she had always secretly dreaded. He was already about to enter the tower. But then the old misgivings and fears came with double force and dragged him away from the door. He was not allowed to comfort her, he was not allowed to approach her purity. And then, she was not completely alone after all. He saw Eleagabal Kuperus upstairs with her, the friend who would give her courage. Slowly he moved away from the tower door and, finding that he had already attracted people's attention, he wanted to mingle with the crowd.

But Mrs Swoboda had recognised him and hurriedly approached him.

"What do you say, sir, what does he want to do?" she asked, grabbing him excitedly by the sleeve of his skirt.

Adalbert didn't know whether he should tell the truth. But why conceal what they had to see for themselves in the next few minutes?

"He's going to fly," he said, "that's his flying machine up there."

"Jesus Maria! Flying? In the air? Over the rooftops?"

"Yes."

"He's going to fall down! Gotts'will'n!"

The news travelled through the crowd, rousing them and forcing them closer together in a sense of horror at the danger of a human being. -

Heinrich Palingenius had finished his preparations. Finally, he had attached a padded hanging apparatus underneath the movement mechanism, from which the body could adjust the lever positions in the most comfortable position. He turned round with a beaming face: "One hour ... not much longer! What did I say? But don't make such faces! Regina!" He lifted his daughter's head with a tender

Grip under her chin. Then he saw the tears in her eyes. "Child! Child!" he said and kissed her on the forehead.

Eleagabal Kuperus put his hand on his friend's shoulder: "A glass of wine!"

"What for?"

"Just have a glass of wine! It won't do you any harm! Of the old one, the Greek one."

"It's the last bottle."

"Why not have one last bottle on an occasion like this?"

At Eleagabal's hint, old Johanna went to fetch the wine. "Your audience is getting bigger and bigger," said Kuperus, pointing down to the cathedral square. And the honourable police are already here!" A guard with a flashing helmet walked across the square towards the tower door. At the back of the tower room, the electric bell was ringing. "You probably don't have permission to fly. He'll want to forbid you."

Palingenius smiled: "The authorities! When you fly, you've lost all authority." Just as the bell above them announced the end of the hour with four quick strokes, old Johanna came in with a dusty bottle and an antique glass, from which was written in ornate letters between roses and lilies: "In memory." The reverberation of the hour bell rolled heavily across the tower gallery seven times, drowning out the clamour of the electric bell in the room.

"She drank from this glass at our wedding," Palingenius said, half to Regina and half to himself. With a transfigured face, he lifted the glass of heavy, almost brown wine and emptied it in one go. Instead of the wine, it was now filled with the sparkling gold of the sun, b r e a k i n g at the edges and the rim and making the roses and lilies translucent and luminous. Slowly and carefully, Palingenius handed it back to old Johanna. "Like this," he said, and it was as if there was some of the sun's gold in his eyes too.

The flying machine lay trembling with its wings stretched out on the poles in front of it. Quivering with excitement itself, it seemed to be a living being in a state of extreme tension. Regina stared at it; her father's faith had taken hold of her and she felt as if she had to implore this winged creature with pleading words. As she embraced and kissed Palingenius, she managed not to cry out, for Eleagabal had whispered to her quickly beforehand: "Be strong! Don't make him weak."

Then Palingenius shook hands with Eleagabal and old Johanna with such radiant pride that Johanna suppressed a half-grumpy, half-fearful word of rebuke. And then he swung himself over the balustrade of the gallery with youthful vigour and adjusted himself in the hanging apparatus. With both hands on the railing, Regina watched her father. He turned a crank and a small blue flame shot out of a perforated brass disc, disappeared, shot out again and so on in ever faster, rhythmic repetition. Palingenius immediately pulled a lever and the machine slid on its supporting straps over the advanced iron bars, left its hold and floated freely in the air outside.

The murmur of the crowd that filled the square in front of the cathedral had fallen silent and the raging shrill of the electric bell had stopped. The guard had stepped back from the tower door and stood among the others, who watched with craned necks as the turret's flying machine circled the rooftops.

With beautiful, slow movements it rose and fell, jerked in sudden flight and returned willingly. Now Palingenius suddenly shot up so high that the plane was just a black dot in the clear autumn dawn, and then he was there again, overshadowing the cathedral square with heavy, casual wing beats. The three people in the tower gallery didn't say a word. Regina had grabbed Eleagabal's arm, and when she saw her father's safe flight, a hearty pride in his boldness returned along with her hope.

Palingenius was still making his machine perform all kinds of movements, like a living animal that obeys its master's every word. He hovered in a broad travelling flight over the house of Kuperus and was now flying at the same height as the tower gallery.

Suddenly Regina felt Eleagabal's body jerk as if the tendons of his gaunt arm had been struck by an electric shock. He had noticed that the smooth flight of the machine had changed, something mad and flickering had come into its movements, and he saw that Palingenius was tearing violently and angrily at the levers.

"What's wrong?" Regina asked anxiously.

"She has ... she has a mind of her own," he murmured. "It's there!"

"What? What?"

Eleagabal was unable to give an answer. Over in the air, a furious battle was taking place between the master and his creation. For a moment, Eleagabal felt as if Palingenius was turning a deathly pale face towards him with his mouth open to scream. But there was nothing to hear but the whirring of the great wings and the rhythmic pulsations of the machine. It was clear that Palingenius had lost control of his machine. The machine climbed up and down without a break, flying in reckless circles, sometimes close to the roofs of the houses, sometimes close to the walls of the tower, once flying so close over the heads of the crowd below that some ducked, and now ... it had suddenly disappeared behind the tower.

There was a clamour downstairs: "Where is she, where is she?"

Regina leant against the wall. Two strokes of the quarter-hour bell rippled out over her. Eleagabal had taken hold of her hand and was stroking it incessantly, unable to give her any comfort. With folded hands, old Johanna knelt in the doorway of the tower room and moved her lips. She was praying, she who had never seen anyone pray.

Suddenly the machine shot out from behind the tower again. It climbed at an angle, and Eleagabal saw Palingenius in a blind rage, beside himself with fury, lashing out at the machine with clenched fists as if to chastise an unruly, stubborn animal. When the machine

was a few metres above the top of the tower, it suddenly stopped. And then the terrible thing happened. First a trembling went through its frame, the wings stretched out as if in a sudden spasm and then contracted. These movements became so violent that Palingenius flew back and forth in his hanging apparatus. In sudden fear, he reached out to both sides and grabbed two iron brackets of the wing frame to hold on to them. But the machine shook itself and freed itself from him. And now it suddenly shot upwards, with wild, jerky jerks, high above ... it suddenly rolled over in a rapid turn. A dark body separated from her confused, tangled frame.

A single cry from the crowd on the cathedral square ... then a thud on the pavement ...

As if relieved, the machine climbed a little higher, then sank down at an angle and came to rest on the flat glass roof of a photographic studio, its wings twitching, as if exhausted from excitement and exertion.

Regina was slumped over, just as she had been leaning against the wall, simply slumped over. "Stay with her," Eleagabal called to old Johanna and ran towards the stairs. But when he had covered half the steps, he heard the hard, hasty clatter of the wooden foot above him. "What is it?" he shouted back. But old Johanna gave him no answer, overtook him and ran ahead of him, half stumbling and sliding along the banister, as if in wild confusion, just to get to the bottom first.

Heinrich Palingenius lay on the cathedral square in the midst of the retreating crowd. Old Swoboda knelt by him, weeping, oblivious to the tears streaming down. The butcher carefully lifted the dead man's head and laid it on the old woman's lap. Heinrich Palingenius was completely unharmed, with only a thin stream of light-coloured blood coming out of the back of his head, which had formed small pools in the hollows of the bumpy pavement. Apart from the guard, who had already pulled out his notebook and was busily jotting down the facts, there was someone else there - Adalbert

Semilasso. He had pushed his way through the crowd and opened the dead man's waistcoat to feel his chest, which was covered in grey hair. In a flurry of excitement, some of the first groups standing were discussing what to do.

When Eleagabal arrived at the dead man, the guard kicked the butcher's dog. The animal had followed its master, dragging the cart behind it, and had begun to lick up the puddles of blood on the pavement.

Adalbert Semilasso stood up and faced Eleagabal. After an initial fearful glance, he lowered his head. Then he felt himself pushed in the chest. Old Johanna stood in front of him and shouted angrily in his face: "Leave! What do you want with this dead man?"

"Stay!" said Eleagabal, holding Adalbert back by the hand.
"You belong here."

Someone had called a doctor who lived nearby. There was nothing left for him to do but realise that Palingenius was dead. Now the guard also remembered his dignity. "Get away from there! Get back!" he shouted with a commanding wave of his arm. "He's going to the hospital."

"No," said Eleagabal, "what do you want? He's dead. We'll take him up."

"Up the tower? You're going to drag him up there?"

"That's our business. I know it was his wish to wait upstairs for the grave."

"And who will keep the tower watch?"

"The daughter and this old woman here, as always when he was ill."

"It's all right. I'll make the report."

"Come on!" Eleagabal called out to Adalbert, who was standing shyly to one side. "Come on, touch it."

"You want me to go up there? I can't. I can't go in front of them. You don't know ..."

"I know everything. Just come on! Great love forgives everything!" Adalbert took a step back. Those were the same words he had heard from the countess, the words that had haunted him for nights when

they wanted to give him new courage. How strange that the wise man and the harlot met in the same realisation. His hesitation lasted only seconds, then he bent down and took hold of the dead man's shoulders with Eleagabal. The old woman, who had laid the head of the dead lover of her youth on her lap, stood up crying.

"Don't cry," said Eleagabal Kuperus quietly, "it was your wish. You wanted to see him again."

The old woman completely forgot that it was the dreaded wizard who was talking to her. "But not like that ... but not like that ..." she sobbed.

"It was his will, there's nothing we can do. Just come along. Regina will need you."

The Trinity cobbler and the frame maker had taken hold of the dead man's legs, and slowly the bearers reached the tower door with the gaunt body of the old man. The crowd followed with participating curiosity, and the scene of the accident was revealed, where the butcher's dog, after a shy glance round, began to lick at the bloody stones again.

Regina stood in the centre of the tower room and awaited the panting men who brought her father's body. Without crying, she opened the door to the workshop, where she had meanwhile made a bed out of a mattress and fresh linen, surrounded by equipment and tools.

"I think ... that would have been fine for him ... here," she asked Eleagabal, faltering with inward sobs, without looking up, her gaze fixed firmly on the dead man's face. The friend nodded. Eleagabal had noticed something as soon as he entered, but he hadn't been able to say what it was. Something was different in this room than usual, something was missing, a rigidity had spread over everything like a blanket of armour that could not be broken through. Kuperus glanced at Adalbert's face, who had timidly withdrawn after the dead man had been laid on his bed. He saw that Adalbert might have noticed the same thing. And now Kuperus suddenly knew what it was. All the mechanical works of art that were housed here stood still, the pendulum chimes, the purring of the

Wheels, the manifold small and large noises that made up the life of this room had fallen silent. All these machines, which had been built over the course of many decades by an unceasingly active skilfulness, on which the stations of a destiny could be set apart, had become silent at the same time as the death of the master. The planetary system under the ceiling had stopped moving. The Negress, whose eyes were filled with the numbers indicating the hours, seemed to have frozen in the middle of a bow. Her eyes showed that the movement had just s t o p p e d at half past seven.

Eleagabal slowly turned back to Regina. Kneeling beside the dead man, she had taken his hands and, after a shy kiss on the wrinkled fingers, held them in her hands as if to warm him. While old Johanna walked to and fro in restless bustle, the men who had brought Palingenius up stood apart. Only Mrs Swoboda had ventured forward a little, and it seemed as if she was following an irresistible pull to the dead man's camp, to Regina's side. Was she not entitled to kneel beside her daughter?

The frame maker seemed to be lost in silent prayer, but the Trinity cobbler looked around with curious eyes in this room filled with so many strange devices, about which the strangest things were said and which it had been one of his most burning desires to see.

Now Regina stood up and approached the men to thank them. She caught sight of a face between the protruding heads and the sheepishly swaying shoulders ... she only let out a soft cry and ran her hand over her eyes once. Then she l o o k e d again, it was Adalbert, and it seemed to her that he was endeavouring to hide himself from her. After a brief tremor of her whole body, she carried out her intention and shook hands first with the frame-maker and then with the Trinity cobbler. She did not want to show her surprise in front of the strangers. When she also shook hands with Adalbert, she felt that his fingers were no warmer than those of the dead man.

The strange men stumbled out of the door, greeting each other sheepishly. For a moment it seemed as if Adalbert were about to follow them, but Eleagabal beckoned him back. He stood looking into Regina's eyes, pleadingly, with a shy and hot expression, with a passion of feeling that lifted him above himself, so that at that moment he lost the consciousness of his unworthiness.

"Have you finally come?" Regina asked as the footsteps of the men on the tower stairs faded away. "Are you there?"

"And, if you don't send me away from you ... I want to stay with you forever now."

Mrs Swoboda looked up in astonishment and discovered the relationship that existed between Regina and the young man who had always enquired after the doorman's well-being. She saw that they were kissing at her father's corpse, and she was only more moved by it, as she had to remember her own youth.

"And do you know everything?" asked Adalbert.

"I don't want to know. Now you're back."

"Saved!"

"Were you in danger? I'll take care of you ..."

Once again, someone gasped up the tower stairs. It was the district doctor, who had to inspect the body and issue the death certificate. When he had gone, the women began to undress and wash the corpse.

Eleagabal Kuperus beckoned Adalbert to follow him into the living room. They sat down opposite each other at the tower's table.

"There's a dead man lying next door," said Adalbert after a while: "Your father! But I ... I'm so incredibly happy. Isn't that an outrage? And I'm completely confused."

"You see: it's like I said. Great love forgives everything."

"Yes ... yes! But whether she knows everything ..."

"I think she at least suspects it."

"I'll tell her everything. I want to be completely pure in front of her."

Eleagabal Kuperus nodded his head in agreement. "Later ... later sometime."

"But I don't understand everything yet. Some things are still unclear to me. Why didn't she reply to my urgent letters? Her father was ill. That's when she became meagre. But when he was well again, why didn't she write?"

Smiling, Kuperus said and the two Eberhauer crawled out of their sheaths like curved knives: "It was on my advice; I advised her not to answer. And Regina has obeyed. You don't know what a struggle it cost her. But she behaved well because she believed me that it was for her happiness."

"For her happiness? But it could have been that I ... you see, I could have despaired and completely ... completely ... fallen for the other."

"I knew ... if you were tossed round and round like that, you would come to your senses ... you would be ours again."

Adalbert pondered for a while: "It's true!" he finally said, "it's true." But now he continued with sudden vigour: "And now my slavery is over. I am freeing myself. From her - and from him."

Kuperus looked at him with calm, shining eyes. There was a deep fire in that gaze. "Will you be strong enough?"

"I will think of everything I have already endured, but especially of the fact that I almost lost Regina."

"Good boy! Good boy! And now, my dear, I want to give you a book to read. I believe it will strengthen your resolve. For the fight against Bezug will not be easy. Wait for me here, I will go and fetch it."

And with that, Eleagabal left his young friend, who remained in a strange mixture of happiness and apprehension, devotion and indignation. It had become quiet in the neighbourhood. The round-up, with which everything necessary was fetched, was over, and old Johanna only came through the living room one last time, just as Eleagabal Kuperus was leaving.

Adalbert heard nothing but a dull, monotonous murmur, the steady prayers of old Swoboda, who was now allowed to use the skills she had acquired as a candle-lady for her childhood sweetheart. She had donated two large, thick wax candles and a dozen smaller ones from her supply. They burned in two rows on either side of the deceased, with pale, almost invisible flames, for the sunlight of the bright autumn day had fallen in broadly and did not allow the artificial lights to come to light. Regina stood at the window, her back leaning against one of the small cupboards in which her father's ingenious system of boxes had managed to store hundreds of tools and small machines. As she stood there, her eyes resting on her father's head wrapped in white bandages, she felt sad, but also infinitely peaceful. Wasn't this death the necessary end of his life? Was it not the fulfilment of his destiny?

Grumpily, old Johanna reported that Adalbert was alone outside, and Regina slowly left her seat and went to him. She put her right hand on his head, and Adalbert took her left and kissed it fervently. This is how she found Eleagabal Kuperus when he re-entered the tower room after some time.

"Can't you hear anything?" asked Regina, "Can't you hear anything?"

"Like what?"

"A song ... a melody! Nothing? I don't know ... as if it came out of the ground ..."

Eleagabal Kuperus stepped up to Regina: "It's pouring out of you everywhere. It seems to fill the whole tower. Endless, monotonous, an unspeakably sad litany. It torments you like a heavy feeling that won't leave you. Isn't it?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"The walls are full of these sounds that seem to be wet with tears. It is a whisper of a thousand wailing voices. It comes from great depths."

"Yes!" whispered Regina. And Adalbert nodded. He too had already heard this plaintive melody, this desolate litanies that flowed endlessly, a procession of tired notes that had lost their soul.

"It is the voice of the cathedral!" continued Kuperus: "The voice of the cathedral. All the agony accumulated over the centuries, the unfulfilled desires, the struggling longing that arose here before the altars from the hearts of the worshippers. Probably everyone hears the voice of the cathedral once. At least once. And the comforting words of the priests are vain reassurances and promises. It is the voice of the cathedral."

"The voice of the cathedral," Regina murmured.

Then Eleagabal turned to Adalbert. "Here is the book," he said. It was a book the usual size of an album, with only the letter *N* embossed in gold on the brown saffiano leather cover. Adalbert picked up the book, looked at it without opening it, and then placed it on the table in front of him.

"Leave us now," Kuperus said to Regina, "go inside. Adalbert has this book to read."

Regina quietly disappeared and Adalbert began to read. He remained bent over the book all afternoon and all night.

In the next room, old Mrs Swoboda's prayers fell silent from time to time and then became stronger again. Old Johanna began to walk about again, preparing meals and setting them before Adalbert with a sullen face. Then she took her old place in the corner, silently, like a silent sentinel, occasionally casting a glance of hatred at Adalbert over her stocking.

Eleagabal, who had left in the afternoon, came back in the evening and sat opposite Adalbert at the tower's table. All night long, with bright, alert eyes that seemed to look into the distance.

Adalbert didn't speak, didn't look up and didn't touch the food Johanna had brought him. He sat motionless and read his sister's notes.

Nella's diary

Table of contents

When I think back now ... what was it that put me in the hands of this person? Ambition? I didn't have it until he convinced me that I did. The desire to find my brother? How can I look for him if I am bound to one place? And then, would I even recognise him? How many years it's been since I left the forest! I wonder if he hasn't changed as much as I have. I know he wouldn't recognise me. The serious illness back then. All the hardships of our travelling life! Then the terrible thing that I wanted to escape by fleeing, but which I was not spared. But at least it wasn't my own father. How can you escape such a person as soon as he has seriously decided to enforce his will? What was it like? It's not my fault. It is a misfortune. I was unsuspecting and followed his orders, because he had to command me as my director. And how well everything was prepared. The whole gang gone and only his two body bandits hidden in the car. And I ... no sooner had I entered the carriage than I was attacked, thrown on my back, bound ... I won't say in what hideous, bestial way, so convenient for him. And defenceless ... defencelessly at his mercy.

I think it must be nice to be allowed to love. To be able to. I don't mean the harmony of the soul, that seems quite unearthly to me, completely beyond anything that can be achieved. At least for us. But even earthly love, the physical. It must be marvellous to give oneself to a man, voluntarily, as if intoxicated or in joyful contemplation. The thought: now I want to experience what is probably the highest of all things in the world for us.

But to be forced to do so! With a clear conscious: my body is resisting you. You are repulsive to me. And lying defenceless

while he ... I am disgraced! We women mature earlier.

When my brother was still unaware of these things, I had already been taught by my instinct and by observing the farmers in the villages. I thought quite calmly, even once myself on a summer evening ... oh, why shouldn't I be honest with myself here? I wished it. It was curiosity and desire. It was quite natural. A woman who doesn't feel that way is probably not entirely truthful. But I was robbed of my peace and my joyful expectation. First the father! the old man! How his hands trembled when he stroked my shoulders and arms. It was disgusting ... disgusting!

And then the other one. This horrible thing. He stood in front of me and laughed.

"I've got you now, Nellachen. You're still half a child, but that's just fine with me." I spat at him. "Never mind," he said, wiping it off with a red chequered handkerchief covered in dirt. And then ... how he undressed in front of me with great pleasure. And the two bandits at the door ... grinning with pleasure. And while the guys were outside, it happened.

Now I'm disgusted. They have robbed me of love. I don't know if I'll ever achieve the happiness I first imagined. Or rather, I know that it is over. Just as one can become fed up for all time with a thought that has been forced upon us, so it has been with me. My body feels poisoned. Every touch makes me sick. The beautiful health of everything sexual has become alien to me.

* * *

I know that Bezug is unhappy with me.

I was never in any doubt about what he wanted from me, not from the beginning. Or ... or ... I'd rather be careful, maybe

Am I only imagining that I was never in doubt? Have I not allowed myself to be deceived after all? We women are happy to do that.

Sometimes I feel as if I am clear about everything. And then again: there is no trace of clarity in me.

What was it like with the reference? They persuaded me and I let them persuade me. Today it seems to me that Bezug bribed Biancini. And my ambition? There was ambition too; it's true, it first had to become a flame in me. But the spark was there.

My ambition has been satisfied ... I think they all like me, my colleagues and the audience. And the director too. At first he wasn't very enamoured with me. Now, of course, he wants to deny it. But I saw it clearly. I remember it exactly. First we drove into town in a car. It was very nice. I must have behaved very childishly, because Bezug was always smiling and the chauffeur turned round a few times until Bezug told him not to. My God, it was the first time I'd ever sat in a car. And then I said: "I believe that the car will have a special meaning for my life." And the reference laughed: "You may be right." Three days later I had a car.

Yes ... well ... first of all, the first thing we did was go to a fine restaurant. A very fine one. The table was already set in a separate room. I'd never eaten like that before, and I've never tasted it like that since. And the cover was very decent. He got a little drunk, but he didn't touch me with a finger.

How everything is still alive in front of me.

I was still a stupid girl. I've only matured in these few months.

But I wasn't completely harmless and unbiased. Everyone thought I was incredibly naive. Biancini was a bit enamoured of me and I think it was because I was so cheerful. After all, it's my

my own nature, but I have to wonder that my nature has prevailed again. Back then ... when I ran away from my first director, I didn't think I could ever recover.

It was the middle of the night and the moonlight was so bright. The shadows of the poplars like thick black blobs on the meadow. There were fourteen of us in the little sleeping car. My neighbour, Rosita, the fire-eater, never slept any other way than with her arm on my chest. It was hard to get up without waking her. And when I think about it today, I still don't understand how I **m a n a g e d** to get out of the car. Despite my fear ... completely silently. And I realise even less that I managed to get past him without giving him a push with my foot. He lay there with his mouth open, snoring ... the dog! I felt as if he was pretending, as if he wasn't sleeping at all ... as if he was watching me. His eyelids were not completely closed, there was a gap open ... and as a moonbeam fell on his face, I saw a moist glow in this gap. At first I thought he was blinking at me ... it was lucky that I held back my scream ... but then, when I saw that he was fast asleep, I lifted my foot to kick him in the face ... the dog!

I think that was the beginning of the fever!

When I finally got outside, I walked across the meadow, from one poplar shade to another, and then I was in the forest. But there was no stopping me. I walked downhill along the road. Without knowing where I was going. And then I got more and more confused, and the trees in front of me moved away from me and only parted when I was already quite close. Then I remember ... the forest was over and a hilly area in front of me ... cornfields far and wide. I must have been walking on narrow country lanes, because I know it was as if I was walking through water. There was a roar all around me. And suddenly I was in a valley ... I crossed a river on an iron bridge. Over there, in the moonlight, on a hill, was a castle.

Franz knows the castle. He says it's a baroque building. Then I was on the market square in a small town. The castle in the moonlight above like in a fairy tale. There was an old fountain in the centre of the market square. Water rushed out of a pipe. I sat there for God knows how long. I wondered where I should go. But the whole town was in a deep sleep. Who should I wake? So I got up and walked round the square. On one corner there was a pole with an arm with a name on it. The arm pointed into a street, and in my fever I felt as if it was pointing me out of the city. I obeyed and walked. An endless street ... on and on until I lost consciousness. Perhaps the indifference that dominated me in the end was the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced.

They picked me up on the street and took me to the hospital. My fever was persistent. I was ill for nine weeks. My beautiful hair became thin and sick and had to be cut off. I have to wonder why it grew back.

In the beginning, it was really only pity on Biancini's part that he took me into his troupe. I was quite poor and more of a burden than a member who was expected to earn money. But in a few weeks I was out again. And then my cheerfulness returned. I was able to let my experience sink deep into me, like the dead are lowered into the sea. Franz told me that they tie a stone around their feet and push them off a plank into the water. Franz was also a sailor. What a lot he was!

I also changed on the outside back then. The way I stood in front of the mirror ... for the first time. I was a completely different person then. My features were completely different. I really don't think Adalbert would recognise me anymore. Even if I did manage to find him. But where would I find him? I enquired about him carefully. The farmers told me that my father is now living alone in the cave with a young woman. With a peasant girl from the village. And Adalbert is gone. Nobody knows where. Where am I supposed to look for him? I only know now,

how wide the world is. I've been to Hungary, Bohemia, Tyrol, Poland, Saxony, I don't know where.

* * *

I know what Bezug wants. What all men want from us women. They may behave as they always have. Their desires are stronger than any art of deception. And although we women love to be deceived, they never succeed in deceiving us. Except when we want to be deceived ourselves. Bezug also tried it with poems. As if he were the man to write poetry. But they spoke to me so kindly, touched me so relationally. They were like caresses. Soft and flattering. Franz also wrote poems. But they weren't as beautiful as the ones he brought me. I wonder if the poet who wrote them is still alive.

One thing finally made the difference: I was tired of walking. A wish that first awoke in me in my fever when I saw the castle in the moonlight. If only you could live above a small town like that, in a castle. To step to the bedroom window at night and look down on the sleepy market square where the old fountain murmurs.

They told me so much about his power and glory. And that I must become famous through him.

I'm on the way to doing that. Kutschenreuter looked very mistrustful at the beginning. If I had come alone, he would probably have sent me away immediately. But Bezug brought me to him and I immediately realised what his word meant. Kutschenreuter hired me.

This was our second trip to the city. Right after breakfast in the restaurant. And then we went to my flat. To - my flat. Five rooms, one more beautiful than the other. With a lot of

Things I didn't know what to do with. Now I've learnt all that. I have a chambermaid. And the old woman has also shown me a lot of things. She's very kind to me, the old woman. But I can't stand her. She has a treacherous look in her eyes. Treacherous, yes! I feel as if she's always looking at me. Even when she's not there, she stalks me, suddenly entering my room as if to surprise me. That's why I only write at night.

* * *

Why am I writing? Why did I buy this book to record my experiences?

I don't really have anything to do. I really don't need to rehearse my numbers any more. I go to the show in the evening and come back home as soon as I've finished. I slip into my silk dressing gown.

- Silk dressing gown! Me! Nella! In a silk dressing gown. I can't say I don't enjoy it. He sits opposite me and looks at me so ... so ... his eyes are always asking if I will consent tonight. But I can't! I can't. I know he expects me to. According to the unwritten laws that apply in my circles, he can expect it. He pays for my flat, my silk dressing gowns, the red floor lamp is his. Well, I accept all that. And I should ... but I can't.

But what did I actually want? Oh ... why am I writing? Why? During the day, reference never comes. I'm free. Free? No, I'm a prisoner. A prisoner. Yes, I am. At least I have the embarrassing feeling that I am being held prisoner. This old woman is my jailer. Reference seems to have given her power over me. For all her kindness, she cannot deceive me about the fact that she is stalking me. I have thought long and hard about who she has given me to.

reminds me. The pre-swollen eyes that always seem ready to twist convulsively. And then those adverse, thick, blood-red lips in the puffy face. I've been thinking for a long time about who she looks so terribly like. I finally figured it out today.

"Signor Francisco" once gave me a book about the poison murders in Paris at the time of a French king. It was quite fashionable at the time to poison your closest relatives. It was like a contagious disease. And the woman who started this horrible fashion was called, I think, Mrs de Brinvilliers. There was a picture in the front of the book: Mrs Brinvilliers on her way to execution. She has such eyes and such a mouth in her puffy face as Mrs Anastasia. What is her name - Thumas! Really, that's the resemblance that makes her so disgusting to me. She looks like the poisoner. She always walks around in the morning with a scarf on her head and a night jacket. And that's exactly how Brinvilliers' wife was dressed on the way to the execution.

I can't talk to her. I can't bring myself to do it. And so I'm alone all day. If I want to go out ... Mrs Thumas goes with me. If I want to drive in the car - Mrs Thumas sits next to me. I'd rather stay at home. Alone!

I read a lot now. But I have to be able to talk to someone. I don't want to talk to the old lady. And I'm also finding it difficult with Bezug. He's getting more and more scary. Now I sit and write when everything is asleep. And I imagine I'm talking to my brother.

Good night, Adalbert! Wherever you are, a thousand greetings to your dream.

* * *

Franz! "Signor Francisco", pistol marksman and dog trainer! Why didn't I give myself to you back then? I was drawn to you

little to you, and I know you loved me very much. But I waited, because it seemed to me that the right person to tell me the secret was still not there. I waited until the headmaster took by force what I didn't want to give him voluntarily. I shouldn't have waited, maybe everything would have been different. I wouldn't have felt poisoned and I wouldn't have been disgusted by the love of bodies. And then I would have given him the right to defend me. It's a strange world, the world of circus people. The sexes mix as they please. But no one would ever dare to use violence against a woman who already belongs to someone else. If she consents voluntarily, it is something else. Only the woman who does not belong to another is sexually without rights.

He loved me. I should have confided in him. He loved me. I know that if I had told him what had happened to me, he would have shot the director. He would have just hit him between the eyes like he hit his card hands and his glass balls. But I didn't tell him anything.

He's already shot one person. In a duel. He told me his whole life: Only I know, only me and perhaps no one else before. And he won't tell anyone else afterwards either.

He was a student. And I think he had a fortune. His people renounced him. And then he moved around the world, from one job to another. He was in America; I don't know what all. He was a sailor and a newspaper delivery boy, a preacher for some new sect, a hunter in some wild American mountain range. Then he had the idea of joining the artists. He learnt completely new things in Japan. And he was the best among us. He could have performed in a big circus or variety theatre and earned a lot of money. But he preferred to be with small troupes and travelled from village to village. He was very different to me in that respect. He didn't long for comfort and wealth. There was perhaps too much restlessness in him.

I have always had the impression that he was never as comfortable as when he could tell me about his life, or tell me about his life.

listened.

I owe him a lot. My father taught us, me and my brother, to read and write; that was all. But Franz was an incredibly clever person. He was a student and had read an awful lot. He had a small black suitcase full of books. And he let me read them all one by one. Then we started talking about them and sometimes I liked what he had to say even better than what I had read in the book. If I can now express myself to some extent, if I am able to read a book with understanding, I owe it to him. I want to cherish his memory with the best memories.

With the best memories.

* * *

How long has it been since I wrote anything in this book? It must be seven or eight weeks. What should I have written? I was sick, furious, mad with disgust. Disgust for him, for me, in front of the world.

It has happened! He has succeeded. I resisted long enough, but he finally got his way. But how did it happen? It was no different, no better than in the sleeping car. The director took the groom and the clown to help him. His assistants were Mrs Thumas and the wine. A hell of a wine. I like drinking these sweet, heavy wines. He knows how to find his allies.

I was already in the best possible mood. In the circus, cheering, wreaths of flowers, baskets, festive excitement, a tremendous roar. I'm standing under a whole rain of bouquets. And I wonder what people want. The coachman comes, congratulates me and laughs when he sees my stupid face: "You don't know" - I'm the only one

of all the members he says you to. Otherwise he says you to everyone, even the school rider and Miss Wanda, the mermaid - "You don't know why people are shouting like that? It's your name day today: Bianca!" My name here is Bianca Semonski on request. It doesn't really matter what you're called when you're on your own. I didn't tell him my real name. So that's why people were shouting, and why the roses and violets. I was v e r y happy about it, and the way I threw out a few kissing hands m a d e it even more fun. They all love me. I feel it and I am grateful to them.

And when I get home, of course with Thumas next to me in the car, everything is festively lit at home too. The chandelier and all the lamps in all the rooms are lit, and in my bedroom there is a naked bronze woman dancing in front of a glowing red fire. It's a marvellous figure, and the fire casts its glow so warmly from below on her brown, hard limbs. This is a name day present. And flowers everywhere, it's so humid in all the rooms. I'm still so intoxicated by the fire, by the idea of falling round his neck and giving him a kiss. Afterwards I shuddered, but it was too late, I couldn't even wipe my lips. He looks at me and asks: "And today?" But I shook my head. I had come to my senses and realised that I couldn't. I can't. He made his usual offended face and I thought to myself that it was over, as always.

But that was not the end of it. It was going to be different this time, very different. So we sat down at the table and the meal was delicious, because Bezug is a connoisseur and this time he had put together the menu himself. "It was supposed to be our wedding meal," he said, smiling wistfully. And I let the wistfulness fool me and almost felt sorry for him. And to give him some consolation, to explain to him why it's not possible for me, why I hate my body, I tell him the story of my first director. And there

his eyes sparkle so green that I am startled. But he immediately starts talking about something else, about my triumph and the enthusiasm of the people at the circus today.

"I knew you would be successful. You just charmed everyone like you charmed me." It must be nature's way of making us women lose our minds when we talk about our successes. Thumas sits opposite me and also starts talking like a waterfall about how popular I am with people and how I've been celebrated today. Bezug has bought her a box and I think she's watching over me from there too. So she puts on her sweetest face and talks incessantly about my triumph and I don't know what else. And she toasts my well-being and my success and my future. And I always clink glasses and laugh, because I've never seen Bezug so funny. It was another sweet, heavy wine.

And suddenly it occurs to me: why don't you tell the reference about your brother, he'll help you look for him. And I want to start talking about it, but something stops me. Something is warning me. So I become pensive and silent and think about what is holding me back. And without paying attention, I drink more and more.

At the end comes a green liqueur in very small, pointed glasses. We drink some of it, and I become amused again and forget Adalbert and everything. And then the chandelier starts to dance and sinks almost to the table before my eyes. And then everything swirls around me, I hear someone laughing out loud, without end ... it must have been me and then I lose my senses ...

Back then I had to endure the humiliation in full consciousness without being able to defend myself. This time at least I was spared that. But the awakening was all the more terrible.

I lie naked on my rumpled bed and next to me, pressed close to me, sleeps Bezug. If there had been a weapon, I might have done to him what Judith did to Holofernes ...

* * *

Something has happened. Something has happened again in my monotonous life. My parlourmaid has seemed so strange to me for a few days now. She kept looking at me as if she wanted to tell me something, some secret she didn't dare share. And yesterday, after combing her hair, I finally found out what she had to tell me. I was very kind to her and asked about her family, her siblings and her sweetheart. That must have encouraged her. Because when I released her, she slipped me a letter: "Don't betray me!" And was gone.

Aren't you going to betray me? I was astonished and hesitated to open the letter. There was no address on the envelope.

Adalbert, my love, who do you think this letter came from? From him, from Franz, "Signor Francisco", the friend. He was looking for me, saw me at the circus - Bianca Semonski! How could he know it was Nella - and he knew how to find me in my flat. He wants to see me. And I want to see him too. But am I not a prisoner? Doesn't Thumas lurk at every keyhole so that I always have to check to see if the flaps are down? None of my doors has a key, I can't lock myself in. How am I supposed to start getting together with Franz?"

"I'm outside your windows every day at four in the afternoon. If I may come, please wave to me."

I was excited and thought until my head hurt. I was at the window at half past three in the afternoon. We live in an alleyway that hasn't been fully developed yet. Opposite is a large wooden yard, a long barren wall stretches along the street. Around four o'clock he slowly came round the corner. He was dressed as inconspicuously as possible. In the past he had always worn a large calabrese and a flapping tie. "For business reasons" ... he said, "The marksman must have a calabrese so that it can be seen that he is

straight from Mexico." - He was from Jägerndorf in Silesia, Franz. - "Just like the jockey rider has to wear an English travelling cap and a scarf around his collar and walk around in his shirt sleeves so that people believe him."

But this time he was dressed very differently. He looked more like a teacher from the country. Just to avoid any suspicion that he had anything to do with art. He walked along the wall without looking up, only just opposite my window he glanced up at me. He's seen me, but he hasn't given himself away with a twitch. What should I do? I want to see him and talk to him! But how can I get rid of the Thumas?

* * *

The cover becomes more and more sinister and disgusting. How disgusting his lust for my body is to me. How I hate this body and this raw love that has so far caused me nothing but disgust. And I looked forward to it with such wondrous expectations. But when he pulls me around and pushes me off and tries to force me to do his will, I resist, even at the risk of seeing that ugly, horrible grimace on his face again, like the other day when he hit me in the face with his fist.

Yes, he hit me. Hit me! With his fist. The next day he brought me a pendant, a marvellous piece, as precious for its extremely fine workmanship as for the stones, each of which cost a fortune. "Don't tempt me," he said, "I have a temper! Why are you still fighting back? Am I so disgusting to you?" What should I say to that? Do I really still have a right to this violated, denigrated body? Is it not indifferent what happens to it?

But still: something inside me is revolting against the relationship. Still, even though I can feel how he tries everything to subjugate me completely. He is a tyrant who shamelessly exploits his power. And my captivity is becoming more and more unbearable. The Thumas is watching me more than ever. It is as if she has been ordered to be stricter. Perhaps something is telling me that I would like to break out of my prison. He is a predator and has predatory instincts. Fine scent. I suspect he has a hunch that Franz is there and that I'm pinning my hopes on him.

I recently made an appearance with the Thumas. Mira, the parlourmaid, mediated my correspondence with Franz and carried the verbal greetings back and forth. I am very fond of Mira. And I've started to tell her some of what's going on inside us. But we have to be very careful and can only talk in whispers between loud fragments of harmless conversation, because Thumas is always behind the door. And then a few days ago, while Mira was combing my hair and quietly telling me about Franz, I suddenly saw the bedroom door open quietly, very quietly, in the mirror I was sitting in front of. Just a very small crack. But I did notice it, because I've also become very careful.

"Come in, Mrs Thumas!" I call out - she appears in the doorway and doesn't quite know what to say. But the anger has got the better of me. "But I advise you to knock next time you want to come in, you understand! I've had enough of this sneaking around and lurking." But then her whole face suddenly changed and she hisses at me like a snake that's been kicked: "Don't be so arrogant, my little doll! What are you doing here? You don't need to talk to me like that. speak."

But I'm not lazy either, I jump up and shout: "Get out, you old monster, you spy, you poisoner!"

I was only thinking of the Brinvilliers woman, with whom she bears a resemblance. But, God knows, it gave her a good jolt. She turned pale, clenched her fists, gritted her teeth, and for a moment it looked as if she was going to pounce on me.

Then she buckles, making those certain pious, bulging eyes ... the size of a fist ... she looks up at the sky reproachfully and walks out. But Mira, who is standing behind me with a slumber roll in her hand, armed for defence, starts to dance, kisses my hands and her eyes sparkle with joy and pleasure. "You gave it to her, thank God, thank God!"

It did me good for a moment. But I know that I now have a bitter enemy in the old woman. The first thing was that she complained to Bezug. And Bezug expressed his displeasure to me. "I don't want you to treat Thumas like that. I esteem her very highly and she has my full confidence."

"But she listens at the doors!"

"Nonsense, you're imagining it. Because you have a guilty conscience. Isn't it?"

That's all, that's all I've achieved. And the Thumas walks around with an aggrieved face behind which she hides her hatred, not speaking a word and still lurking, only more skilfully.

* * *

And yet we managed to outwit our guards. I have spoken to Franz. I have spoken to him and I - will flee.

Chance has come to our aid. We discovered that Thumas sometimes disappears from the flat at night. Mira claims that the old woman still has a lover and visits him. That much is certain, she gets up at night and leaves. But she locks the flat from the outside so that we can't get out. Recently I feel a little sick at night, and I call Mira and send her for Hoffmann's drops, which are in the medicine chest in the pantry. But Thumas has the keys to the pantry, so Mira had to go into the old lady's bedroom. There she was not a little

surprised that the old woman is not in bed. She searches the whole flat, but the old woman is nowhere to be found.

Our plan was already finalised. Mira had to make a wax impression of the lock - like the real criminals - and we then had a key made and a second key from the Thumas' bedroom.

And yesterday, when the Thumas flew out again at night, Franz was with me. He climbed into the house from the garden and then Mira opened the flat for him with our thief's key.

He doesn't look well, poor chap. I think he was very upset for me. He grabbed my hands and held them as if he didn't want to let them go. Good Mira was moved, I think she cried. Then she went out.

"This is the person," said Franz, "this is the person you gave yourself to! To him of all people!" And he told me the most terrible things about the power of reference and the ruthlessness with which he uses this power. The whole world had to beware of Bezug. It could be, he says, that one day it will wake up and find itself bound by him.

We have decided to flee. My heart is very fearful, because if Bezug really is that powerful, he will know how to find us. But let's take the plunge. If only I wasn't so scared. But I don't know, I can't be so joyful and hopeful. Franz shouldn't have told me such horror stories about Bezug.

Our plan is very simple. Tomorrow - tomorrow! - it shall happen. Franz will come for me, the same way he came yesterday. Mira will open the door for him, after locking the old woman in her bedroom so that she can't get out when she wakes up. And we'll go, Mira with us, in a carriage to the second nearest railway station and then off.

I kissed him, the dear, brave fellow, and his handshake was a silent vow.

* * *

It is over. It has failed ...

A complete failure. I can't explain how Bezug figured it out, but this much is certain, that he slammed the door of my prison, which was already open, shut again in time.

It was three days ago. Or three nights ago. I cried through two of them. It's only today that I'm finding the strength to write it all down again. For you Adalbert, even though I know you will never read these notes!

Everything was carefully considered and well prepared. I was to go to my bedroom as usual and go to bed to make the old lady safe. But Mira had to keep an eye on whether Thumas flew out again, and if she stayed at home, to lock the door. Then she was to come and get me. It couldn't be later than twelve o'clock. We had more than three hours by car to get to our railway station. And the train left from there at four o'clock.

I was certainly excited, but not in such a way that I could have jeopardised the success of our escape. On the contrary, despite a few palpitations and quickened breaths, I was quite sure of myself and knew for certain that I would be able to act quickly and cold-bloodedly in the moment of danger. I remained in this mixed mood of confidence and excitement until about twelve o'clock.

It had long since gone quiet in the flat and I didn't understand why Mira still hadn't come. Thumas must have gone to bed long ago. Why did Mira hesitate so long; she knew that we didn't have much time. Once I felt as if I could hear the door open quietly in the next room. I listened intently, but I must have been mistaken, because no one came to get me. And now, as minute after minute passed, I began to get restless, my confidence sank and I looked at the clock with increasing anxiety. I saw how

the hands came closer and closer, and this slow creeping closer excited me so much that I endeavoured to look to the other side. But there was an irresistible force that turned my head back and fixed my gaze on the antique dial of my gold and ivory Empire clock. The angle between the two hands had already become acute. My body was covered in cold sweat. And Mira still hadn't come. At last, I could no longer bear to lie here and await my fate. I wanted to act myself, to intervene, to see what had happened. I quickly got dressed and took the small travelling bag that I had packed earlier and hidden behind the sofa. In the red light of my traffic lights, I saw that the two hands were now completely on top of each other. And now there were twelve bright, thin, silver chimes. By day, the clock played a little tune, a French minuet or something. But at night it was kind enough to remain silent.

I waited until the twelfth beat had died away. Then I quietly opened the door to the parlour. It was completely dark here ... not a sound. Where could Mira be? I called her name quietly. I groped my way to the centre of the room and switched on the electric light. It became bright.

Then I cried out ... and the travelling bag fell out of my hand.

Sitting in one of the armchairs, his arms on the armrests, his legs stretched out far from him, with a green gleam in his eyes - Bezug. He sits and looks at me in silence. I stare at him and can't say a word. I think the silence must have lasted an eternity.

Finally he says: "Mira's not here! She's not coming." And as I still can't answer, he continues with a sneer: "I don't like you driving around at night. You could catch cold. It's not good weather outside. And if you want to go on excursions, you could have said goodbye to me first. I deserve that for you. Don't you agree?"

I let myself fall into an armchair and start to cry. Out of anger, surprise, shame, despair. "Stop crying!" he shouts, and then he picks up my travelling bag, which is lying on the floor next to him and

says again in his most scornful tone: "And so little luggage? One must say you are modest. Is that all you wanted to take with you?" Then he rings the bell and the Thumas appears, with a sugar-sweet arsenic face, beaming with pleasure and full of ironic politeness. He has tea brought and sits opposite me, sipping a cup or two, always with his mean smile, talking about my "excursion" and the imprudence of travelling in such bad weather. Thumas walks by now and then and rejoices. It was a terrible hour.

"Drink," he suddenly shouts at me again, and with trembling hands I lift my cup and obey him.

His eyes are burning into me and I can feel his impure instincts awakening. He finally pushes his cup away and stands up.

"Come on!" he said hoarsely. I lean back and pretend I don't understand him.

"Don't look at me like that! Lead the way to the bedroom." Into the bedroom! I start to tremble and can't move. Then he grabs me by the arms and pulls me up. Brutally, with a firm grip against which there is no defence. I still have marks on my arms.

"Lead the way!" And with thrusts he drives me before him ... into the bedroom ... panting like a greedy animal ... and throws me onto the bed from which I had risen an hour before to escape.

* * *

I am his prisoner and will remain so for as long as he pleases. And I have a hunch that he will kill me rather than release me. I am at the mercy of his will and his wild desires, those desires that have something animal about them. He has seen that I detest him and has discovered that I want to escape. And I think that is yet another attraction for him. So he enjoys his power even more when he submits a reluctant woman to his will every day. This adds to the pleasure of cruelty.

His power knows no bounds. Mira has disappeared. Another girl has taken her place. A grumpy, ugly, red-haired person who fits in perfectly with Thuma and gets on with her perfectly. So now I have two guards, and the thought of escaping is madness. And Franz has also disappeared. Without a message. I don't know what has become of him. If only nothing has happened to him. I stand at the window all afternoon, but Franz doesn't come.

It's all over. And I'm so tired that I wouldn't even try to escape anymore.

People love me and always give me new proofs of affection. And there are a lot of people who vie for my friendship. But they do it shyly and always as if in fear of reference. His closeness scares them away. And I myself probably take away all their courage. Because when I discover a desire for my body in the background of their feelings, for this violated and poisoned body, I am seized by disgust. Disgust!

There is the governor's counsellor Pensinger. The racing stable owner Tintler. And then Doctor Störner, a journalist. He's my favourite of them all. A mocking man with a newspaper behind him is a power that everyone fears. But what is he against reference? What can he do against reference?

* * *

It becomes increasingly clear to me that cruelty is one of his pleasures. He begins to demand strange things of me. For some secret purpose, which he will not tell me, I must study a new dance. A dangerous dance. An exciting and nerve-wracking game. One of my rooms has been strangely altered, with two pendulums hanging from the ceiling, set swinging by clockwork. And then a series of statues have been erected, and

I have to dance between these statues and the pendulums. The pendulums will be sharpened during the performance, says Bezug. Sharply honed! Isn't it an extravagant and insane fantasy that falls for such things. I have to practise for a few hours every day. And Bezug monitors my work and my progress. And he impatiently urges me to hurry up.

* * *

Now I know what my pendulum dance was for. Or rather, I don't know. But the performance is over. Thank God!

I was in Bezugs Palast. It really is a palace. Princely! Mr Bezugs's fortune must be immense. I didn't see much of his house, because I went up the back stairs into a room where Greek robes were laid out for me, in which I looked like the Greek statues. I had to dance in these robes, in red light on a small stage, between the stone figures, surrounded by the sharp pendulums. They were really sharp, as Bezug had said. Sharp crescents of steel that swung back and forth, hissing. I danced in front of a crowd of people, whom I could vaguely make out in the dark room in front of me and whose wheezing breathing I could hear. I didn't have much time to watch because all my attention was focussed on my dance. One false step and the pendulums would have torn my body apart. It was terrible, and when I finished, I was half unconscious. My heart ached and it felt as if it was turning round and round in my body.

Praise God that it's over.

* * *

Now I haven't written anything for a long time again. And today ... although I am completely full of my experiences ... I don't want to write at all ...

No ... I'm simply incapable. I can't. I have already confided in this book everything that has happened to me, shameful and outrageous things, things that have made me sick and desperate, I have not shied away from mentioning everything disgusting and low - but here I want to remain silent, and I am allowed to do so. How could I find words? With an animal ... it's terribly sad, but how could he ask that of me! And at first I was full of pity, I wanted to look after him. How is it that I of all people should be condemned to such abominations? Would that you knew, Adalbert, how your little sister is faring, your Nella!

The thought of him is even closer to me than usual. The young man I met on the island reminded me so much of my brother. Not any outward resemblance, my brother must look completely different ... but a great similarity of character. There was an immediate trust. And then the similarity of our fates; that immediately made me feel an intimate kinship. I have to say, I would never have believed that I could relate so completely to a stranger. And - it's ridiculous, but once I came close to asking him if he wasn't my brother. My brother! I pulled myself back at the right time. How he would have smiled. Strange: and I don't even know his name. He's supposed to be a great poet. If only I could read something about him in a newspaper. But I'm strictly forbidden to read newspapers. I'm not supposed to know what's going on in the world. Why not? Doctor Störner once slipped me a copy of his newspaper in which he had written something about me. It was very sweet and as detailed as if I were a great artist. Really, like a great artist. I was very happy and kept the newspaper under my pillow at night, then in the morning I hid it in my toilet seat, but when I went to take it out again in the evening, it was gone.

I'm trapped worse than ever. And old Thumas, the monster, is becoming more and more vicious and torments me more and more. As it seems with approval, it becomes increasingly clear that he hates me. I do not take a single step unguarded. I have to be extremely careful not to be caught writing even at night. The new girl is the old girl's helper.

I wasn't even allowed to make the journey to Trieste on my own. Thumas took me there, and Hainx took me back at the station.

I am quite a superficial creature after all. With a little sunshine and joy and freedom, I am immediately transformed and as cheerful as if there was nothing heavy and gloomy in me. I feel that I could perhaps be a good person if my life had turned out differently. How happy and full of confidence I was when I got on the ship. And with what joy I went about my work of caring for the sick. But then how everything turned round.

And last but not least, this terrible thing. The sick man - my God, I think his madness was incurable, so perhaps it wasn't the most terrible thing that could have happened to him. But then - the murder! I think I would almost certainly say that it was murder. And her threat only strengthened my conviction. I wonder who the poor man was? I dare not ask anyone.

I live among such people. People like Dallago and this Hainx are blind tools. I have been in constant fear since my return. I have to admit it to myself, in fear.

* * *

My fear is probably not without reason. I believe that Bezug hates me. He blames me for the death of his son. Me? No - I can't help it, and if the dreadful hours were to come again, then

I could not act differently again. How can one ask a woman to do such an adverse and low thing? I love life, but of course I would rather die than let this happen to me.

But how is a person who knows no other will than his own and will accept no other goals than his own to realise this?

He hates me, and I have to beware of him. But how can a prisoner beware of his jailer? Now he seldom comes to me, and I see from the change in Thumas' nature, from her increasing insolence, that I can count on no protection if I want to complain about her. She restricts me even more everywhere, laughs openly in my face when I give her an order, and prefers to do everything that she knows will annoy me. The books that I love and that I used to read are gradually disappearing, and all that remains are the vile and obscene books that Bezug used to give me to read in order to stimulate my - as he believed - sluggish senses. I find the lewd pictures that are an abomination to me lying around everywhere every day. I don't like seeing these pictures and reading these books and so I am condemned to the most terrible boredom.

And reference is more puzzling to me than ever. When he comes, he sits opposite me and stares at me for a long time without speaking. His eyes are eerie, piercing, frightening. I try to say something just to break the silence. But his answers are short and dismissive, and then he stares at me again. I ask him why he's not talking. "What more do we have to say to each other?" he replied. Like a sacrificial animal under the gaze of the victim - that's how I feel.

I am afraid. I am afraid.

Sometimes I wake up at night to a scream that I have emitted myself. All this torments me so much that I can't rest even in my sleep. I am surrounded by darkness and danger.

* * *

Today I asked him why he won't release me. Since I returned, his desires have no longer bothered me, and I have quietly begun to hope that he is tired of me. If only it were so! Would that it were so!

But he doesn't want to release me. He looks at me as if his eyes should remain on my face like port-wine stains. And he answered my question: "Why don't I want to release you? Because I want to have something special, something very precious, just for me, something that is the envy of the world."

"And that's me?"

"That's you! You're the audience's favourite. Everyone adores you. But I would like you to delight them even more, to make them mad with something new that you bring."

I must confess, this kind of madness is incomprehensible to me. When I had something, I always enjoyed sharing it with others. But maybe you have to be like Bezug to get anywhere in the world.

* * *

The reference is what he wants me to do: I only dare to think about it with a shudder. He asked me to try *looping the loop* in a car. How can you "try"? Either you succeed straight away or you're dead. And I love my life. Despite everything. I still feel a glimmer coming from somewhere: the hope that one day I can become free. But my fight against this desire will be difficult. He seems to have set his mind on it, and then he is as relentless and hard as granite.

All sorts of crazy ideas are racing through my head. Today I **thought about** stepping in front of the audience if he continues to torment me: folding my hands in the centre of the ring and shouting out to them to protect me ... from Bezug! That wouldn't cause a bad commotion:

"Save me from Bezug. He wants to kill me."

Sometimes I feel as if that really was his secret intention. He has become friendlier and more talkative again. Is he trying to deceive me? He told me yesterday: "I have forgiven you everything."

I was proud enough to reply: "I regret the death of your son myself. I feel sorry for him, poor man. But there's nothing to forgive here. Only the woman herself can decide about these things."

"As if you were still -" he said angrily, but he immediately interrupted himself. In that single moment, it seemed to me that a mask shifted and the true face underneath was revealed in a terrible distortion. I know what he was going to say. I know what he was going to say.

* * *

Oh, the villain knows how to get his way. He knows how to get what he wants. I will have to do what he wants me to do after all. Can I help it: the price I have to pay is too high. I should find out what has become of my brother. Of you, Adalbert, whom I have thought of in every line of these notes.

Tonight, after the performance, he was with me. He's sitting in the corner of his sofa, smoking and watching the blue clouds. As long as old Thumas was there, he talked about all sorts of trivial things. But then, when she's outside, he leans back even more and suddenly asks, without looking at me: "Why didn't you ever tell me about your brother?"

I felt as if the wall had split and some kind of apparition had emerged. If there was anything I was proud of in my long fight against the reference, it was that I had survived the temptation to tell him about Adalbert. That always made me happy, as often as I thought about it. He didn't know about my most secret and sacred things. And now, all of a sudden, he's asking me about my brother. How could he have found out?

After a while, he says: "If you had told me earlier, you would have known what happened to him long ago. I would have brought you together myself."

I couldn't hold on any longer: "Where is he? Where is he?" But Bezug laughs: "You should have shown me your trust earlier. I would have been happy to help you find it. And you know that if someone wants to find a reference, it won't take long."

But I asked more and more vehemently where my brother was. Then he looks at me again so penetratingly that I think his eyes must leave wounds: "So you want to know? You must love him very much? Don't you! Well, you shall find out. But now I have one condition."

"What condition?"

"Can't you guess? I want you to fulfil my wish. My wish, you know it ... I want you to drive her crazy. I want you to become even more valuable. In *Looping the Loop* ..."

"That's despicable ..."

"Good," he says and stands up, "then we won't talk about it any more."

* * *

I'm going to do it after all. Isn't the price too good? He himself shows me the way to freedom. I know Adalbert will succeed where Franz did not. So why shouldn't I take a bit of danger and

Take on the fear of death? At that price! I don't fear danger as much as I fear death. I told him that I would do what he wanted. And his eyes lit up. I am determined. Completely determined. I tell myself that I am much calmer since I have thrown off all uncertainty. But in the night it comes over me again like a grey ghost. All these fears, these bad forebodings that have not wanted to leave me since my return, have increased, merged into a single tremor that overtakes me with the dawn. I have had a vision, as real as a picture, what am I saying, like a picture ... like life itself! I saw myself in the middle of the ring, bloody, with shattered limbs, and the car in ruins next to me. And all around me the audience with horrified, frozen faces. And a glowing hand came out of the air and pointed to the reference standing next to me. "It's him," said a voice, and then a storm swept across the arena and tore the roof away. I saw a shining starry sky above the amphitheatre and saw how the bloody body down there floated higher and higher out of the dust of the arena, and although I saw the body before me like a stranger, I had the sensation of rising higher at the same time ...

I'm going mad with fear.

* * *

I have the first trial behind me. I've already finished with life once. Nobody realises how terrible that is. I must say it was a pleasant feeling when I fell unconscious. The moment I whizzed through the loop and was upside down and backwards, I saw the director and the chauffeur and my colleagues downstairs. I felt as if the earth and the sky were being torn away from me at the same time and as if I were floating in a bottomless pit. This sensation was so overwhelming that I thought my body would burst, shatter

like an overfilled balloon. A terrible pressure that worked from the inside ... then I lost my senses.

I lay unconscious for a long time, said Doctor Schwartzkopf. And he wants to forbid me to attempt the journey again. But I won't let him forbid me. I insist on it. Won't I win you, my Adalbert, through it? The doctor is worried that my organism is not strong enough. He examined me and shook his head. My heart ... he says. Oh no! The hardest part is behind me: the first journey.

If only it weren't for this fear that makes me so weak. This terrible fear. But reference! Is it within the realms of possibility that one person tortures another like this? I believe this is his revenge on me. But he could be satisfied with what I have already endured and could tell me where to find Adalbert. He remains silent. I begged him. He answered me: "You shall hear it on the evening of the performance. Before you go out." I no longer want to humiliate myself with a request.

* * *

Tomorrow I will know what has happened to you, my brother.

It's midnight, just like when I tried to escape with Franz. The hands on my Empire watch are aligned. Before the hour hand has travelled around the dial twice, I will know. And my journey will be over. Just this one time. That's what I've promised myself. I want it to happen just once. Because I feel as if it's a sacrilege. Against whom? Perhaps against myself. But how can it be an outrage, which should ultimately lead to me finding my brother again? -

If only it weren't for the terrible fear. Something crouches behind me in the room, a shadowy hand reaches for the clock, and it's as if

whether the pulsations of the pendulum would become quieter, like a heart whose labour is weary.

If only I wasn't so alone. So completely alone. I should gather my strength this night, I should sleep peacefully. How much I want to sleep. And yet I don't dare. I'm afraid of nothingness, of the unconsciousness of sleep. Sleep is too similar to death. And I don't want to know anything about death. Doctor Schwartzkopf has foreseen that I won't be able to sleep and has prescribed me drops. I should take them and I will sleep. There they are. But I won't take them, no, I won't take them. I don't want to sleep.

I would rather awake and await the day ... it is better to be afraid than to know nothing. If I am afraid, I still feel that I am alive ...

The prisoner frees himself. Hainx makes one last attempt

[Table of contents](#)

Adalbert Semilasso closed the book, looked up, looked around him as if he first had to find his bearings in his surroundings. He was as pale as the dim light coming through the window curtains. Now Johanna stood up and pulled the curtain away. A reddish glow fell on Adalbert's face and it was as if the blood was returning to an already frozen body. He opened the book once more and slid down a page with trembling fingers. Eleagabal Kuperus, who was sitting opposite him and reading his soul, knew that Adalbert wanted to see for himself whether everything was real.

And now he closed the book for the second time, more gently than at first, as he had slammed it shut almost unwillingly, braced his fist on it and stood up. The glow on his face had become redder. He stood and looked straight to the east, towards the rising sun. Then he lowered his gaze and searched Eleagabal's face. "He tortured her ... to death ..." he said slowly at last.

Eleagabal nodded.

"Tortured to death. It's safe. And I was with her and didn't recognise her ..."

"Blinded by the gods!"

"Blinded by the gods!!! Why don't we speak when a hunch arises within us? When I was still ignorant

... yes, I immediately confided in everyone. The unworthy. I learnt to keep quiet and not to reveal everything, even where I felt I should speak. That is mistrust. I learnt it from them and I was proud of it. I remember that the first time I was together with Regina ... I spoke of Nella, of my sister, whom I have to think of when I see the tightrope walker ...

Connections! Connections! And then I failed to speak. Perhaps just one word and everything would have been revealed. And we didn't find that word. Reference has even chance as its ally. Or he has our will in his power in such a way that we only do what pleases him. And then ... how I learnt of her death

... It gave me a blow ... it flashed through me ... terrible ways of fate ..."

The sun had risen and a victorious glow burst into the room. Adalbert was still up to his chest in the twilight of the room, but his shoulders and head were already in the bright light. His face was hard and determined. He held out his hand to Eleagabal.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Are you still asking? I'm going to Bezug. That's the path I have to take now."

Then Eleagabal put his hands on Adalbert's shoulders and looked into his face: "Go," he said, "go ... you will be victorious."

Astonished, Adalbert grasped the old man's hands and squeezed them: "You say ... how am I supposed to ... I hear ... they say you to me."

"And I ask you to tell me too. In this hour, you are earning the right to do so."

- Bezug had just received reports from Hainx on the progress of his great endeavour. Significant successes had been achieved recently, the company's agents had succeeded in acquiring enormous amounts of land, and some of Bezug's great expeditions had concluded favourable contracts under all kinds of pretexts. While the whole world sang the praises of his great scientific achievements in ever more enthusiastic hymns, praised his willingness to make sacrifices and portrayed him as a promoter of ideal endeavours, he tirelessly pursued his goals. Some newspapers that did not want to join the general chorus were quickly silenced by being bought by the company or threatened with destruction. In the English House of Commons, an Irishman had referred with some concern to the Company's grand and, it seemed, planned land purchases.

and addressed an interpellation to the Ministry as to how it intended to counter these dangerous machinations. But at the very next meeting, after a few generalised phrases from the Minister, the questioner declared that he was completely satisfied with this answer.

Since Nella's death, his labour seemed doubled, his orders were clear and decisive, and Hainx bowed his head in admiration of his master's genius. Not a day passed without a great step being taken and a new stage reached. Today, Bezug had examined the report of Professor Hartl, who had returned from Abyssinia and, in addition to a wealth of scientific results, was able to present a number of favourable agreements with the Negus. "Tell him," Bezug instructed his secretary, "that I am satisfied with him."

"But the wife ... I spoke to her yesterday! She asked me if her husband wouldn't have to go on another research trip soon. She's insatiable, that woman!"

Bezug had already put his hand on the door handle and looked round at Hainx with a laugh: "I have no objection to letting the professor step into his right hand again. Tell her that."

"I'll be careful," Hainx replied, and with a rasping laugh, Bezug descended the stairs from his tower room. As he entered the great hall, he suddenly found himself face to face with Adalbert, and one look at the young man's face told him that he was looking at an outrageous man. He had never seen one of his slaves like this before, free of all fear and firm in himself, honourable and with a calm forehead. And he asked in astonishment: "What do you want?"

Adalbert was still silent, his eyes fixed on her face. Then he said, as it seemed, in a changed, deeper voice:

"I don't want it to look like I'm running away. I simply didn't need to come back. Because my chain is broken. But I don't want you to think that I'm still afraid of you."

"What do you mean?"

"What does that mean? Are you still asking? Think of my sister, who you killed ... That set me free."

"So the old man set you off. With his crazy talk. He belongs in a lunatic asylum. He's dangerous."

"Do you mean Eleagabal? That would be fine with you if you could render him harmless! Your most dangerous enemy! Lock him up somewhere like this, if you can't silence him completely. But I didn't get it from him ... no," and Adalbert stepped closer to him. "I got it from Nella herself."

"From your sister? She's dead." But Bezug's face changed colour. What had happened again that his calculations had overlooked? Or was she not dead at all? A superstitious fright made him uneasy.

"She is dead. But she still speaks to me from the grave. She left me a book as a memento, in which she recorded exactly how she was killed by you. Step by step, through a thousand fears ... through a cruel, sophisticated torture ... oh, very clever ..."

"Devil!" Bezug had clenched his teeth and his nose protruded sharply above the narrow gap between his lips.

"That's what I wanted to tell you. And now I'm leaving. I should beat you down like a dog, but I hope you will find a more miserable death."

Adalbert turned to go, but when he had taken a few steps, Bezug called after him: "Stop!" He had regained his presence of mind and grinned treacherously at Adalbert: "And you think, you fool, that I'm going to let you go. Now that you're resisting, you'll have to obey all the more. Now you will stay. Now more than ever. You want to rebel against me, you worm? Do you have any idea of my power? What do you think of me? Do you think I'll let who I have get away from me?"

Fearlessly, Adalbert stepped closer. He felt the words of reference like a sickening touch, and at the same time he felt this powerful will,

to which he had always been inferior until now, shook the foundations of his soul. Now was the moment of the toughest struggle. Now it had to be proven whether he was a match for the enemy. He saw a great brightness before him, but at the same time a shadow loomed menacingly and gigantically. The subterranean fire glowed in his salt lake eyes and it seemed to be preparing to explode. "That's it," Adalbert said slowly, "I'm free of you. Listen, don't bother."

Bezug laughed: "Do you think so? Do you know what I can do? Who all helps me? I have the right on my side. Didn't you sign a contract?"

So things turned out as Eleagabal had predicted. And in the fear that Bezug might weave new cords from this circumstance, Adalbert lost control of himself. With one leap he was at Bezug and raised his fist: "Silence," he shouted, "or I will strike you down." Then something strange happened. Bezug, who kept his cold blood in all dangers, backed away from Adalbert's threat. He ducked before this fist, an unprotected fist, raised his arm above his head in defence and seemed to grow smaller, taking a step back with bent knees. And now Adalbert knew that the moment had arrived t h a t he had to seize. Slowly he turned and left without looking back. And so he left the reference house.

He walked through the city as if in a dream. People and things passed him by, and it seemed to him as if he was walking through an immense tumult, through a wild tangle with a strange unearthly lightness, without any discomfort and without having to turn his attention to overcoming resistance. Then came a feeling of ascent, the two saints at the top of the cathedral steps seemed to be beckoning to him. He didn't realise how quickly he had climbed the tower stairs. It was only when he entered the tower room that this strange state disappeared and a marvellous clarity spread around him. In a surge of almost unbearable happiness, he threw his arms around Eleagabal Kuperus' neck. "Free," he cried jubilantly and then, remembering that a dead man lay next door, more quietly and fervently: "Free!" One of his hands

was gripped and pressed. Johanna stood next to him. She didn't say a word, just looked at him and held his hand tightly. "Eleagabal told me ..." she mumbled after a while.

And then Regina came out of the doorman's workshop. She had heard the voices next door and knew that Adalbert had returned from a dangerous journey.

Heinrich Palingenius was buried the next day. The pallbearers dragged him past the black cross with which he had marked the borders of his kingdom on the wall of the tower. They did not know the meaning of the sign, but it flashed through their minds as their eyes fell on it, and it was as if the burden in their hands grew heavier. The dead man was followed by the two women, Eleagabal and Adalbert, and last of all, sobbing and almost blinded by tears, was old Swoboda, who had not moved from the corpse of her childhood friend the whole time. Down in the cathedral square, however, a large number of people were waiting, and when the coffin was lifted onto the black carriage, everyone took off their hats. All the inhabitants of the old neighbourhood around the cathedral had turned up and joined the procession. After all, Heinrich Palingenius had lived among them, albeit high above them and only known by the older people. But his death had brought the guardian of the peace of the nights back into everyone's memory, and it felt like a sacred duty to finally make up for a long missed opportunity. So a long procession escorted the deceased out, and the man who had withdrawn himself from all foreign attention during his lifetime was followed by a living memory.

After the funeral, however, the deceased's relatives did not return to the tower. Early in the morning the new doorkeeper had taken up his duties, and although he behaved very quietly and reverently, the whole little world up there had taken on a new and strange face. At the corner of the street where Mrs Swoboda's path branched off, she stopped and shook hands with everyone, including Eleagabal Kuperus, albeit only after a moment's hesitation. He looked her firmly in the red-rimmed eyes, swollen from crying, and held her withered fingers

in his hand for a while and only released it when Mrs Swoboda looked up at him shyly. Then, shaking her head, she walked round the corner with short, swaying old-woman steps. -

Elisabeth learnt of his release in the same hour that Adalbert had left Bezugs Haus. He told her himself down in the hall, with an angry grin and his hands raised in the air, seeming to shake something in the air. Then, when his fit was over, he looked eagerly into his daughter's face. But Elisabeth did not change her expression. She turned and walked slowly back to her room.

In the music room, she stopped at her grand piano, one hand resting on the smooth, shiny wooden surface.

It whirled in her head, and the musical devices on the walls stretched out into long strips, with red dots shooting in opposite directions between them. She sank onto the chair by the piano and, without realising what she was doing, flipped open the lid. Tiredly, her right hand fell on the keys and there was an ugly discordant sound, a pile of notes with no inner coherence. With a bitter taste in her mouth, she looked at the regular row of white and black keys.

Her body twitched and she thought of the terrible adventures they had had, the mysterious orgies, full of feverish debauchery, such as had hardly been heard of in the wildest times of pleasure. Taut and hot, she straightened up. What prevented her from indulging in this life anew? It was a voluptuous thought for her to throw herself down again, to give herself away as she had done before Adalbert had come to her father's house. Determined, she crossed the row of her rooms, pushed a chair up to the desk and wrote a few lines on a cream-coloured piece of writing paper, the envelope of which she sealed with a seal taken from the secret drawer of the desk. The letter was addressed to the countess, and the seal showed a flying dove in the centre of a druid's foot.

For several days, the housemates hardly saw Elisabeth. From time to time she was seen among the bushes in the park, the

had now been swept bare by a heavy autumn storm. She did not take part in the communal meals and kept to herself in her chambers. It was impossible for Hainx, who lay in wait for her on every path, to approach her, although he used all the cunning of a man experienced in all things. If he saw her dress anywhere in the park, he immediately went after it, but Elisabeth always disappeared in an incomprehensible way. So he gave up trying to speak to her in the house and waited patiently for the news that Samek had promised him. Samek was the most skilful and resourceful of Bezugs's oath keepers, a daring and clever man for whom no task was too difficult. And then he was involved in all the endeavours that Hainx told him were directed against Adalbert Semilasso with an unquenchable hatred. "Dän, the oily dog ... I always want to squeeze his throat so that he can't snort any more." And then, always in hasty, crude words, he gave an account of the performance in the inn garden "Zum General Laudon", where Adalbert had forced him to retreat in front of the assembled audience.

The news arrived on the evening of one of the first days of December. Samek was waiting for Hainx at the door of the Café Lederschneider, which Doctor Störner had given the name "Zum unterbundenen Tiger" years ago. When the illuminated clock on the small island in the middle of the busy square showed half past seven, Hainx came out of the door, let the quickly opened sash fall shut behind him and stood on the threshold for a moment, looking out into the drifting snow and turning up the collar of his winter coat. Samek immediately approached him in the humble attitude of a supplicant. "Today ..." he whispered, "at ten o'clock!"

"Today?"

"Yes ... for sure."

"It's fine." And Hainx completed the manoeuvre by also giving the beggar a small gift. Then he slowly walked home and began to change his clothes. From a secret cupboard he took an elaborate, dark-haired wig that did not arouse any suspicion that underneath it was an almost bald head covered only by thin blond hair.

covered the top of his head. He fixed a short moustache on either side of his face with mastic and then put on a pair of massive horn-rimmed glasses. He now looked very much like a staid head teacher who is extremely strict in the fulfilment of his professional duties and a terror to his pupils. He left the house shortly after nine o'clock.

Half an hour later, one of the doors in the park wall creaked open and Elisabeth stepped out after a cautious glance at the dimly lit alleyway. The north-east wind was still driving the hard, grainy snow in front of her, and despite the thick veil she could feel the icy needles on her hot face. The public park lay heavy and silent before Elisabeth, and the tops of the trees leaned towards each other as if with anxious sighs, as if they wanted to tell each other terrible dreams and fearful forebodings. With watchful, bright rows of windows, the neat houses that stood around the island of the park peered into the darkness. Elisabeth crossed the park by the shortest route. A few couples met her, their tender ardour withstanding even the north-east, and a single man, who might be looking for an adventure, stopped to watch Elisabeth.

Beyond the park, a row of carriages stopped, their coachmen having taken refuge from the storm inside, while the horses, their heads drooping, endured the driving snow under the shelter of the blankets. Elisabeth approached the nearest of the carriages and opened the door herself. The sleepy coachman jumped out, startled. "Where to, please?" he gurgled as he took the blanket off the horse's back.

"To the railway station! To the ten o'clock train!"

It was still about ten minutes until the train was due to leave when Elisabeth arrived at the station. Without stopping at the ticket office, she immediately went into the waiting room and took a seat on one of the sofas, very close to the window, through which she eagerly watched the hustle and bustle on the platform. The door to the waiting room was just opened and the few travellers made their way to the train, which was already outside on the second track. Apart from Elisabeth, only one man remained behind.

He was sitting in the corner diagonally opposite Elisabeth's seat, looking ahead as if lost in thought. A quick glance at him from under the cover of her veil convinced Elisabeth that he was not an acquaintance. Some professor from the provinces who was probably returning to his nest after a visit to the big city and was already waiting for the next train.

Two minutes before the train left, a girl of about fourteen came in, walked straight up to Elisabeth and handed her a ticket. Elisabeth slowly got up and approached the train as the conductors were already beginning to slam the doors shut. The conductor, to whom she turned, held up the ticket in the light of the lantern, then placed his hand on the edge of his cap in a reverent greeting and pulled open one of the doors to a first-class carriage. Just as Elisabeth was boarding, the professor crossed the platform, ran towards the train with the gestures of a desperate man, as if he had almost forgotten to come along in his distraction, and was ushered into a carriage at the last moment by two conductors, one of whom was scolding and the other laughing.

Then the train started to move.

Elisabeth had made herself comfortable in her carriage compartment after locking the door from the inside. She had taken off her fur-trimmed jacket and put her legs up on the other bench. The only thing she hadn't taken off was her veil. The night was completely dark, with only occasional patches of white flying past, the places where the wind had blown the snow together on the embankments.

After a while, someone came down the corridor and stopped in front of her door. Elisabeth pulled the ticket out of her glove to hand it to the conductor. A key was inserted, then the door screeched into its tracks.

Without looking, Elisabeth handed her card to the person entering. She heard the door being pushed shut again, but no one took the card from her. Astonished, Elisabeth finally turned round and saw not a single

conductor, but an unknown man, the professor who had stayed behind with her in the waiting room earlier. He stood there and looked at her.

"Excuse me," said Elisabeth, "you must be mistaken."

"I'm quite right," said the man in a high cathedral voice.

"No, you're wrong. I've ordered a reserved coupé." Elisabeth had slowly pulled her feet down and moved close to the emergency line. "And anyway, how did you get in? I've locked it from the inside."

"I've never let little things like that stop me ... you should know that," said the man in a completely different voice, taking off his glasses and black wig along with his hat.

Elisabeth had jumped up. She saw that she was standing opposite Rudolf Hainx. "Vile," she hissed. It really was like the hiss of an irritated snake.

"Vile? You know that I've still managed to be vile," laughed Hainx.

"What do you want from me?"

"I want to talk to you. You made it impossible for me in other ways. So I had to try this way."

"I don't want to hear anything."

"You will have to listen. Now, I know you're interested in what you're going to hear. So don't pretend."

"All I ask of you is that you leave immediately."

"Be careful, my dear; be careful! I am coming for the last time today. This hour will decide whether we meet as friends or enemies in the future."

"You should know that your threats do not intimidate me." Standing tall, Elisabeth faced Hainx. Smiling, Hainx dropped onto one of the benches and looked her in the face. Elisabeth leapt to the emergency line and took hold of the handle.

"If you don't leave immediately," she gasped, "I'll bring the train to a halt."

But Hainx remained calm. "You can give it a try. But I don't think the train will stop."

"You have..."

"But of course. You don't think I'm going to miss it. By the way, you can sit down again. I won't use any force. It would be marvellous to enjoy your writhing, writhing body ... to tear everything off you and then throw you naked off the train ..." Hainx stretched out his fists and opened and closed his fingers as if in a spasm.

Elisabeth looked him in the face with contempt: "Great! That means you don't dare, because you know that I am superior to you in strength. Weakling, you who are content with what my father leaves."

Hainx smiled: "Well - they're still nice leftovers! But a poor substitute for what I lost with you. What I wanted to say was this: I will not use force, because you should give yourself to me voluntarily. I know what you can give in terms of pleasure if you are there with all your senses. And finally: you also have your pride! Don't you? Rudolf Hainx isn't the first best ... As I said before, I'm also offering you news that will interest you."

"And I tell you that I don't want to know anything about you." Elisabeth took a seat in her corner by the window and looked out into the night again.

"You'll thank me when you've heard me out. So: I know where Adalbert Semilasso is."

"Do you think I couldn't have found out for myself? If only I had wanted to. But I don't want to know."

"Don't tell yourself that. Do you want to bear the shame of a man spurning you? You! That he just walks away? Do you hear me? I don't understand you. You have changed completely. Your soul is weak and sick. You want to know and just don't dare to ask."

"Silence!"

"Well, he lives with the miller Enzberger, in the mill by the inn 'To the General Laudon'. You know where that is."

Elisabeth did not answer and looked out into the night. Hainx continued emphatically: "But not alone! Not alone! With a young girl, you hear. This is the girl he favoured over you."

Hainx realised from the rapid rise and fall of Elisabeth's shoulders that his message had made an impression. "This girl's name is Regina. She is the daughter of Palingenius, the doorman who crashed his flying machine, the fool! Now Adalbert lives with her in the mill. Isn't this news worth something?"

There was still no answer from Elisabeth. Then Hainx moved closer and grabbed her hand, which was hanging down. But with a violent jerk it was taken from him. "I didn't ask you for it," said Elisabeth, "I haven't heard anything."

"Elisabeth, I told you that this hour will decide whether we will be friends or enemies. You will take revenge on Adalbert and on her. I want to help you with that."

"If I want revenge, I can do it myself. I don't need you."

"He preferred this woman to you. A poor thing, I tell you. I was with her in the tower. She's a child, a stupid child. I let her explain the oddities of the tower to me. It was entertaining to see how suspicious she was of me. A simple mind."

"Is she beautiful?" Elisabeth asked without looking at Hainx.

Encouraged by the question, Hainx continued to sketch Regina's characterisation. "A daisy! Meaningful, bold, the German maiden." And he compared her to Elisabeth, whose beauty outshone Regina's and whom he celebrated with hot words. Suddenly he was on his knees in front of Elisabeth. "You ... you!" he gasped and pressed his face into her lap, greedily soaking up the scent of her dress.

Elisabeth straightened her knees and jumped up. "Go!" she said to Hainx, who had sunk back from the force of the push. He lay with his upper body on the red velvet of the seats, his arms spread wide, while his fingers dug into the soft fabric. His whole

His body was contorted and his limbs thrown about as if he had fallen from a great height. He lay there like that, half stunned, unable to move, only his fingers playing half unconsciously in the velvet of the upholstery. Elisabeth had stepped to the other window and pulled back the curtain a little to look out into the poorly lit corridor. She heard Hainx rise slowly behind her and approach her.

"Good," he said, "good, you don't want to! I have brought you a message that is worth its reward."

"I didn't ask for a message from you."

"Good, but I have not only had this matter in mind, but other things as well. Perhaps my silence will be valuable enough for you to secure it."

Elisabeth let the curtain fall and turned round quickly. Crossing her hands behind her back, she leant against the door: "Well ... so ... what does that mean?"

"What does that mean? I can see from your face that you know what it means. It means that I know everything. Do you think it's by chance that I found out which train you're travelling on? You are very careful, and your organisation is good. But I did find out about you ..."

Elisabeth said nothing in reply. She realised that no denial would help here. And Hainx continued slowly in the thoughtful enjoyment of his triumph: "... your club ... the club of Babylonian virgins."

"Good, so you know. What next?"

"What next? Delicious! Don't you think there will be people interested in this? It will be very nice when the whole society is exposed, when the police take out your nest. An extremely piquant scandal. Don't you agree? Material for all the newspapers and funny papers. I'm already looking forward to seeing caricatures of you. Miss Istar! Isn't that your name? You see, I know everything."

Without answering, Elisabeth sank back into one of the seats. The tension in her features eased and something soft, tired

veiled her energy. The hands that lay in her lap clasped involuntarily. Hainx, who knew Elisabeth, was once again as confused as he was entranced, and the enigma of this woman suddenly made him as anxious and oppressed as if he were facing the infinite. She sat before him, not as if he had pointed out the orgies of lust, but as if she had been told that they knew of her secret church visits and pious prayers and works of which the world should know nothing. And in dismay, he stammered once more: "I know ... everything."

"Fine by me," said Elisabeth, looking in front of her.

"You can't be indifferent to that, can you?"

A gesture said that Elisabeth didn't care after all. And now that it seemed to Hainx that his game was not as safe as he had thought, the anger came over him again. "And if the world finds out ... you hear," he grabbed Elisabeth by the shoulders and shook her.

"You want me to buy your silence? No, my dear. I can't think of it."

"You think I'm going to keep quiet? Don't you? But you're wrong. I'll sic them all on you."

"Do what you want."

"Elisabeth: for the third time! Shall we be friends or enemies - - from now on ...?"

"Oh leave me with this stupid phrase, where are two people who are friends? We're all just enemies, one of the other and his own."

Hainx stood trembling in front of Elisabeth, but she didn't even look at him, instead stretching out on the bench and pulling her feet up.

"I'm going, Elisabeth, I'm going."

"You go ahead. I want to get some more sleep."

For a brief moment, it looked as if Hainx wanted to pounce on the woman who despised him so much that she could abandon all defence. But it was like a dream to him, when all our strength has left us and we are master of no limb. Someone laughed. Hainx remarked,

that it had been him. Then he walked out of the compartment and pulled the screeching door shut.

The club of the Babylonian virgins

[Table of contents](#)

The "Club of Babylonian Virgins" flourished in the shadow of the metropolis.

The whole thing had started with an association of unsatisfied women. And the instigator had actually been a man, a wise man, a philosopher, who had become a lame cripple from an athlete through a fall. When he died, among many other manuscripts in his estate was a record that gave the initiates the key.

"The physiological conditions," it said here, "must remain in the dark. On the surface, morality shines in the full sunshine. But I ask, why are we ashamed of the instincts implanted in us by nature? Why, the 'spiritual man'! A prejudice that the

'spiritual man' must overcome the instinctive. On the contrary: the spiritual man grows out of the instinctive and always refers back to it. As the Latin says: *naturalia non sunt turpia*. For the sake of this one saying, I regret not having learnt Latin. So now: and eroticism is one of the basic psychological conditions of a healthy person. A healthy person craves love, just as they crave sleep and food. It's all so simple and self-evident. But maybe that's why people don't want to know about it. The man can help himself in this matter. But the woman is to be pitied. For the young girl, love is a mysterious garden. You can see through cracks in the planks or stand on tiptoe, but you're not allowed in. Perhaps the girls in our country bear it less heavily, because centuries of familiarisation have prevented the senses from becoming outraged. But the women. Once the torch is lit, it must not be extinguished. The

is marriage, and it is assumed that the woman finds satisfaction in it. But what if the man dies or an illness destroys his strength? The chastity belt is the greatest cruelty in the history of the world. How many unhappy women have suffered from it. And the chastity belt is still being forced on our women. The truly free man, who looks at everything natural and human with clear eyes, will free himself from this spectre. How can a cripple demand chastity from his wife? If he is forced by misfortune to renounce it, should the woman do it voluntarily? Where is the sense and justice in that? And despite all the bitterness and pain, despite all the gnawing agony, the truly free man will let the chastity belt slip from his wife's womb."

The man who wrote these lines had had the courage to put his theory into practice. But he had asked his wife: "Don't get attached to one, because that would be hard for me to bear. From the secret relationship of bodies grows the intimacy of souls, and I would like to preserve that with you. Give yourself to many as they come, and with caution, lest they laugh at you, for they do not yet understand what I mean." And the woman - a woman who loved her husband - did his bidding after much reluctance. Their friends marvelled at their happy marriage.

This is how the "Club of Babylonian Virgins" came into being. The club had its home in a spacious old palace rented by an elegant and wealthy lady. Not even the nearest neighbours knew much about the life of the woman who, without knowing her real name, was called the "Countess" for short. It was difficult to make sense of the countess's strange habits. She was only ever in her home for a short time, usually arriving or leaving at night after spending a few hours in the palace. She was rarely seen getting into her carriage during the day, always deeply veiled and accompanied only by a chambermaid. After the neighbours had racked their brains for a few months, she gave up the investigation, which was made more difficult by the fact that the palace was in a state of disrepair.

in the middle of a large park. They contented themselves with declaring the countess over-excited and turned their attention to more rewarding things.

The whole organisation of the club was so ingenious that the police never had the slightest suspicion. The women who frequented the club did not know each other, for they wore masks over their faces at the great feasts of lust, and only the countess knew who the guests were. A number of female agents were out to bring men to the club. Only strangers were taken, and the first-class hotels were under constant surveillance by the club's emissaries. Under all kinds of mysterious ceremonies, the chosen ones were brought to the Babylonian virgins and taken away again under all kinds of precautions, so that none of the lucky ones knew where they had spent the night. -

A car stopped in front of the brightly lit entrance to the "City of Karlovy Vary" hotel, through which one could see into a vestibule decorated with palm trees and statues, at the time of the arrival of the evening train. A young man got out, paid the chauffeur, and the room waiter, who was already waiting on the steps of the entrance, saw from the astonished face of the driver, from the accelerated swing of the cap, that the tip must have been unusually generous.

"Kiss your hand, Baron," said the chauffeur and started the engine. If the chauffeurs are still polite, even after they've already received their tip, it's a good sign - even for the room waiters. Franz knew this from his own experience, so he quickly deepened the courtesy lines around the corners of his mouth and, after a submissive greeting, waggled dutifully behind the guest.

"Has nobody asked for me yet?" the young man immediately turned to the porter ... "Engineer Hecht!"

"Mr Engineer Hecht? No - please!" replied the porter, a f t e r thinking for a while.

"So give me a room. And if anyone asks for me, send them to me immediately."

"Very well. Please, ... would the gentleman like a room with a balcony, or ..."

"I don't care."

Hecht walked up the carpeted stairs past a bronze bear holding a tray filled with all kinds of adverts in its paws. The room waiter, always two steps behind the guest, showed him the way in a soft and polite voice:

"Left please ..." "Straight ahead." Then he opened a door, switched on the lights and left the guest alone after drawing his attention to the registration forms on the table with a submissive gesture. When Hecht was alone, he stepped to the window and looked out. Everything was covered in a soft layer of snow. The street, the roofs of the houses, in the narrow park over there, which had to fight desperately for air and water in summer, the snow clung in damp, heavy clumps to the crushed, dishevelled bushes. Behind the car park, the illuminated tram carriages rang past in an almost unbroken line. The cars stopped in front of the hotel and snow had piled up on their roofs. The life of the metropolis, which usually swept Hecht away, always giving him new impulses, did not touch him. After a quarter of an hour, Hecht turned back into the room and was just about to wash up when there was a knock. He spun round and shouted loudly: "Come in!" He was afraid he was not in control of his voice. Startled by the loud entrance and worried about being a nuisance, the parlour maid came in. "Please ... the room waiter ... it should be heated up."

"Yes! Yes!" Hecht remembered that the waiter had asked something like that, but he couldn't remember his answer. While the girl made the fire as silently as possible, Hecht poured water into the washbasin, put his head in and then washed his hands. Then he sat down in one of the large armchairs, his arms on the backrest, his head leant back and looked up at the ceiling. With his eyes wide open, he looked at the painting up there and traced the arabesques and garlands again and again as if with a pencil, drew the spikes of the

He followed the lines of a large star, from the centre of which hung a chandelier adorned with a multitude of glass prisms. He didn't want to think otherwise, hypnotised, as it were, by the compulsion to follow those lines up there. Although he was trembling with impatience, every minute was like a gift to him, and once he had stabilised his half-awake state, he felt as if he had been transported beyond time.

There was a knock.

Pike winced, his head sank down onto his chest and he realised from the adverse, dry feeling in his throat that he had been sitting there with his mouth open the whole time. All the tendons in his throat ached. It was terribly hot in the room, the stove behind Hecht's armchair hissed out a glowing heat, and Hecht felt cold sweat on his hands.

There was another knock and then the door was opened.

Slowly, leaning on both arms, Hecht straightened up and turned to face the person entering. It was a woman who looked at Hecht with puffy, cold eyes. In the puffy white-grey face, the thick, red lips were the most striking feature in addition to those eyes.

"You are Mrs Thumas?" asked Hecht with difficulty.

"Yes!" She stood there a little bent over, eager to serve and awaiting an order, and yet Hecht thought he could see a hidden glee in her demeanour.

"Shall we go?" Hecht pushed the heavy armchair to one side, because he had to do something to hide his excitement a little.

"It will be time," replied Mrs Thumas. Hecht pulled out his watch. It was past eleven. And he had arrived at six in the evening. The time between the moment he had entered the room and now yawned like a deep, black hole. "So let's go!" he said and put on his winter coat, which pressed down his weak arms. He would have liked to drop the heavy coat and throw himself back into the armchair.

The porter was astonished to see the newly arrived guest, accompanied by an elderly woman, leaving the hotel so late. After paying the prescribed respects, he returned to his box to continue his "Strohmandl" party with Eduard, who had come over from the now deserted restaurant. "What do you think?" he asked, indicating with a short jerk of his head that he was talking about those who had just left. "She's shy enough!"

"Well what! Anything is possible, I say! There are so many different flavours in the world. My guests send the game back when it doesn't stink."

They crossed the road and waited on the other side of the narrow parking lane for a tram carriage. "You have to comply with everything, do all the prescribed things," said Mrs Thumas. "We mustn't arouse suspicion."

"Good, good," muttered Hecht, doing his best to hide the fact that his teeth were chattering. They got into one of the carriages and travelled back and forth for quite a while. After they had changed a few times, Hecht had completely lost his bearings, even though he thought he knew the city quite well. He passed through neighbourhoods that were completely foreign to him and it seemed to him that the journey went right round the outskirts of the city. When he looked at his watch again, it was half past twelve. If she had used the ten o'clock train again, she must have arrived by now. At this thought, his heart seemed to stop beating for a few seconds. At last Mrs Thumas left the carriage, and Hecht followed her through some dark and winding alleys until she stopped in front of a house with a red lantern burning above its entrance. It looked to Hecht like the entrance to a criminal's cellar. "In here?" he asked.

"Come on," she took the hesitant man by the hand and pulled him along behind her. She led him along a long, damp corridor, down a few steps, into a small courtyard enclosed on all sides by dirty walls with blind windows staring out, then back through

a dark corridor. Voices and a trembling glow of light came towards Hecht. Mrs Thumas opened a door and they stepped into a cloud of smoke and noise. A number of men were sitting at the uncovered tables of a pub, gesticulating with their arms outstretched in front of them or shouting at each other in loud, bellowing voices. From one corner came the screeching of women's voices. A woman in a red blouse was leaning against the bar table, which had been turned into a kind of cage and fortress at the same time by solid iron bars, talking to the landlord. At the back, above the belt, the blouse was slightly torn open, revealing a shirt that was no longer clean. When Mrs Thumas entered with Hecht, the attention of everyone present turned to them for a moment. But people here seemed to be used to such late and strange guests, or they were so well educated that they didn't bother them any further and pretended they weren't there. Only the landlord came out from behind his fortress, took his black taffeta cap off his head and, as the guests sat down at an empty table by the stove, said in a completely hoarse voice, "I wish gunn Ab'nd."

Without having received an order, the landlord placed a green drink in front of her in two tall, narrow glasses after greeting her. Mrs Thumas raised her glass and said: "To your health", then poured the contents down with a quick flick of her wrist. "Drink," she whispered. Hecht obeyed and drank. It was a vile, bitter and burning stuff. Then he looked round the room and wished he could sit there like that until morning.

Suddenly a man in a yellow overcoat, his collar turned up, rose from one of the tables and came over to Hecht's table.

"Here you go," he said, "so if we want to go."

"Good," said Mrs Thumas. Hecht looked at her in astonishment. "Pay up," she whispered to him. And Hecht followed the two of them after he had paid. He walked through a barely penetrable darkness again, across a second courtyard, and then they came to a small alley where a car was parked.

"Forward, forward," urged Mrs Thumas, "it's time."

"It's time!" Hecht let everything happen to him. He was no longer able to perceive connections. And yet something inside him, perhaps under the effect of the drink in the pub, was strangely tense, so that he felt an incessant vibration inside him, as if from a thin and extremely sensitive membrane. After a journey of a quarter of an hour, Mrs Thumas pulled out a black bandage. "Let me blindfold you now," she said.

"Yes, it has to be. Otherwise we won't be let in." And she put the bandage on Hecht and grabbed his hand.

The carriage stopped immediately afterwards. Hecht groped his way out of the carriage by his guide's hand and was pulled away. A door slammed shut. They were still outside. Hecht felt the cold night air and the soft snow under his feet; occasionally his hand brushed against thin bushes. Now they climbed a few steps and entered a different area. There was warm, fragrant air around him and carpets under his feet. It seemed to him as if he was being led through a series of rooms. Sometimes he heard voices and the sound of doors opening.

Mrs Thumas stopped and took the bandage from Hecht. "Wait here," she said, and left him alone in a small room whose walls were covered with thick red carpets. Apart from a small table, there was no furniture in the room, and the cell seemed so tightly sealed that no sound could penetrate from outside. In this complete silence, Hecht was suddenly overcome with fear like a black, angry animal. He looked around for an exit, but he could not discover how Mrs Thumas had got out. He stood in the middle of the room, his eyes looking around him like a rushed man whose every avenue of escape was blocked. I will see her, he said to himself, I will see her, I will see her ... And he repeated this again and again, a hundred times, finally in a half-loud whisper.

Suddenly, without Hecht having seen how she had come, a woman stood before him. She was wearing a black silk dress, the neckline of which

was studded with lace on whose tendrils diamonds bloomed. The heavy, blonde hair surrounded her head in a wide wave. Only a narrow strip of the woman's forehead and her mouth and chin were visible, however, as she was wearing a black half-mask. Between the black of the dress and that of the mask, the precious ivory-white skin of her chest and neck was tinged with delicate rosy colours.

Hecht felt himself being scrutinised by a penetrating gaze. Then the woman said, taking another step back: "You have been introduced to a house where you can experience the unheard-of."

Hecht thought it was now necessary to give some sign that he was ready for anything and wanted to submit to everything. He awkwardly spread his arms and stood up a little, tilting his head to one side. "An eccentric!" thought the countess, who watched his every movement attentively.

After a silence, she continued: "The women you find here are the priestesses of a marvellous, intoxicating love. Their secrets date back to antiquity." Again the countess observed the impression her words made on the man. He seemed to be in a state of the most terrible excitement and hardly in control of his senses.

"But," she said, "be careful. If you tell anyone a word of what you have seen or experienced here, you are a dead man. Our alliance is powerful and knows how to find the traitors! Do you promise to remain silent?"

"I vow."

"Then I bless your entry in the name of Astaroth." With a quick grip, the woman reached into the front of her dress and pulled it apart so that the narrow underarm clasps fell down and her breasts became visible. "Place the kiss of the vow between my breasts." She approached Hecht and stood in front of him. The smell of her body stunned him and, dizzy, he bent down and kissed her between the breasts.

"It's fine," the woman said coldly and covered herself up again. Then she walked towards the wall and pulled one of the carpets aside. Out of one

She took a book from the wall cupboard, the door of which, decorated with enamel work, popped open when pressed, and placed it on the table in the centre of the room in front of Hecht. "You have a choice of these women."

Hecht flipped back the heavy cover. The book contained a large number of artistically executed photographs. Naked female bodies in poses that emphasised the characteristic and unique nature of each of them. Hecht immediately realised that an artist had been at work here; with the finest artistic understanding, with uncommonly sure tact, everything banal and coarse was avoided and no thought touched the sphere of mere, lowly lust. All these women were also deprived of the real piquancies, the irritations of curiosity, for each of them wore a half-mask of the same cut as that of the woman in the black dress. They were nameless priestesses of love, whose bourgeois and spiritual individuality was veiled in order to emphasise the individuality of the sexual. Nothing should be more decisive than the traits of the bodies, ennobled by the joy of the pure play of forms, of a renewed Greekness of the highest fervour and power.

As Hecht continued to turn the pages with trembling hands, the countess thought she had to give an explanation. "Chance should be eliminated," she said, "the chance that gives a pretty face an advantage over other women. In our club that should be ruled out. Because women are all created equal for love. And the body decides. Only the crippled and deformed have to do without."

Hecht kept nodding his head without listening to what the woman was saying. Suddenly he paused, stopped turning the pages and stared at one of the pictures on the open page. The countess looked eagerly over her shoulder. The picture showed a slim, even body with a broad chest and only slightly narrower, unbuckled hips.

"She! again she ... again and again she ..." muttered the countess involuntarily.

The woman in the picture stood in front of a dark curtain, the colour of which highlighted the outline of her body. And as if nature had decided to give this body not only the noble sculpture of antiquity but also the flirtatious charm of the

Rococo, there were still two small, brownish spots on the white skin below the right breast. With a trembling finger, Hecht pointed at the picture, but he immediately withdrew his finger as if he had touched the flesh of the body itself.

"That one!" he said. "Who is it? Will you tell me who it is?"

"Don't ask," said the countess, "don't ask anyone! You listen! You have chosen. Come with me!"

She went ahead and picked up one of the carpets, behind which was a small door in the wall. A short corridor led into a bathing room, where a servant dressed in a dark, cumbersome robe was waiting. The guide disappeared, and Hecht willingly allowed the servant to take his clothes. A lukewarm bath in a marble basin smelled of strange spices. Hecht got into the water and allowed the servant to rub an ointment on him afterwards and pour a fragrant oil on his hair. Then he was given a wide, soft cloak of white cloth, the edge of which was decorated with a red stripe. Throughout the whole process, Hecht stood outside himself, indifferent, unwilling and watching everything that was happening to him. When he had finished, and the servant was preparing to lead him away, it came over him again; he wanted to know if he was not mistaken, and in spite of the prohibition he ventured to ask once more who the chosen one was. He had seen that his companion had whispered something to the girl before she left the bathing room.

"Who is it? Who is it?" he urged her.

The servant, who was wearing a mask like the woman in the black dress, looked at him. "Asking questions is forbidden!" she said.

"You shall be rewarded ..."

"I'm not allowed to give an answer. And I don't know either, h e r name here is Istar."

"Istar! Istar!" murmured Hecht, following the woman in front. They passed through a hall. From some neighbouring room there was a strange mixture of great, loud laughter, shouting, singing and the strumming of a stringed instrument. Suddenly, the roaring noise flickered for a moment

A door slammed shut and a naked woman ran across the hall in front of Hecht, followed by a young man with his coat gathered over his arm.

And she ... and she was in the crowd of these bacchantes ... she too ... thought Hecht, and a terrible anger and bitterness came over him. The servant opened a door and Hecht stepped into a semi-dark room.

"You have to call her three times," she whispered to him: "Istar!" And then she left.

"I'll see her ... I'll see her ..." Hecht muttered to himself, but this one thought was so completely out of all relation to his ego and this place he was in, it floated inside him like a fiery cloud in empty space ... all around him were infinities. Hecht had lost his sense of unity. He only felt this fiery cloud sinking lower, glowing heavier and redder, as if it wanted to burst and give birth to new clouds. And suddenly the terrible realisation came over him that this was all inside him.

"Istar!" he cried out wildly and in horror, as if he wanted to banish the worst of the horrors with the name. And a g a i n , lamenting and quieter: "Istar!" But before he spoke the name for the third time, he paused. It was like an incantation, a threefold call that unleashed the spirits. What awaited him the moment he had called her for the third time? And now, in this last minute before the decision, he trembled and retreated. He wanted to get away from here. But then he felt as if he could hear the laughter and shouting from outside again ... and he remembered everything he now knew about the mysteries of this house ... everything he had learnt. And now ... he remembered that he had come as an avenger. A racing ball spun in his brain.

"Istar!" he shouted for the third time, loudly and commandingly.

It was like a change of misty images. A new image appeared in the dim light of the room. Opposite Hecht, in front of a dark curtain, stood the woman he had summoned. Istar! In the same position in which she had shown the photograph. The dark, heavy curtain

lifted the outline of her figure, and under her right breast Hecht saw the two brown spots. A strange light shone through the eyes of the mask, greenish, as if there were glowing orbs inside.

"Elisabeth!" cried Hecht, stretching out his arms.

The naked woman let out a scream and took a step forwards, so hastily that Hecht backed away. This brought him into a brighter area of the lamp, and the woman recognised him. "It's you," she gasped ... "how did you get here?"

Hecht answered nothing. Then he said slowly and sadly: "How did you get here?"

Now they were both silent, and only the heavy breathing of the two people shook the room.

Suddenly Elisabeth tore the mask off her face: "What's the point ... if you know?" Hecht felt as if Elisabeth was only now naked, as if she had only now reached the peak of shamelessness. She stood in front of him and made no attempt to cover herself. And now she laughed out loud: "I still ask how you know ...? I still ask ... He told you ... Hainx!"

Hecht made no reply ... he endeavoured to pull a corner of his coat back over his shoulder as it slipped down.

"Perhaps he was cowardly enough to forbid you to mention his name. Well - tell him that you didn't name him, that I knew ... that it was him."

"Yes," said Hecht.

"So this is his revenge ... and then Elisabeth stretched out on the polar bearskin of the divan that stood across the room, unconcerned about her nakedness, as if she were fully clothed. Her slender legs were slightly crossed; she put her arms under her head and looked up at the ceiling. Without looking at Hecht, she laughed: "And you're the avenger? ... you? ... it's so incredibly ridiculous ..."

Hecht was still standing in the middle of the room, trying to get himself worked up. He had resolved to be brutal, to rush at his bride, to choke and beat her; and now he could not find the

power within itself. He was a dark, inert mass that lacked the ability to explode. He saw the burning lust for her body, tamed and limited by the awareness of his servitude, which she had imposed on him all too deeply. And Elisabeth continued as if talking to herself:

"Hainx has ... he must have one of his creatures here somewhere. He directed the whole thing ... oh, he's an excellent director ... someone bribed by him led you here ..."

"Yes!"

After a while, Elisabeth turned her head towards her bridegroom again: "And what else do you want here ... Why don't you go?"

Hecht had imagined the scene unfolding quite differently beforehand, if he had ever dared to think that far. He had seen a contrite, shaken woman in front of him and himself as the judge. Now Elisabeth dismissed him as if she were sending an annoying visitor out of her boudoir. Had she quite forgotten where they were, that she was lying naked before him and had been ready to give herself to the first best?"

"Well?" asked Elisabeth, when Hecht still didn't prepare to leave. Then the rest of his courage and pride collapsed. He fell forward onto his knees in front of the divan and his forehead touched Elisabeth's bare leg. But she pulled her leg back and his head sank onto the polar bearskin. "Elisabeth," he murmured, "Elisabeth ... you gave yourself to this Adalbert ... you used to belong to Hainx ..."

"He told you that too ...? Oh, he also gave you the licence plate number."

"Yes! And you have made countless people here happy ... give yourself to me too ... give yourself to me ..."

"No!"

"And why not? Why not?"

"Because I hate you ... because my body rebels against you."

"And I could die to own you once," Hecht murmured, his face buried in the villi of his white fur. He got no answer, but he felt a cold beam directed at him. When he looked up, he saw Elisabeth, leaning on her elbows, staring at him.

There was something new in her eyes, a sparkling, sharply honed cruelty. "You talk phrases," she said slowly, "don't play with such things. It could turn out badly for you."

"Just try ... put ... me to the test ..." he stammered with excitement, for it seemed to him that a hope of fulfilment was emerging.

"You wanted to ... what you said ... do ...? Die?"

"Yes ..."

"If I ... you wanted to kill yourself?"

"Yes!" He said it firmly and firmly, looking at her.

"Listen," Elisabeth said, and the green gleam in her eyes intensified, "I have to cut you out of my life. You must go out. At that price ... I am ready ... I am ready ..."

"And I'm ready to die ..." Hecht cheered and wrapped his arm around Elisabeth's knee.

"You swear to me...?"

"I swear..."

"I give you twenty-four hours from tomorrow morning. In these twenty-four hours it must be done ..."

"Yes ... yes ..." What was death? What was death if this was the last great gift of life? "In twenty-four hours ..." muttered Hecht.

Then Elisabeth let it happen that Hecht threw himself over her and kissed her ... -

He had already asked to speak to Hecht several times during the day about an urgent matter. However, as often as he called him by telephone, he received the answer that Hecht was not yet present. Bezug sent a messenger to the building and enquired about Hecht at the office. He had not been seen anywhere and there was great confusion on the site. The work had just reached a point where Hecht's instructions were needed step by step. Nobody knew the plans, which were carefully kept secret and only given to the engineers and architects in bits and pieces so as not to reveal the context prematurely. Now they were just

The enormous machines were being fitted into the building, and here Hecht had avoided even the slightest hint. No one knew what to do, and after hesitantly saving at least the appearance of activity during the morning, work had to be stopped completely in the afternoon. The workers stood around idly, the managers paced up and down nervously and telephoned Hecht's flat every quarter of an hour to see if he had still not returned from the journey he had set off on yesterday afternoon.

Bezug was furious. Right now he was pushing forward relentlessly, was indignant at any delay and recognised no obstacle. He threw himself against everything and used such tremendous force that his work progressed as if in jerks. And now Hecht was causing such a delay. Bezug resolved, as soon as he had him back, to tell him his opinion in no uncertain terms. In the meantime, he went out to the building himself, raced between the scaffolding and convinced himself that there was really nothing to be done. He shouted angrily at the architects, as if they were to blame for the standstill, and thundered down any objections. On the way home, after a sullen silence, he turned to Hainx: "You should have got hold of copies of the plans long ago!"

Hainx asked in astonishment: "Me?"

"Yes ... you! Who else? Who am I talking to? Maybe the man who's sticking the notes over there?"

"But I don't understand anything about these things. I'm not an engineer."

"It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter at all. That's how you'll learn, you see! What would happen ... if something happened to the pike. You never know. So ... I'll do it tomorrow ..." And he interrupted himself and stared at the chauffeur's back, which was visible through the glass, as if he was reading the continuation of his plan.

Just as Bezug re-entered his tower room, the telephone rang. It was already dark, only a reddish glow was still outside

on the snow-covered roofs of the city. While Bezug took off his fur, Hainx answered the phone.

"Who's there?" he asked ... Then he turned to look.

"Hecht is on the phone," he said, "he wants to speak to you."

"At last ... at last," and Bezug leapt to the phone, from which he hastily pushed Hainx back. "Are you there at last? ..." he shouted **i n t o t h e** machine's shell, "at last ... you're a hard-working gentleman, I must say. One can rely on you magnificently. What do you actually think? Where have you been? What?"

Hainx, who had just switched on the electric light, knew where Hecht had been, and his face twitched in a nervous spasm. He looked at the wall clock over which the vulture was perched. It was half past four.

"Away?" Bezug shouted again, "away? You can travel as much as you like, but you have to be there when you're needed. I believe you yourself are interested in our work being completed as soon as possible."

"Not any more!" said Hecht, and Bezug noticed how weak and sluggish his speech was. As if he was very sleepy ... or, Bezug turned pale with anger, had he perhaps been drinking?

"Not anymore? What kind of nonsense is that again! Hell, you're talking like a little kid. You know what we agreed. And I'm not going back on that ... Until you've fulfilled our contract ..."

"I'm no longer interested in fulfilling the contract ..."

"Mr ... you're insane! I'll put you in a straitjacket ... I'll have you locked up."

"You ... have ... no more power over me, honoured one ... I am dying ..."

"Yes ... once ... like everyone ... but until then I will know how to force you to fulfil your duties. All work has had to be cancelled today ... because it was not convenient for you to come."

"It won't be able to be recorded either. I've burnt all my plans, notes ... and drafts ..." With a

A terrible fright came over him. There was no doubt that Hecht had suddenly gone mad. The change from rage to horror was so sudden that he felt as if he were suddenly thrust from the embers of a furnace into icy water. He jumped back so quickly that the line's taut cord tore the earpiece from his hand. "Hainx," he shouted, "I beg you ... come on ... take the other shell ... I think - Hecht is mad."

Then, after a few seconds of collection, he began, as it were, suggestively, conciliatingly, coaxingly: "Don't make jokes, Hecht ... what kind of strange ideas are these? - Why should you burn the plans? And your notes ... ridiculous!"

"It's ... so ... I burnt everything ..." Hecht's voice was pressed, veiled, as if he was speaking with great difficulty.

Bezug made a desperate gesture to Hainx, who was holding the other shell to his ear, a gesture: so just listen, what's to be done? And then he shouted into the machine again: "Then you'll just make new plans."

"I won't have time for that."

"Why not?"

"I told you that ... I'm ... dying. I took ... Veronal a quarter of an hour ago. I think - the dose is enough."

His arm with the earpiece sank down. He looked into Hainx's pale face and saw that there was no doubt in his mind. But once again he pulled up the shell: "What have you taken?" he shouted into the device, as if he still couldn't believe it.

"Veronal," replied Hecht.

"Forward ... Hainx ... forward," Bezug shouted, "run ... you must not be too late. He must be saved. Take a doctor with you ... just quickly ..." And although Hainx had no hope, he jumped up, tore his skirt and hat from the clothes rack and ran out without saying a word.

"Listen, Hecht ... Hecht ... are you on the phone?"

"Yes!" came back with difficulty.

"You must not die. The doctor will come ... You will be saved. Do something ... Why don't you talk ... Why don't you speak? Don't you have an antidote at hand ... You are a chemist ... You will be saved ..."

"I waited ... until it was too late ..."

"And why only? I don't insist ..., I'll give you Elisabeth earlier. Right away, if you want ..." And when there was no reply, he shouted: "Don't you hear? Why don't you speak?"

"I can't ... stand any more ... sleep is coming ..." and there was a dull roar in the machine. Then Bezug knew that the earpiece had fallen out of Hecht's hand. But he stayed on the phone and kept shouting into it, begging him to say at least one more word, threatening and finally shouting the angriest insults into the machine. Then he paused ... looked with distraught eyes at the clock, over whose face the time vulture was beating its wings mercilessly in time with the pendulum. Twice he ran up and down the room and put the shell back to his ear. If Hainx had done all he could, he must be with Hecht soon. Nothing could be heard. What was that? Where was Hainx?

And again Bezug began to shout into the machine, almost unable to stand on his feet, one arm braced against the wall. He paused ... the beating wings of the time vulture seemed to drive a wheel that rolled inexorably towards a slope.

Suddenly the membrane of the earpiece began to hum softly ... a faint sound was picked up and passed on. Confused voices ... they were there ... they had entered Hecht's room. Then silence again ...

"What is it? What is it?" Bezug shouted into the phone. But no one answered him. And Bezug repeated his question, louder and louder, shouting until his voice cracked.

"Hello ... Are you there?" he heard Hainx on the phone.

"Yes ... Yes ... Yes!"

"He's dead!"

"Dead?"

"Nothing more to do, says the doctor. Dead as a doornail."

Then Bezug took hold of the earpiece with a firm grip and struck the device so hard that the wood splintered and cracked and the membranes burst with a loud noise. And when he could go no further, he threw the shell into the corner of the room with a curse.

Hainx brought a sheet of paper that he had found on the dead man's desk. On this sheet was written: "Dear Master! My great 'idea' is of course nonsense. Man will never succeed in overpowering the infinite abundance of nature. Everyone had to realise that, but you couldn't. If I had wanted to win someone else, I would have had to stay within the realms of the possible. I had to offer you the impossible. You reached for it. Farewell. When I look back on everything now, I have to admit that it was good fun. Your devoted pike."

In Enzberger's mill. The solar eclipse

[Table of contents](#)

5 March was the day of the great solar eclipse. Eleagabal Kuperus had promised to come to the mill and watch the phenomenon together with the others. Shortly after dawn, Adalbert Semilasso got up, for his new life meant that he soon went to bed and was out of bed early. This new life, which made him work hard once more and strengthened his body, which had become weak and soft in the house of reference, this constant movement in the open air, in perpetual contact with the earth, filled him with exuberance and cheerfulness.

Adalbert Semilasso walked back and forth between the washstand and the bedside cabinet, and when he was half-dressed and had put on his tie, he stepped to the window. The country road below was already in a brighter light, but the shadows of the night still lingered under the trees of the "Zum General Laudon" pub garden. And just as Adalbert stepped to the window, a man retreated into the shelter of the twilight. Another one of the reference spies that always surrounded Enzberger's mill. Adalbert smiled, he wasn't worried, because he felt safe here. His bodyguard was always at his post. The five Romanians had received the knife and had come immediately at his call, surrounding him with such loyal devotion and watchful care that he could not be approached. There was another one sitting on the high pile of wood by the mill wall, so that he could not be seen from outside. From time to time he cautiously raised his head from behind a dry shrub at the top of the wall and looked over. Adalbert knew that the watchman had seen the man outside and was keeping a close eye on him.

And after all, Adalbert told himself, he was someone too. He bent his arm at the elbow and tensed the hard muscles of his upper arm. Then he stretched out his fist and flexed the tendons of his forearm. The strength that he had gained through hard labour with the Italians and lost during his idle life in the Bann Bezugs was back. He was not afraid, and the wrestling matches in which he occasionally tested himself against the Romanians or even against Enzberger proved to him that he could rely on his neck and his arms.

Now he was ready and went downstairs. The door to the room where the Romanians were staying was already open and he saw three of them busy tidying up while the fourth was preparing breakfast. They took it upon themselves to get everything they needed. The miller's wife was the only one to provide them with a living, and it had been difficult to persuade them to accept a weekly payment from Eleagabal Kuperus for tobacco and other small expenses. When the Romanians heard Adalbert's footsteps outside, one of them stepped under the door and greeted him.

Adalbert, to whom it had seemed a kindly duty to learn their language, thanked the man with a Romanian morning greeting. "And how did you sleep, friends?"

"Good, sir, with an open eye and an open ear."

"Don't go to so much trouble. How am I supposed to thank you for all this?"

"Don't talk about thanks, Lord! We have never had it so good, we have a solid roof over our heads. We have food as good as we've ever had. And you force us to accept money."

"And don't you long for home?"

"We are used to travelling the world, Lord. And then we have a good remedy for homesickness. Would you like to see it?"

On one of the windows stood a kind of filtering apparatus, a metal sieve in which there was a layer of white, pure sand; under the sieve

was a glass jar. "We bought some wine from home a week ago. If you drink this wine, homesickness swells in your heart and makes you sick and weak. But a simple remedy makes this wine a medicine against illness. Let the wine run through the sand of a river in the country where you are staying. The sand takes away all pain from the wine and gives it the strength to make you forget your homeland. If it should come upon any of us, we will use this remedy. But none of us has had to use it yet."

The man looked round at his companions. "None," nodded the others. A sudden emotion came over Adalbert and he took hold of the leader's hand. "It was only because of you that I wanted some of the wealth I could command. To reward you. And I don't even know when Kuperus will release you. He has reserved the right to tell you when we may release you. Who knows how much longer ..."

"We'll stay as long as you need us."

Adalbert stood and looked at them all in turn, and then he went out, because he knew these men were very careful not to show deep feelings. Outside, in the courtyard, the day's work had already begun. Enzberger came out of the grinding room, from which the clattering and pounding of the wheels could be heard, and walked across the yard towards the stables, where the bright voice of the miller's wife was in charge of the maids. "Morning," he called to Adalbert. "Today we've got a solar eclipse ... we'll have to see that something is done by the time the fifth comes," he laughed.

"And Mr Kuperus is coming today too."

"Yes, he's coming. And what work do you have for me today?"

"Today? In the garden. Ask the Regin', she already knows." And he stepped into the stable, bending down and shouting a joke to his wife. One of the farmhands pulled back the heavy bar from the gate and opened the wings. A cart loaded with sacks of grain drove into the yard, and Adalbert saw the Romanian keeping watch climb down from his woodpile and be replaced by one of the others, who

stood near the entrance gate. Adalbert slowly turned towards the garden where Regina's windows were. Was she already awake? He thought about it for a while, then smiled and grabbed the window sill with both hands to pull himself up. But then two hands came round his eyes and Regina called out behind him in a disguised voice:

"Stop!"

Adalbert turned round, got loose and kissed Regina on the lips. "Up already?"

"Of course, I'm already up! And if I hadn't been up? Are you allowed to look into my room like that? What kind of behaviour is that?"

"But, go ... how long should I ..."

"Quiet," and she put her hand over his mouth, "Kuperus wants it this way ..."

"Kuperus ...!"

"Yes, and we owe him so much that we must be obedient. Hasn't everything he advised been for our own good?"

"Certainly."

"So don't grumble. Here's a shovel and come ..." and as if to encourage him to work, she gave him a quick, fresh kiss. "I love you so much."

There was enough spring work in the garden. In one corner, old Johanna was already busy with some kind of manual labour, and Regina now instructed Adalbert on what Enzberger had ordered for today. The miller had been reluctant for long enough to let his guests take part in the work in the house and yard. He had objected that it was not appropriate to pay for accommodation and a little bit of life in this way. But Eleagabal Kuperus supported Adalbert and Regina's wish. He pointed out that the two had experienced such strange things and suffered such heavy losses that physical labour could bring them recovery. And after Kuperus had spoken, Enzberger submitted as he always did when the old man expressed a wish. And then the miller took pleasure in seeing how Adalbert and Regina worked in the

The people of the city, who had worked so hard to overcome their gloom, did not forget their dead, but became calmer and more cheerful.

Now Regina led Adalbert to a bed that was to be cut up and planted with all kinds of kitchen plants. Adalbert worked for a while without saying a word, just in the blissful feeling of knowing Regina next to him, seeing her swift, powerful movements and hearing her healthy breathing. This made him eager and did not let him realise that she had interrupted her work. Only after a while did he realise that he was missing something, looked up and saw her leaning on her spade, looking ahead of her.

Slowly he straightened up: "What's wrong? What are you thinking about?"

"Something has crossed my mind. You have another trial against Bezug tomorrow!"

"Thank heavens: final negotiation! And it's giving me a headache."

"Yes - how will it end?"

"Do you still have doubts? Everything is fine! Very well! It is as good as certain that his claim to me will be rejected. He can do nothing to the living Adalbert Semilasso. And what happens to me after death ..."

"Don't talk like that!" Regina dropped the spade and clung to his arm with both hands. "How can you say something like that ..."

"Kuperus has made you fearful. And he wanted nothing more than for us to be careful. By the way, we have our guards," Adalbert added with a smile and pointed to the garden fence, where one of the Romanians stood watching the garden without bothering the two of them with his gaze.

"Yes ... they're good blokes. Loyal as dogs."

"But actually superfluous." Adalbert said nothing about the fact that one evening, when he had returned home from the field accompanied by two bodyguards, they had tracked down a man in the bushes at the edge of a hollow path who, when they saw him, immediately ran off. The fact that one of the Romanians had found a tree at the edge of a wooded clump which

The first tree was sawn through and connected to another tree in such a way that if the second tree had been brought down, it would inevitably have fallen with it. And this happened just on the morning of the day on which Adalbert should have been felling trees at the edge of this forest block. And the tree that should have taken down the second one was marked with a white cross by Enzberger as a sign of its destiny. Finally, that one night the guard at the courtyard wall had smashed the fingers of a fellow who tried to pull himself up the wall from the outside with a heavy log of wood. And that often enough, as just this morning, suspicious riff-raff were seen prowling around the mill.

Regina knew nothing of all these things, but nevertheless she now said in her loving concern: "No, no ... don't say that ... they are not superfluous ..."

"But they may soon become redundant. Very superfluous, in fact. And disruptive.

When Kuperus finally lifts his ban ..."

"Work ... work ... don't talk such nonsense," Regina said and picked up her spade again, bending down to hide her blush. And now they resumed their work without a word, until Enzberger called over the fence that Kuperus had come. They found him in the yard with the miller's wife, who looked up at him with an expression of happiness and gratitude, as she always did when she spoke to him, smoothing her apron incessantly. It was always a festive day at the mill when Kuperus came, and Enzberger and his wife made every effort to ensure their guest's well-being. A cosy fire was burning in the large living room on the ground floor, where the cold of winter had not yet completely left the thick walls. The logs crackled in the green tiled stove and the black tomcat had made himself comfortable on the stove bench. A small breakfast was laid out on fresh white linen on the large table in the centre of the living room. Butter, cheese and smoked meat smoked in the fireplace, the black crust of which was a dark meaty red colour.

"Children, you have a cosy place here!" said Kuperus, looking around the room.

"We can't thank you enough for bringing us here," said Adalbert, placing his hand on Eleagabal's shoulder.

"Come on, thank Enzberger and his wife for taking you in." Eleagabal placed a carefully wrapped long parcel in a corner.

"We don't have any children. The young people have brought life into the house," said the miller's wife, quickly rearranging the bowls and plates on the table.

"We like them. You have to like them," and Enzberger looked Regina and then Adalbert in the eye. "Only you should come more often, Mr Kuperus," he added.

"I've had a lot to do in the last few days."

"Where? If you don't mind me asking."

Eleagabal Kuperus pointed his finger upwards and let his eyes follow. Now, in an attempt to smile, Adalbert realised that there was something sombre about his friend's seriousness. It seemed as if some of the confidence had been taken from him, and Adalbert wondered with some trepidation what this was due to. Was it not perhaps because of the trial that was to be decided tomorrow? Was the outcome uncertain after all? Adalbert decided to ask Kuperus about it later.

Enzberger looked up at the ceiling and asked in amazement: "Up there? In heaven?"

"In heaven."

"Aha ... astronomy! Because of the solar eclipse today? When does it start?" Kuperus answered with a glance at the wall clock:

"In a quarter of an hour. Five minutes past eleven."

They sat around the table, busy with breakfast. The trial became the topic of conversation, in which everyone, with the exception of the silent Johanna, took part.

"I don't begrudge the reference that it flushes," said Enzberger, when Kuperus had emphatically assured him that there was no question of any other outcome.

could be. "I don't begrudge him it, even if I wouldn't like Adalbert so much."

"Such a dangerous chap." The miller's wife pushed a plate of fresh butter towards Kuperus.

And people talked about how strange it was that Bezug, who had first made such efforts to buy land, now renounced further acquisitions, and even tried to sell fields and forests again. But the former owners had moved to the city, just as Enzberger had foreseen, and of the tougher farmers who had resisted longer, few were capitalised enough to acquire the fields that had now become free again. Enzberger did not miss the opportunity to say that Bezug must have been pursuing a very special but now abandoned plan, and old Johanna nodded her approval.

Shortly before eleven o'clock, Eleagabal Kuperus got up, took his parcel from the corner and, followed by the others, went into the garden. There he unwrapped a telescope from its wrapping and screwed it to the tripod he had also brought with him, which had been left outside in the courtyard. He gave those who were curious a brief explanation of the corona and the prominences and asked them to use the telescope. Then he asked the miller's wife for a white cloth. Before the woman had returned with the linen cloth, which she dedicated to Eleagabal's purposes, the eclipse had already begun. A black shadow was eating into the disc of the sun, which had stood clear and brilliant in the sky until then, untouched by the dark event that was already preparing itself somewhere within the lawfulness of the worlds; an insignificant loss of the abundant fullness, a barely noticeable section of the profile, a kind of rot, the touch of which could hardly harm the mighty body. All those present surrounded Kuperus, who answered all the questions about the apparition in the sky in a calm voice. The old man never seemed greater to Adalbert than when he spoke calmly and enthusiastically at the same time about things that are close to infinity, about the immeasurable expanses of the sky or the highly intricate affairs of men.

Then his words emerged from the abyss, illuminated red by an inner glow, still fiery, fluid and, as it were, vivid, meaningful in themselves and at the same time through their context. They were clear and mysterious at the same time, naturally in the midst of extremely strange relationships. Even ordinary people could not escape the power that emanated from Kuperus at such moments, and Enzberger and the miller's wife looked at him, completely lost, as if his words and not the events in the sky were the most important thing.

At last, Kuperus pointed these processes out to them again, and they watched the progress of the darkness with the dark glasses the old man had equipped them with. They also took it in turns to look through the telescope and, in whispering voices, drew each other's attention to details. The rot had already penetrated deep into the shining ball, and the impression of this gradual devouring of the sun lay like a spell over the earth. Adalbert understood how what Eleagabal had told them could happen: that primitive peoples, struck by sudden terror at this phenomenon, lost all consciousness.

In the meantime, Kuperus had made his preparations away from the others. The sheet that the miller's wife had brought him was almost as large as the irregularly shaped sandy area in the centre of the garden. With a few stakes, which he rammed into the ground, and some ropes, Kuperus had stretched the cloth tightly so that it formed a perfectly smooth surface. All that was left of the sun was a narrow crescent, a remnant of its power overwhelmed by darkness, and the strange restlessness that usually accompanies an eclipse set in. Outside in the courtyard, work was at a standstill, the servants and maidservants had gathered together and were staring upwards. The Romanians stood apart from them in a group, except for one, who had not left his post at the fence and was keeping a watchful eye over the garden. It had become strangely quiet, even the whispering had stopped, and the sound of the millstream and the rattling and stamping of the wheels was almost embarrassing in this silence. A sound that no one else in

The sound of the noise they heard in this house penetrated everyone's consciousness with clarity, filled them completely and confused them. The pigeons on the roof, which had fluttered about anxiously at first, had moved closer together and were sitting in a long row. From the kennel sometimes came a short, as if frightened, rattling sound.

In the moment immediately preceding the total eclipse, Adalbert suddenly saw a shadow like a grey ghost move slowly through the garden and glide away over Eleagabal's stretched cloth. And Kuperus, kneeling on the ground in front of the cloth, followed the shadow's path with rapid strokes of a large charcoal. A second shadow followed the first, moved across the cloth and was captured by Kuperus.

"What are you doing?" Adalbert asked the old man. But Kuperus was so absorbed in his work that he gave no answer. Without looking up, he fixed his gaze on the paths of the shadows, which were now following each other at an ever faster pace. Dark patches appeared, remained between the shadow lines for a while and then slowly travelled across the cloth. And now it was all over in one fell swoop. Kuperus straightened up and looked at the sun. The total eclipse had occurred and it was almost completely dark. Adalbert felt Regina's hand searching for his and her fingers gripping his tightly. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. Then he looked over at Kuperus, who was kneeling on the floor in a scattered light reflected from the white cloth, as if praying.

And now the darkness gave way to a dull twilight again. Slowly, the objects became clearer. And again the strange play of shadows began. The stripes emerged from the gloom, travelled across the cloth, intersected with the lines that Kuperus had drawn earlier. Spots appeared, stood firm and slowly receded, and Kuperus followed their path. With the first ray of light, which gave colour to things and life to people's pale faces, the apparition disappeared. People dared to move and whisper again, the sound of the millstream and the grinder could not be heard.

The sun's rays became more tormenting and lost their determination, the pigeons on the roof loosened their tight line, and slowly the sun emerged from the realm of death, victorious and, it seemed, even more radiant, as if it had fought a difficult battle.

As if the earth had been created anew or rescued from a grave danger, it went through the people. They breathed a sigh of relief and trembled, and it was as if the ground beneath them was also stretching and moving. Kuperus was still kneeling in front of his cloth and looking at the lines he had drawn.

"What are you doing?" Adalbert repeated his question. A strange drawing covered the cloth; despite all the confusion, all the puzzling confusion, there seemed to be a secret meaning to it. A kind of hieroglyphic writing of the universe seemed to be spread out before a magician who, bent over it, was endeavouring with all his might to wrest the secret of its meaning from it. What message might the old man have received through these signs? What had he learnt from them about what was happening in space? And what connections existed between them and the events down here? It seemed to Adalbert that such connections must exist, for he was astonished to see that Kuperus was unusually emotional and agitated.

"What are you doing?" he asked even more urgently for the third time.

Kuperus looked up. He was pale, and his eyes were deep in the Caves, the grey patriarchal beard trembled. "I made a sample."

"A sample? On what?"

"An astronomical problem, nothing more." Kuperus stood up and began to release the cloth from its tension.

Enzberger approached him triumphantly: "I've seen the protuberants," he said. When Eleagabal tried to smile, his canines only came out tentatively. Enzberger, who was constantly scrutinising the old man's face to see if he was satisfied, noticed that something was bothering him.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" he asked anxiously. But Eleagabal gave him a hint that forbade any further questions. Then he turned to his instrument, pushed the tube together, packed it up carefully and also folded up the tripod of the apparatus. The miller's wife, who had run off before the end of the eclipse after one last look at the sun, now called over from the courtyard for them to come and eat. Although Kuperus affirmed that he had no appetite at all, he finally had to comply with his landlords' requests so as not to upset them. Enzberger was determined to find out the reason for Eleagabal's displeasure. He had enough peasant tenacity and cunning to go along with his bourgeoisie and straightforwardness to further his plans. After the meal, during which all the miller's arts were demonstrated, he succeeded in removing the others under all sorts of pretences, so that he was left alone with Eleagabal Kuperus.

Kathi was still busy clearing the table, and she did it with some noise and clatter, so that Enzberger had to keep quiet. He was sitting on the stove bench, smoking his short pipe, and while he seemed to be watching Kathi's work, he did not take his eyes off Kuperus. Kuperus, however, seemed to have forgotten that he was not alone: he sat on his chair near the window, slumped down so that he seemed much smaller than usual, and looked out into the garden, where Regina and Adalbert were engaged in eager conversation with the miller's wife.

Finally Kathi had finished, swung the folded tablecloth over her shoulder, grabbed the last pile of plates and walked out, slamming the door behind her with her foot. The blow seemed to awaken Kuperus, who turned round and looked at Enzberger. A smile came into his eyes as Enzberger began to speak, a cautious man at first, about something other than what was close to his heart. The miller spoke at length about the solar eclipse, and his newly acquired knowledge had undergone a droll transformation. Kuperus listened to him attentively, and when

When the miller thought he had prepared the old man sufficiently, he moved on to the important question. He had noticed that something was wrong, that Kuperus was worried about something. And he asked him to let him in on it, for perhaps he could be of use.

Then Kuperus stood up and approached Enzberger. The miller also rose involuntarily, and when he saw the deep seriousness in the old man's eyes, he was almost shocked that he had dared to ask the question. All at once he realised that he would have been better off keeping quiet than prying into Eleagabal's secret.

It looked as if something heavy and oppressive was about to be passed on to Enzberger. But just as he was about to say the first word, Eleagabal Kuperus paused. "No," he said, shaking his head, "not even to you. You are a man, you are brave ... keep your strength. Don't ask."

The terror

Table of contents

The diary of Professor Zugmeyer, which was published together with other documents on the history of the last great equilibrium shake-up of mankind, contains the following notes. Zugmeyer had been employed by Bezug as the director of his large observatory, the costly building on the barren heights of the Schlangenberg, whose gigantic refractor surpassed that of the Lick Observatory by a considerable margin. He was in charge of a whole staff of scholars and labourers and received the income of a prime minister. But he had to undertake to devote his scientific work exclusively to the service of the reference and to submit the results of his research to him first and only publish them once he had received his permission to do so. In addition to the book in which Zugmeyer entered the astronomical and mathematical data, he kept a second one, to which he confided his remaining wishes, thoughts and feelings after he had completely emptied himself in the first one. The following notes can be found in this book:

5 March. The shadows cast by the solar eclipse have confirmed my calculations. It is so. Or it seems to be. For how can I say with complete certainty that this or that will happen if I do not yet have the orbital elements. These are preliminary assumptions ... of course ... I'm so excited that I can't even rely on myself. And I can't call anyone in to check up on me. Not until I've spoken to a reference. I want to wait a few more days before I start again.

8 March. A second discovery. I don't know which of the two is bigger and more important. The discovery for the sake of which I embarked on the series of observations that brought me the terrible, provisional

result. They telegraph us through space, they give us signs, the Martians ...

10. March. That was the way I came to this discovery. I embarked on it before I was even promoted to court astronomer. The Paris Academy offered a prize of one hundred thousand francs. A nice little fortune that would have been very welcome to me at the time. The prize was to be awarded to the first person to establish a connection between humans and the inhabitants of another planet. But the gentlemen were careful to exclude Mars. This proves that they are of the opinion that such a connection with Mars no longer presents any particular difficulties and that it must sooner or later become a reality. It is true that the geography of Mars has made extraordinary progress in the last twenty-six years; we know its surface almost as well as that of our own Earth. And even if we have abandoned the misconception that its periodic channel changes are a kind of telegraphy for us, we could still expect everything from the near future. I have taken Mars as my special subject. Because our way into space goes via Mars. It can be assumed that as soon as we are able to communicate with the Martians, we will also learn more about other planets from them. Who knows whether they have not already been sending and receiving messages in space for a long time, and only our hard-hearted Earth has not yet entered the circle of their correspondents. So if I wanted to win the prize, I would first have to set about trying to communicate with Mars. Marconi showed me the way. His wireless telegraphy station on the island of Cape Cleau has been receiving signals for several months for which there is no explanation. These signals recur regularly, at the same intervals, in the same strength and in the same form. But the signals do not belong to any known language. They are of mysterious origin and people have tried in vain to decipher them. I had a radio-telegraphic station built next to the observatory especially for this purpose,

to study these signals. And I am convinced that the signs come from Mars. Who can say for how many centuries the Martians have known and utilised an invention that is a recent event in our country. Who can say whether they have not been continuing these attempts to make contact with us for centuries with untiring perseverance. How stupid and backward they must t h i n k us, since we have not yet sent them a reply.

12 March. I am becoming more and more certain that the signals from my station originate from Mars. We are on the verge of solving old questions, the fantasy of countless conjectures is about to turn into clear reality. And just now, when the existence of our Earth is in question. Right now, when a great body seems to be storming towards us with hostile force.

13 March. I have forced myself to rest. And unfortunately, what I fear seems to be confirmed. Are we to perish without having fulfilled our destiny?

16 March. My signal receiver works regularly between twelve and one o'clock in the morning. Always the same ... always the same. At the end of the series of signals, the same signal always comes several times. It's like a series of exclamation marks one after the other. As if they were urgently drawing our attention to something.

18 March. Are they perhaps giving us a warning? Have they, who seem to be ahead of us in all things, perhaps long since realised the danger that threatens us? It is exasperating to receive these calls from a strange world and not understand what they mean

...

On 20. March, Thomas Bezug received a private letter from Professor Zugmeyer with the official letter from his observatory, asking him to report to the observatory around midnight. The letter arrived at a trembling house. For a few days, Bezug had been brooding ominously over abysses. The trial had been decided against him. A self-evident decision that had to be made if one did not want to slap the law and all sense of justice in the face. But

The fact that this could happen, that people did not dare to violate justice and the law to please him, proved to him that he was still not the master of the earth. Now he was less so than ever.

The day after the trial, he received a letter of apology from the regional court judge who had presided over the case. It was written in the most imploring terms, referred to the rigid paragraphs of the law books and tried to shift the blame for the outcome onto the lawyer's clumsiness. It spoke of the embarrassing duty that could not be avoided and appealed for mercy. After Bezug had read over the letter, he wrote the sender's name on a green slip of paper and sent it to the secret office of his credit agency. After half an hour, he had news of how to deal with the regional court judge. He had debts, the good man, quite large debts, and then he was supposed to be devoted to perverse passions, but that was not proven. Bezug added up the debt items and wrote next to them: "Take over", and next to the suggestion that the man's inclinations were moving in dangerous directions, he added the order: "Observe and report within eight days."

But no sooner had he let his order go than he was annoyed that he had paid so much attention to such a nothing, a little provincial court judge who had sat on his dignified chair as if on a red-hot gridiron. And if he had not made it a principle never to revoke an order, he would have done so this time. What could he prove to himself? They were pathetic gimmicks of his power, and he was almost ashamed of them when he considered what he was aiming for. But that was the end of it, Hecht was dead, and Bezug racked his brain for a thought, for the brilliant inspiration that could have taken the place of the old plan. All his ideas were lame and brittle. They had no vigour and no grandeur. Next to Hecht's frantic and terrible plan they looked like plucked geese next to an eagle. He could have whipped mankind, he could have chastised them cruelly, he could have made them suffer in agony and horror.

They wanted to see him squirm, to knead and strangle this reluctant, gigantic mass until they ran out of breath with fear. There they lay in the foreground at his feet and flattered him, letting his mercy shine over them as sunshine and perceiving his oppressions as misfortune. But what was all this compared to the multitudes who stood apart, who did not yet know his name, who knew nothing of his existence. And they were all to feel his power, he wanted to stamp his name on them like a brand.

Over in America, they had their trusts with which they controlled the money market and the economic situation. The good Smith from Philadelphia was one of the most powerful men. But what a miserable power it was, dedicated to no other success than earning money and amassing billions. It was dangerous to the wealthy, it was capable of destroying the competition, bribing all officials, threatening the president. A miserable power. For those who possessed nothing were free from it, the hungry rose triumphantly above it and could mock it.

The brute force of billions was useless without the brilliant idea that forced everyone down ... everyone!

His housemates did not show themselves to him unless they were called. Hainx had bad days. Elisabeth was out of town, staying at the villa, from where she could see the roof of Enzberger's mill between the trees.

Bezug had received the professor's letter in the morning, read it and put it on his desk. Then he forgot about it and only remembered Zugmeyer's request in the evening, when the letter came to him again. He weighed it up for a moment, put it on the table and rang for Hainx.

"Professor Zugmeyer has written to me to visit him tonight. Go out and ask what the man wants from me!" But as if he couldn't rest, he reached for the letter again. It said: "... on an urgent and extremely important matter ..." - "Wait a minute," continued Bezug, "I'm going to talk to

Drive them. A car should be ready at half past eleven. Have the road guarded."

Hainx bowed and left. A recent discovery gave his hatred of the tyrant no small satisfaction. It seemed as if Bezug had begun to fear him in the last few weeks. He had set up a strict watch, was surrounded by a select band of his oath-keepers, as if he had to ward off some attack, as if he suspected something threatening about himself. His security and confidence seemed shaken, and it often seemed to Hainx that all outbursts of anger were just mine blasts designed to mask a secret weakness. -

Half an hour before midnight, one of the two hammersmiths on the desk lifted the hammer and rang it twice against the bell. The sign that the carriage was waiting downstairs rolled clearly through the silence of the room and awoke a sound in the wall clock, a related humming and quiet rattling in the gears. The time vulture above the clock twitched its wings as if it wanted to soar. Bezug, who had slumped wearily in the large armchair with the snake heads, got up, looked round the room as if searching for someone, and then rose ponderously. But when he came into the anteroom, he was already walking with vigour and strength again and had the servant hand him his coat and hat.

Taut and resilient, he climbed into the car in which Hainx was waiting for him. But no sooner had he adjusted himself than he was overcome with displeasure again. He wondered what he was doing out at the observatory. What could Zugmeyer have to tell him that was big and important? Some astronomical discovery that would excite the scholar and perhaps the other astronomers too ... but which was otherwise of little importance. Bezug was on his way to be bored or annoyed for half an hour. What could he expect from Zugmeyer? What did he expect at all? He admitted that he was waiting for some news ... and he found that this

This expectation was an empty feeling - all together just symptoms of his weakness, which he was forced to admit to himself.

It was a beautiful, balmy early spring night, and although the moon was not visible, a strange brightness made the dark masses of farmsteads and groups of trees recognisable in their massive black. The light trickled down in thin threads from the multitude of constellations that today gave the poor sky of the north an almost southern glow. With the broad, glaring light of the lanterns, the wagon seemed to search its way, and the heaps of gravel and the tree trunks were quickly pulled through. The wagon tracks of the road became broad, running stripes, endless belts set in motion by a whirling flywheel somewhere far back in the darkness.

As they passed the large quarry, two men stepped into the light and took off their hats. It was like a fleeting vision. But Bezug nodded contentedly, regaining a little confidence. Then the car raced past the elongated redoubt, which had been thrown up by the Swedes during the Thirty Years' War, and at its end turned onto the side road that led up the hill to the observatory.

Zugmeyer was waiting for his master at the entrance gate to the courtyard, which was enclosed by a wall like a fortress. While the chauffeur carefully steered the car into the open shed, the professor led his guests up the stairs and let them step onto the gallery under the enormous dome of the observatory. The room was only partially illuminated; near the seat in front of the lens of the large refractor, which was pointed hulkingly towards the sky, the metal parts of the fine and complicated apparatus used to adjust the tube gleamed. To the uninitiated, the jumble of screws, gears, cogs, rods and pendulums in front of the seat was nothing but a confusing chaos, a jumble of hieroglyphics whose meaning could not be deciphered. The clockwork, which adjusted the whole apparatus to the rotation of the heavens, ticked loudly in the silence.

"Now tell me," Bezug began impatiently, "why you actually called me out here in the middle of the night?"

The professor stood in front of him, on the balustrade of the gallery, dark against the light in the centre of the room and still silent. He didn't know what to begin.

"Well ... then!" urged Bezug.

"It's ... it's ... a matter of such importance ... that I wish it could remain between the two of us alone ..."

"Hainx is my right-hand man ... speak quietly in front of him."

"Good, then I'll ask you to follow me." - Zugmeyer stepped out from the gallery onto a kind of command bridge that was built in front of the room. It ended on a small platform that was enclosed on three sides by white cloths stretched tightly over frames. Below, the dark room of the observatory lay like a dead crater. When the professor had extinguished the last lights with a turn of the small lever on the platform's barrier, the starlight gained its power ... The eyes of the audience turned up to the dome. A swaying thin pole, from which wires ran down, stretched upwards on the outside, next to the observatory.

"I suppose that's the spark telegraph?" asked Bezug.

"Yes - I asked you to come here to see how he works. I have arranged for the dispatches received to be immediately converted into light signals. This allows even sharper and more precise observation. You will see the signs appear on these screens in front of you."

"When?"

"As soon as it strikes twelve o'clock."

And as if on cue, twelve bright, ringing beats followed each other in quick succession, then a small puff in the clockwork, and now the steady swing of the pendulum again.

At that moment, a broad, unevenly illuminated beam of light appeared on the screen in front of him. It flashed a few times and disappeared. Then it came back, narrowed its circumference at

The light intensity was simultaneously increased until it shone with an even, greenish glow.

"That's the alarm signal!" said the professor. "Watch out, now comes the actual despatch."

After a few seconds, the spot disappeared again and was followed by a number of signs in a sequence interrupted by sections. They consisted of longer and shorter flashes, of small, round strips of light, triangles and squares of square and elongated shape, which came together in groups, then were separated again by longer intervals and seemed to develop from the pauses in the most varied connections. This took place at a slow pace, as if the message should only be comprehensible, as if its sender was striving for nothing so much as clarity, like a teacher who puts letter after letter into words in front of his pupils.

"Very interesting!" said Bezug after a while, "and what are they telegraphing to you?"

"I don't know."

"What ... you don't know? What does that mean? Didn't you try to read the despatch?"

"I don't understand the language it's written in."

"And you can't help yourself? You know that you have a whole academy of linguists at your disposal, if you'll only let me know."

"I believe that even in an entire academy there will be no one who can read this despatch."

"Yes ... listen ... why not?"

"Because this despatch is written in a language that no scholar understands. Because it is not one of the languages in use on earth."

Bezug became impatient. "Zugmeyer, you may be a good astronomer. But you don't seem to know much about these things."

"I am convinced, Baron, that these dispatches come from a region where no one has ever had the privilege of studying languages. They come from Mars."

"Are you serious, from Mars!"

Zugmeyer's voice was heavy and dark: "I am completely serious ..."

"But hell ... it's strange, what might they have to tell us? Can't they wait to get in touch with Thomas Bezug?" And Bezug turned to Hainx, whom he saw next to him in the reflection of the greenish light. "Mars will come later, when Earth is mine."

Zugmeyer continued slowly: "I don't know what this dispatch contains. I don't know with complete certainty. But I can surmise its meaning, with some probability."

"Well ... and?"

Zugmeyer turned the lever back. And the narrow ring of lights around the centre of gravity of the room lit up again, releasing the brass parts of the apparatus from the darkness and bringing them back to life, while the lights on the screen went out.

"The Martian dispatches coincide in the strangest way with another discovery I have made recently. And from this coincidence I believe I can guess the meaning of the messages."

"And this is...?"

"A warning ... I now ask you to come with me to my study." He led his guests across the narrow bridge, then along the gallery and opened an iron-bound door in the wall of the observatory. Here a winding staircase led down to the astronomer's study. It was a simple room, panelled with wood up to half the height of the wall, and yet within this austere practicality it was imbued with a kind of poetic magic that even Bezug was unable to escape. As little as he otherwise appreciated the efforts of the scholars in his service,

He was more in awe of the astronomer's work than he was willing to admit to himself. He, whose whole aims lay on this ball, saw with astonishment and a kind of envy how the astronomers succeeded in seizing other worlds, drawing them down into the silence of their study rooms, capturing them in mathematical formulae and determining their course. There were the secrets of the heavens, the movements of the most distant stars, laid out in long rows of numbers, in tables; there was an incomprehensible and almost uncanny wisdom piled up in inconspicuous books and shelves.

While Bezug looked around the room, Zugmeyer took a seat in front of his desk and opened one of the small drawers on the left-hand side. He took out a pack of photographic negatives and placed them in front of him.

"Well, Professor, and your other discovery?" asked Bezug at last, when Zugmeyer still refused to speak.

The astronomer picked up the top plate and held it up to the light hanging above his desk. "Take a look at this negative!"

Bezug looked through it. He saw nothing but a small black line in the centre of the otherwise unexposed plate.

"Well, and...?" he asked.

"What you see here is a photograph of a new planet that I have discovered." Bezug handed the disc to Hainx: "This is probably very surprising for astronomers ..."

"Yes - but it's not a very pleasant surprise. You will understand me immediately if you will listen to me for a quarter of an hour. Apart from the large planets known to the whole world, there are also a lot of small planets. They have actually always been suspected ever since the law of planetary distances from the sun was discovered. This law firmly demanded a world body in the gap between Mars and Jupiter. However, no entire world body has been found in this gap, but the debris of one - precisely those small planets, the first of which was found in the

New Year's Eve of the nineteenth century. A number of debris ... smaller and larger, and they became more and more, the more diligently one focussed one's observations on their discovery. So far the law had been brilliantly proved. But then came the discovery of the astronomer Witt. He again found a new small planet, which he called Eros. But this planet did not move in the planetary zone that the law had instructed him to find, in the gap between Mars and Jupiter, but - against all order and harmony - between the Earth and Mars."

"How is that possible?" asked Bezug excitedly.

"People have tried to explain it with extraordinary influences that have torn the new planet out of its sphere. Its incredibly eccentric orbit seems to indicate this. In its solar orbit it comes within three million miles of us, while Venus is still five million miles away. Far from the sun, however, its orbit still extends beyond that of Mars. Once Witt had calculated the orbit of Eros, there was some head-shaking. Because such a strange celestial body is a warning for us, it indicates danger."

"A danger?"

"If such irregularities can take place, if unknown influences can pull planets out of their spheres

... is it then impossible that one of them will come so close to us that the attraction of the earth will prevail over its mass and that it will crash down on us?" The professor had risen and stood in front of Bezug, pale and determined to say everything now. "We cannot logically exclude this possibility, you see. We have evidence that something similar has already happened. Just look at our moon. The immense ring mountains, the walled plains ... If you throw a stone into a viscous slurry, a very similar formation is created. These ring mountains cannot be volcanic phenomena. They demand an explanation that such errant celestial bodies once crashed into the viscous fiery slurry of the moon. And

then what is called the Earth's pole height fluctuations. Fluctuations of around twenty metres. But they are enough to explain the Earth's strange climate fluctuations. There were once cherry trees and laurel bushes on Spitsbergen, the South Pole continent was not always buried under ice ... perhaps our Earth was also once hit by such a shock ..."

Zugmeyer paused. His forehead was wet and he looked at Bezug fixedly, his glasses sparkling. Then he took the glass plate from Hainx's hand and held it up. "I have n a m e d my new planet Terror ... Terror ... Now I am convinced that it could not have been discovered earlier in its orbit, simply because it was not there before. It has only recently been torn out of its zone, and it is coming towards our Earth, gentlemen, unless my calculations are wrong ... or unless some other influence pulls it back ... and it must collide with us. That's what the Mars people are telephoning us, they've discovered it and they're warning us ..."

"And what happens ...?" asked Bezug breathlessly.

"The sinking ... it is only one tenth the size of our moon. But it's enough."

"What is to be done? What is to be done?" Bezug looked at Hainx. But he had backed up to the enormous wall of books that covered one wall and was leaning back against it, breathing heavily.

"There is nothing to do. We must remain silent."

"Silence?"

"Think of the horror that would come over the world."

"It's true! It is true! A terrible horror must come over them. Must come upon them ... They will not know what to do in their fear ... and when must this collision take place, Professor?" The reference eyes burned.

"According to my calculations, in July."

"In July! Very good. They can twitch and writhe for more than three months ... in mortal fear ..."

Zugmeyer reached behind him and gripped the armrests of his chair. "I told you about this, Baron, because I thought it was my duty not to conceal from you a discovery I made at your observatory. You don't want to ...?"

"I don't want you to give me advice," said Bezug, so threateningly that Zugmeyer wanted to get out of his neighbourhood. That was when all the brutality that ultimately decided the victories in his favour returned.

"It was your duty, of course. I thank you. What I intend to do with your discovery is my business, you understand me. I will use it or not use it as I please, and as it suits my plans ... Come, Hainx!" And with a nod of his head, he left the study, followed by Hainx, who forced his legs to work with difficulty.

In the courtyard, Bezug stopped and looked up at the bright night sky. There were these distant worlds, from the background of which destruction was bursting forth somewhere; the shattering projectile was already in motion, at first only detectable by the calculations of the scholar, but soon the eyes of all mankind would turn to the sky in mortal fear, the terrible message would penetrate to the furthest corners of the earth ...

"I will experience the spectacle of seeing all of humanity crawling like a pack of whimpering dogs," muttered Bezug.

The car drove up with a clatter. The two night watchmen pulled the gate wide open and stood at attention as Bezug drove past them. As they turned onto the road from the observatory, he turned round. On its hill, the white building with its dark dome resembled a giant fairy-tale mushroom that had been pulled out of the ground by a magic word of the night. Then he looked up at the constellations, and when his gaze sank back down to the dome, it seemed small and compressed, huddled and shuddering under the vaulted weight of the firmament. Next to it, the mast of the telegraph station stood out thin and pointed into the night.

Bezug felt Hainx, who was sitting next to him, tremble.

"Are you cold, Hainx?" asked Bezug.

"Yes!"

But Bezug smiled. The fever had already taken hold of a victim. He wielded a scourge. He went back to his fantasies: "So it is good ... so it must come. I have not been able to subdue her to my power, listen, Hainx! I could not subjugate them. It should not come to that ... but I will be compensated for it: I will experience a spectacle such as has never been seen before. Science ... l i s t e n , Hainx ... if science says so! If it were only a belief, a superstition: but science! There is no escape into unbelief above reasonableness. Reason itself will drive them with lashes ... into madness. Reason will tell them: it's over, it's over, it's over ... no escape. For we have no point outside the earth to which we can flee. No Noah's Ark floating in space until we can land somewhere again. They must all perish, the whole crowd ... the whole brood. They will run and pray and flee and kill themselves in the madness. And order will go to pieces ... listen, Hainx! ... and the "law" and custom and everything, everything, everything" - and Bezug struck the edge of the wagon with his clenched right hand with every word - "they will become mad and raving mad, listen, Hainx! Mad and raving, a monstrous cage from which no one can escape ... in which they must all perish together. I'll perish too ... and you, Hainx ... all of us, everyone! But it doesn't matter if I perish too. In the very end I will still enjoy this marvellous spectacle ... the triumph of seeing them all humiliated and destroyed ... even if not by my power - but I will still rule over them in the end ... in their fear of death ..."

A wheezing cough forced him to stop. The words would not be pushed back, they welled up, but the air only came whistling out of his lungs, he reared up and sank back. Then he sat hunched over, his back hunched and his shoulders slumped.

His head was stretched forward as if he was carrying a burden on his neck. His eyes were stubborn and bloodshot.

Hainx looked at his master in horror.

The dervishes he had visited in Egypt, in the last stage of their fanatical frenzy, had been similar to what he now referred to.

Only slowly did the tension ease and he returned to his senses. But he no longer spoke. He only smiled and occasionally looked at Hainx from the side with a mocking and scrutinising gaze. It was that old look of the inquisitor again, the executioner who drew his strength from the despair of his victim. And with all the strength of his will, Hainx pulled himself together so as not to tremble.

As they drove into the courtyard of the palace, Bezug threw back the covers. And getting out of the carriage, he said lightly: "Isn't this going to be delicious fun, Hainx?"

And Hainx replied firmly: "I'm looking forward to it, Baron."

Thomas stayed in his bedrooms the whole of the following morning. The valet had strict orders not to disturb him under any circumstances. Even a letter brought by a servant from the observatory, which Zugmeyer had described as particularly urgent and to be delivered immediately, could not reach its addressee. It was a last attempt by the scholar to reproach his master with the terrible consequences of revealing the secret and to warn him. Despite the danger of incurring his wrath, Zugmeyer felt it was his duty to approach him once more.

Then came the committee of the united artists' and writers' association "Minerva", who had been ordered to attend the audience this morning to present their memorandum. They were also denied entry and Richard could do nothing but put the delegates off until the afternoon.

This audience was about nothing less than the planned foundation of the artists' town that Bezug had promised. The association had been formed specifically for the purpose of carrying out the preparatory work.

and to come up with firm proposals. They had come to blows over this and had a whole series of bitter feuds to fight out. It was a particular pleasure for Bezug to receive the bulletins of these battles. Often they fought in whole battle lines against each other: here writers and here painters, or here painters and here architects, often the battle dissolved into a number of individual fights. Störner claimed that it was as uplifting a sight as the fury of the Homeric heroes. When one on either side stepped in front of the phalanges and then both fell upon each other to the delight of the others. It was like cockfighting. Rarely enough did one get away unplucked. And often enough it turned out that the feathers one of them had lost in such a fight were other people's feathers.

But when Bezug wanted to raise his spirits in a particularly festive way, he attended the meetings of the "Minerva". In the presence of the high protector, people were even less inclined than usual to put up with anything and attacked each other even more ferociously. One man would use his fists to drag the other off the platform on which he stood in public. And Bezug enjoyed it.

Now, after endless consultations, deliberations and jealous lists, they had finally come so far as to establish the basic outlines of the organisation.

In the afternoon, the gentlemen of the committee returned to the Bezugs Palais. They were led into the hall with the alabaster columns, which was now closed off from the park by a wall made of a single enormous mirrored disc.

People stood around in groups and waited impatiently for the landlord to appear.

Dibian, Harthausen and Schönbrecher walked up and down the mirror disc at a measured pace.

"Do you think he will accept everything as we suggest?" Harthausen asked after a pause following a lecture on his latest novel.

"Why shouldn't he?" Schönbrecher asked in reply. "He has given us all power of attorney."

Dibian laughed: "There you go: he's giving it away. That always and forever means: I get the last word."

Schönbrecher plucked at his tie and tried to catch his picture in the glass wall: "But art has its own laws. And artists also have their own laws. At least that's how it should be everywhere. And here, for the first time, is an opportunity to show how our performance is enhanced when we are free from the constraints of the beastly public - completely free, you understand me ..." He interrupted himself with a hostile glance at Doctor Störner, who had just joined them.

Doctor Störner was not actually a member of the Minerva committee. But he occasionally strolled along, out of curiosity, to see how the whole affair would develop. And since he was feared and his paper was needed for those reports that were supposed to make the public aware of the immense importance of the artists' republic, they didn't dare reject him.

"Tell me, honoured Sophocles," he began, "have you ever thought about love? How have you regulated love into your social organism?"

"Free love," Harthausen wanted to begin pontificating.

But Schönbrecher interrupted him angrily: "Can't you see that Doctor Störner is just teasing us? How can you regulate something like that! Free love, that's nonsense. Nonsense, like any slogan. Buzzwords are for the masses. But not for free spirits. It goes without saying that all prejudices should be abolished in the matter of love ..."

"Listen, Schönbrecher, my wife will be against that," said Dibian.

Schönbrecher shrugged his shoulders disdainfully and turned away. This ox painter also had a ponderousness that was unrivalled. The women?

"Women will always resist any genialisation of men. The higher we rise, the more pathetic they feel. The conquest of woman! A goal to be fervently desired! But it is difficult to realise in practice ..."

Störner was a nasty heathen who wasn't even in awe of Schönbrecher's ancient ideal of beauty. He always smiled at him whenever he spoke to him. And smiling, he said, tilting his head on his shoulder: "My dear Sophocles ...!"

"Don't always say Sophocles to me!" Schönbrecher snapped.

"So, my dear Aeschylus or Euripides, as you wish. I was actually planning to approach the problem from a different angle. Namely, what about money, which is part of love in general?"

Dibian laughed and nodded at Störner. But he continued seriously: "Does everyone have to dig into their own pockets? ... or does the famous joint fund come into it? ... or will the love be delivered to you in kind, so to speak?"

Schönbrecher planted himself in front of Störner, looked down at him from above with unearthly majesty and said: "We are a 'new community', you understand me. Our ethics must first be formed. According to our own laws, as I've already said."

"But you have a radical group among you. The socialist poets and artists will demand that things be done according to their principles. They will claim the fees you earn for the common good."

But then Harthausen came to mind. Such a prospect could make him beside himself. "Of course that's out of the question," he jeered.

Störner shook his head: "I'm afraid, gentlemen, the glue for your 'new community' is a watery glue."

"If it goes wrong," said Dibian, "I don't care. I can always attach my oxen. I don't do ancient dramas."

Bezug entered the hall at that moment and the humming immediately stopped. The noble donor was greeted with silent bows. With a few quick steps, Bezug reached the centre of the room and nodded his thanks to all sides.

"What's wrong with him?" Dibian whispered to Harthausen, "see what he looks like."

His seriousness was striking. His brow seemed furrowed with heavy worry, and there was an indeterminate line around his mouth, something like participation or fear. "I apologise, gentlemen, for not being able to see you this morning. You will excuse me when you hear ... So I have asked you to come with your proposals ..."

Harthausen, who had risen to become the speaker, took the pause that followed as an invitation to begin. So he bowed and pulled an envelope out of his pocket with some effort.

"We have taken the liberty, Baron, of recording here everything that we regard as the basis, so to speak, of our - your - foundation ... wish ... request! We could not expect anything petty or insignificant from a company that is to have your name written on its forehead. That is why we have always kept in mind that it would be in keeping with your magnanimity if we were to set the highest standards for everything, if we were to design it on the grandest scale. In this sense, we have -"

Then Bezug stretched out his hand towards the speaker so that he fell silent in shock. And now Bezug covered his eyes with his other hand and stood like that for a long time, until he realised from the whispering of the guests that they had fully grasped the impression of his gesture. "Yes, gentlemen," he said at last, "I thank you for your trouble. I thank you very much for having followed my intentions so perfectly. I should really have wished to see my plan carried out in the greatest style. No more ardent wish than that the history of art of all the future should have my

to teach names. But ... I have to tell you ... I have to tell you, nothing can come of this beautiful plan."

He fell silent again, as if overwhelmed by pain. The emissaries looked at each other, dismayed, stunned, they saw a seemingly solidly founded building totter and topple. "What are hopes, what are designs?" murmured Störner. "When Zeus wobbles on his throne ...!"

"But ... Baron ..." Harthausen began once again with uncertain commitment, "it is of course far from us to want to penetrate your ... motives. We can't do that. And we don't want to. We only hope that some misfortune in your family has not caused you to ... yes, we had built a stately home. Thousands of the best have turned their eyes to this new community, what a blessing for the future ..."

"Yes ... the future," Bezug interrupted him, "you see, the future! That's just it. We no longer have a future."

"No future? We would have ..."

"It's hard to comprehend, isn't it? But you can believe me, we don't, I don't. The whole of humanity is drifting towards the abyss of nothingness. You have upheld the idea of development, gentlemen, you have dreamed of the superhumans of the distant past. Our development has come to an end. A few more weeks, then ... You are men, gentlemen, you will know how to bear like men what I have to tell you. These are not petty concerns ... but why go about founding a city of artists if this whole ball on which we stand will be deserted in a short time, all life extinguished, all the glory and greatness of humanity gone ..."

A smile appeared on Harthausen's face. And he tried to look sympathetic: "Baron, you speak like a prophet. You want to proclaim the end of the world. And the prophets, we know that ... they have always wanted the purification of their race. They want us ... it's a joke."

But Bezugs's face did not change, the oppressive seriousness did not leave him: "I wanted to be able to laugh now and tell you: yes, gentlemen, I have put you to the test, I wanted to see how you take a message that is capable of shaking the bravest, of upsetting the calmest ... I am proud to say that I find nothing but heroes among the artists I have gathered around me. But you must now also familiarise yourselves with the thought: it is as I tell you. We and our old earth have been given a short deadline. Until July - then - the destruction will come."

Harthausen wiped his forehead a little less confidently than before. And Schönbrecher took the floor in his place, lowering his head so that the flawless parting line was visible right up to the vertebrae. His right hand played with the short watch chain hanging from his waistcoat pocket, on which several cameos were clambering.

"Well," he said, "Baron, we will order our house and finish our work. But let it not be said that we artists, for fear of ruin, have hastened anything that cannot be hastened."

"So," Störner added, turning to Schönbrecher, "... motto: die in beauty."

Reference looked from one to the other: "You still don't seem to believe me, gentlemen! I repeat, it is as I tell you. At my observatory, Professor Zugmeyer has discovered a small planet that has lost its orbit. And it's heading straight **f o r** our old Earth. It's going to make quite a racket ... I must legitimise myself before you, it seems ..."

The seriousness was now so compelling and powerful that no one dared to smile. There was a strange movement in the assembly, a swaying and trembling, and when all at once the flash of the electric light ended the twilight, they hardly dared to look at each other. Meanwhile, Bezug had a letter

and held it out to Dibian, who had been pushed into close proximity by his backers.

"Please," said Bezug, "read. You'll see that I'm not joking. Just read ..."

The others pressed forward, overwhelmed by an irresistible compulsion. Dibian took the letterhead from the envelope and unfolded it with his thick, chunky fingers. His lips moved.

"Teixel, Teixel," he said after a while, "Sapperment. The story's gone wrong!"

"So, what does it say?"

"So give it to me!"

"Read aloud!"

"Don't upset us!"

They shouted and screamed at each other, attacked Dibian and tore the letter out of his hand. But no one could get round to reading it, as it travelled from one person to the next until it reached Störner. Störner jumped out of the turmoil and, holding the letter in his hand, backed away to the glass wall. There he held back the pursuers with an outstretched arm. "Just a moment," he shouted, "right away ... you'll all hear it straight away. The letter is from Professor Zugmeyer ...: 'I implore you once again not to let the news of the destruction of our earth get out. The most terrible horror would be the consequence ... keep quiet about it, keep the terrible discovery with you ... when other astronomers discover the terror, they will certainly keep quiet just as I wish I had kept quiet - even towards you' - and yet you have not kept quiet," Störner interrupted himself, "you have not kept quiet, Mr Bezug."

His face was pale, his salt lake eyes glistening: "Zugmeyer is a scholar. A man of books. He knows the infinity of celestial space and the distances between the stars. The greatness of the heavens has prevented him from turning his attention to an even greater greatness, the greatness of the human soul. And

Man, gentlemen, man has always been the object of my study. I know his weaknesses and his strengths and have an unbounded reverence for the beauty and strength of his soul. I trust in them. And you see, gentlemen, can there be a more sublime spectacle than when this whole humanity, in its full strength, at the height of its ability, knowledgeable and yet composed and heroic, approaches death? The whole of humanity, as composed and bold as I see you before me. There will be no one left to sing about this spectacle or to capture it in pictures and pass it on to posterity. But that will take nothing away from its beauty. It will be a worthy counterpart to our emergence from the night of animality. - Go now, gentlemen, you will feel the need to withdraw into yourselves. And I too ... I want to be alone!"

With a sharp gaze, Bezug observed how the men he had praised as heroes looked at each other, how they scanned each other with fearful and shy eyes, how they shuffled around helplessly. Slowly they withdrew.

Dibian, who was walking next to Störner, muttered: "It's bad, I haven't had enough of painting oxen for a long time."

And Störner put his hand on his arm: "This cover ... he's insane. He should be shot over the pile ..."

When everyone had left, hesitating as if they were still expecting a word of explanation, a laugh that called them back, Bezug walked the length of the hall a few times with quick steps. Then he turned to Hainx, who had stepped out of an adjoining room: "Well ... well ... Hainx, what do you say?"

"It's ... it's ..."

"I couldn't do anything better to spread terror quickly and fiercely among mankind than by telling them ... they will talk and write and talk and write ... until they tear each other apart with fear."

At the place of grace

Table of contents

The pilgrimage church of Schönau was situated on a basalt cone that rose abruptly from the plain. The friendly village was arranged in a semi-circle around the foot of the mountain. The houses were characterised by rural prosperity and comfort, and the large Maierhof farm, which closed off the right wing of the village, was a model of a well-managed agricultural estate. Together with many fields and woodland plots, it belonged to the rich monastery on the hill above, which attracted streams of worshippers and seekers of grace with its miraculous image.

Since Polydor Schleimkugel had been working on the reputation of the place, the number of visitors had increased from month to month. Some new dates had to be set when the grace was particularly effective. Schleimkugel had flooded Christendom with pictures, brochures and souvenirs from Schönau, so that all believing minds were so excited and impatient to be part of the great miracles that were promised.

The influx has been exceptionally high for the past two weeks.

This may have been partly due to the fact that the Easter holidays were approaching, to which Schleimkugel's brochures and flyers pointed with special significance. But there was also something else that drove people into the sacred precinct. There was great unrest among the people.

A rumour had surfaced.

At first only distant, shadowy flight, slowly moving over the horizon. Then it burst forth again more suddenly, closer and sharper and lingering for a long time. It swelled up, loomed over the heads for a while and then left with a rumble.

There was talk that the end of the world was imminent.

The newspapers had taken up the cause and tried to determine public opinion. The general chorus was initially accompanied by no small amount of ridicule. Zugmeyer's name became popular in one fell swoop. It was part of the requirements of education to smile at his doomsday fantasies. He was mentioned in the same breath as several other discoverers who owed their reputation to the same mocking smile. The editorial astronomers proved to the forum of subscribers in the most definite way that they were dealing here only with an error, a kind of learned superstition. Only rarely did they take Zugmeyer's discovery more seriously and consider the consequences, only to conclude again and again that they had no reason to feel alarmed in any way.

As a result, the surface layers had really calmed down again, and the end of the world was treated as one of the many themes that the day brings and takes. Even the heroes to whom reference had been made at the time drew courage and strength from the general doubt and thought of drawing profit for their art from the mood of their contemporaries. The comic strip artists produced series of caricatures in which the horrors of destruction were turned into the grotesque. A talented young painter who knew his way around current affairs produced a colossal painting entitled "The Last Day" in a fortnight. It took up the widest display of a department store and showed a vast moorland landscape that rose to hills in the foreground. People were fleeing across the plain in endless trains, or in senseless haste, confusedly running over each other, heedless, intent only on their own salvation. They looked backwards with distorted faces, where a huge, glowing star rose terribly threateningly over the horizon. Flames played furiously over the whole ball, a tumult of raging thunderstorms, and before the blaze of the destroying star stood clear and black the towers of a distant city, as poor and tiny as man's work before the wrath of heaven. The swirls of dust that chased across the plain and enveloped the fleeing and

The winds, which carried away branches and stones, seemed to be the immediate messengers of doom. In the foreground, however, on the gradually rising hills, a number of groups were depicted in which the seven deadly sins were united in a ghastly symphony of despair. Avaricious people sat with contorted faces amidst their treasures, weapons at the ready, trying to fend off the greedy, who even in these last hours were unable to suppress their envy. Feasting and gluttony dominated the others in a mad frenzy, while men and women fell upon each other, tore off their clothes and celebrated the last orgies of lust in shameless nudity.

There was always a great crowd in front of this painting, and while some people weighed up the colour values purely artistically and acknowledged the talent of the painter himself in this rapid work calculated for effect, others tried to get over the impression they were unable to escape by joking.

On the third day after the exhibition of the picture, its painter was invited to come and see him. He knew, as everyone else did, that the pernicious planet had been discovered at the baron's observatory and that the baron himself had publicised the discovery, and was completely in the dark as to what Bezug's attitude to the picture would be. To the painter himself, his picture seemed more likely to frighten and confuse people. It was part of his plan to pass it off as unsaleable for the time being and only after the end of the world, in which he could not believe, to sell it at a higher price to someone who wished to preserve a memory of this time of life. But he knew from his reference that he had exhorted the artists to whom he had first sent his message to be calm and prudent and had called upon all the good forces within them. To his astonishment, the painter received an extremely friendly reception from Bezug. Not a word of disapproval about a picture which, contrary to the intentions of Bezug, was more likely to spread terror. After the baron had spoken at length about the merits of the picture, he invited the painter to show a second picture.

which dealt with the same subject, but in a terrible intensification. And when the artist still hesitated, he ordered the picture from him, firmly and bindingly, and set such an outrageous price himself that the painter began to be dizzy.

Of all the things that caused a half-despondent, half-ironic ripple in the upper classes, only a muffled rumour penetrated the depths of the people. Every now and then a word would stir them up and some interpreter would come up with a strange explanation.

So the world was going to end! A bloody fist had appeared in the sky, threatening the earth! And the rich had resolved to take away the last of the poor so that they could celebrate their last days in a mad rush.

Down here, there was a lack of reverence for the newspapers. People were not used to having their opinions exclusively determined by them. And people didn't know how to take the ironic expressions, the mocking winks, the jokes as they were meant. From all the articles that went to the root of the doomsday superstition, one took only the conviction that one had really made that discovery, that one was talking about it and dealing with it. The caricatures of the funny papers, the pictures that wanted to be taken purely artistically, were viewed here on the ground with sombre seriousness.

"They only talk like that..." said the Trinity cobbler, "so that we don't realise what they actually want. They don't want us to realise anything until the last moment. They want to cheat us out of our last day."

The rumours that were spread in the dark courtyards, on the stairs and in the laundry rooms gained power daily and swelled menacingly. They did not yet dare to come out, they still only dominated the nameless masses, but they were already storing up the power of the beating weather. The old women harboured a perpetual fear and increased their worries in hour-long conversations, reliving the horrors of doom in wild fantasies. The reckless youth still resisted and did not surrender

the stream. But it happened that the women's fear, already aroused, determined them to grant what they would otherwise have refused. What was there to wait for? Why refuse when everything might soon be over anyway? And now the people were certain that the Antichrist had come into the world. He appeared as a harbinger of doom. Fornication and harlotry came in his wake.

People flocked to churches and specially consecrated places to seek solace.

A new preacher had appeared in Schönau, who described the Last Judgement to the people with all the arts of eloquence. It was only after some hesitation that the prior had given the young priest permission to stand in the pulpit. He had travelled to the bishop especially to discuss the matter with him and submitted, albeit reluctantly, to his decision that Father Methud's sermons were authorised.

"The church has an obligation," the bishop had said, "to take care of everything that goes on in the community. We must always be at hand with our advice, our help, our comfort. We must not pretend that we do not know what is troubling and worrying people. They want a word of redemption from us. We must emphasise and place clearly before them what they only feel dully within themselves. We must free them from it by putting it into words. And at the same time we will point them to God's grace and mercy as the only hope we all have. Let your preacher speak only in this sense. Let him avoid pointing conspicuously to the rumours of the earth's doom. Leave it to the people to find all the connections and relationships for themselves."

After the prior had left, the bishop informed him that the prior of Schönau had questioned him about Father Methud's sermons and that he had been decided according to the baron's wishes.

The success of these sermons was immense. Almost the entire population came from the surrounding villages, and whole trains of pilgrims arrived daily from the most distant places. Not even the sick stayed

at home. The church, a large building designed for thousands of believers by the caring fathers of Jesus, was too small to hold all the worshippers.

Priests had to maintain order in front of the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary. They regulated entry and exit and did not tolerate anyone spending more than ten minutes in front of the miraculous image.

When the early morning train on which Mrs Agathe travelled to Schönau on Sundays came behind the elongated foothills of the Waldgebirge, which obscured the view of the plain, she stepped to the window of her carriage compartment. From here you could already see the basalt cone of Schönau, sharp and blue in the distance. Agathe had usually looked across with joyful impatience, but today she felt a heavy sense of trepidation. What comfort would the bishop have for her? Green fields to the left and right of the railway, endless, vigorous fields stretching to the horizon. Agathe had never watched the germination of the earth with such emotion; the great drama of the year had never been an event in her life. And now it came before her in all its beauty and power, as it was perhaps for the last time, as she would no longer have the opportunity to take possession of all its wonders with an unclouded mind. With a sudden fright she stepped back from the window: it was impossible, it couldn't be ... it was all just a fairy tale, an invention of overly anxious scholars, that's how he would interpret it, certainly ... and the newspaper writers who mocked it were nine times right.

At Schönau station, Agathe was expected by the bishop's carriage. There was a great throng of pilgrims on the platform, pushing and shoving, shouting and waving, little children crying and murmuring prayers, who couldn't wait to begin their pleas for heaven's favour. The bright colours of the peasants' costumes blazed in the sun, the darker clothes of the townspeople separated the lively groups and enclosed them like islands, colourful, overblown islands with murky water flowing between them.

The bishop's two servants guided Agathe through the crowd, past the stationmaster, who saluted politely, to the elegant Landau that stopped in front of the exit. Then it was off down the dusty road

along the road, which was enlivened by singing processions shrouded in white clouds, towards the village. The veterans' association of Schönau was lined up in front of the village pub. It had been decided to visit the pilgrimage church together, as a certain apprehension about the imminent end of the world had not gone unnoticed among the committee of these brave veterans. Now they gathered on the small village square, quickly fortified themselves in the village inn for the ascent and then assembled in double rows. Just as they were ready for the commander and his adjutant to discuss whether they should move out, the standard-bearer noticed the bishop's carriage.

"Franzel," he called to the captain, "watch out, the bishop is coming. And after the commander had convinced himself that the wagon coming down the village street was really the bishop's vehicle, he pulled himself round with the presence of mind that his troops had always admired in him and shouted across the ranks: "So ... watch out! I'll command eight!" And then turned to the music:

"Banda! Radetzky march!"

His limbs jerked and twitched, they tightened and tensed, came into contact and aligned themselves as best they could.

And now the car had approached.

The captain looked down the rows. His face was all red. And now he raised his white-gloved right hand: "Battalion! Haaabt - Eight!"

The music began with a resounding roar. Apart from the funeral march, which was used at the funerals of members, they had only prepared the Radetzky March for festive occasions. They played it with all the more vigour and with a noise that tripled their numbers.

The sun shone on the green feathery bushes and the shot blouses.

And the Baroness drove past the battalion with a cool thank you.

Mrs Agathe drove along the long village towards the mighty Meierhof, which defended its right flank like a bulwark. The bishop used to stay down here when he was in Schönau. When he left his residence, he did not like to be dependent on the ceremonial of the monastery. The entire first floor of the building had been furnished for him, a flight of rooms that offered pleasant cooling in the summer. Light-coloured furniture and light fabrics were a pleasant change from the heavy splendour of the rooms in his urban palace. A few exquisite pictures adorned the walls, and a small, carefully chosen library gave substance and colour to the quiet hours of the cosy *bon vivant*.

When Mrs Agathe entered the room where he had just completed a work by the astronomer Flammarion, he rose and went to meet her with the friendly and amicable smile he always had for important visitors.

But Agathe was unable today to maintain the progression that gave their togetherness a constantly renewed charm, that progression from states of amiable intimacy to the raptures of love, which was so wisely arranged that it seemed as if the obstacles had to be overcome again and again each time. Today she took down all the barricades at once, rushed at the bishop and threw her arms round his neck: "Dearest!" she gasped, "I am beside myself. I don't know what to do ... I'm fleeing to you ..."

In the bishop's ear was the fine rustle of her silken dress. And that almost boiling perfume enveloped him, which excited him so strangely. Mrs Agathe was still beautiful, and when she overcame the flabbiness and fatigue of her condition, her eyes came alive with rapturous ardour. The bishop held her close and felt her wild breathing. "Be calm," he said, "don't be so timid. Be brave ... And he broke away from her and went to the door of the antechamber, which he opened to see if no one was outside.

Then he returned to her, who had remained motionless in the middle of the room with her arms hanging down, took her gently around the shoulders and led her to the window that looked out over the wide garden. He pushed the window open and the fresh, sun-warmed air brought in the echo of the bells calling the worshippers together upstairs. Down below, the sparrows frolicked in the lush green bushes, and the sunshine lay golden and good on all the beds. Beyond the garden wall were fields, then a double row of poplars flanking a distant country road, and then, far away, the blue border mountains.

Agathe had allowed herself to be pressed into the soft leather fauteuil, into which she sank deeply. The bishop had stopped in front of her, so close that his knees were touching hers. Worried, but no longer desperate, she looked up at him and took hold of his hands. "Now, what do you think of this," she asked, "I beg of you? Why don't you speak? All you ever do is look at me and say nothing. Do you believe in this rumour...?"

He pointed to the book lying on the small window table. "You see, I'm trying to educate myself about this question. Unfortunately, I'm not a specialised astronomer, so I can't check Zugmeyer's calculations and hypotheses. I can only use my common sense to form my judgement. But common sense is subject to challenges in such bad times. In short, I don't know what to think ..."

"You just don't want to tell me. You're usually so calm and sure ... and you shouldn't have any judgement this time ...? But you yourself are afraid it might be over."

"No! No! There's no question of that ... I don't believe in it. Providence ..."

Then Agathe got up from her seat and threw herself impetuously at the bishop again: "No ... no, it must not be over ... It must not. Now that I've finally got to know you! Now that you love me! I want to live ... with you. After long years of loneliness and agony, finally - you! And now my happiness is to be shattered. Yes - is that even possible? I don't know ... I think I'm insane, I

I'm probably just imagining the whole thing ... it's probably not ... so speak up, Franz! speak up!"

The bishop was frightened by this storm. His inclination favoured smooth sailing before a fair wind, under a clear sky. He himself, who had formed his view of the world on the teachings of the Stoa, looked forward to the possibility of a downfall. But this woman, who clutched him in her fear, was incapable of entering the cool realm of his philosophy. Carefully he began to reassure her that nothing definite was known yet, that the whole rumour was based for the time being only on Zugmeyer's legendary discovery. Zugmeyer himself had not yet published anything about his "terror". And other astronomers had not yet commented either. In other words, science has by no means made a final decision in any way. He himself did not believe in it, because he could not imagine that God's hand would want to bring the clock of this earth to a standstill right now. There are things that point too far into the future. And given the great general reasonableness of God's plans, he could not see why he should have allowed such germs if their development was not his intention.

The bishop had great power over Agathe. He had made her sit down again and seated himself next to her, holding her hands in his.

"So you don't believe in it?" she asked, looking at him with a grateful wet eye.

"No, I can't believe it!"

Exhausted and happy, she leant back. Now the world was bright and cheerful again. Then the lustre faded from her eyes, and while she touched his hands with trembling fingers, she asked, seized by a new concern: "And you ... won't you leave me?"

... Will you not turn away from me? - If that happens, I'd rather the earth fell into ruins, do you hear me? I couldn't bear that ... that would be more bitter than death for me."

The basalt cone of Schönau was covered in dense forest up to half its height. The road that had recently been built cut through it in regular spirals that went around the whole mountain. When you emerged from its shadow onto the stony, overgrown slopes, the marvellous panorama that had made the mountain famous in the travel books, even in the books of the Protestants, for whom the miracle of grace of the image of the Mother of God counted for nothing, opened up as you drove on. One could see the endless plain, the blue meander of the wide river, and the border mountains were so close on bright days that one could distinguish the forest glades between the primeval forests and the lookout built on the highest peak of the chain.

In addition to the road, there was also a footpath, a stony, arduous path along which a number of small chapels preserved images from the Passion of Christ. It was a way of the cross that the devout travelled with fervent prayer, lingering in front of each of the chapels and sighing with remorse as they tried to reach the top in dignity and stand before the image of grace. For the Augustinians of Schönau Abbey, it was an indication of the general mood whether the Way of the Cross or the road was used more. Those who had an urgent and important matter at heart took the arduous route, those who did not place themselves completely in the hands of heavenly grace and still had a little faith in themselves chose the road. In recent times, however, the Way of the Cross was used almost exclusively, and this indicated that the fear of the crowd was great and their cause was urgent.

The bishop's carriage travelled slowly up the spirals. Where the Way of the Cross intersected the road, the coachman often had to stop for a few minutes, so dense was the crowd of devotees; and so full were they of their devotion that they paid no attention to the coachman's calls.

At the top of the flattened summit of the mountain, the crowd was tightly packed together. It took all the caution of a skilful charioteer to prevent an accident, and only when the lay brothers,

The coach was able to enter the courtyard of the monastery thanks to the help of the brothers who were already expecting the bishop. Here the prior received the distinguished guest, received the brotherly kiss and escorted him, followed by the brothers, through the monastery into the church.

In the sacristy, the bishop found an old acquaintance: Polydor Schleimkugel was standing in front of a pile of chasubles and talking to a few fratres about the value of these pieces and the solidity of the work. He gave expert judgements, which he supported with examples from all the church treasures of Christendom.

When the bishop entered, Slimeball turned his enormous body towards him and puffed out his chest: "I have the honour of paying my respects to Your Episcopal Grace."

"I'm delighted to see you again, my dear friend. How are you?"

"If Your Episcopal Grace is satisfied with my little services, then my health is good above all else."

"I am satisfied with you, slime ball! You have shown yourself to be a good Christian and faithful son of the Church in every respect. If I'm not mistaken, you've just returned from a trip to the Orient. Were you working for us there?"

"I have brought something with me, Bishop's Grace..." and Slimeball stepped towards the bishop so that his warm breath, which smelled a little of wine, hit his face. Whispering mysteriously, he repeated: "I've brought something with me ... A shrine, nothing like this has ever been seen before! It's the greatest thing imaginable. They have nothing like it in Rome."

"Really?"

"Really and truly. Nothing like it by far. They would cover it with gold if they could have it. But I give it to you, Bishop's Grace ..."

Schleimkugel was interrupted by the prior, who, after standing aside with a young priest for some time, now approached the bishop.

"Your Grace, allow me to ask for your blessing for this young brother."

"Is it Father Method?"

The prior said yes, and the brother bowed his head so that the bishop looked at his bald, greasy, shiny tonsure.

"How come I've never seen you here at the monastery before?"

"I was only recently transferred here from the Bohemian province." The priest's voice was dry and cracked like breaking wood. The bishop looked closely at the man. Leather-coloured skin stretched over protruding cheekbones. The chins were hard and angular and seemed to be held together by the thin-lipped, narrow-slit mouth as if by a snap-lock. The forehead was hilly and full of bumps, as if he had hammered his head with his fists. Now, as he returned the bishop's gaze, there was a cold, grey calm in his wide-set eyes, whose axes were slightly askew, an expectancy without impatience, the expression of a man who is aware of his strength and who always tells himself that he has time to use it.

When the bishop raised his hand to him, he lowered his head as before.

"I bless you, my son," said the guest, "God grant you consecration and true humility, that you may not become arrogant when you see how the people listen to you. And may the Almighty grant you to observe all that I have marked out through your reverend prior as the limits of your speech."

The serving lay brothers had already prepared the vestments in which the bishop was to attend the service. While the others were also dressing, endeavouring to appear slow and dignified in posture and movement, so that one could see that they were well aware of the solemnity of the preparations, the bishop, with a quick, vigorous jerk, put on his surplice, took the stole and donned the gleaming gold cloak. He was still dressed like an officer,

who has to go to the barracks early in the morning, and after he was the first to finish, he waited impatiently for the others to follow.

Then the wide door of the sacristy opened and, preceded by four friars, the bishop stepped out into the church, into a broad strip of sunlight that lay on the stones before him like a carpet. The dusty, dark red cloth covering the altar steps took on a strong colour in the light, like blood on the verge of congealing, when it has not yet lost all its vitality. The organ, a marvel of musical architecture, trembled under the melody of an old psalm with which the *Regens chori* greeted the bishop. With a fleeting glance, Franz Salesius surveyed the church. Head to head, the crowd stared. Once he had reached his high seat, which was attached to the side of the altar on an otherwise bare wall, he turned his face towards the Blessed Sacrament and no longer allowed his eyes to deviate.

The dignitaries of the monastery sat on low chairs to his left and right. The prior himself celebrated the service.

Although the bishop did not look into the nave of the church, he felt the tremendous tension with which every solemn movement and every word of the prior was followed. They were released from his limbs and mouth and slipped over into the soul of the crowd, who stood there praying and in unacknowledged fear before the altar. The sunlight slowly advanced across the floor, revealing the traces of countless footsteps on the old, worn stone slabs. Then the gleam of gold shone on the bishop's cloak, and at last the light hit his face. He just squeezed his eyes shut and didn't move. It did him good to feel the colourful and softened warmth of the sun through the stained glass of the church windows. He felt a comfort he had not felt for a long time, which was not disturbed by any thoughts.

High mass was over. However, the prior and his entourage did not leave the choir but joined their senior pastor. The prior took the chair to the right of the bishop, which the subprior conceded to him with a deep bow.

Father Methud had appeared at the top of the pulpit. He had stepped quickly out of **t h e** folds of the dark curtain that closed off the end of the winding staircase. Then he had come to the balustrade and sunk down, banging his head hard against the railing. Above him on the canopy hovered the dove of the Holy Spirit, in the centre of a star-shaped bundle of rays. Around the parapet of the pulpit were reliefs with scenes from the life of John the Baptist, interrupted by the bodies of cheerful putti that seemed to leap out of the structure of their frames.

A great hush fell over the whole church.

Now the preacher raised his pale, threatening face and began a murmuring prayer, which he followed with the reading of a passage from the Bible. And in the same tone he continued to speak, without raising his voice, without endeavouring to indicate to his listeners that he had now come before them with his own words and thoughts.

It was barely comprehensible, and the bishop marvelled that such powerful effects should emanate from this poor speaker.

But then something forced him to raise his eyes, which had already slipped from the pulpit to the listening crowd, back to the preacher's face. His voice now sounded like it had earlier in the vestry, like the rattling of dry wood.

"For destruction has been set into the world since the beginning. It stands beside all life as its shadow. And the shadow grows and grows and spreads out as an angry fog that shrouds all splendour and all light. There will be nothing stronger than it. It rises up to the sky as a cloud and covers it from east to west, from midday to midnight. And horror is at home in the bosom of the cloud. It still sleeps like a spark that must first be ignited. But the breath of the destroyer blows it into a fire, into a storm of fire that breaks out of the bursting cloud and rains down on the earth like pitch and brimstone over the cursed places of Sodom and Gomorrah. For truly, this earth is Sodom and Gomorrah. An abominable wickedness and an abyss of all sins. And like Sodom and Gomorrah

it must be destroyed by the roaring breath of the destroyer that breaks out of the cloud."

The preacher paused and looked at his listeners with a fixed, mesmerising gaze that had lost none of its cold calm. Only his voice had increased and become as powerful as booming ore. So he stood in the pulpit and seemed to be sipping the fear of the crowd that surged up to him like a hot drink. He became intoxicated by this fear, he stirred it up more and more by presenting the horrors of doom to the crowd in ever more gruesome images. Like a wise connoisseur, he knew how to keep himself calm, in a dichotomy of his ego, in a twofold being, one of which served to threaten the souls of men with ever wilder urges, while the other calmly observed the effects.

"And here come the riders from the four corners of the world, the dreadful messengers of the avenger. They come from the lair of the demons, from the abysses of the night, from the caves of terror. Under the clatter of hooves, the whole sky ignites and the stars begin to fall from their glowing lairs. The great chariot shatters against the rock of nothingness. And then all at once the trumpet sounds, the sound of which awakens the dead. The graves open with a crash, and howling, the corpses of the criminals flee from the whips of the angels to whom the work of destruction has been entrusted. This is a procession in which mothers will see their sons and children their parents and the bride the bridegroom, hounded and covered with the brand of the scourge."

The crowd that had been pressed into the church had become vocal, a whimpering gasp, a stifled wail and a weeping wail. But the preacher continued relentlessly, with fierce and triumphant cold eyes, hateful and driven by an insatiable greed to see the poor souls tormented and despairing before him. He stood long and gaunt before the red curtain that closed off the pulpit, and his leather-coloured skin had acquired two red, circular and sharply defined patches where it spanned his cheekbones.

The prior looked anxiously at the bishop. But he did not return his gaze, instead looking out into the church, where the people were in a whirl. A shout interrupted the preacher. Someone was shouting in the midst of the crowd, loud and shrill, and those at the front, who were pressed tightly against the choir screen, tried to turn round.

Father Methud had leant forward and looked down. He leant his arms on the parapet and took no notice of the commotion. The frenzy of one person seemed to infect the others and sweep them away. You could see arms thrown up, hear sobs, cries and loud prayers. The men in front of the ornate wrought-iron latticework of the choir room gripped its bars and tendrils and shook it as if they would not allow themselves to be prevented from rushing to the Blessed Sacrament and clasping it. The bishop saw that a panic could break out at any moment.

He turned to the prior, who was staring at him, pale and bewildered. "Ring the bells ... quickly ... and send someone to the pulpit ... have him say the closing prayer ... immediately."

The excitement of the crowd had increased. The crowd was boiling and foaming. Mothers picked up their children over people's heads. Men pounded their fists to make their way to the chapel where the miraculous image hung. A fierce fight broke out there. The priests on guard were thrown aside and torn away. The people tried to drag each other away, banging their fists, shouting and screaming. In the midst of the crowd, some had sunk to their knees and begun to pray. They were trampled underfoot and were unable to rise. The prudent few were unable to fight off the frenzied crowd.

Suddenly, the great bell began to ring with broad, high-arching notes. They sank down as if from the ceiling of the church and enveloped the noise of the crowd. They enclosed it as if in a frame and prevented it from spreading. And the more powerful the sound became, the

The people's cries became more timid. They came to their senses, looked at each other and their souls, which had been torn away by fear, found themselves again. After a brutal outrage of all the instincts of the ego, people began to show consideration for others again, astonished and ashamed that they could forget themselves in this way.

The brother sent by the prior stepped out of the folds of the curtain in the pulpit and touched Father Methud on the shoulder. But he only moved when the messenger shook him again and more firmly. Until now, he had been leaning forward with half his upper body, watching the scenes of turmoil he had caused. Now he stood up, looked at his brother distraught and had his message repeated a third time. Then he nodded humbly, immediately sank to his knees and began to say the final prayer in a loud voice.

The crowd looked up at the pulpit and willingly followed their leader. A murmur began, overarched by the sound of the great bell, a humming like the drifting of a storm. And when Father Methud had finished praying, the organist, who had meanwhile composed himself, began a fugue that utilised every register and register of the mighty instrument.

Slowly, the broad wings of the great gate flapped back, and a stream of sunlight came into the church. And in full order, only a little weary and endeavouring to hide the traces of the fight, the crowd left the house.

The bishop waited until he was sure that no more confusion was to be feared. Then he preceded the brothers through the sacristy and the vaulted corridors of the monastery into the refectory, where a festive table was ready. The prior, who walked at his left side, did not dare to break the silence. The bishop pondered. What possible reason could he have had for insisting that Father Methud should cause such excitement and fear among the people? This reference, whose plans were always unfathomable, but never without a secret meaning. At last the prior could stand it no longer: "It was very embarrassing,

Episcopal graces ... very terrible. But it was the first time ... of course, these sermons have never remained without impression ..."

"I don't blame you, my dear," said the bishop, looking at the brothers, whose eyes were fixed on his face with impatient expectation. Father Methud was standing at the back, modestly next to the door. He was the only one looking down.

"Let the brothers take their seats," said the bishop. And while everyone lined up behind their chairs, the bishop approached Methud, who stood in front of him with his shoulders hanging down and his head bowed.

"You must not continue your sermons for the time being," he said, "you will receive my decision in a few days."

The preacher bowed his head even lower so that his forehead, covered with bumps and bruises, stood out.

They said grace and sat down to eat. Slimeball was seated next to the bishop's place of honour. The prior sat to the left of the distinguished guest. He was overjoyed that the affair had gone so smoothly and endeavoured to make it completely forgotten by discussing other topics. But he was counteracted by Slimeball, who did not have enough tact to guess the Prior's wishes and kept recounting details he had witnessed. At the other end of the long table sat the brothers who had been assigned to stand guard in front of the miraculous image today. They sat very still and silent, as if still unable to recover from the horror they had endured. They were asked by the slime ball to recount their experiences, and they did so, with faltering words and a reflection of fear on their faces.

The bishop, however, who had not yet come to terms with himself as to how the matter should be handled and concluded, was more inclined towards the prior's tactics. He interrupted Schleimkugel's discussions with the question of what he meant by the very special shrine that he had managed to find.

Slimeball immediately took the conversation in a new direction, as if he had been waiting for the question for a long time. He saw the

He looked at the bishop and then at the prior with his small eyes buried between fat bulges and said: "It is still a secret for the time being, and I would like to ask you to remind the venerable brothers in particular of the vow of silence beforehand if I am to speak about it."

"That's not necessary," replied the prior, who still held his tactlessness against the guest, "what is spoken within these walls remains here - unless the interests of the holy church and our monastery require it to be brought into the world."

"Well then ... I am still busy having one of the greatest church scholars collect the historical evidence for the authenticity of my find. And I will only show my shrine when I have all the documents together at the same time. We should not be attacked again and a clamour raised about the new hoax ..."

"You make us very curious, dear slime ball ..."

"I tell you, Bishop's Grace, there has never been anything like it ... it is a miracle, the discovery itself is a miracle ..." and when the slime ball had sufficiently savoured the tension on the faces of all the listeners, he continued: "It is nothing less than the shroud of Christ."

"The shroud of Christ?"

"Yes - the cloth in which the most holy body was wrapped when it was taken down from the cross."

"Wait," said the bishop thoughtfully, "I believe that this cloth was once owned. But it disappeared again later."

"That's right, Your Episcopal Grace, and I've found it again."

"And where did you discover it?"

"In the big mosque in Damascus. I don't yet know how it got there. But its authenticity is certain. It was locked in a precious chest, of Byzantine workmanship ... this chest alone is a marvel. And it took me three days,

to open the extremely ingenious locks without damaging the chest."

"So you also know something about the trade - the locksmith?" smiled the bishop.

"Of course, Your Episcopal Grace, I must understand that. - In the courtyard of the mosque stands a graceful little structure on slender feet. It looks like a large oven of the kind that our sixteenth century had. Only Arabic in form, of course. The mosque's archive is housed in this small domed building. The rarest and most curious manuscripts. Of immense value, as I have been told. But I don't know anything about it. However, I have obtained permission to look through these treasures for study purposes. One comes across forgotten things among such manuscripts and books. There is no order in this strange archive. Everything is colourful and jumbled up. And after several days of work, I came across my chest in this confusion. It immediately caught my eye. When I finally opened it, I found a kind of bed sheet and a few documents in Latin, which I understand. I immediately realised what I was looking at, because I also knew about the shrine that had been lost to Christianity. And the documents confirmed my suspicions."

A silent movement ran through the rows of brothers at the table. Everyone had stopped eating and were looking at the slime ball.

"It's not impossible," said the bishop mutedly.

Slimeball puffed deeply and gurgled. Then he finished his glass of white Bordeaux. "You can imagine the effort it took to acquire this precious sanctuary."

"I am only surprised that the Ulemas have given their permission ..."

"The Ulemas don't know that I took the box away. They hardly knew what treasure they had there. So why make them aware of it? If I had told them - who

I don't know whether they would have allowed us to return this shrine to Christianity. So I preferred to get it by other means. We took it by night. A dangerous piece ... and it cost a small fortune, because nobody would risk their neck for a few francs." And after a pause, he added:

"I hope to be absolved of this sin, because I have committed it.

..."

"Tell me, dear friend," the bishop interrupted him, looking at him firmly, "why didn't you take this shrine to Rome? They have enough money there to pay you for all the danger and trouble. Why do you offer it to me? I am a poor man ..."

"I'd rather make do with a little than take it to Rome. You know that the Curia has not been particularly favourable to me for some time. Certain machinations ... as is customary in Rome. His Holiness certainly knows nothing about it. His Holiness is too just to condemn me unheard. But there is this Cardinal Braganza. He's on his way to the Holy Father. Like a great mastiff, he bares his teeth when someone tries to climb over him ..."

This was applauded by the brothers. God knows, His Eminence Braganza was known for always being on the way. "That's the truth," sighed the prior, "you can't get past him."

"And since the papal see had the grace to honour me in recognition of my minor services ... since then he has growled so fiercely when he sees me. He has instigated all sorts of things ... in short, they don't seem to be as accommodating to me as they used to be. But I'm not the man to be offered such things. - And I'm going to show what I'm capable of. Now more than ever. You can have the shroud of Christ from me, Bishop's Grace. We'll come to an agreement about the price."

The bishop smiled. He now knew quite well what the real reason for the quarrel between Braganza and the slime ball was. She was blonde and had ample hips and was called the beautiful Fiuman. And Braganza, the slim, elegant, sinister man of the world, had given her away to the fat

and ponderous ball of slime. Now it had just occurred to him. And smiling, he saw that he too had been given a part to play in the spectacle of Slimeball's revenge. He was gladly prepared to take it, for he was gaining a precious treasure; and he stood to acquire it, even if it were only for the short span of time that Zugmeyer's prophecy still gave the earth. If only because Braganza would have been furious about it. The bishop remembered a scene in which he himself had confronted the Italian. He had made no secret of his contempt for the Germans. And it had taken all the bishop's skill and swordsmanship not to lose that fight.

He handed Slimeball his ringed right hand: "You are one of the best and most reliable friends of my episcopal chair, dear Slimeball! I accept your offer. And I thank you for it, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. And I hope that we will soon come to an agreement on the price. For your efforts shall not have been in vain."

Slimeball put his right hand on his chest and puffed out his cheeks, panting loudly, as if he were emerging from the depths of the water after holding his breath for a long time. "Certainly, certainly!" he said.

"Please endeavour to hand over all the processed documents and evidence to me soon. You are right, we must not expose ourselves to the danger that people will start a journalistic agitation against this linen cloth of Christ as they did against the holy skirt of Trier."

Raising his elbow, Slimeball dug his arm into one of his inner chest pockets. Diligently digging, he puffed harder and harder, and his face turned that deep, true-coloured purple. At last he produced a piece of paper, which he handed to the bishop: "I can give you a brief sketch now, just a very brief outline of the background ... it will all be worked out in detail later."

The bishop nodded to Slimeball and stood up, folding his hands in prayer. Slowly and with expression, he gave thanks to the Lord, and the brothers repeated it with lowered voices. Then

This was followed by half an hour of confidential chatting with the prior and the other dignitaries of the monastery, and when it was reported that the carriage was harnessed, the bishop was escorted down to the courtyard. There had been no talk of Father Methud and the panic in the church.

The plateau in front of the church was no less busy than in the morning hours. New trains of pilgrims had arrived and were impatiently pushing their way through the crowd. When the coachman had brought the carriage out of the turmoil and steered it onto the road, the bishop leant back in the blue cushions, took out the paper slime ball and began to read.

"The Holy Shroud of Christ was already venerated in Constantinople in the 11th century. The precious chest in which it is still kept today seems to date from that time. It has not yet been possible to determine where it was before the 11th century. However, certain traces point to Africa, where it may have been kept in one of the main Arian churches. In 1205, the shroud disappeared from Constantinople, and for a period of almost 150 years there were no clues as to where the relic was kept. It only reappeared in 1353. In that year, the Count of Charny gave it to the Abbey of Lirey. It now travelled around the monasteries of France. When the Tour abbey burned down in 1523, it was in danger of being destroyed. An unknown man rescues it from the flames and disappears. The friars claim to have recognised the archangel Michael from one of their altarpieces in this man. The shroud later travelled to Turin. From there it disappears again in 1661. How it came to be in the great mosque in Damascus is still unknown. The shrine is a kind of bed sheet, 4.10 metres long and 1.40 metres wide. The already somewhat fragile fabric is yellowish in colour and has many stains. Dots and lines in which the image of a human body can be recognised. Blurred, distorted, incomplete and disfigured, as is only possible with such an imprint. The image consists of two parts: one

Front and rear view. Two Parisian scholars are in the process of finding a scientific explanation for this phenomenon, while an outstanding church historian is collecting historical material on the relic."

The bishop read Schleimkugel's manuscript again before pocketing it. It was written in a strictly factual manner, and the discoverer could not be accused of being a fanatic or blind. Then the bishop leant forward to see why the carriage had stopped again. It was at one of the intersections of the Way of the Cross with the Spiral Road, and the crowd was almost worse here than in the morning hours. The coachman was shouting at the people, but there were about a dozen people crawling across the road on their knees just in front of the carriage. They did not rise and continued on their way, unconcerned by the coachman's shouting, bending their heads low to the ground as if to inhale the dust of the ground. "Lord have mercy on us," they repeated again and again, moving forwards with slow jerks.

Suddenly a wave jumped out of the stream against the bishop's carriage. An old man with tangled white hair, bareheaded and wearing an open shirt. His long, lean arms were thrown up and flailing in the air.

"Nikolaus Zenzinger!" he shouted. "Nicholas Zenzinger! I wrote the Revelation of John! Me! Me!" And he hurled a small parcel into the carriage.

The coachman, who had turned round in horror, believing his master to be threatened, now struck the horses so that they tore the carriage forwards at a single bound, right into the middle of the crowd of worshippers. It was surprising that nothing happened. Those kneeling threw themselves to one side at the last moment, the others bounced back. A shout arose.

From the crowd, in whose procession the gap immediately closed again, a woman burst out and limped towards the man, who was still standing in his place, his arms slowly drooping as he watched the carriage. His lips moved as if he had not been able to say everything he had intended to say and as if it was still pouring out of them

like the gurgling residue of water from a pipe that has been shut off.

"Nicholas! Nicholas!" she shouted and grabbed his right arm.

He looked at her wildly, pushed her back and set off at a strange, swaying trot. He ran up through the forest beside the Way of the Cross without looking back at the woman, who followed him limping and shouting fearfully. Then he turned off into dense bushes and disappeared from her sight. She stopped, panting, and clutched her aching head. The stump of her leg was sore from the hasty movement and she put the whole weight of her body on the healthy leg.

Then someone grabbed her hand.

She flinched: "Eleagabal Kuperus," she whispered, "is it you?" And then it began to swirl in front of her eyes, the old man's face pulled wide apart and Eleagabal caught the staggering woman and laid her gently on the damp moss.

When she woke up, the pine trees all around her were a flaming red with blue-black tops, and her hand was still in the old man's.

"I haven't seen you for a long time, Mrs Emma Rößler!" he said.

She nodded, and a long-lost comfort made her weak and happy: "I didn't come! I couldn't come - I couldn't bring myself to come ... because ..."

"Even if you haven't come to see me, I haven't lost sight of you. I know how you've been. And you see - I'm only allowed to come when I'm called."

"So you know everything?" Emma asked hesitantly.

"Everything? - I know why you've been avoiding me."

She cringed and hid her head on her raised knees. She sat like this for a while, hunched over with her back hunched; her lean shoulder blades were visible under her worn blouse and the tendons of her neck left a deep furrow between them. She sat like that until Eleagabal touched her shoulder.

"Come on," he said, "let's go. It's cool up here. I'll show you down."

She stood up with his support and held on tightly to his arm, because her sore stump still hurt. She spoke a word in apology: "His power is great..."

"Yes, his power is great!" said Eleagabal.

Suddenly she stopped. "I can't go home without Nicholas. I always have to fear that he will do something wrong."

Eleagabal Kuperus knew that she was now talking about the man who had fled from her. "It's Nikolaus Zenzinger?" he asked.

"It's him. He's always so excited now ... I don't know what's got into him. Since everyone's been talking about the end of the world, it's become particularly bad."

The old man pulled Emma gently by the arm: 'Come on,' he said, 'you don't need to worry. It will soon be dark and he will come to the railway station by himself. Wait for him there and take him home. Tell me, what was that thing he threw into the bishop's carriage?'

"I don't know why he did that. He's been so confused for a while. What was it? Yes - it was those correspondence cards, about five ... nothing more, on which he wrote the entire Revelation of John ... the whole apocalypse. These are his works now. It's incredibly tedious and tortures his weak old eyes ... You can imagine how he sits there with a magnifying glass and writes ... it hurts my heart. And he can't be persuaded to do anything else. At first it was a welcome distraction from his brooding ... I was happy to let him do it. But now he doesn't want to do anything else. And this activity is dangerous for him. Not just for his eyes, but also for his mind."

As they walked on, the old man stroked her arm, which was resting on his. He had happily brought her out of the dense forest, where it was already beginning to get dark, and was now leading her along a meadow path straight towards the station, which, with its coloured lights, was some distance away.

lay. They did not need to touch the village on this path; the strong breath of the spring-moist earth enveloped them. As carefully as he guided the woman, the pain in the stump of her leg increased and she hobbled ever more slowly at his side.

The railway station was already close in front of them. They only had to cross a short embankment that had closed off a now drained pond. Behind the station, the late red of the long-set sun had flowed out in a semicircle across the sky. The station building was swarming with black people.

"So you haven't found asylum with him either," said Kuperus, "you're not supposed to be at peace."

She smiled: "That's why I don't fear destruction. By the way, sometimes he has times when he is very gentle and lenient. That's when he closes in on me again and is full of tenderness and care. But then he gets a grip on me again and gathers up all the money in the house and leaves. Often for several days and nights. I don't know where he goes. He drinks all the time. He has to drink terribly. And he gets deeper and deeper into his delusion of being a prophet, one of the great prophets."

"They suffer because of him."

'But I'm not going to leave him,' Emma said firmly, 'I'm not thinking about it. I'll stay with him. Because I can see that he would be completely lost without me. And he has been a support to me at a time when I was completely abandoned and miserable. When he comes back after his escape, he is always completely shattered and ill. Then he needs me. I will not leave him.'

They dived between the first groups of people waiting outside the station building. Fragments of conversation fluttered to them from left and right. They showed that the people had found little comfort and were leaving more agitated than when they had arrived.

And when Mrs Emma turned to Eleagabal, who had stayed behind her, she found herself alone in the midst of the crowd.

But inside the waiting room, she found Nikolaus Zenzinger sitting with his head leaning back against the wall, wedged into a crowd of passengers, his eyes closed as if he were asleep. He felt Emma coming and opened his wilted eyelids. With a humble and shy look, he slowly rose and gave her his seat.

The frenzy begins

Table of contents

Professional astronomy had long remained silent about Zugmeyer's discovery. The reports in the newspapers were too unclear and too riddled with the petty personal vanities of their authors, who wanted to shine with their opinions and jokes. And Zugmeyer himself had still not given an authentic account.

Finally, the American astronomer Mr Wall from Philadelphia spoke out. The first voice to give a factual judgement attracted general attention. He began by stating that the destruction of the earth, or indeed of organic life on it, by a small planet torn from its orbit was by no means an impossibility. Then he examined the material that had been provided in fragments by the newspaper reports with acumen and analytical talent and presented his results in an exciting way that was reminiscent of the detective novels of his compatriots. He believed he could prove that Zugmeyer had made mistakes in his calculations and called on the discoverer of the "Terror" to finally give a scientific and detailed report. Finally, he announced that he had begun to make precise observations himself. He would not hesitate to publish his research as soon as he had reached at least a preliminary conclusion.

This report was widely glossed over by the newspapers. Some papers still retained the mocking tone. Others, however, dealt in detail with Mr Wall's remarks, and there was no doubt that traits of seriousness were beginning to appear in the physiognomy of public opinion. Moreover, it was impossible not to take notice of the excitement of the lower classes any longer. The panic in the Schönau pilgrimage church was only the first of a series of outbreaks of fear that now flared up here and there. With

With grim expressions on their faces, the liberal members of the party fought in a united phalanx against the "nonsense" which, following the example of Schönau, began to proliferate more and more in other places of grace. They called for state authority, which should not tolerate the people being harmed by such means. And it was already quite clear from these articles that even in the circles of the sensible and prudent, people were beginning to fear all sorts of things.

Could the people's despair not escalate into rage? Was it thus quite impossible that the masses, in their blind fear, would get out of the hands of the leaders and begin a work of destruction? The anarchist paper "Die Lunte", published in Zurich, laughed derisively at these concerns of the bourgeoisie. At last the full and contented were so far gone that one had the pleasure of seeing them tremble before the dark forces of the crowd. And with harsh words the paper called on all anarchist elements to finally break out of their disguises. The favourable moment had arrived for action to be taken.

The governments of all countries responded to these wild threats with arrests and mass expulsions. But they could not prevent the terrorists, who saw their heavenly symbol in the new planet, from gathering in remote corners and accumulating terrible energies far from the control of state power.

Doctor Störner wrote a feature article in his newspaper about "Stormy mood". He warned of a general headlessness and, if those above him did not do everything in their power to counteract it, he held out the prospect of a mental epidemic.

The news of the discovery of the "Terror" by the Italian comet discoverer Alfons Chiari broke into this sultry atmosphere on 15 May. He had summarised his observations in a report and submitted it to the Milan Academy, having previously sworn them to secrecy. But the silence was broken, the secret was leaked and found its way to the public.

A few days later, Mr Wall also confirmed the accuracy of Chiari's findings. And now all the astronomers of distinction came to comment on this question as well. Most of them sided with the researchers, who rightly ascribed their name to the new planet. Only a few tried to point out that the determination of the orbital elements of such a strange celestial body did not guarantee complete certainty. The planet was beyond all astronomical laws and its observation was extremely difficult. The power that had snatched it from its sphere could also snatch it back again.

But their voices did not penetrate the storm that arose after Chiari's report became public.

For the time being, the state was still bewildered by the movement. At first, it had experimented back and forth hastily, with half-measures and ill-considered regulations. And so the public was left with the conviction that nobody knew what to do. Even the gentlest citizens were no longer convinced of the trustworthiness of state providence. They had to rely on themselves. And those who did not want to receive their consolation and reassurance from the hands of the church resorted to the wisdom teachings that had already given the wavering a foothold in a time of decline. Alongside this, there was a renaissance of Kant, whose strict ethics were too clear and transparent for the vast majority. Most of them preferred to hide away in the sometimes somewhat fanciful ideas of Stoic natural philosophy. The "primordial substance" and the "primordial force" became buzzwords that

"guiding matter" and the "working world soul" provided the leitmotifs for the confused conversations of the adepts.

On 28 May, one of the large meetings in which the waves of excitement were to be calmed by the oil of philosophy took place in the Amor Halls, which were otherwise only filled with the frenzied whirls of the carnival. Störner, who had been restlessly active in recent times in order to prevent the general

He wanted to attend this meeting to prevent discouragement through clever articles. He had given up his actual subject altogether. Now was not the time to discuss trivial literary events or to report critically on the theatres that had been painstakingly continued. There were more important things at stake now, questions of human life.

"I don't know," he said to Professor Schreier, whom he had met up in the gallery of the centre hall, "what people want? We have to live as if we knew nothing of what's in store for this old clay dungeon. That goes without saying. We have to live as if there must be an endless series of other days after the supposed last day. We don't need any philosophy or artificial means to revitalise our courage. Just imagine ..."

But then the little man down on the speaker's platform began to speak, and the neighbours immediately hissed at Störner to be quiet, as if every word Adam Gästner said was a precious commodity. Gästner was a natural philosopher, whose system was a very strange crossover to theosophy. The basis of the whole thing were certain doctrines of the Stoics. With his tangled locks of hair, sunken cheeks, sandals on his feet and baggy skirt made of a coarse fabric, Gästner gave the impression of a new edition of John the Baptist.

He was incredibly agile and jumped around on his stand as if the floor was on fire. His speech began with the creation of the world. Just as the universe had come into being through the thickening and thinning of the primordial substance and had completely absorbed the divinity after being permeated by the world soul. Thus it is by no means possible to speak of an annihilation of the whole world. However, one must assume a world fire through which everything created returns to the primordial fire. But then the creation of the world would start all over again. However, the human soul is not completely immortal. It may last beyond physical life and ascend into ever more ethereal regions, but with this world fire, its survival also has a goal

was seated. When Adam Gästner had reached this point in his speech, he moved to the opposite side of the gallery and announced that he was personally convinced that the souls would not be lost, but would undoubtedly provide the material for the future souls of the next world formation. The destruction of the earth was not to be regarded as identical with the world conflagration. One must also learn to regard this doom as a manifestation of the same divine law from which the necessities of nature spring. Natural necessity and doom are two different outflows of the same power. But in order to recognise this, one must learn to understand nature. And in order to understand nature, one must live in accordance with nature and act as a rational being. And to do this, it is above all necessary to renounce the pernicious consumption of alcohol.

The conclusion of this long speech was a call to unite and make the most of the last few days in order to purify body and soul and return purified to the bosom of the universe.

Adam Gästner was met with much applause. And there were many in his audience who were willing to sign their names on the list of abstainers at the entrance to the hall.

As Störner and Professor Schreier descended the side staircase, which he knew well from happy nights out, into the back alley where the closed cars usually waited, he saw Dibian and Schönbrecher. The two of them had just turned the corner and turned round at Störner's call.

Dibian was on his way to the "Mehrfach beinzichtigen Aasgeier", his favourite pub, where he was served an excellent Pilsener beer, and was accompanied by Schönbrecher.

"That bloke has made me thirsty with his talk about alcohol," he said. "Rags like that should have their mouths shut," he added grimly, "they take all the juice and strength from humanity. That will be a fine discipline that the last day will find."

"Did you know," asked Professor Schreier, "that we are now even getting a new magazine for the downfall of the earth? I was recently in company with Tintler and the governor's counsellor Pensinger. And Pensinger ... he is in the press office ... told me that a new newspaper is to be founded. It's called 'The Last Day', and its last issue is to appear on the day the earth is shattered."

Doctor Störner's annoyance at today's meeting melted away:
"Humanity always retains its sense of humour ... even in serious situations. When will this delicious leaf cheer us up first?"

"They don't know what to do in the press office. They discuss back and forth what they should do if the paper ends up in the anarchists' style ..."

"Nothing can be more annoying than what goes on and is tolerated every day under the eyes of the state authorities. This Father Methud, who is driving the people crazy, has been preaching again for some time."

"He has a powerful protector," said Schreier cautiously.

"Reference?"

"Yes - how do you know?"

"I could have guessed it."

"I got that from Pensinger, too. The governor's counsellor ... well, I can tell you. He's as good as engaged to my daughter. They finally get the girl - bang: the world comes to an end."

"That's a pity," said Dibian profoundly, "well - congratulations in any case. Especially in case the world doesn't end."

Schönbrecher looked on with fluttering eyes. He had remembered that he had once found Frieda Schreier quite pretty. He had found a nice little pain for a few sonnets.

But Störner was a wicked mind reader. He just looked at Schönbrecher and guessed: "Do it like Dante Gabriel Rosetti."

"What is it?" asked the poet suspiciously.

"I'll give you an empty tin of sardines as a present. Or if that's too small - I also have a tin of sea trout at home."

Unsettled, Schönbrecher took up a defensive position: "Aren't you going to tell me ...?"

"I advise you to seal your best poems in a sardine tin and sink this coffin in a grave, perhaps it will survive the general destruction and you will awaken to immortality in a few hundred thousand years in the midst of a new human race."

"Sir!" Schönbrecher tugged at the thick knot of his tie and stopped. Schönbrecher wanted to say something. But he changed his mind, took off his hat to Dibian and Schreier with a silent salute and turned into a side alley.

"Sapperment," said Dibian, "he was wild now."

"Oh no. I can't stand him. If he survived Judgement Day, he'd be able to make a drama out of it. In five acts and five-footed iambs and vine leaves in his hair. Stylised like the Apollo of Tenea. But now, gentlemen, now the beer will taste good."

The "Mehrfach beinzichtige Aasgeier" - Dibian had used this name instead of the harmless "Schwarzer Adler" - was located in the maze of houses around the foot of the Domberg, in an area that had not yet been reached by the desire for schematisation. You had to make your way through many small alleyways and then stood at the entrance to a cellar. Down there you often met a small group of artists and professors. But recent events had also brought unrest and confusion to this circle and had broken it up. Only the most intrepid among them persevered.

Today, only Hauser and Adamowicz were sitting at the table in the corner next to the wooden staircase. The conversations that night grew out of an oppressive fear of freedom. Here were men who did not fear death and rose above fear. And their laughter left the fear of the masses far behind.

The admonitions of the apostle, who had so warmly recommended abstinence, were not followed at all. When they set off and reached the upper world with some difficulty using the banisters, the ashes of dawn lay over the small square in front of the cellar. The sky above the houses was yellowish and covered with long clouds. From the wall of the house opposite, an ancient lion's mouth spewed a jet of water into a wide stone basin. The edges of the basin were smooth and polished from the many pitchers and jugs that had rested here over the centuries to catch the water. Hauser, who had jumped up here, had to hold on to an iron hook in the wall to prevent himself from falling.

"Speak!" the others shouted, "Speak!"

"Brothers!" he began, "Brothers under the sign of terror! The sword of destruction hangs menacingly over us. We can already hear the roll of thunder -"

There was a murmur somewhere in the sleeping city. It was as if the masses of houses were being given a voice, rough and disgruntled, like that of someone disturbed from sleep.

"Bravo! Chorus!" cheered the undaunted, "Keep talking ... with Chorus!"

But Hauser was intimidated by the distant noise. He jumped down. And they were all forced to listen to the murmur that swelled and seemed to bubble between the houses, mixed with the grey of the dawn.

"What's that? They're getting closer!" said

Störner. The men looked at each other.

The noise really did seem to be getting closer. It had taken on a menacing sound and was hoarse, like the restrained roar of a predator. In the thinning grey, the low houses seemed to stretch out to see what was approaching.

A window rattled. Someone looked out, up and down the street and then stared at the small group at the lion's mouth opposite. The

The sleepy waiter, who had just been locking the door to the cellar, ran back and fetched the landlord out. He didn't look very clever and joined the guests to ask them for advice. But they had no explanation themselves.

By now it had been decided that the crowd would come here. A policeman's alarm whistle shrilled in a side alley. Two or three whistles answered. A locked-out dog approached along the walls of the house, shy, its tail curled up. He occasionally turned his head backwards. When he reached the small square in front of the cellar, he hesitated. Then the noise behind him rose loudly. He jumped and ran past in a hurry.

Now it could be heard that the basic current of the noise was a kind of howling, above which a loud hu - hu - hu! reared up.

A well-built guard approached from the area around the cathedral.

"Mr Patry," shouted the landlord, who knew all the guards on his beat from the curfew violations, "what's going on?"

The guard showed no ill desire to plant himself next to the innkeeper and engage him in a cosy conversation about the cause of the noise. But then he pulled himself together, because a guard leader and two men came out of Antonsgasse with eager faces and called him over. They hurriedly walked towards the noise.

And now nothing happened for a while to distract our attention from the increasing noise.

Suddenly Störner saw a dark mass turning the corner at the end of the descending alley.

"Hu - hu - hu!"

Professor Schreier began to get worried. "Let's get out of the way," he said, pulling the others after him into the vaulted cellar chasm.

It was a strange procession that came howling past. Leading the way was an old man with skinny arms and legs. He was always doing a few leaps forwards, contorting his pelvis in the most adverse manner, and then jumping back again.

"A new edition of the Andernach jumping procession," Störner whispered to Dibian. The leader wore a tight-fitting leather cap on his head, with a foxtail dangling from the back. A strip of red cloth was sewn onto the collar of the skirt, and two wide stripes ran along the seams of the trousers to the frayed edges.

"Hu - hu - hu!" roared his entourage.

It consisted of men and women, miserable, battered creatures, some of them dragging their children with them, who hung asleep on their backs as wispy bundles. The men were gloomy and pale; one could see that they had passed a night in which their souls had wandered helplessly. Now they had made up their minds, now t h e y had made up their minds to go no matter what. They had a leader and followed him without hesitation. A kind of military organisation held them together. Some of them had circular patches of cloth, red like the leader's badge, on the front of their chests. They walked on either side of the procession and kept time with their hands to the repeated Hu - hu - hu!

Occasionally the leader stopped, threw up his arms and began a clamour produced by a movement of the lower jaw. A continuous we - we - we - we - we, like a stylised chattering of teeth. Then the others also stopped, raised their arms and joined in the clamour.

The procession took a long time. There must have been a few hundred people. Nobody noticed the group in the cellar neck. No one looked left or right, all attention was focussed on the front, a stream that no amount of influence could divert from its course.

The security guards, who had so bravely moved in the face of the noise earlier, remained invisible.

Only after the last stragglers had turned the corner did the small troop, which had been reinforced by three men in the meantime, arrive.

A fresh wind seemed to have swept away the ashes of the dawn. A cold, calm light trickled out of the sky. The day flashed

up. And the policemen's helmets flashed. Mr Patry, who was the last to pass by, panting, was called by the landlord.

"Mr Patry, what is it?"

He placed an important finger on his mouth, a finger that looked like a sausage. Störner found the gesture so funny that he almost laughed. "It must be some new sect," the guard whispered mysteriously, "we've been ordered to ... vastehngen S'

..." he interrupted himself in a popular tone, "so religious parades! I'd have to go as far as possible ... Well ... of course!" And then he saw that the others were already far ahead and set off at a trot to catch up with them.

"Children," said Störner, "I feel like seeing where this company is going. What are we going to do with the evening? So forward ... after them! Those guys looked really scary. Who knows what else they're up to."

The others were prepared to accompany Störner. Only Professor Schreier excluded himself and recommended himself: "It got me excited ... a fanatical crowd like that is always exciting. I'm no longer young enough for that sort of thing ... I'm tired!"

It was not difficult to follow the procession. The clamour kept climbing up the cathedral hill, and when the small company had reached the top, they saw the square in front of the cathedral densely occupied by the crowd. It seemed as if they had been joined by all sorts of early risers and curious people who couldn't resist observing what was going on. The sub-guides had divided the whole crowd into clusters, between which they walked about, talking quietly, sometimes to this one, sometimes to that one. The clamour and howling had stopped.

Störner noticed that people's faces were rigid and mask-like. It was as if they were waiting for a call to revive them. A few children were crying. But their mothers made no effort to soothe them.

The leader was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly he rose on the shoulders of some of his officers above the heads of the crowd, near the portal of the cathedral. Grey and cold

the gigantic stone backdrop rose up behind him, with countless scrollwork and lacework that seemed to become ever finer further up. There was a blood-red glow on the knob of the higher tower.

The leader swayed a little on his living throne. Then he stood still. A murmur flowed over the crowd.

All faces were turned towards him.

"Me," the man called across the cathedral square in a hoarse voice, "I tell you, I, Nikolaus Zenzinger, have written down the revelation. God appeared to me in a dream and showed me visions. The four visions of the abyss. Gehenna, Mishkotin, Aphradot and Erebar." Then he threw up his arms and started shouting again, his lower jaw quivering.

"We - we - we - we - we," howled the crowd. It was like the babbling of a fool. "Go, exterminate! he shouted at me. His voice was as strong as thunder, like the thunder that bows the heads of mountains. But I was strong and did not bow my head. I looked him in the face. He thundered, and I saw the sign of the red death on his face. The sign of the red death. Go, exterminate! he thundered and said it a second and a third time. Root out my adversaries, for I will not see them before me on the last day. They shall be cut off from the earth when I appear in my glory, shining like a red robe and on my throne of terror and power. They must be destroyed, for they shall not see the splendour of my judgement. I will make you my arm, my fist, the fingers of my fist. You will have the strength of the lion and the tiger that roars through the valleys. Your finger will point, and whoever you point at shall be destroyed. My lightning is in your fist, and you will hurl it at my adversaries, for you are the last of the prophets, greater than Elijah and more glorious than Moses. My adversaries are handed over to you. For I have spoken to many and told them of these last days. But they have stopped their ears and acted as if I were the voice of the clouds or the voice of the grass when it grows. They have stopped their ears with the

wax of disobedience, and have pretended not to hear what I said. These are my adversaries."

"Hu - hu - hu - hu!" the shouts fell like lashes, inciting, spurring lashes.

"What crime is greater before God than disobedience? They are among us to whom his call has gone out. They have acted as if they heard nothing. And they have kept silent and have not warned us. They wanted to withhold the majesty of the Lord from us. They knew what the Lord God had decided for the earth. And they kept silent even though they knew it. There lives a man after the heart of God. He showed my finger an adversary of the Lord. Thomas' reference has shown me who has heard the voice from the air and has stopped his ear with the wax of disobedience."

Störner looked at Dibian. "Thomas reference!" he muttered, "him again and again."

"That's a bad story," Dibian replied quietly, "just look at the people. They're beside themselves."

"This adversary of God wanted us to perish without being able to prepare ourselves for God's glory. We should have gone unwarned - unprepared. But now we have recognised him, and I stretch out my finger and point to him. I have brought you before his house, before his castle, before his door, and I point to him."

Zenzinger raised a stiff arm and held it out straight. His finger pointed to a house that stood at an angle opposite the cathedral. A house with a steep gable above the weathered face. A hand jumped out of the wall above the door and held a large key.

Next to Störner, an old, shrivelled woman cried out, shrilly, so that it could be heard all over the square: "Eleagabal Kuperus!" It was Mrs Swoboda, in whom Zenzinger's words had confirmed an old delusion. The hatred and mistrust of the sorcerer had given way under the impression of Palingenius' death, and she had willingly submitted to the

friendly influence of the old man. But then she had remained alone. And in the long, joyless hours, now empty of her timeworn hope, it came creeping out again. Had not Kuperus alone been responsible for the death of her childhood friend? Who else had given him the idea of flying but the one with his cursed arts? And she had begun to hate him anew, more fiercely than ever before. His name slipped from her lips, dipped in poison and bile.

"Eleagabal Kuperus," she screamed, "Eleagabal Kuperus!" And the crowd repeated, muffled and rumbling: "Eleagabal Kuperus!" Nikolaus Zenzinger grew on his throne: "Yes - Eleagabal Kuperus.

It is he. He is the great adversary of God who must first be destroyed. He must disappear from the presence of the Lord. I hand him over to the red death!"

The old woman next to Störner flailed her arms and shrieked:

"He is a sorcerer! He is God's adversary! He is doomed to the red death!" She pushed her way through the crowd, flailing about, and you could see the path she was taking by the whirlpool that was travelling behind her. It led towards the house of Kuperus.

"Mrs Swoboda, Mrs Swoboda!" someone called after her. But she didn't hear.

Everyone had turned towards the old house. The rigidity had gone from their faces. They were animated by fierce determination, by a terrible hatred; the masses, fused into a single body, writhed and writhed under the whip lashes of the shouting: "Hu - hu - hu!"

And Zenzinger approached the condemned man's house on his throne. His arm was still outstretched, as if in spasm, stiff as a piece of wood, and he repeated bellowing: "To the red death! The r e d d e a t h !"

A clatter. A stone had hit a small window in the weathered face of the house and smashed one of the dirty panes. A second and third stone followed, shattering the window panes.

remaining discs. The empty cave was like an eye knocked out of an old face.

And then a whole rain of stones began to crash against the front of the house. The mortar came loose in many places and crumbled down onto the heads of the first of the attackers.

In a few minutes, the house was covered in wounds. The bricks had emerged from underneath the rubble and their dull red colour looked like maltreated flesh.

And suddenly a couple of lads dragged a long beam over.

"Watch out," they shouted, "the key to the house is coming!" They must have fetched the enormous, heavy timber from a building that had been started near the cathedral and on which no work had been done for weeks. And now they were dragging the beam towards Eleagabal's house, and one of them was dragging a long, rusty iron chain behind it without knowing what it was for. "The key is coming!" they shouted again and again.

And the crowd that made room for them repeated triumphantly:
"The key, the key."

"Hu - hu - hu!"

And after the dreadful beat of the screaming, the lads swung the beam backwards and then let it whizz forwards for a moment. There was a crash and then a clatter. A large piece of the litter had fallen on the head of the man in front and knocked his hat off.

The guards finally thought it was time to intervene and protect the threatened man's property. They had now grown to fifteen men and burst out of two of the narrow alleyways at the same time. A terrible commotion ensued.

"Police! Police!"

"Hu - hu - hu!"

"Strike them down! They want to protect the adversary."

A young man had grasped the stone ornaments of the cathedral portal and climbed up them until he could swing himself into one of the niches where the stone saints lived. There he stood on the barely foot-wide landing and took one stone after another out of his pockets. Pieces of brick and hard chunks of cement flew in a wide arc towards the places where the guards' helmets were visible. They fell into the centre of the crowd, and the people who thought they had been hit by the policemen's blows or blows in the turmoil went into a frenzy.

The harmonica player Samek had grabbed the guard leader by the chest with both fists and shook him so hard that his helmet fell off his head. "What do you want? What else do you want? Dog, it's the masters, vastanden!"

A few courageous guards tried to chop their leader out. But their fists were grabbed, their sabres were torn from them, their legs were clutched so that they could no longer move.

A shot was fired somewhere.

"They're shooting! They're shooting at us."

Samek, from whom his victim had finally been snatched, whistled on two fingers. The oath keepers answered from all sides. In the midst of the tangle of fighting, old Swoboda screamed incessantly ... shrilly:

"The wizard ... the wizard must go!" Her friend, the church servant, who had made his way to her, clutched her arms and tried to pull her down.

And suddenly the body of the crowd contracted elastically and pushed the guards away. They staggered back, exhausted, bleeding, their uniforms torn. The leader, one eye swollen from a punch, gathered them in the small square in front of the

"Schwarzen-Adler" cellar and led them back to the town hall at a run.

In the meantime, the strikers had seized the beam again and thundered it against the door. It crashed against the carvings depicting Saul's visit to the witch of Endor, against the lindworms and fire-breathing dragons, against the leviathan that was floating on its sea.

swam with sharp waves. The iron fittings crunched and popped out of the rivets, they bent and broke and clattered to the ground.

"Hu - hu - hu!" Samek howled, beating time to the thrusts with his hands. But then something strange happened. From the frozen hand above the gate, this deceptive replica of a human hand, the key it had held for centuries came loose and fell down hard in front of Samek.

And the fingers, which had previously been completely closed around the metal, had opened up and remained slightly curved. Their posture seemed completely different from before.

"Jesus, Maria!" cried old Swoboda.

Samek picked up the key and looked mockingly at his hand. "We already have a key," he shouted, "we don't need any more!" And he flapped his hands and, carried away by him, the men grabbed them again

...

Then a dry crack went through the old wood and a large crack cut the mutilated carving in half. But before the beam could shatter the door completely, it opened silently inwards of its own accord. It was like the gesture of a victim giving up his futile resistance and offering himself to the executioner. And something of this eloquent expression had an effect even on the excited crowd, causing them to draw back a little hesitantly and indecisively from the open door.

But Samek didn't quite let her come to her senses. "Hu - hu - hu!" He howled like a wolf and rushed into the corridor. The others followed behind him, egged on by the oath-keepers who were scattered among the crowd and working according to their leader's instructions. The frame-maker, who lived in the cathedral square, was among the first.

They ran along the corridor, on whose walls the glowing letters formed words without meaning, they bumped into the statues in the niches and threw them off their pedestals, they made their way through the red room and into the narrow gallery between the walls of books.

It was always as if a shadow was receding before them. It was dusk here, and Samek would bump into an obstacle at any moment, which

stopped him in his tracks. It was only at the entrance to the domed hall that he thought he saw that it was Eleagabal's servant, the man with the pointed ears and the wolf's face. He had him at arm's length in front of him and stretched out his hand, but then he received such a violent blow that it immediately sank down. The pain ran crawling up into his shoulder and seemed to settle in the joint. At that moment he was overcome with fear, but those who followed pushed and shoved and hurled him into the centre of the domed hall, almost to the marble table that stood there.

He looked round. There he stood in a circle of pillars, but they were not pillars, for none of them had the task of supporting the beams. High above, the dome arched over the room, a lid screwed on tightly so that nothing of what was happening here could leak out, a kind of cornea over a large eye directed towards the sky. The glass was dull and merely translucent. A whitish light streamed over the splendour of the marble, whose slabs glowed in the strangest colours.

The strikers were amazed at the quiet beauty of the room. They were disappointed. They had expected to find some kind of witches' kitchen, all the usual magic apparatus, skeletons and skulls, snakes and children's corpses in spirits and stills and large mysterious books.

Suddenly Samek noticed Eleagabal just opposite him. He saw him behind a kind of thin curtain made of long, branched and matted red fringes. Eleagabal had gathered some of the fringes together with his hand and pushed them aside, looking calmly at the crowd.

"Durten is er," shouted the leader, who had regained courage and confidence from the flow of the crowd behind him. And he tried to raise his right hand to point at Eleagabal. But he couldn't, and when he looked down, he realised that his hand was blue-black and swollen.

The frame maker had already spotted the old man and rushed at him with a heavy angle iron that he had snatched from someone's hand.

"He must be exterminated," howled old Swoboda.

Five, six, seven men followed the frame maker. But then they saw Eleagabal drop the fringes of the curtain. His figure was only visible in very faint outlines. One last impression remained: a smile in which the large yellow canines crept out of the withered mouth like crooked knives. With a cry of rage, the frame maker reached into the curtain.

His fingers crushed against the stone.

Eleagabal Kuperus had disappeared.

They saw that they were standing in front of a marble slab that covered the wall smoothly and without joints. What they had thought were fringes was the red veining of the stone.

Then they turned angrily and rushed at the few pieces of equipment in the hall to smash them. They spread out in the corridors and small adjoining rooms, tore down the books and crushed them with their feet, blindly hitting the walls with the pieces of the smashed chairs and bookshelves ...

A warning call came from outside: Military!

They paused, reflected ... what had happened? What had driven them to rage like this? Now they saw the consequences before them. The habit of this obedience to state authority had not yet been completely extinguished by the frenzy of mortal fear. They hurried to leave the house.

When the military arrived on the cathedral square to the sound of drums, they found it cleared. Eleagabal Kuperus received the captain, who advanced through the devastation into the domed hall with ten men, with a smile and a somewhat ironic thank you. -

The astronomer's notes

Table of contents

From the diary of Professor Zugmeyer:

30. May. Yesterday, terrible scenes are said to have taken place in the city. The crowd stormed and destroyed the house of Eleagabal Kuperus, a harmless old man. He is a kind of miracle man, this Kuperus, and it is not known that he has ever done anyone any harm. Why did people turn their anger against him? This is the first symptom of a frenzy that will soon grow even more. They will soon attack anyone who tries to oppose them in any way.

1 June. I receive letter after letter. I wonder how long it will t a k e f o r the post office to start working. I don't even look at these letters any more. I am supposed to answer whether it is true that the earth will perish. What am I supposed to say? Why didn't I keep quiet? I should have taken all the fear upon myself. That would have been a heroic deed, a true heroic deed, against which all other praised deeds are nothing. But if someone else had discovered it ...? at least it wouldn't have been me who plunged humanity into this abyss.

3 June. Eleagabal Kuperus, the miracle man, is said to have known it too. At least it is said that this was the reason for the anger of the crowd. A certain Nikolaus Zenzinger is said to have led them. The police are looking for him. But how will they find him? It's not the people of prudence and order who have the power, but the madmen. I sit in front of my devices all night long. The terror is getting closer and closer, on the path I have calculated. During the day I can't find peace to sleep. It is impossible. I wear myself out. My assistants have left me. They have declared that they f i n d it unnecessary to continue working. But I cannot s u r r e n d e r yet. I stare at the sky, night after night, hoping for the small

A change in the orbit of terror that would indicate to me that the earth is saved. If it takes much longer, I will sink down, powerless, unable to rise. But hope keeps me going. Perhaps some unpredictable influence will tear the terror away from us. Or: I was wrong after all! I wish I had been wrong. I don't care if my scholarly reputation is gone. I want to have been wrong. Let it be said that I am a dilettante, an incompetent person. It is nothing to me. But let this agony be taken from me that it was me ... I don't care if it was the most extraordinary miscalculation, the stupidest blunder in the simplest formula. But Alfonso Chiari and Wall and twenty others came to the same conclusion.

10. June. I received a distinguished visitor today. My daughter was with me. She looks strange, I don't know how to put it. The perfume of sensuality that clings to her is incredibly sublimated, and she looks as if ... no, it doesn't seem to be fear that has changed her so much, but rather longing ... What else can she long for in this short span of time? She is quite distraught, but only like someone who wants to achieve something and fears that it will be impossible. I have never studied psychology, I have paid too little attention to the people around me ... that is now taking its revenge, and I am forced to search fearfully into the souls of all the people I meet. It is fortunate that I have no wife and no children. No one in whom I take a direct interest. - She asked me, of course, if it was really true. I tried to evade with possibilities. But she didn't want to believe me. So I told her everything. And I have to confess it, with a surge of hatred and satisfaction. That horrified me later. But it's understandable. Isn't she the daughter of the man who actually brought the horror into the world? Why didn't Bezug keep quiet?

11 June. And why am I actually continuing this diary? Why do I always feel the urge to pick up my pen in the morning and open my book? Why is that? - Perhaps because

hope still lies at the bottom of my soul. Against all the objections of reason ...

12 June. Today, or perhaps yesterday ... Doctor Störner has come to see me! I am in a state of excitement that cannot be ... A suspicion has been confirmed. It has almost become a terrible certainty. What is it? I think I can see through a diabolical plan. Doctor Störner has come to me in a very hostile way. At first he treated me like an enemy. He thought I was an accomplice. And his accusation is terrible. Reference! Thomas Bezug! He believes that Bezug is trying to increase the general consternation with full calculation. He sees the hand of reference everywhere. Through this Zenzinger, Bezug has incited the crowd against Kuperus. And he thinks that Bezug is taking ghastly pleasure in the agonising end of humanity. "He has the instincts of an inquisitor," he said, "who is constantly contemplating new tortures. He has seen from my condition that he has wronged me. Now he demands a pious deception from me. The news of the earth's doom had come from me and I had to endeavour to make people believe that the earth would be saved. I wanted to do it. But I don't have the strength to do it if I can't rely on the truth. Where am I to get the tone of conviction in my condition ... The lie will be recognised at a thousand paces. Yes - if I had a spark of probability for it ... just a distant glimmer of a possibility of salvation ...

15 June. Fear produces strange blossoms. I don't leave the observatory. But rumours still reach me. You only find out most things through rumours. The newspapers are already appearing very irregularly, the workers have stopped work. They are said to have found the Shroud of Christ. They have put it on display in the cathedral and are beating their heads bloody in front of it, trampling each other ... And then something that makes t h e m laugh. It is terribly comical. A triumph of technical science in the service of faith. At the "end of the world." The phonograph industry has quickly taken off before it's all over. They sell

Phonograph cylinder with the Pope's blessing: *urbi et orbi* ... and with a *Hail Mary* that he spoke into the machine. A phonographed blessing! And the pope's voice is said to be very good. It's a good piece and actually a pity that a humanity that likes such jokes has already perished. But what's the point if there are poor devils who use it to assuage their fears. Fifty per cent of the profits go to the holy father and fifty to the factory. What the agents get, I don't know. But if the earth survives their destruction, they will all have made a good deal.

18 June. The horror is growing. We hear scary things about new sects forming. The old earth throws up poisonous bubbles. The sweat of death breaks out of every pore. It groans and rattles. The Marianites should show themselves again. But they are harmless people compared to that other sect that has everything in consternation. The
They call themselves the "Brothers of the Red Death". They are only spoken of in whispers. They seem to have their scouts everywhere and choose their victims like a bird of prey chooses its prey. Because they are supposed to sacrifice people - it is as if people are returning to all the cruelties and follies of the beginning of their history ... in the same state of helplessness and defencelessness in the face of forces they are unable to recognize. These "brothers of the red death" are said to smother their fear in blood. They live somewhere in dilapidated factory buildings and are untraceable for the last guardians of the law. They really are brave people, these last guardians of order. The majority have run up and away and given up exposing themselves to danger - for nothing. Because you hear every day that police officers have been murdered ... here and there.

20. June. It's no wonder that everything is going haywire. Who is going to want to work when everything is coming to an end so soon? People have thrown away their tools, abandoned their workshops and machines. The farmers come into town and add to the turmoil of the desperate. They want to be comforted and lifted up

and only get caught up in the whirlwind that robs them of their senses. And on top of all the horrors, a spectre rises in their midst: hardship. The rise in food prices is enormous. Everyone wants to earn and enjoy quickly. And yet hundreds of thousands of people roam the streets with nothing to eat. I have a new servant, a red-haired man. He's a brave chap who isn't infected by the general confusion. He gets me what I need and tells me faithfully what is going on. Robbery and looting are common occurrences of the day.

21. June. The Khedive has been murdered. He is said to have been strangled by his own wives.

22. June. The President of the United States was seriously injured by revolver shots on the street. The frenzy has gripped the whole world.

23. June. Two regiments are said to have been furloughed yesterday. Two entire regiments. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say disbanded. The soldiers could no longer be kept. They wanted to return home, and they are said to have threatened to kill their officers and then themselves if they were not discharged. If the military no longer obeyed, who would confront the hordes of frenzied soldiers?

24. June. The King of Sweden is dead. He has been blown up along with half the palace. In Romania, the peasants rage like animals. Fights between old enemies everywhere: Poles and Germans, Czechs and Germans, Hungarians and Germans - the old hatred of the whole world against the Germans has broken out ... People no longer force their feelings.

25. June. ... My hands are shaking ... I almost think ... I don't dare write it down ... Tonight! If it were the truth ... if it were the truth ...

26. June. I was not mistaken. It is the truth. They are saved. The deviation of terror is clear. My calculation is not wrong. But the miracle has happened. A secret power is working on the corrupter so that he slowly recedes to the side. They shall not be one day

live longer in their fear. It's four o'clock in the morning. I will try to sleep. If I can for joy, after not being able to for so long out of worry. And I'll be at Thomas' house by nine in the morning at the latest to give him the news ... I'm tired ...

26 June. 10 o'clock in the evening.

I have to collect myself. What a day? How right Doctor Störner was. I have to think about what to do. Above all, I mustn't stay an hour longer in this man's service. Then I can do what I want. Tomorrow I'll be free and can tell them that the earth has been saved. Doctor Störner will help me with that - of course! He knows the quickest way for my good news, my gospel, to reach their ears. And now I will calmly record what this day has brought me, for now I know that the final vignette of my diary will not be destruction. - I had slept after all, and slept well, much longer than I had intended. Weithofer, my servant, woke me at about ten o'clock. I got up and got dressed. The few hours of sleep had made me calm and confident. All the excitement was far behind me. When I was ready, I had a hearty breakfast - I hadn't eaten with such appetite for a long time - and set off for the city. For the first time in many weeks. I was the first of all to tell my servant that we no longer had to fear the terror. He remained quite calm, his face did not change in the least, as if I had merely told him that I wanted to have chocolate instead of coffee for breakfast tomorrow. But when I left, he timidly held out his hand to me - as if to congratulate me on a success in his rough, naïve way. As if I had averted the danger. I wasn't afraid to take his hand and shake it. All sense of distance was taken away from me, I felt purified by the events of the last few months and immersed in a warm stream of brotherhood. I believe that I really have become a different and better person. Then I told him that I was now going to Bezug to share my discovery with him. His face became hard and stony,

He had a completely different expression on his face than before, when, for all his mastery, it had been different. I only realised later what this meant when I returned from the city and he told me that he had been in the service of D for some time. He knew him better than I. - As I walked towards the town, enjoying the fresh vigour of my strength, and finding great pleasure in walking along the street in the sunshine, I thought out what I had to say to him. Whether Störner was right in his suspicions or not, my relationship with Bezug forced me to report to him first and foremost. On the road I saw whole platoons of peasants travelling towards the town with their wives and children alongside wagons laden with their belongings. In front of the first houses I came across a whole troop of drunken soldiers. They had torn off their uniforms and were chopping branches from the trees by the roadside with their bayonets. As I passed the large asylum, I saw the gate wide open. The shutters had been torn out, the windows smashed and the garden, which I could see into, was completely devastated. A man in uniform was lying on the stones of the driveway, his face in a pool of blood. I a s k e d an old man sitting impassively on the bridge railing what had happened. It was a long time before I got an answer out of him. The lunatics had attacked the few guards who had not shirked their duty, beaten them up and escaped. Now they were roaming around the town. I saw a crowd in front of a suburban liquor store. The mob had broken into the shop and smashed the barrels while shouting, after everyone had drunk themselves into a stupor.

I realised that I had to hurry to get my message out to the people. At every turn, I encountered signs of complete wildness. In front of a large window of the Bäck furniture shop, the street was so full of people that I couldn't get through. When, after a few unsuccessful attempts, I tried to retreat to take another path, I was so hemmed in that I had to be patient and couldn't help myself.

than to follow the crowd. She pushed towards the shop window and I saw that her attention was focussed on the large picture on display there. A monstrous picture that filled the whole window. There was a groaning and gasping all around me, a gasping and frightful trembling, as if the picture in front was having a mighty shattering effect. After half an hour I had advanced far enough to look at the picture. It must be a work by the same painter who had already created another painting of the end of the world. The same painting that I had become familiar with through the mass-produced reproductions. This new work was also dedicated to the end of the world. A panel at the bottom gave its title: "The Last Hour."

It was another vast, barren heath. But instead of the sky, a sea of fire hung over it. Fire blazed around the entire horizon, and long tongues of flame ran across the earth before the maw of the blaze. They caught hold of the dry grass of the ground and rushed on. Towards the centre of the picture were some old willow trees, which looked like burning people with their branches thrown up in despair. Close to these trees was a cart of travelling comedians whose rear wheels were already engulfed in fire. At the very front, however, was a group of people, or rather a mere tangle of bodies, their skin brown and brittle to the touch, like the crispy rind of a roast. They had clutched each other in mortal combat, their limbs entwined, and so had all been scorched together and roasted by the terrible breath of the flames. But among the pile of distorted, twisted corpses there was still a little life left. Two people, a young man and a woman, who had miraculously escaped death so far. Or rather, only one person, for the young man had thrown himself over the woman's still soft, bloodied body and was drinking her blood from a wide wound just between her breasts. The figures were so large and this group so far in the foreground that the observer was just opposite the man's face. The eyes that looked out of the

The eyes staring at the picture were wide open and swollen, stony with horror, and in them all the horror of the whole picture was repeated once again and increased to its peak. And if you turned away from these terrible eyes and looked at the horizon and sky of the picture, you saw eyes directed at you from all sides. It was an army of flaming demons rushing towards you, with human-like and animal-like formations, grinning, hideous heads with broad mouths, polyps of fiery slime that darted forward with swollen antennae, winged serpents ... and all with hideous, greedy eyes ...

I saw from the numbness of the people that this image had a terrible effect on them. And by God it was time for them to hear that their fear might be at an end. For a moment I felt as if I had to turn round and shout among them: It is not true! It is not true! You are saved! It was a great temptation, I can tell you that. But then the conviction won out that they would not believe me, and that under the influence of this image they would be able to fall upon me and tear me apart. And I was not allowed to put myself in this danger, because I was the bearer of the saving message.

I was pushed back and forth in front of the painting for more than half an hour until a wave finally carried me onwards. I finally managed to free myself and ran as fast as I could towards the Palais Bezugs. It was almost midday when I arrived. I found none of the servants in the anterooms and ran up the stairs to Bezugs's study. The door was locked. So I went back down the stairs and into Bezugs's flat. At last a servant came to meet me. The master is not here, but outside the city in his villa. Another delay. I am beside myself. Every hour increases the frenzy of the crowd. I order the servant to hitch up a carriage immediately. He laughs cheekily at me and says that he doesn't have to take orders from me. That's the end of commanding and obeying. I grab him by the throat and hold my revolver in front of his forehead. At that moment I see

I realise how well I did to follow Weithofer's advice and take a weapon with me.

There he goes at last, shy and with a treacherous look. I don't let him out of my sight and always walk with him, revolver in hand; I accompany him to the stables and wait until the horses are harnessed. Then I get into the carriage and drive off as fast as I can.

It was half past one when I finally arrived in front of the villa. The drawbridge was open and someone asked from behind the embrasures what I wanted. I replied that I had to speak to the gentleman urgently. Then I had to give my name and was told I would have to wait. It took an hour before the drawbridge was lowered. I was led through a dark corridor where I heard whispering and the clink of weapons. The courtyard I came across was guarded by a few men armed with rifles and revolvers. The reference had obviously been well guarded. I was taken to a room with a glass ceiling and iron walls and left alone.

I had to wait another hour.

When I became impatient and wanted to leave the room, I found that I had been locked in. There was nothing left to do but to leave me to the arbitrariness of the authorities. But I can say that I have never experienced a similar nervous agony as during that hour. At last, when I was already half insane, they took me out of my cage and led me through some corridors in the thick walls of this fortress-like building. I entered the large greenhouse and found Bezug under a group of palm trees. Two men were with him. One was undoubtedly a sailor. The other, however, was dressed in a most peculiar outfit: a medieval velvet cap, wide Turkish trousers of blue cloth and pointed beaked slippers of red leather.

Without any greeting, Bezug asked about my desire. What did I have to talk to him about so urgently? And when I asked a little more

hesitated, because I was almost at a loss for words owing to an understandable excitement, he might have thought that I did not wish to speak on account of his companions, and said: "Leave off all secrecy, Professor, they may hear everything. It is Captain Dallago of my *Regina maris* and the good castellan of my castle at Antothrace."

"I don't mind, Baron," I said, "if these gentlemen are present. I want the whole world to hear what I have to tell you."

"So out with it!"

"I come to tell you that humanity is saved from its horror. The earth will not perish ... we are saved."

Then he approached me: "You're crazy, sir, how can you say that? You yourself were the first to ..."

"Yes - but I have now convinced myself ... I have unequivocal proof ... the Terror has left its orbit, it is moving away from Earth ..."

And now I could see that Störner's intentions were clear. His face flashed with a furious rage. His voice was screeching and shrill: "That's not true! That's not true! What do you want with this? What are you up to?" It looked as if he was going to run his hands round my neck, and the captain and the castellan, who were always at his side, seemed ready to throw themselves on me at once.

It was necessary to muster all my prudence. And to distract him a little, I began to give an account of my new observation as calmly and clearly as possible and far more objectively than was necessary. My means was well chosen. His anger subsided, and when I had finished, he said: "It's all right! It may be so for my sake! But look at the people! Do you think they will believe you? This disease must take its natural course."

"No," I said, "this disease is fatal, and before it comes to its natural end, before the day of doom is over, mankind may have injured itself so badly that it can no longer recover."

"So, tell me, what do you want to do?"

"I come to you to ask you to calm humanity." And in a fit of painful anger that this tormentor did not seem inclined to put an end to the torment, I added: "You have caused this terrible confusion, it is your duty to find means to solve it."

"I'm not going to do that. I tell you, this illness must take its natural course. It goes without saying that I appreciate you bringing me the news. I can now watch them tear each other apart with even greater pleasure."

I couldn't refrain from saying: "You're a scoundrel, Bezug, the greatest criminal who ever lived."

He took it calmly and looked at me coldly with his terrible eyes, which now had an indeterminate expression: "You only realise that now? But you will also realise now that I am in no mood to be deprived of my pleasure. You see, I have taken good care to savour everything to the end. I am carefully guarded here ... by my most reliable people. I don't want to leave prematurely, because the sensations of these last days are too delicious. I don't want it to happen to me like the Khedive or the King of Sweden, who were not careful enough. Or like my friends, the banker Rosengarten from Berlin and Mr Smith from Philadelphia, whose houses were stormed and who were beaten to death. As I said, I thank you very much for giving my enjoyment a solid basis with your message."

My excessive anger and contempt made me careless.

"Good," I said trembling, "then I'll try to bring the madmen to their senses myself."

Bezug always looked me in the eye: "You won't do that. You won't want to condemn yourself to death. It will happen to you as it almost happened to that Eleagabal Kuperus if he hadn't deceived the crowd with his sleight of hand."

Remember, back then the anger of the masses didn't have the force and impact it has now ..."

There was a clear threat in these words, and I had to think of Störner and what he had told me about his involvement in the storming of Kuperus' house. But I could not refrain from repeating: "I will try it myself. I will find ways and means ... I will look for allies ..."

Bezug closed his eyes. "I forbid you to bring this news to the people."

"I will not be forbidden to do so. I consider it my duty ..."

Then Bezug opened his eyelids again to a narrow slit. His fingers stretched and closed as if in a spasm, and he held his clenched fist in front of my face. "I'll crush you," he hissed, "there won't be an atom of you left." And the two companions, their gazes fixed on his face, moved closer to me again.

Bezug was a terrible sight, and I don't know where I got the courage to resist his will. "You will not prevent me from doing what I owe to humanity."

"Good," he replied, "get out of my sight," and he turned away.

I left the villa through the garden. Elisabeth was standing behind a bush. I greeted her. But she was looking ahead and didn't see me. The car was no longer there. But I didn't care, because now I wouldn't have used the car after all. I returned to the town on foot.

I tried to come up with a plan on the way, but I couldn't find anything that seemed likely to help me quickly. Then I went to Doctor Störner and told him what I had discovered and what had happened between me and the reference. At first he couldn't get a grip on himself. Then he asked me to leave him alone so that he could think things over properly. He wanted to support me in everything and publish the news in his newspaper tomorrow.

Then let's see what we can do next ..."

The brothers of the red death

[Table of contents](#)

Elisabeth had only caught sight of Professor Zugmeyer when he had already passed her. It was only then that the image had reached her consciousness and caused her to turn round quickly. She felt as if she wanted to ask him something. Just what was it? She no longer knew ... it had come to the surface for a moment like a question and then sunk again. Continuing a haphazard wandering through the garden, she busied herself with compiling all the symptoms that indicated an increasing paralysis of her mental faculties. There was this strange delay in the propagation of sensory impressions along the pathways. Then there was the appearance of ideas which immediately vanished again before they could be fully grasped. As before, this indecision that could not find its way anywhere, the softening of the will. It gave Elisabeth a painful pleasure to realise this. She almost caressed the thought that she was about to destroy herself completely through the terrible excesses of the last few weeks.

Her body was exhausted to the extreme. The excessive and shameless countless adventures of which the "Club of Babylonian Virgins" had been the scene, these orgies flavoured by the fear of death, had broken even her proud and supple strength.

She stopped, shuddering. A chill ran through her, even though it was a warm, almost sultry summer evening. And despite all her efforts, she had not managed to forget her great longing. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists, but there it was again ... this image that haunted her, this spectre that followed her around, more vivid and dominating than any of the realities on which she was usually dependent. When she thought of Adalbert, of his kisses and caresses that she

When she had savoured it, it blazed before her ears, and her eyes were blinded by an overwhelming brightness. And as painful as this feeling was, as reluctant as she was to let it approach - once it was there, she surrendered to it completely, in a lust before which everything else was void.

Slowly, she went up to her room and stepped out onto the balcony. From here she could see the white walls and the roof of Enzberger's mill between the old trees over there. There he lived with his lover, with this Regina, there he devoted his time and his whole being to another woman ...

But soon it was all over. For him and for her and for that third person. Everything was over. But his last hours would belong to this woman, his kisses and the last embers of his body. And fiercely she repeated the oath that this earth must not perish without her having first taken her revenge.

Her hands dropped. After the excitement of the last few moments, she felt again how weak she was and how her body ached ... like a great open wound. All her limbs were distorted from the contortions of passion, from the countless sacrifices for Astaroth.

"It's all right ... it's all right!" she murmured, but she didn't know what she meant. Then she went back to her room, shivering, after one last look into the dusk, in which a light had flickered on. A light in one of the windows of the mill over there. When Elisabeth went to her desk, she found one of the pale blue letters lying there. A pale blue oblong envelope with red edges and cut lines. On the back was the symbol: the flying dove in the centre of the druid's foot. She knew: an order for a night at the "Club of Babylonian Virgins". It had always remained a mystery to her how these letters had been delivered to her. She found them pinned with fine golden pins by her bed when she woke up in the morning, on her desk, in her jewellery boxes or cupboards - always in such a way that they couldn't fall into the hands of anyone but her. She always liked it so much that she

She had a fantastic dream that the goddess, the great and terrible Astaroth, was using special magical means to deliver these messages to her. And was it not really a miracle that this letter could reach her, in this well-guarded fortress of her father's, which was surrounded by armed men, and into which a stranger was only admitted after endless precautions.

She opened the letter and read it in the last light of dawn. People called for her, the goddess called for her priestess. With slow movements, she lit a candle and burnt the letter in the flame. It passed away in a cloud of sweet, shimmering blue vapour

...

Elisabeth stood there for a long time, looking into the flame that flickered in the breeze from the open balcony. Then she gathered the ashes of the letter into the palm of her hand and stepped out onto the balcony. After she had rubbed the ashes completely, she opened her hand and scattered the black crumbs out into the night.

Her dress brushed against the large beach chair that stood outside. She turned round and felt it, as if she had to find out what it was by touching it. At last she sat down and leant her head on her right hand so that the remains of the ashes were rubbed on her cheek. And so she sat for many hours, her eyes fixed on the distant, lighted window in the mill, until it grew dark there. And beside her, the dim light of the flickering candle ran over the balcony and trickled over the edge into the darkness. Then the moon rose ...

Of all the sects that had sprung up in those days of horror, the "Red Death League" stood out as the most powerful and terrifying. Its meetings were held in a dilapidated, sprawling factory building on the outskirts of the city. Most of the murders and atrocities were committed there. The brothers dragged their victims into the "castle" and killed them with all kinds of gruesome ceremonies, but they also attacked them on the street or sought them out in their homes. No one was safe from them

for sure. And no one could predict what they would do next, because their activities were completely senseless, nothing but a spawn of fear. Two murders took place almost simultaneously, both of which were committed by the "Brothers of the Red Death". One happened in silence, the other in broad daylight, in the frenzy of angry, mad masses.

Professor Zugmeyer had been strangled to death in his study. He was found in front of his desk, and it was seen that he had just started writing an article in which he proved that the earth was saved and that there was no longer any need to fear its destruction.

That same morning, Störner was attacked in the editorial office of his paper. He had worked all night in order to flood the city in the morning with a mass of posters and flyers proclaiming salvation. But the people had left him in the middle of his work, furious at the fraud that was being perpetrated on humanity with this message. And so Störner had stood at the machines himself with the few loyal followers and had helped distribute his posters and leaflets in the morning. An hour after his return to the editorial office, the building had been stormed by a slaving, hate-filled beast of a thousand heads. Störner, who had not moved from his seat, was torn to pieces and trampled on so that only a bloody lump of flesh remained.

The head of the "Brothers of the Red Death" was still Nikolaus Zenzinger, who had increasingly taken on the demeanour of a prophet. After keeping himself hidden for a while, he ventured out again as order deteriorated and occasionally appeared among his flock in a long red cloak. For the most part, however, he remained in the "castle", in a small room that had been prepared as a kind of sanctum sanctorum. Only his officers were allowed to visit him here, and it was here that he would concoct plans for new deeds for his gangs in his confused mind. He often climbed up to the flat roof of the centre wing at night and spent hours in monotonous howling. He

spoke with God, and his followers were on their knees in the courtyards all around, listening in devout shudders.

But then it happened that he disappeared from the midst of his followers. Often for whole days; and it was whispered that he had been raptured. Those were the days of a partial return of his consciousness, when he awoke as if from a bad dream; then he returned to his former flat, where Emma Rößler was still waiting for him. She knew that he was believed to be the head of the Red Death League and was convinced that this rumour was true. But when he came to her, her pity grew so great and radiant over her disgust that she was unable to push him back. She could not have betrayed him even at the time when he was still being sought. And whenever he came she hoped for his recovery, she hoped at last to restrain him, and she pursued his wild and mad imaginings with infinite caution in order to recognise their roots and prevent their return. But after Zenzinger had sat at home ill and broken for some days, it came over him again. He began to walk restlessly up and down the room, muttering to himself and casting threatening glances around.

Emma Rößler found refuge in her fear in the memory of her husband. His head was like an amulet that protected her from all evil. And she took it out and spoke to it as if her husband were present in the flesh. Loudly and ever louder, the more agitated Zenzinger became. She could see from the old man's expression that he hated that head. And one day he had jumped at her and tried to snatch it from her. But she had defended the head and pushed it in front of Zenzinger's chest, and then he had come to his senses and crept timidly and humbly into a corner.

But all Emma's battles were in vain. After three or four days, Zenzinger broke free and ran away to his hordes, who greeted him as if he had come from a realm between heaven and earth. -

Next to the League of the Red Death, the Marianite sect was the most important. While those in an unclear mixture of the

While the Marianites were satisfied with the most diverse ideas, they clung to a fixed dogma. Its herald was the old Swoboda. She had originally joined the Brothers of the Red Death, but soon broke away from them and went her own way. After she had once spent two days and two nights praying in a circle of consecrated candles, the Mother of God had appeared to her and announced that her Son had given her dominion over these last days of the earth. God the Father and Christ had withdrawn from heaven, which was first of all the earth, into the seventh of the heavens piled one above the other. They did not want to see or hear anything more of this sinful world, but Mary had, by the divine mercy, nevertheless worked out that she would be allowed to assist the earth in its hour of death, and she had assured herself of the co-operation of the Holy Spirit. The only consolation now lay in invoking Mary, and the Divine had promised her chosen servant that she would be a gracious intercessor and helpful friend to all who would seek refuge in her in prayer.

A significant number of believers quickly gathered around the proclaimer of this message of salvation. People eagerly grasped at anything that seemed to promise them salvation. The first and most enthusiastic disciple of old Swoboda was the church servant, who had always felt and recognised her superiority and now claimed that he had always known that she was called to special and high things. And he told anyone who would listen that sometimes, when he and Mary's chosen servant were busy in the dark morning church, he had noticed a light glimmer around her head. The former candle-lady called herself Sister Annunziata in her new role, and she wore a nun-like robe, a white, long, pleated shirt and a black coverlet cut out on her chest and back. Her nature had changed completely under the influence of heavenly grace. Her former garrulousness was gone, she moved with serious dignity

and rarely spoke. And when she did speak, it was with measured solemnity and a meaningful expression.

A large number of priests belonged to the Marianite sect. At first the bishop had opposed them and wanted to prevent the clergy from joining the sect. But the power of the old woman and her idea of salvation was so great that her attraction was greater than the ecclesiastical discipline, which had been loosened in every respect. The priests proved to be no strangers to all things human in this play either. Like the others, they were subject to the terrible fear of annihilation. And elsewhere they openly fell away from the church, joined the ranks of the desperate and raged in an unbridled lust for pleasure, as if they wanted to make up in these last days with shameless openness for everything they had previously denied themselves or only allowed themselves to do in secret. It was thanks to the iron energy of the bishop and his prudence that the clergy in his diocese at least held together as a whole. There was certainly some dissent here too, but the majority persevered at their posts, even if the bishop could not conceal the fact that the order was only purely external. He looked through his fingers and let everything go as long as appearances were kept up. He was all the more likely to allow the priests to join the Marianites because one of their vows was that of chastity and sobriety. And the strange attraction of the former Candlemaid to the clergy was explained by an idea that seemed to have been taken from the Marian legend itself: the elevation of the inconspicuous through heavenly grace, the election of the last maiden ...

The Marianites were based in the cathedral and had been tacitly entrusted with guarding the Holy Shroud of Christ, which was displayed there for devotion. And it was no small task to keep the crowds who wanted to see the shrine every day in order. There were outbursts, frenzied scenes in which rapture and despair flowed together.

But this shrine was the final cause of the relentless battle between the Marianites and the Brothers of the Red Death. One day

After a conversation with God, Nikolaus Zenzinger had gone among his faithful and announced that he had just learnt that God wished to see this priceless relic in the hands of his most faithful servants. They were called to keep and guard it. But the Marianites had not wanted to leave their place under any circumstances and had confronted the Brothers of the Red Death in such a well-armed and threatening manner that Zenzinger had to give the order to withdraw.

The opposition between the Marianites and the followers of Zenzinger was so great in all respects that a natural enmity was bound to arise. Now jealousy over the possession of the shrine increased this enmity to a burning hatred. A terrible war broke out between two sects. The Brothers of the Red Death lay in wait for the Marianites everywhere, pursued them, and if one of them fell into their hands, he was lost. The Red Death was sure of him. It finally came to the point where the Marianites no longer felt safe outside the cathedral and almost all of them took up residence in the church. They had a few blankets and some utensils with them and cooked their meals on the stove in the sacristy or in the large courtyard between the cathedral and the bishop's palace.

During the day, they took turns standing guard in front of the Holy Shroud. It was kept in a glass shrine that stood on the high altar. A precious brocade cloak was spread over the shrine during the night and it was Sister Annunziata's duty to remove it in the morning. No other hand was allowed to touch it. When the mantle was removed, the assembled Marianites and the other devotees who had filled the church from the earliest hours of the morning would fall to their knees and begin to s i n g the great hymn of praise.

A very strange drawing could be seen on the yellowish cloth. A jumble of spots and lines that bore little resemblance to a human body. And yet it was possible to prove that this was the image of one. The

The linen cloth had been photographed on behalf of the bishop. Hundreds of thousands of copies were to be sold to the faithful. The photographer had made a strange discovery when developing the plate. The reddish-brown spots and strokes had merged in the negative and produced the image of a naked man lying stretched out with his hands crossed. There was only one possible explanation for this appearance. In order to come out as a positive in the negative on the photographic plate, the image on the cloth itself had to be a kind of photographic negative.

So there really was proof here that this naked corpse, which had once been wrapped in the cloth, was the body of Christ. However, the picture showed some oddities. The neck and ears were missing, the shoulders were only faintly indicated. The head was coarse and the face broad with protruding cheekbones, quite different from how we were used to imagining the head of Christ. The nose was squashed and the cheek, it seemed, swollen. The two views that made up the picture showed strange and significant differences. No traces of nails were visible on the front. On the rear view, however, they were perfectly clear. They were not in the palms of the hands and feet, but in the wrist and the crook of the foot. The scholar who had written the report on the relic had come to the explanation for this circumstance, which showed something deviating from tradition, that the nails should have been placed in the wrist because they could not have supported the body in the palm of the hand. Other signs, however, confirmed the information in the Gospels. The traces of the crown of thorns were clearly visible on the blood-covered forehead.

At the time the relic had emerged, the scholarly world had still been interested enough in scientific questions to get into a passionate debate for and against. But the storm surge of fear, in which everyone thought only of themselves, had soon swallowed up the whole debate. Only one person had stubbornly stuck to the issue. Hartl, the professor of archaeology, had, from reference

He had just published a brochure against the delusional belief that we were dealing with the burial shroud of Christ. It had been produced in the print shop of the "Morgenblatt" under Störner's supervision. Störner had judged Hartl correctly. It was not courage or a flaming love of truth that compelled the professor to fulfil his task, but precisely the fear of annihilation that drove him to do something, to somehow convince himself that the fight must not be given up. But whatever Hartl's motives might have been, his brochure was welcome to Störner, for it seemed to him a good means of supporting his work, which had been aimed at calming the masses. -

The large factory where the "Brothers of the Red Death" had their castle lay dark under a rainy night sky. From time to time, the storm swept over it in heavy blasts, bringing with it a shower of rain which it pattered against the walls and broken windows. The man who had the gate watch then wrapped himself tighter in his coarse blanket and huddled in the alcove, where he was somewhat protected from the rain.

Sometimes someone would shuffle across the courtyard and exchange a few words with the guard as they passed.

Struggling against the wind, eleven chimes came from the larger tower of the cathedral. There was the only tower clock that still told the time correctly. It was as if it still retained something of the spirit and sense of duty of its former keeper, the tower keeper Palingenius.

A few minutes later, there was a knocking on the door in an anapestic rhythm. The guard unwrapped himself from his blanket and opened the slider in the door. But it was so dark that he couldn't see anything. "Who's there?" he asked.

"The Lord and the prophet," he was told.

Then he pushed back the large crossbeam, which was attached to two chains like a battering ram, and let the waiting people in. There were four men with black masks over their faces. The rain only shone on

The storm had waited for the moment when the gate would open, and now threw itself in with such force that all five men were enveloped for a moment by the plunging, foaming veils of water. Then the storm swept on, over the roofs and around the edges, with shrill laughter and malicious whistling. And when the storm was already dancing on the dark fields outside, a sound swelled up that seemed to have been left behind from the wild roar and now took on a meaning of its own: a persistent howl, with a plaintive, eerie sound.

"The Prophet is on the roof?" asked one of those who had arrived.

"Yes - he's talking to God!"

"In this vile weather?"

"When God calls, we shouldn't care about the weather."

Hainx looked the man in the face. It was the frame maker from the cathedral square; Hainx knew him to be one of Zenzinger's most loyal followers and knew that his piety was unfeigned.

"Are the others already assembled?"

"You're in the great hall. Just go ahead. You know the way."

The large gate slammed shut and the chains of the crossbeam rattled a little. Hainx led his companions across the courtyard, endeavouring to avoid the pools of water as much as possible in the darkness. Then, after groping around in a bad set of corners, they came to a door with a candle burning in a lantern above it. The light suddenly flickered on as they entered, as if to see who was coming. They went up a staircase with another candle attached to the walls here and there. Then through a few desolate rooms that might once have served as writing rooms. One of the following rooms seemed to house the covenant's armoury. All kinds of weapons hung and stood around. From time to time, the four men came across one of the castle's inhabitants.

Then they raised their right hand with the cut side facing forwards to the height of their foreheads in a silent salute.

As they crossed a draughty, bare corridor, they stepped into a murmur that seemed to linger over the dark end of the corridor. Hainx opened a door and they entered the meeting hall of the "Brothers of the Red Death". It must have once been the factory's machine room, because large holes in the walls seemed to indicate the place where the machines had once been walled in. Above, near the ceiling, smaller holes marked the places where the translation belts had run through. As if some kind of rot had eaten away from these holes, their edges had crumbled away and mortar and bricks lay on the floor like peeled scabs. This room had no windows in the walls, only a red glass eye in the centre of the ceiling.

The prophet's howling was clearly audible here. He sat just above the heads of those gathered on the glass ceiling and spoke with God. The disciples, a group of chosen ones from the large crowd, sat in two rows along the walls on the floor, legs crossed like the Orientals, and murmured to themselves. Three barrel hoops with candles hung from the ceiling and a number of poorly lit paraffin lamps on the walls provided an ashen, sometimes yellowish light. In this light, a strange meandering ribbon that ran around three walls of the hall came to twitching life. It was a meandering band of human hands, all right hands, attached to the wall with large nails. Where the ribbon began, in the corner next to the entrance door, the hands were withered, dried up like mummies and seemed to claw into the wall with curved, scrawny fingers. At the end of the tape, however, the hands were still fresh, with bloody cuts and a bluish tinge. When the lights were brought together by a gust of wind that found its way through the holes in the walls, it looked as if a host of large, ugly spiders were about to climb up the walls.

When the four masked men entered, some of those gathered turned towards them.

"It's them again, the four of them," one of them whispered.

"They always come at the hour of sacrifice."

"Nobody knows who they are."

"The prophet knows. He has brought them among us. He knows them."

"Silence. He is silent. He has stopped talking to God. He will be with us in a moment."

Above those gathered, footsteps crunched on the glass roof. The murmuring of those praying became quieter in anticipation of the prophet. But it was another quarter of an hour before he entered, in his red cloak girded with a coarse rope. Then they all threw themselves to the ground, including the four strangers who had taken their places silently behind the others, and remained in this position of humility and contrition for a few minutes.

Then a voice hoarse with howling began: "The angel of destruction has already drawn his sword and lit the torch. He stands on a rolling wheel that glides over the slope of the heavens, on a wheel that knows no stopping. In ten days he will be among us, and the Lord will call his chosen ones to himself."

"Hu! - hu! - hu!" the disciples joined in, rising to their feet.

Zenzinger stood among them, in the centre of the hall, his arms raised high. A cold horror emanated from his face; his eyeballs were fixed and so twisted that only the whites were visible, two thin threads of blood flowed from his nose into his grey beard.

"The sign!" whispered some, "he has the sign of grace."

The prophet stood like this for a long time with his arms outstretched, longer than it is in a person's power to remain in this position. Finally his arms sank down, his eyes moved and the threads of blood seeped away.

"We are gathered for the sacrifice that is pleasing to God." He clapped his hands. A door opened in the wall opposite the prophet and a couple of men in red shirts entered, carrying a naked girl between them. It was a slender young thing with small, pointed breasts and slightly curved hips. Her arms and legs were long and slender and her hair hung loose. She trembled

so that she was unable to walk and had to be led by the men. Her hands were tied tightly behind her back and a gag was stuck in her mouth, forcing her teeth wide apart.

The men led her in front of Zenzinger and stopped about five paces from him. The girl's eyes were wide open in a horror so great that it robbed her of even the mitigation of unconsciousness.

"The sacrifice is ready," said the Prophet, "I ask: is she ready for the sacrifice of the red death?"

Then the frame maker, who had been relieved of his post at the gate, stood up: "She's ripe for the red death," he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Why is she ripe for the red death?"

"She belongs to the Marianites, who are cursed by God."

"What are their crimes?"

"They have usurped the sanctuary of the last days and do not want to give it up to us, to whom it has been entrusted by the Lord."

"What are her other crimes?"

They spoke from different sides at the same time:

"They say that God has forsaken the world." - "They lie that only prayer is pleasing to God and abhor the deed." - "They lie that the union of man and woman is not pleasing to God." -

"They lie that humanity can only be redeemed through them." - "They lie that they alone are called to fight against the Antichrist."

The prophet waved his arm: "That's enough! Then she's ready for the red death. We'll give her a chance to speak so that she can hear her voice for the last time and recognise it over there in the valley of the damned."

One of the guards pulled the gag out of the condemned woman's mouth. But only a whimper came from between her teeth, a horrible, agonised whimper, an unformed sound, soft and muddy like a rotting jellyfish.

In the meantime, the prophet had approached the small door through which the sacrifice had been brought. At the door, he turned round: "I call my twelve apostles to me!"

Twelve of the Prophet's officers stood up and followed him. The four masked men had also stood up and joined them. They went back through a few smaller rooms until they reached a room, at the door of which the guards stayed behind after pushing the girl inside. She immediately collapsed, writhed like a worm and lay there whimpering.

The inner sanctum was completely covered in red fabric, and when the door closed with the clang of iron, it seemed as if you were locked in a large lined box. In the centre of the room, two red cushions lay on the floor, with iron clamps, a kind of catching iron, attached next to them. The apostles and the strangers crouched down along the walls again, only two of the officers remained standing next to the girl.

As before, the prophet had raised his arms and was praying with his head thrown far back. There was a heavy panting in the room. The girl had stopped whimpering and made no sound. Only her skin had acquired a strange mobility, like the skin of animals, dogs or horses, and from time to time a tremor passed over it.

Then the Prophet gave the two officers a hint. They grabbed the body and carried it to the centre of the room. They placed the head on one of the red cushions, then stretched out the legs and snapped the shackles fastened to the floor around the ankles. They released the restraints on the arms and forced the wrists into the other pair of leg irons. There was a crunching sound, like the rubbing of a giant's iron teeth.

The prophet had picked up the second red velvet cushion and approached the bound woman. He bent over her and looked into her eyes. Her agony broke out in one long scream. The prophet quickly threw the pillow over her face and sat down on it.

The scream broke off and was followed by gurgling and gasping. The prophet's long red cloak billowed out in rich folds over the girl's body, half covering it. And this body reared up in the iron clamps under the Prophet's feet, which he had placed on the white body.

Hainx always looked at those feet. They were in red velvet slippers and were thrown up by the terrible convulsions of the suffocating woman. But Zenzinger kept his seat and his face lost none of its rigidity until the movements became weaker and weaker and finally stopped altogether.

Those feet in the red velvet slippers ... those feet were still standing on the white body, which now flowed smoothly and silently out from under the red folds of the coat ... Only around the edge of the irons at the ankles and wrists had formed red bloody traces of the horrible agony, from which individual drops were slowly seeping out. -

In the hall, the assembly of disciples awaited the prophet's return in prayer.

A triumphant shout rang out to him as he entered, accompanied by his apostles, who walked to either side with flaming pitch torches. On a red cushion he carried a human hand freshly cut from his body, which looked like a strange fruit of pale, bluish flesh on the dark fabric.

His crotch was stiff and splayed as he now carried his hand under his comrades; his legs seemed to be deprived of all flexibility in the hollows of his knees.

"Hu - hu - hu!" howled the brothers and sisters of the congregation, embracing each other in ecstatic jubilation. They hugged each other tightly, began to feel each other, kissed and bit each other.

With grotesque frog leaps, the Trinity cobbler approached, so called because his house had had an image of the divine Trinity on it. He had burnt down this house in one night because he wanted to renounce all earthly possessions, and through this

A significant part of the poor neighbourhood below the cathedral hill was burnt to the ground in the blaze that started in the second fire. He had soon reached a high rank among the Brothers of the Red Death. He now leapt forwards in a crouch, flapping his arms violently. He stood up in front of the prophet and took the pillow in his hand. Two assistants carried the hammer and nails behind him to the end of the meandering ornament, where the hand was attached.

The big ceremony was over.

The prophet addressed the congregation with the usual question: "I ask: who has a complaint against anyone ... be it man or woman, high or low, brother or sister or stranger?"

A low murmur went through the rows:

"The prophet ... the prophet ... he is mighty and great."

"How his eyes shine ..."

"He has never been so filled with God ... the further to the end, the more visible the hand of the Lord is upon him."

A man stood up in a corner of the hall and stretched out his arm.

"The brother who has to complain, he speaks ..." said Zenzinger, and it was strange that he looked in a completely different direction and yet knew that someone wanted to speak. "I am complaining," the man began, "against a blasphemer of the Latter-day Saint. He has written a book against the Holy Shroud of Christ ..."

The four masked men put their heads together and whispered to each other: "Who's that? Isn't that ..."

"Yes, it's that Adam Gästner ... The chemist! The herald of abstinence ..."

"Also a prophet. But he has given way before the greater prophet ..."

"Look at the man. He's converted. He's heavily intoxicated." The plaintiff was really swaying back and forth in his seat. His face was puffy, and his words came to him only puffy and

Saliva dripped from his mouth. But he had that stubborn eloquence of drunks that forces them to hold on to their subject **a n d** gives them a special kind of urgency: "He blasphemed. He wrote a book ... a book. In it you can read ... the man is a professor, a learned man, and his name is Hartl ... and he has written that a painter must have painted the picture on ... on the cloth. A painter who imitated a print ..."

"We - we - we - we!" clamoured the assembly.

"And that is sinful and blasphemous. Because it really is the imprint ... the imprint of a body ... that could be proven. Prove it! Prove it! I was a chemist! It doesn't matter what I was ... because before the breath of annihilation we are all the same ... all of us ... I could have been a king ... I would be no more than I am now. But I was not a king, I have examined all substances ... all substances that exist. And I know: when a man is crucified, crucified, yes, a terrible fever comes over him ... and ammonia ... hup ... ammonia vapours ... emanate from him. Ammonia vapours ... hup! And these ammonia vapours ... there's a cloth ... painted over with aloe, with aloe, understood, and when these vapours come on such a cloth ... understood ... on such a cloth ... such stains ... as ... said ... so such stains ... the body wrapped in such a cloth must leave an imprint ..."

The speaker staggered against the wall, ran his hand over his sweat-covered face and stammered on: "The body of a crucified man ... of course ... so the cloth ... for it was ... as reported ... with aloe ..."

Then he collapsed, but once more he raised himself on his hands and slurred: "That can be proved ... it can be proved ... as I said ..."

The Prophet had not looked at the plaintiff once during the speech. Now he said, "It is good ... it is good ..." and as if under a thought impressed on him by a strong will, he repeated, "It can be proved ... it can be proved ... if one had the body of a crucified man ..."

Ten or twenty of the brothers and sisters jumped up at the same time. "I ... I ... I want to be ... take me, prophet ... take me ... I want to be."

But the prophet raised his hand and shook his head. "God has chosen ... it is someone who has long been marked, marked ... and now God has pointed his finger at him ... it is chosen."

And those who were rejected threw themselves to the ground and cried and wept that they should not be allowed to offer their bodies for crucifixion, in an unfeigned despair that shook them in convulsions.

A few muffled drums beat out a rhythm and a flute bounced high and shrill in between. It was as if someone was dancing on one leg, completely crazy, while the audience sat in a circle, motionless and staring dumbly.

And then the whirl of the orgy began, in which they fell over each other, devouring each other into a wild tangle of bodies, a groaning, gasping, boiling lump of people, while Zenzinger stood among them, motionless, like a pillar in the turmoil of the frenzied people rolling at his feet.

Towards morning, the four strangers who had been watching the orgy from a corner left the factory. The yards lay silent and desolate, even the guard at the gate was gone. In a corner, among all sorts of junk, equipment from the time when the factory had still been in operation and waste from the kitchens of the current residents, they found Adam Gästner lying half-naked, in a state of complete drunkenness ...

"It seems that this gentleman has become quite unfaithful to his principles," said one of the four. "It's a good touchstone, this downfall."

Hainx pushed back the gate and opened it, and as they stepped out, he turned to the speaker: "Yes," he said, "you can truly be satisfied. You have done very well with this play."

The other laughed: "I'm happy too, my dear Hainx, quite happy." And he finally took off his mask to expose his red, puffy face to the morning coolness. - It was Thomas's reference ...

Emma Rößler always got up early. She did not suffer long in bed in the morning, and as she, like everyone else, believed that the end of the world would come soon, she wanted to make the most of the little sunshine and morning happiness that was still granted to her. She had been surprised by a change that had taken place in her without her realising it. It had happened slowly, so slowly that she had only realised it late. The uneasiness about Zenzinger's behaviour had finally been displaced by a deep feeling, which at first she did not dare to call happiness, but then she felt it. What did she really care about this man? She had lived with him for a long time and had taken on some of his worries. But in the meantime he had become a completely different person. Every atom of his body and every particle of his soul had been replaced by another. It was terrible that such a thing could happen, but it could not touch her deepest depths. She was growing on completely different ground.

As she paced up and down her bright little room, dusting, she recalled the memory of Zenzinger's last return to her. She had seen that the dark demons had only released him for a short time, that he had only let himself go for hours, perhaps for the last time. And she wished that it had been the last time. She was still deeply moved with pity, but she felt so far separated from him that she could not help him. And now her mind was completely turned to the end, which everyone had to deal with alone.

She poured a shower of dust from her little green watering can over the flowers in the window. How much longer? How many more days? That was the first question that made her realise her happiness. Only a few hours and then she would be with her husband. Whatever it looked like over there, she knew that he was waiting for her. She had been unable to do anything for him, for his glory and immortality. But now, still on this side of the great curtain, she saw a glimmer of the wisdom of Providence. Immortality through a world on which the mark of destruction was already imprinted?

When she walked through the room while working, she never failed to take a look at his head, which now always stood on the old chest of drawers under its glass bell. She now knew his features far better than when he was alive. And she would recognise him among the legions of souls, by virtue of that unmistakable attraction whose premonition she already felt.

She went to the small tiled stove next to the door to put the pot of milk on the fire. Then she remembered Nikolaus Zenzinger, who gathered his gangs around him in a dilapidated factory and about whom the most horrible things were said.

And as if she had called him, he suddenly stood in the doorway, bare-headed, wearing an old, tattered Havel skirt with something red shining through the cracks. He carried a parcel under his arm and approached on red slippers. She looked him in the face, startled. It seemed to her as if it was covered with a kind of rigid layer that forced his expression into immobility.

"Are you coming to see me again?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, throwing off his havelock in the middle of the room, "I'm coming in my regalia today." He stood before her in a red gown held together in the centre by a coarse rope. "You haven't seen me like this before."

"And I don't want to see you like that either, Nicholas! You shouldn't remind me of the terrible things I don't want to know about. I don't want to know what's going on among you in your castle, do you hear me? I have grown fond of you and I pity you. You are ill ... but when you come to me, you have to take all that off ..."

His face remained immobile: "I know it, woman ... I have known it for a long time ... the Antichrist is speaking from you. He is still making every effort in these last days to assert his kingdom. But Christ is on his way with a legion of angels."

He approached the table with shuffling steps and placed his parcel on the table.
from.

"What are you bringing?"

"I'll bring what I need." And he tore off the paper wrapping. There was a large white cloth inside, and wrapped in it a number of long nails with broad heads and a hammer. While he was busy with these things, Emma looked at him from behind, and saw that his large head, with its tangled hair, seemed to be subject to a pull that bent it to his right shoulder. Despite his constant efforts to straighten it and keep it straight, it kept sinking to his side.

Zenzinger had finished, smoothed out the paper and folded it carefully.

"Why don't you tell me what you want with all this ...?" Emma realised that Nicholas was out of her reach, and a painful twitching began in the stump of her leg, which she already knew was a physical side effect of great excitement.

Without answering her, Zenzinger walked around the room and looked at the walls as if he wanted to measure them. Then he stopped in front of the wall against which the bed had been moved and nodded. He took hold of it with his large, lean hands and pulled it aside with a jerk. There was a terrible strength in this old man; Emma was frightened, for she knew how weak and feeble Nicholas was in his lighter hours. And all at once the thought came to her that she must escape, escape from the terrible things he seemed to be preparing. She approached the door quietly and was about to take hold of the handle when the milk on the fire suddenly boiled and hissed.

Zenzinger turned round ... he saw Emma at the door and was at her in one leap, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her to the floor. Then he turned the key and put it in one of the pockets of his red gown.

"What do you want? You're insane!" Emma gasped and struggled to get up from the floor. Her stilt foot had hit the ankle of her other leg hard in the fall and she could hardly walk now.

"You are chosen! You are chosen! You will atone for your sinful life ... by a death that is pleasing to God ..."

"St Nicholas, are you forgetting everything ... remember how I ..."

"We should not hold back the uplifted hand of God. God has raised his hand against you. I, to whom he has done his last great revelation, I am his instrument ... I have spoken God. He is stretching out his hand to you."

Once again, Emma let all the possibilities of salvation slip past her. Should she be murdered here by a madman instead of awaiting her husband's return in the cloud of destruction? After all, the end of the earth was near. But she did not want to die, not like this ... Was she to lose the last days of the happiness of expectation? She was determined to defend herself. Nobody lived in the entire house, which had been half-destroyed by the fire the other day, except for her. It was no use her shouting for help; no one could hear her here. But what if she ... here was a last resort ... if she ran into the next room and quickly locked the door from the inside and shouted out of the window? Someone would pass by and hear her and perhaps have enough mercy to help her ... that, yes that ...

Meanwhile, Zenzinger had moved the table to the wall and driven one of the nails into the wall high up, near the ceiling. When he saw that Emma was approaching the next room, he jumped down, hammer in hand, and drove her back with a raised arm. She staggered into the centre of the room with a hard thud of her wooden foot, tangled herself in the Havelock lying on the floor and fell down. Nicholas bent down to her, swung his hammer wide and hit her temple.

Emma moaned once, then closed her eyes and stopped moving. Zenzinger stood in front of her and watched her for a long time: "The Antichrist," he muttered, "... he has ten thousand lists and secret ways ..." But when he saw that the woman was really unconscious, he put the hammer down on the chest of drawers. The glass lintel clinked softly above the poet's head.

Zenzinger dug into his pockets and pulled out a long, strong rope, which he placed in a noose. Then he picked up Emma's upper body and fastened the noose under her arms. He pulled the body behind him, lifted it onto the table and climbed up himself. His movements were light and the weight of the unconscious woman was no trouble for him. With

With the help of the rope, which he placed over the nail in the wall, he now picked up the body and secured it by tying the end of the rope to the noose.

Now he was ready to begin the crucifixion. Emma's unconsciousness had been so deep that she only woke up when

Zenzinger hammered in the second nail. She opened her eyes slowly and saw the madman in front of her, hammer in hand ... The first crazy movement her instinct drove her to make was to push the man with the ghastly eyes back. But her hands were somehow held fast, and the jerk she gave them left behind a furious pain. And at the same time as that pain came the sensation of an unpleasant floating ... what was it? -

What was that all about? -

The pain in her hands was accompanied or framed by a warmth, and Emma would have liked to look, but she dared not take her eyes off the man's bloodshot eyes, which were so close to hers; she felt as if such carelessness must be immediately followed by a more violent outburst of madness. But Nicholas slowly broke away from her gaze and descended from the table ... then Emma realised that she had lost her mastery over the man ...

Only his strange beginning ...

And now he suddenly pulled the table away. A violent jolt went through her body as he suddenly sank down, held only by the rope and the nails in his wrists. The pain became so intense that she let out a loud scream. She turned her head and saw that her arms were pinned to the wall.

Then she felt a touch on her leg, a pulling ... she wanted to free it, in a desperate defence ... but Zenzinger had already caught her foot in a loop and pulled it tightly downwards, placing his foot in another loop at the end of the rope. Then he drove another of his large nails through the stocking and joint

...

Emma screamed again ... the agony was unbearable. And the fear of death turned into a blind rage of hatred against her tormentor. She lifted the other leg, the one with the wooden foot attached to its stump, and pushed Zenzinger in front of his chest. He staggered back, grabbed his neck, choked down something and then threw himself on top of her ... he held her foot and began to undo the straps that attached the wooden leg to the stump. He tugged at her body in such a way that the flesh around the nails began to loosen and the blood trickled down more copiously.

With a satisfied face, he stepped back and let the wooden leg fall to the floor. It made a dull thud that seemed to reverberate throughout the desolate house before returning to its starting point.

Emma's body hung twitching on the wall. She was no longer screaming ... her head had sunk forwards ... Zenzinger approached her once more and did the last thing left to do. He untied the noose around the crucified woman's chest and removed the rope. The body sank a little lower so that the knee of the nailed leg bent, the whole weight now hanging from the two nails in the bloody, swollen wrists.

The woman just moaned softly and tried to raise her head ... her eyes searched for the direction of the chest of drawers where her husband's head was standing. But she could no longer see anything ... her face was greenish and there were two red spots on her cheeks. Her mouth slowly opened and sticky drool flowed from her lips in two long threads.

"The fever, the fever is here," murmured Zenzinger, who had been looking at her attentively. And he set about spreading the sheet he had brought with him on the floor. -

Then he heard a voice behind him, a clearly audible male voice. And this voice said: "Murderer!"

Zenzinger looked up: apart from him and the crucified woman, there was no one in the room. And the woman on the wall, she hardly spoke any more ...

He turned round.

But the head was there, the head on the chest of drawers, had it got a voice? The old hatred for this head tore Zenzinger up from the floor. He grabbed his hammer and rushed to the chest of drawers to smash the glass lintel and this fetish to smithereens. But then he saw the head move its eyes and raise them so that he could look into his own ... and he saw the head open its mouth and heard it say again, clearly and slowly: "Murderer!"

The hammer slipped from Zenzinger's hand ... there was another thud that seemed to run through the entire desolate house. Then the man jumped back with a leap. He tumbled over his Havelock to the floor, just as Emma had fallen earlier, picked himself up and threw himself against the door ... It was locked, and Zenzinger had forgotten that he himself carried the key in his sack. With all his strength he tried to pull it open ... he howled like an animal, the nails broke from his fingers ...

Then he heard for the third time behind him, clearly and slowly: "Murderer!"

And the horror, whose master he had been, rebelled against him and fell upon him ... he threw up his arms and ran into the adjoining chamber - tore open the window ... and threw himself out ...

That evening, Eleagabal Kuperus entered Emma Rößler's flat. The locked door opened silently, and from the threshold he surveyed the room. The sheet was spread out on the floor and the tracks of Zenzinger's shoes were all over it. And on the wall hung the body of the crucified woman.

A ray of sunlight fell broadly into the room, struck the glass lintel above the poet's head, and a faint, light-golden reflection glided from there over to the woman's head, which had sunk to her breast. The tangled strands of grey hair had regained a glimmer of their former beauty ... and it was like a transfiguration from this kiss of the sun that the distortion of the body, the swollen, bloodthirsty hands, the propelled body were not able to disturb the impression of peace.

Eleagabal Kuperus looked at the corpse. Then he spoke to himself: "It is finished." And he walked towards the crucified woman and pulled the nail out of her ankle with ease. Then he pushed the table closer and took the nails out of his hands as if he were pulling them out of soft dough. His outstretched arms fell down and rested on his shoulders. It was like an embrace with which the dead woman thanked him. Then the body slid to the ground and Eleagabal Kuperus laid it on the quickly prepared bed.

And he looked around the room.

"One more," he said with a smile, "one more ..." he picked up the glass lintel and touched the poet's head with a gentle hand. Then the features changed, extinguished, as if a mist were drifting over them, and slowly, slowly this head, torn from decay, shrivelled up and became a heap of dust ...

Adalbert and Regina. The battle for order

[Table of contents](#)

Adalbert recognised that morning had come by the noise the sparrows were making in the large pear tree outside the window. The day could not announce itself with a sign of light in Regina's room, for the shutters were firmly closed and the curtains were drawn. But the important fuss of the sparrows had become Adalbert's alarm clock.

He got up and got dressed. Then he stood very still for a while and listened to Regina's breaths. They were firm and regular, sounding waves that came gently to a soft shore in the dark. Adalbert always liked doing that: standing in the dark and listening to Regina's breathing. From this steady rise and fall, a firm trust came over him, a faith in light and joy in the future, from which he drew new strength. And now he carefully opened the shutters, pulled back the curtains and opened the window. The sun was already well up **a n d i t w a s** the sparrows' right to perform their morning spectacle in the old pear tree.

With a deep sigh of relief, Adalbert lay down in the window. There were two watchmen down in the garden, leaning against the wall and talking quietly to each other as they picked at blades of grass. From the barns came the bellowing of the cows, and the miller's wife was walking across the yard with the milk pail. Here they lived as if on an island, in the midst of the turmoil and terror of death, on a rock that the sea of horror could not reach. The farmhands and maids had been unstoppable, they had fled despite all the miller's warnings. But Enzberger and his wife took care of the economy themselves, they took on the triple labour, and Adalbert and Regina and the Romanians helped them honestly. Of course, with the very best

Only the most important things could be accomplished, only the unavoidable - but at least: one had not surrendered and had gained great confidence in salvation from the continued activity ...

Adalbert thought about these things and the happy news that had reached them a few days ago. And it all seemed to fit so well into the sunny morning that he began to hum quietly to himself.

"Good morning," Regina said behind him and put her arms on his shoulders. Adalbert turned round and there she stood in front of him, in her shirt, with bare feet, just as she had just jumped out of bed. He grabbed her around the hips, pulled her close and kissed her deeply and long. Her slender body was cool and hard as bronze.

But then she saw the two Romanians standing down by the wall. She turned away from her lover: "Wait, when they look up ..."

"Get dressed quickly and come to me ... the morning is wonderful."

"Yes - in a minute ... but don't turn round! Listen ... if you turn round, it'll take just as long."

Smiling, Adalbert lay back down in the window, quite cosy, with his arms wide and heard skirts rustling behind him and cords being tied. Then a rubber band snapped. "Ow," said Regina and let out a few bright, giggling sounds. And there she was with him, all respectable in skirts and blouse and stockings. Only the shoes were nowhere to be found. Adalbert had taken them off last night and carried them off to God knows where.

"Good morning," she said again as she leaned next to him. And she looked at him from the side with a happy smile.

"Was it nice tonight?" he asked boldly, pushing his arm very close to hers and taking her hand at the same time.

"But don't go ... don't ask like that!" She turned red and pretended to be angry. But she immediately made amends. "How can you ask like that?" she said softly and tenderly.

Enzberger shouted something down across the yard to his wife, who had just stepped through the door. Two of the Romanians came out of the barn loaded with large bundles of straw and went into the stable.

"You know," Regina said thoughtfully after a while, "sometimes it's a bit hard on my heart."

"Like what?"

"Well ... that ... this ... that it has happened between us after all. That we ..."

"But go ... don't let that make you think bad thoughts."

"Yes - I feel as if Eleagabal Kuperus ... he demanded that we not ... And we disobeyed him. We owe him so much and yet we disobeyed him. And he hasn't come to the mill since. Haven't you noticed that? As if he knew ..."

"He made the promise to me at a time when no one had any idea of the terrible things that would happen afterwards. But ... then it came ... The earth will perish! Didn't we all firmly believe that?"

"We had to believe it! But I wasn't afraid at all, Adalbert, with you ... perhaps I didn't have the right feeling for it, because I love you so much ..."

"Afraid? No, I wasn't afraid at all. I can't say that I was. But there was a restlessness in me. You felt that, didn't you? If that hadn't happened, I would have endeavoured to keep my promise. But now - should we stay away from each other even then, when doom was imminent? It was something unforeseen, the way the first news came from outside - Enzberger tried very hard to keep everything from us, but in the end it couldn't be hidden ... yes, I was very depressed when the rumour reached us. And then - that evening came when we shook off all our doubts. Do you remember? It was so natural, wasn't it ... It was beyond all human strength. The downfall before our eyes ... do you regret it?"

Regina shook her head without looking at Adalbert. Her fingers played on the windowsill with the remains of the food she used to scatter for the birds.

"And from then on," Adalbert continued, "from that night on, I knew that the earth could not perish. It was written in me, engraved, imprinted: it could not be. I was convinced that this earth would not be shattered. Perhaps it is a miracle ..."

"It's a miracle," Regina repeated, "a miracle! And your trust ... they have all begun to believe you ... they have all looked up to you. And if they didn't fall into confusion and frenzy like all the others, then you did it, you alone ..."

"You love me, Regina, and that's why you see something special in this. Enzberger is a man, and I believe that he would have held out to the last moment even if he had been convinced of his doom. But if I have gained this great faith ... who is ultimately to be thanked for it? ... You ... and the miracle ..."

"Look," Regina deflected, "Johanna's coming downstairs."

The old woman had just come into the courtyard through the small gate that one of the guards had opened for her when she knocked. She dragged herself a few steps and then sank wearily onto the chopping block that stood next to the large pile of wood. Enzberger approached her and began a conversation.

"He's been out all night again," said Adalbert, "and has been sneaking round the house. He's stalking him ... I don't want Johann to be my enemy. He's scary in his hatred. Maybe it's because he can't get close to Bezug ..."

Regina pondered for a while: "No ... it's actually too funny, isn't it? Our old Johanna is not a woman at all, but a man. And all these years I've always believed that he was a woman. But his father knew it ... didn't he?"

"Yes - your father knew. There must be something terrible in this man's life. A terrible experience."

"I still can't get used to saying Johann to him and talking about him as a 'he'. And when he talked about it back then

began ... it was as if he wanted to make a will before the end. I couldn't believe it at first! Now, of course, that I really know what -" she broke off and turned very red again. Then she took a different tack: "I always believe that if this rumour hadn't come ... he would have left us to the end of his days ... that he is the old Johanna."

Adalbert straightened up: "In three days..." he said.

"In three days? What's in three days?"

"Have you forgotten? God knows, she doesn't even think about it. Or actually the day after tomorrow ... Really, the day after tomorrow ... well: I don't know exactly myself ... the end of the world is announced for the day after tomorrow ..."

"Oh ... yes, I hadn't thought of that."

"The day will come," said Adalbert, stretching out his hand with exaggerated secrecy, "the day will come. And then another day will come. And another day ... and many more days ... countless days ... and nights!" he added quietly and pulled Regina back from the window to kiss her.

She said nothing, snuggled up to him and shivered a little.

"But you shouldn't joke about it," he continued seriously, "you shouldn't joke. Because there are millions of unfortunates outside who still can't believe in their salvation ... they rage in despair against themselves and the world ... it's a sad story."

"You think they still haven't calmed down?"

"I've been through a storm at sea. Once the water is really moving, the waves don't calm down the moment the wind stops. They first have to release their power ... the poor devils who fear for their lives can't realise that they have nothing more to fear."

Half an hour later, they were walking side by side through the garden. And then Adalbert von Kuperus began to speak. He couldn't believe that the old man could have moved to another town, fled, so to speak. That was so unlike Eleagabal's nature.

But still it remained most strange that the old man had never and nowhere confronted the frenzy of the crowd.

One of the Romanians, who had mastered the German language to some extent, organised the traffic between the mill and the town. He had also been away tonight and was now bringing home news. Above all, there were some leaflets reporting new observations by astronomers from all parts of the world, confirmations of the good news. The terror was clearly turning away from the earth, and there was no doubt that it had been saved. The observation should have been made much earlier if the cloudy sky had not made all astronomical work impossible for a time. And it was quite cheerful to see how - no sooner had the fear of destruction been cast off than a dispute broke out among the scholars about the priority of the discovery. From the certain assurances of the astronomers, the state authorities had gained new courage and made attempts to restore order. They had turned to all prudent elements for assistance and issued a call for the formation of civil guards. But the people still dared not believe in salvation and continued their blind frenzies. The armed hordes still roamed the streets, plundering and murdering, ruled by the desires that had burst forth from the abyss, while the new fighters for the survival of society confronted them only timidly and with insufficient power. The frenzy had even spread, and robbery and arson had also begun in the countryside. The peasants, who had found no solace in the city and suffered most from the general misery, now returned to their villages, infected by the madness of the urban mob, half-starved and deprived of all confidence.

Marconianus' report and certain strange remarks made by Johann gave Adalbert no peace throughout the day. He did the work that Enzberger assigned him in the courtyard and garden, but his thoughts did not cease to dwell on everything he had heard. They finally got together in the town, rallied and tried to bring the masses to the

to bring him to his senses. All prudent people were called upon to help, and he should not take part now? It was impossible for him to remain inactive. He also felt the call directed at him. And then there was another thing. What if Johann was right in thinking that Bezug had somehow played a part in agitating this terrible disease of all mankind? That he had injected the poison into her in a diabolical way or had caused the germs to develop? Was it not then all the more his duty to take part in the restoration of order? Precisely because he himself had been one of those to whom Bezug had once been an implacable master, and because he still felt that dishonour upon him?

At dusk, he sought out Johann in his chamber. The old man was lying on the bed, dressed, and awoke from his light sleep when Adalbert entered. Between the two nights he spent looking round the villa, a few hours of slumber were enough to keep him awake. While Johann remained on the edge of the bed, Adalbert pulled up a chair and sat opposite the old man. Then he began by placing his hand confidentially on Johann's knee: "You said a word earlier that's been on my mind. I would like to ask you ... why do you actually believe that Bezug has a hand in all this ...?"

And when the old man remained silent, Adalbert continued: "I think you've known me long enough now ... you can already know that I can be trusted."

Then the old man cleared his throat violently and tapped out the pipe he had smoked before falling asleep on his wooden leg: "I don't really know ... I can't tell you. But doesn't it look like him? Isn't it just his nature: to terrify everything ... to make a mess of everything until people become beasts? ... who else could it have been that stirred up their fear so terribly? When I walk round his villa at night, it becomes as certain to me as the hope that I shall have my revenge. I need no proof. By the way, I've seen him leave his villa sometimes at night and go into town. What is he doing there if that is not why

goes there? ... it gives him pleasure to see how they wrestle with each other in the abyss into which he has plunged them."

"And why are you always lurking outside his house at night?"

"Why? Because I want to take revenge on him. I know I will succeed. As well guarded as he is ... he has put a lot of people around the house ... and he doesn't go a step without two companions who are like big, snappy dogs. But I will catch him ... despite his companions and guards ... he will not escape me ... not escape me ..."

Johann had stood up and walked to the window, turning his back on Adalbert. And he now knew that it would be in vain to try to make him talk any more.

Adalbert spent the whole night rolling plans around in his head while Regina breathed quietly beside him. This regular light sound, which came from a dark shore and to which he usually devoted himself with emotion and delight, had no power over him at all that night. He did not even hear it. More and more urgently, he felt it was his duty to join the fight against the enemies of order and justify himself to himself. And when the sparrows began to make noise, he had come to a decision. Now the decision had to be made, today and tomorrow all forces had to be deployed. It was impossible for him to stay hidden here any longer. When he thought of Regina and the fear she would have to endure for his sake, he wanted to tremble. But it had to be endured, and he was sure that everything would turn out well.

He got up carefully, opened the shutter just a little and wrote a few heartfelt and joking words of farewell on a piece of paper. Then he got dressed and crept down to the courtyard. He had completely forgotten about his guards and was almost startled when he found Marconianu leaning against the gate.

"I want to go into town for a few hours," he said, "to see for myself how things work."

Marconianu let out a strange hiss between his teeth, at which two of the Romanians immediately emerged from their corners. "We'll accompany you, sir," said Marconianu.

Adalbert tried to fend him off: "It's not necessary. Don't bother! I'll be back in a few hours."

"No, Lord, it is our oath to watch over you, Lord! How can we leave you alone? That must not be."

"I'd rather you stayed. I'll leave you as a guard for Regina, promise me to keep a good watch over her."

But the Romanians would not be dissuaded from their duty, and Marconianu insisted on going into town with Adalbert. In the meantime, the two other guards had also come out of the sleeping chamber, and in order not to wake the people in the mill, Adalbert had to allow all five to follow him.

He went ahead with Marconianu and asked for a more detailed account of everything he had seen in the city.

It had rained during the night and a light mist floated over the large meadow area of the hollow. The willows along the river stood there with thick wet heads, and where the mist was caught by a current and swirled around, a piece of the dark green grass appeared in the funnel hole. The bushes along the path were full of grey drops, like extinguished, dulled pearls. And the sky gave little hope of the weather improving. It was a bleak, almost uniform, dull blur in which individual darker-coloured patches drifted. The things Adalbert passed seemed to be breathing, and each of them had its own haze around it.

The road was completely deserted and the village they were now passing through also seemed deserted. A few houses had burned down, and the smoke from the rubble mingled with the fog, giving it a pungent, corrosive odour and taste. Between the charred beams and the collapsed walls lay two dead bodies. A goose had been placed on one of the pointed fence posts in the garden.

impaled. It hung its head and its wings were spread wide, as if it had tried to fly to free itself. Its back side, which had been facing the fire, was scorched and half roasted.

These were bad omens of what awaited Adalbert in the city. But if this was the way things were going, then it was all the more necessary to turn against the destroyers.

As they came to the end of the village, they heard the rolling of a wagon in the mist ahead of them. And at that moment, Adalbert was overcome with a terrible excitement, a premonition of an encounter. And before he had managed to regain his composure, the carriage was already approaching. It was an elegant, light, horse-drawn vehicle

... and its driver was Elisabeth. She wore a black silk dress and a short jacket, and the reins lay tightly in her yellow-gloved hands.

Two steps in front of Adalbert, the car came to a standstill and Elisabeth leant forward to look him in the face. He felt as if he were in a vortex of high-tension electric currents. It was reference eyes that he saw directed at him, and he knew that he had to defend himself, as if against reference itself.

"We haven't seen each other for a long time, Adalbert," said Elisabeth.

Now he also saw her pale, tired, dilapidated face ... and to put a barrier between himself and her, he took a step back and literally took off his hat.

She laughed: "It's not necessary ... I know. You have a little wife at home. I wish you a happy marriage!" Then she looked at the Romanians who had stepped up next to Adalbert. "And you have a whole bodyguard too. I suppose the little woman is worried? Yes ... such precious possessions must be protected ... Addio, dearest! And say hello to the little woman." And laughing, she pulled on the reins. The carriage rolled past Adalbert at a good trot, into the mist.

He continued on his way and it was as if he had had a vision. His past had come back to life, and as much as he had been stabilised by Regina's love, this apparition had once again

It brought unrest upon him. But it was not the restlessness of a desire, but the restlessness of remorse, as if he had not yet atoned for that pernicious passion, and as if his new happiness was undeserved and therefore surrounded by danger. Only when they reached the suburbs did these paralysing feelings give way to the horror of the devastation he saw. Above all, he wanted to find Eleagabal Kuperus and took the road to the cathedral hill. They had to dodge excited hordes of looters several times, and as Adalbert wanted to avoid unnecessary fights, they had to make their way through side alleys. There was still little sign of the authorities' efforts to restore order. Only on the cathedral hill did they find about twenty men from a police force that had been hastily deployed to protect the bishop's palace behind the choir of the cathedral.

Eleagabal's house still showed all the traces of the storm. The large wounds in the wrinkled face, the smashed windows, the split and violated door. The frescoes on the wall had been caused by the night rain. And as Adalbert stood in front of the house, he found the resemblance of the two women in Solomon's judgement to Elisabeth and Regina even clearer than ever. He did not know whether he had in the meantime come to terms with his former impression or whether a change had taken place in the pictures, a slight decay, a wearing down of the lines and colours, so that they had grown even more into that resemblance. It was almost painful to him that the good mother in the picture, who had Regina's features, had been hit by a stone, right on the chest, so that the bricks underneath the covering stood out like bloody flesh.

Adalbert timidly touched the bell on Eleagabal's door as if he were about to make a big decision. Now he was to find out whether the old man had left the city or, if he had stayed, whether he knew of the breach of promise by virtue of that peculiar perspicacity which seemed to reveal to Kuperus even what was concealed.

The door opened ... Eleagabal was there ...; Adalbert signalled to his companions to expect him and entered. When he heard about the

having been recognised by the wolf-faced servant, he walked through the familiar corridors and rooms. Adalbert noticed that they were bare and unadorned, but when he turned to the servant with a question, he just shook his head silently.

Eleagabal Kuperus approached Adalbert, took both his hands and squeezed them. His eyes were so kind and friendly, and his grotesque smile indicated that he either knew nothing of the transgression of his commandment or was not angry after all.

"Finally, finally someone finds their way to me!" he said.

"We have waited from day to day, father, we could not think that you would have forgotten us completely. Why didn't you come? For a while we were very worried about you ..."

"You could have been quiet. I would only have enjoyed it if I hadn't felt sorry for the people."

"We know you and your power, and we all managed to calm down again in the end."

"And didn't the fall of the earth give you sleepless nights?"

"I have to say, it tickled our nerves a little. And sometimes there was a bit of a fever. But - in the end, we all rose up with the confidence that it was impossible for this to happen ... and: we were right."

Eleagabal stroked his patriarchal beard and then scratched behind his ear in an undignified manner: "Yes - so you are unhappy with me, you out in Enzberger's mill. That's a reproach to me ..."

Adalbert became very embarrassed and tried to put himself right: "No - what - we can't think of that! Not at all ... how are we going to reproach Eleagabal ..."

"Leave it alone. It would have been up to old Kuperus to do something about it ... even if I'm only allowed to intervene as soon as I'm approached about it. I would have just put it on - what I still have to put on. But ..." and now the old man's expression became deeply serious, the wrinkles on his face seemed to have been formed according to a secret law.

so that he suddenly looked twice as old as usual ... "I have now come to a realisation. And as far as I can put it into words, I want to share it with you. Yes, an evil disease has come over the world. But it is a disease that consumes all the evil juices in the long term, that burns up all the waste products in the body of mankind in fever heat and cleanses and liberates the organism. And in the case of such an illness, it is the responsibility of the prudent physician to wait and see whether the patient is strong enough to survive the crisis. Once he has survived it, he will be better and stronger than ever before. One must clear the way for such processes. Like all evil in this world, they ultimately work for the good. And so it is perhaps the highest wisdom of the wise not to confront the bad and to see it finally come to a head in its retorts, foaming and hissing. Who can know whether the accumulated toxins would not have had a truly corrosive and destructive effect in another way in the bloodstream of humanity."

Adalbert's desire for war was dampened: "So you're advising me to turn back? Should I remain inactive? I have come to join the fighters for order. I thought it my duty to join the citizen guards, or whatever they are called ..."

"No, that's not what I mean," said Eleagabal, and his smile was back, "you are to take part in the great chemical process. As a ferment, as a chemical force in the retorts. You had the right feeling. And a keen ear for your duty. There are moments when we have to step out of ourselves, when we can't stay behind. Even if we could actually tell ourselves that it doesn't depend on us. Go ahead - but come back safe and sound." -

Adalbert asked the leader of the guard in front of the episcopal palace where he and his companions should report as volunteers and was directed to the town hall. There it was a bit headless and colourful. There were a lot of people giving orders and only a few who could bring themselves to carry them out. Everyone was obsessed with ambitious plans, with desire,

to distinguish themselves, attract attention and perhaps later be rewarded for special merits. All the uniforms that had been kept in reserve in the magazines were brought out and piled up in large piles in the courtyard, where they argued about how to create a kind of uniform clothing for the citizen guards and which insignia would be best for them. The military authorities had been holding consultations with the heads of the town since the early morning about the demarcation of the spheres of activity of the civil and military administration. Occasionally a detachment of soldiers, tiny remnants of the garrison, marched into the town hall to obtain instructions on how to behave, as the telephone link between the town's official buildings and the barracks had been destroyed by the mob. Individual leaders of particular vigour had been able to gather small troops of volunteers around them and, after laboriously bringing a little order to the ranks and arming themselves, moved off to the most threatened points.

Adalbert and his five Romanians joined such a group and helped to occupy the post office building and defend it against the mob. The building had been stormed and partly destroyed the day before, and a number of mechanics were busy repairing the equipment as quickly as possible. They had been cut off from the outside world for twenty-four hours and were no longer able to receive or send telegrams, as the railway post office had also been destroyed. Adalbert was filled with admiration by the courage of the good telephonists and telegraphists, most of whom had returned to work as soon as they heard that the management building was once again in the hands of the organising party. For the time being, however, they could not go on duty and had to confine themselves to watching the mob attacks being repulsed. Adalbert had been given a hunting rifle and a revolver as weapons and, together with his Romanians, defended one of the windows of the large packing room on the ground floor.

By midday, the attackers had been beaten back three times. They came running with wild cries, without looking around for cover, fanatised by fear of death and hatred of the men who dared to oppose them. And they fell in heaps in the narrow streets into the puddles that had formed after another heavy downpour.

In the course of the afternoon, the defenders had grown to about a thousand men and the commander, a retired major with a somewhat brittle lion's voice, was able to hand over about half of his team, which was to proceed to conquer the railway station together with various other detachments. The station was still in the hands of the Brothers of the Red Death and had been turned into a strong fortress by them. After the death of Nikolaus Zenzinger, the Trinity Cobbler had taken over the leadership of the League and had begun to exercise an even bloodier and more gruesome rule.

The battle for the railway station building was fierce and undecided for a long time. Only towards evening did they succeed in penetrating the freight depot and setting up one of the few guns that had not been rendered useless by the artillerymen during their desertion. As dusk fell, the position was in the hands of the organising party. More than eight hundred dead and wounded from the ranks of the Brethren lay on the tracks, in the waiting rooms and in the rest rooms of the extensive building. In the end, the battle had been fought with terrible fierceness, a lustful thirst for blood had awakened in the most considerate souls. And the meekest representatives of tried and tested ideals of humanity, professors, teachers, civil servants, showed no ill desire to simply cut off the necks of their wounded enemies in the jubilation of victory.

Two of his companions had fallen at Adalbert's side. The other three had minor wounds, only he himself had remained uninjured and spent the night on a bench in the third-class waiting room, his head on the rolled-up coat of a fallen engine driver. -

After the encounter with Adalbert, Elisabeth had travelled on, first at a fast trot, then, when she thought she was far enough away, at a slower pace.

She tried to collect herself after this whirling and sparkling outburst of passion that she still hadn't managed to escape.

Tired, she had returned home to the villa. A night of horrific lust lay behind her. The club of Babylonian virgins had celebrated a party. It had grown so much during these days of horror that the group had become independent in the city and separated from the capital. And the intensity of the lust had become so horrible that it had merged with the cruelty into a blazing flame. The countess, who was in charge of the orgies, had managed to devise a heightening that surpassed all previous arts. They had stolen the great shrine from the cathedral, the burial shroud of Christ, and it had been used to increase the profanity of the sacrifices for Astaroth through the special lust of blasphemy. They had spread the cloth on the ground and rolled on it in the raptures of the service of the Babylonian goddess, naked, in the most shameless entanglements, with wild shrieks and breathless convulsions. They had wrapped themselves in it to prepare for adverse revelations. They had thrown it on themselves and used it for dances that moved under the spell of the most adverse symbols.

The countess had been ahead of everyone else in this. She was inexhaustible in her ideas aimed at the desecration of the sanctuary and the triumph of the flesh. And she had done something on her own authority that had never been done before: she had invited the city's prostitutes to the festival. And when someone had made representations to her about it, she had replied with a laugh that all women were equal in the service of the Astaroth. And if her purpose in this humiliation and equality with the most despised women had been to drive everyone's greed and shamelessness to the extreme, she had succeeded.

Towards morning, the men who had been drawn to this feast could bear the torture of lust no longer. They had collapsed, exhausted, unable to resist sleep any longer. One had been carried out dead. It had been a handsome young lad, a man with a heart condition who had been unable to cope with the excitement of the night.

Elisabeth had left the party at dawn after a serious fight with the countess, who had arrogated to herself the right to hold her back. She had clung to Elisabeth's arms, screaming madly, claiming that no one was allowed to leave against her will. Her eyes had sparkled and her breath had been hot and suffocating. The masks had fallen that night, they had been torn from each other so that the distortions of lust could be read in the faces of Astaroth's servants. And so Elisabeth had had to realise how hated she was by the countess.

And after this night of abominations, Elisabeth had had to meet Adalbert. It was precisely now that all the new and delightful things she had come to know through him had come overwhelmingly before her once again. Who was to blame for her mental breakdown, from which her physical decline could not be further away than he was? Or rather: not him, but this woman, this pathetic creature who had drawn him to her. There was a kind of love spell at work, it could not be otherwise. For none of the men who had ever aspired to possess her had come out of her spell. Pike? He had kept his word and killed himself. And anyone who had possessed her once, like Hainx, was lost to her for all time. - She acted like a law of nature, inexorable, without any defence. It could not be otherwise than that some kind of spell had been invoked against her, a more powerful sorcerer than all the secret means the old Thumas had at her disposal.

And how, if Regina were removed from the world when she was no more - would not Adalbert then fall to her again, as one must follow a natural force when the inhibitions of its effect have been removed?

She felt that this thought had been dwelling in her for a long time, but now, when it stood so openly before her, it flashed through her with a strong ray. She stopped her horse and looked round her.

Through the thinning fog, she saw the "General Laudon" inn and, on the other side of the road, Enzberger's castle-like mill. She drove on slowly, and as she passed the high walls with their embrasures, she began to develop her plan to bring Adalbert back to her.

He had gone into town with the five people who were always around him. Regina was now alone with the millers in the mill. The important thing was to lure them out and get them under her control. How could this be done more safely than by letting Elisabeth's fear for her lover take effect? Shouldn't Regina be afraid for Adalbert, who had put himself in danger, in this cauldron of confusion and horror? Regina needed to be sent a message that would make her fear grow great and wild and cause her to leave the protection of the mill.

At that moment she remembered the skilful messengers of the club of Babylonian maidens, who seemed to be able to achieve the impossible in ordering secret messages. And it was immediately clear to her that she had to make use of them ... this was the way ...

This was the way ...

She turned her horse and drove back to the town, which lay boiling in the fog with a confused roar of gunfire and wild shouting.

As she passed the ramparts of Enzberger's mill, she looked up at the flowerpots on the windows and smiled with a cruel and hard mouth.

Carnage. The miracle

[Table of contents](#)

Adalbert had found little peace on his bench in the third-class waiting room. The whole night was a coming and going, a slamming of doors and noise. In addition, on the track outside there were the blaring whistles of the railway staff who had returned to work and were trying to free the carriages that had become barricades.

When Adalbert was awakened by something after a short, minute-long slumber and opened his eyes, he saw the three Romanians sitting on the ground in front of him. They looked very pale in the yellow light of the paraffin lamps that were burning here instead of the electric lights and were talking quietly and sadly to each other. The murmur of this conversation finally enveloped Adalbert more and more closely, growing up around him and arching over him until he fell asleep.

He woke up at dawn, shook himself together and went out onto the platform. During the night, a few enterprising and cautious people had hitched a cattle wagon to a locomotive and travelled out a short distance to resupply the town. The fighting of the last few days had meant that the supply of food had been almost completely cut off. The night's journey had been a good success. A few oxen had been found somewhere, and the animals, after being unloaded, were now standing on the rails, staring dully and chewing their cud.

Sitting on a broken crate next to Adalbert was a man who had pulled out a sketchbook and was painting furiously with watercolours to capture the image of the oxen, those indifferent expressions, those broad backs and flanks, their colours flowing into each other in the twilight.

"Morning, Dibian," said a young man who had come out of the restaurant wrapped in a plaid.

The painter glanced up: "Morning, Hauser."

"Dibian or you have to seize the opportunity by the forelock."

"Sure, something like that won't happen again soon. I've never seen oxen in such a situation. The shot-up railway station, the overturned wagons, the fire on the track out there ... the purest picturesque disorder."

"Too bad you can't carve history in marble. But I have an idea, I'm making a symbolic group ... it will represent the state and society in the last days. And it will be called 'Oxen on the Mountain'."

"Well, what do you want?" Dibian asked, twisting a couple of crimson plexuses into the mists of neutral ink. "You've pulled yourself together ... finally ... and as far as you can tell ... we won, I think."

"Not quite yet, my dearest. Today is only the day of doom. When it's over, we'll hopefully be able to tell."

"You're at headquarters ... some kind of adjutant, aren't you? You must know. I bow to your superior judgement."

"I can only advise you to hurry up with your sketch. It will start again soon. The Brothers of the Red Death are far from being defeated. That fellow, the Trinity Cobbler, has escaped. And our messengers report that he is gathering his troops. But it's not against us. Wait a minute ..." He had put his hand on Dibian's shoulder and raised it high, listening.

Muffled shouting and gunshots came from the direction of the cathedral hill.

"They've really started again. No sooner had they have 'can light'. Namely ..."

"You can start a sentence with namely, you can ask any German professor."

"This is the grammar of the last day. I don't think the terror would have asked about the German professors. Well, they have this old cloth that they claim is the linen cloth of Christ. And it's such a talisman for the end of the world. They pay divine reverence to it. And now this shrine has disappeared from the cathedral. So now the earth must pass away in its sins without a talisman."

"Terrible!"

"Yes, isn't it - that's what I say. And the Brothers of the Red Death claim that the Marianites, who have to keep the Holy Shroud, have stolen it and are hiding it ... out of sheer malice, so that the others don't get anything out of it. And now the red brothers are furious. And during the night they have gathered their scattered forces and want to attack the poor devils holed up in the cathedral

... As you can hear here," he added in an exclamatory tone, pointing with his hand towards the cathedral, whose uneven towers were already bathed in a brighter light from the twilight.

"Well, I'll be finished in a minute, and then it can start again for all I care," said Dibian, putting a dirty mark on the broad forehead of an ox with opaque white.

Adalbert returned to the waiting room, took his hunting rifle and cartridge belt and prepared to follow the order to leave. The Romanians had mysteriously managed to procure a kind of coffee for him and themselves, a brownish drink whose best quality was its warmth. But Adalbert had barely got halfway down when a bugle call outside on the platform summoned them to gather. He was glad to be relieved of the agony of having to drink the brown leather decoction without offending the good will of his companions.

The military spirit that the common danger of the past battles had awakened proved itself in a firmer cohesion of limbs and ranks. The troops advanced silently and in good order.

and in two columns up the cathedral hill to capture the enemy from two sides at the same time.

The Brothers of the Red Death had not yet been able to achieve any successes against the Marianites. Cheered on by their leaders, the frame maker and the Trinity cobbler, they repeatedly stormed the portal of the cathedral and the episcopal palace, which was also occupied by Marianites and several detachments of military and civic guards, to no avail. Events had pushed the Marianites over to the side of the party of order, and they defended themselves against the stormers as if they had already been convinced that the downfall of the earth was not yet to be feared for today.

The frame-maker, who knew every nook and cranny and every courtyard up here, had finally stopped the onslaught of the masses and pushed through another war plan with the Prophet's successor. It was rather difficult to convince the Trinity Cobbler of the futility of further attacks. In the fanaticism kindled by the sight of the blood and the horrors of battle, he would hear nothing of caution and protection. He was in a state of obsession and, like a drunken man, was always babbling atrocious curses and imprecations. And some of his troops could not be persuaded to change their tactics. They kept running pointlessly against the portal of the cathedral and the front of the bishop's palace, thrown back again and again and advancing on the bloody trail until the last man was shot away.

But the frame-maker had dispersed the rest of the troops to the houses around the cathedral square. He himself had occupied his own little house with the most daring people and wanted to try to make his way over the roofs to the bishop's palace. The passion flowers in the windows, which had begun to bloom again despite all the neglect, were torn to shreds by bullets, the flower pots were smashed, and the Brothers of the Red Death carried the black, greasy earth on their soles through all the rooms.

As the troops moved from the railway station to the cathedral square, they were greeted by fierce fire from all the windows. They spread out

They were routed and forced out, but they returned, reinforced by more and more new fighters who arrived on the cathedral hill. For the first time, regular military forces entered the fray in large numbers. A few companies of infantry with their bayonets cleared several houses in a short time.

In the meantime, the frame-maker and a number of his men had reached the bishop's palace via the rooftops. They saw the friars being thrown out of the houses below and beaten down in the cathedral square. A detachment was forced into the narrow alley between the cathedral gate and the front of the palace, surrounded and completely routed. It was a terrible battle in which the women also took part. They attacked the soldiers and volunteers with nails and teeth, grabbed bayonets and rifle barrels, clutched the feet of the enemy and tore them down. Adalbert, too, was clutched by a tall woman with tangled hair and red-rimmed eyes and, pushing him against a corpse, was brought down. He saw one of the red brothers bending over him with a knife ... then he saw another knife in Marconianu's hand and saw it plunge into the oppressor's throat. He rose, still stunned by his fall, wiped the blood from his face with the back of his hand and continued running forwards, towards a tangle of fighters in which he saw the painter from this morning in danger.

In the attic of the palace, a few courageous Marianites had confronted the frame-maker and his men. But the red brothers, who had watched their fighters being massacred below, were fuming with rage, ran down the enemy, cut off their necks and threw the bodies through the skylights onto the heads of the soldiers in front of the palace. They knew they were doomed and wanted to carry the destruction as far as possible before the end.

On the stairs, in the rooms of the palace, the battle unfolded in a hundred scenes, a gruesome slaughter in which everything became a weapon, candlesticks, vases, chairs and all the utensils of the bishop's kitchen.

The bishop had locked himself in his study with Mrs Agathe. She had come to him the day before, after a terrible performance with reference, almost senseless with fear and filled with a boiling tenderness for her beloved.

"I told him," she cried, as soon as the bishop had greeted her, "I told him. All my hatred ... all my disgust for him ... he had to hear it all. He didn't answer me at all. Oh - he just kicked me and tormented me all those years.

And I put up with it all ... I was weak and weak-willed. But you made me strong ... I told him that I loved you. I told him ... why shouldn't I tell him?

If it's all over tomorrow anyway ... I want him to know. I want him to see that he didn't succeed in his plan, that he didn't make me completely unhappy. That I have conquered my happiness after all." She was beside

herself with kisses and clung to her lover. "You will not let yourself be deprived of it, Agathe?" he said, "you still think that tomorrow will be the

end? I have already explained it to you: there is no question of it. The astronomers have proved it down to the last detail ... the earth will continue

to move quietly, the sun will

rise as always ..."

"Yes ... yes ... I believe you ... when I'm with you, I'll know."

"And? Don't you think about what will come of it ... now that your husband knows that we ..."

"No ... I don't think about it. Everything that happens is one thing to me. And I'm grateful to my doubt and my fear ... At least he knows now ... I've been able to throw it in his face ... word for word

... I didn't go easy on him, you can imagine. I regret nothing, I have no regrets. I'm happy that I finally - finally found the courage to tell him ... as hot as my heart wanted to tell him. And now I'm fine ... I'm with you ... and whether the world ends tomorrow or not ... that's something that leaves me indifferent ... I'm with you."

"Yes ... I'm happy too," he said, breaking away from her to go and have a chat. It was quite a fatal story. Mrs Agathe, the poor sick woman, who was always soliciting pity, had been transformed into a wild woman. He had no doubt that he would succeed in bringing her to her senses and persuading her to return once the day of her demise was over. But there was no getting over the fact that Bezug now knew everything, and there was nothing to do but wait and see what he would begin. By the way, when the bishop thought about all the connections, it seemed to him that a kind of retribution had become visible here. The punishment for the fact that the people had been driven into this excessive fear.

Mrs Agathe, meanwhile, had arranged to stay with her lover for a long time ... quite ruthlessly, as if he must be as indifferent to people's judgement as she was. The bishop had to let it happen, and while all around the town the fight had broken out, she drew him into her embrace, seized him and poured a burning passion over him.

He had been awakened by the news of the approach of the Brothers of the Red Death, and a quarter of an hour later he was already on the square to take command of the defenders. All his military memories had come alive. And it was thanks to his swift and prudent measures that the attacks of the stormers had been repulsed. Agathe had accompanied him on all his marches, steeled by his superior will and freed from all fear.

She wasn't even startled when two bullets came through the window from where she was watching the fight next to the bishop and one of the shards of glass slightly scratched her cheek. Then the bishop locked himself in the study with her. There was a roar of battle on the stairs and in the rooms of the palace. She sat in one of the wide armchairs, one knee drawn up and her hands folded over it, and watched the bishop lock the heavy oak door

and then took two beautiful gold-inlaid pistols and a Browning from a cupboard, which he placed on a small table in front of him.

Everything glided past her like a dream. She felt as if she were looking down from a bridge into a swift river, until the sensation of swimming came over her. The slight consciousness of danger was only like a pleasant stimulus to her. She lived in nothing but the sight of her lover, whose determined and calm movements she savoured with pleasure.

The shouting outside had come closer and a commotion had arisen in front of the door, from which a few blows were directed against the panelling like sudden compressions of the noise. Then a few shots rang out and were answered by a furious roar. The vestibule in front of the study had become a battlefield.

Mrs Agathe still had the feeling of swimming. It buzzed in her ears, and she saw nothing but the figure of her lover, standing tall, a pistol in each hand, looking eagerly towards the door.

Then it seemed as if the buzzing in his ears subsided. The noise of the fight receded from the door, someone shouted outside: "Bishop's Grace ... they're gone ..." And the bishop went to the door and opened it. Someone looked in. "He's alive," he called back, "he's here!" A few people crowded into the doorway. Agathe felt as if she saw a familiar face.

Then everything went down in a pleasant frenzy ... and at the very end she remembered that the man she had seen there was Adalbert Semilasso ...

Adalbert was indeed among the detachment that had come to the aid of the palace's defenders and had driven back the attackers. The framemaker had fallen at the door of the bishop's study, and the last of his band retreated the same way they had come. They were pursued to the attic, and the battle continued on the roofs until the last of the red

The brothers tried to flee through the neighbouring houses to avoid running into the hands of the troops who had already occupied this part of the cathedral square. Adalbert had also climbed onto the roof of the palace. Marconianu and the two other Romanians were always behind him. A fresh easterly wind brought him coolness after the frenzy of battle. Adalbert looked up at the sky. The wind had torn the rain clouds apart and was pulling them slowly back from a bright blue shield.

Adalbert made his way along the gutters to the next alleyway, without a feeling of dizziness and with complete confidence in the use of his limbs. He leant forward to look down on the cathedral square.

The battle was decided, only a troop of about fifty of the red brothers were trying to fight their way through. They had closed ranks, cheering each other on with their resounding "Hu - hu - hu!" and had already reached the alley whose shaft was under Adalbert. The women tore open their blouses and threw themselves at the soldiers, while the men took cover behind them and fired at the enemy.

The volunteers no longer took part in the battle. They stood in groups on the cathedral square or tended to the wounded, who were taken to a dressing station set up by the rescue organisation in front of the cathedral portal.

A strange clamour at the other end of the alley made Adalbert look there. A number of women were approaching, half-naked, in dance steps ... with their arms outstretched and their breasts bare, their clothes pulled up to their knees. What was that? Was the madness still spreading?

The woman who danced in front of the others wore a tattered black dress, her blonde hair was tangled by the wind and blew around her shoulders, flowing over her chest ... who was that? Who was that? On a pole she wore a large scarf with brown-red spots. It was tied to the pole with large knots at two tails and billowed out like a sail, then flopped limply against the wearer's face again, muffling the laughter with which she leapt ahead of the procession.

Now she was so close that Adalbert had to recognise the countess. He bent forward so far that his companions pulled him back. The woman had been completely out of his mind lately, she had taken no part in any of his thoughts, and he was building his future entirely without her. But now he saw her there among him in a state of drunkenness and frenzy, and the certainty was in him that she had come straight from a terrible orgy, in the company of these women who had taken part in it. And he remembered an hour in which he had sought solace in her friendship, an hour which had shown him more of her good and understanding heart than she could ever have shown to another. This memory was a reproach and a shame to him. He wanted to rush down and rouse her from her stupor ... she would obey him, him as the only ...

But at that moment a fanatical roar arose in the alley. The last of the red brothers had broken through the ranks of the enemy and rushed down the street in a tightly packed mob, straight towards the women's procession. When the foremost ones saw the strange flag of the leader, they retreated. Then they cried out.

"The burial shroud! The burial shroud! She has the holy cloth!"

And they attacked the women like wild animals. The countess danced towards death. She didn't stop laughing and waving her banner until a carpenter's axe hit her in the head and one of the brothers snatched the sacred cloth from her. Howling, the women tried to flee, but the red brothers chased after them in the narrow alley, tore the last rags from their bodies and struck at the naked bodies, unconcerned that they themselves were being pursued and cut down by their enemies. From his roof, Adalbert had a view of a hell, of a heap of dead and dying, from which a few armed priests were now unravelling the holy cloth to bring it back to the cathedral. But the outline of a bloody body that might have been wrapped in this cloth centuries ago was blurred

and unrecognisable due to large bright red stains of freshly spilt blood.

Adalbert descended the stairs, staggering. He had before him the image of an open, slaving maw, with a terrible set of teeth, between which hung shreds of flesh and chunks of fat. And in the background of the maw, a swollen, blood-red tongue moved like a fat animal in a dimly lit cave.

He was ill, he felt it. And he had to go to Eleagabal Kuperus to regain his senses through his influence. Keeping his eyes fixed on the front gate and the frescoed wall of Eleagabal's house, he walked across the blood-slick cathedral square, avoiding the piles of corpses that had been gathered here and there, and reached out for the doorbell as if in a dream. He looked up at the pictures above the door. There was the sacrifice of Isaac among all kinds of vines and illegible sayings and the passage of the Jews through the Red Sea and also the judgement of Solomon with the two women, Elizabeth and Regina ...

Adalbert staggered back a few steps and stared wide-eyed at the picture. The woman who resembled Elisabeth stood there with her hand raised and a face whose expression was completely changed and distorted into a mocking triumph. And the place where Regina had stood opposite her was empty. Regina was as if erased from the picture, she had disappeared ... and the other people in the picture seemed to be looking at this empty space in the centre of the picture with expressions of horror.

"She's gone ... she's gone," Adalbert gasped and grabbed the arm of Marconianus, who was standing next to him.

A terrible fear had seized him, like a sudden darkness in which ghostly voices called out to each other and soft, spongy bodies pattered past. Then a gleam came into this darkness, a phosphorescent glow, and in this light of decay Adalbert saw another image, in indistinct outlines, half-guessed, yet terribly determined by the foreboding fear: the

Vision of Antothrace. The image he had seen back then in the barren, hot, trembling cauldron of the island. The two women ... on a bank ... he saw Regina turn her back on her enemy, saw a dagger in Elisabeth's hand ... two thrusts and two red marks on Regina's neck.

Something screamed inside him. And he rushed at the bell on Eleagabal's door again. Then, when the entrance had opened, through the corridors and rooms, past the servant and into the great hall.

Eleagabal seemed to swim towards him in a blue mist.

Adalbert clutched two scrawny, bony knees: "She's gone! ... she's gone! ... gone! Gone!"

"Who's gone?"

"She, the woman in the picture ... Regina ... the woman who looks like Regina ... she has disappeared from the picture."

Eleagabal's features seemed to change in the blue mist. A heavy, but level-headed seriousness affected Adalbert's confused soul. "You mean the woman who looks like Regina...?"

"Yes, she's gone ... Elisabeth murdered her ... it's so ... oh, it's terrible. Where is she? We must look for her. You will lead me to her; come with me ... come at once ..."

Somehow, the servant with Eleagabal's coat and hat was already standing next to him. "Let's go," said the old man.

At the door of his house, Eleagabal turned round and looked at the picture and then, shaking his head, followed Adalbert's urging. As they descended the cathedral hill, they saw an empty one-horse carriage standing in the small square in front of the "Schwarzer Adler" cellar inn. The walls of the closed coupé were riddled with holes from a bullet that had passed right through the carriage. The horse stood with its head down, licking the iron fittings on the drawbar. There was no sign of the coachman. Perhaps he was down in the cellar recovering from the horrors of the day. At Eleagabal's signal, Marconianu jumped onto the coachman's seat and grabbed the reins. The four men

squeezed into the cramped coupé, and then Marconianu drove off through the streets bustling with excited people and occupied by troops.

Sometimes they had to turn off in front of barricades, then there were negotiations with the commanders of the patrols, who asked about the destination of the journey. During these stops and detours, Adalbert held Eleagabal's hand in his with a firm, painful squeeze. And only when Marconianu was able to spur the horse into the fastest gait before the town did he let go of the old man.

The horse followed the Romanian's shouts and whip with clumsy leaps, so that the carriage swayed from side to side, bumping and clanking. Then they came over the height into the shield of the valley hollow, and in front of them lay the inn "Zum General Laudon" and Enzberger's mill and, further on, Bezugs Villa.

Adalbert had been holding the handle of the carriage long before Marconianu had brought the horse to a halt, then jumped out and banged both fists against the locked gate. When he saw Enzberger's distraught face, he didn't ask any questions and ran into the courtyard, up the stairs and into Regina's room. But there was nothing there to tell him where to look for her. He ran through the whole house, opened every door and looked into every room, raced through every cupboard and barn and through the garden and finally sank down on the chopping block in the middle of the courtyard, covered in sweat and breathless.

They all stood around him, and no one knew a word of comfort. Only old Johann kept to himself and walked back and forth between the group around the chopping block and the yard gate, his head drooping and his stilt foot stamping hard, as he always did when he was thinking hard about something.

Enzberger said something ... and his wife ... Adalbert heard nothing but individual words, which fell into an abyss as soon as they were spoken. Then Kuperus began to speak, so slowly and emphatically that Adalbert was forced to stop. He felt as if he were being wound out of a shaft by chains.

"Enzberger tells us that Regina was distraught about your departure. She wanted to follow you immediately and go into town, and it cost Enzberger all his efforts to hold her back. At last she seemed to calm down and hope that she would see you again. If she went away after all - and we have every reason to believe that she did go to the city - then something must have had an effect on her ..."

"Elisabeth killed her ... I know it."

"Enzberger hasn't seen anyone. But ... we have no other choice, we have to go back to the city and look for her ..."

"Search," Adalbert repeated, rising to his feet, "... she's dead ... I know it ..."

Everyone went with them, including Enzberger and his wife; they locked the large gate and left the mill alone. The Romanians had scrutinised everything once more, cursing the murderers of the young woman, whom they all loved. Running back and forth like dogs on a trail, they each came to the same spot three times. They communicated with short shouts, and when they had stepped outside the gate, they continued their investigations in front of the mill. After they had taken a few steps, Marconianu and his companions turned off the road, walked a little way into the meadow, came back again, and now walked so fast beside the road that the others stayed far behind. Then all three turned left and walked through the tall, long unmown grass towards the trees by the river.

Adalbert had stopped. He looked after the three men. They seemed to be jumping up and down in the tall grass as if they were being moved by elasticated cords. The trees over there were not standing still either, but rising and falling ...

Then Adalbert saw a beckoning arm ... it rose up among the dancing trees from a black group of people. And then he began to run ... and it was as if he had to make his way through a rushing surf ... somewhere ... to a point that was very far away and very difficult to reach ...

But Regina was lying in front of him on the damp sand of the shore. At first he only saw her face with one cheek pressed into the sand ... her mouth was open and her eyes only half closed. Adalbert no longer trembled as he leant down towards her. Then he pointed to two small wounds on her neck that were like snake bites. The edges were only slightly apart and there wasn't much blood on the clothes or the sand.

"Elisabeth," said Adalbert, and everyone was startled by his terrible calm, "Elisabeth has killed her. It's like Antothrace! That's how I saw it on Antothrace, Eleagabal, just like that ..."

With tender hands he turned the dead woman on her back. And for a long time he knelt beside her, with the same face that seemed to have lost all possibility of change in its expression. Then, as if following an unmistakable intuition, he reached into one of the pockets of Regina's dress and pulled out a note which, after reading it, he handed to Eleagabal.

"It's Elisabeth's writing," he said.

Eleagabal read the three lines on the crumpled paper: "Adalbert is in the city, if you don't know. He is in great danger. Hurry to save him. A friend is waiting to take you to him."

Adalbert heard someone say: "She made little effort to cover her tracks."

Then it seemed to him that the river turned into a wall in front of him. The bank on the other side clipped up and rose, while the bank on this side remained calm, as if the hinges for the river's movement were in place here. And then Adalbert saw that beside Regina's body, half-hidden in the sand, lay a broken bottle, a battered old sardine tin and a sodden piece of newspaper

...

When the body was brought to the mill, it was already evening and the world had still not come to an end. A cavalry patrol approached from the road. The hooves sounded on the still

always rain-soaked street. Now that order had been restored in the town, the army was sent out to deal with the troublemakers in the neighbourhood. As the riders passed the corpse, the officer bent down to look the dead woman in the face and, as if moved by a sudden emotion, raised his hand to his helmet in greeting.

Adalbert, who had overcome the attack of weakness after half an hour, followed the men carrying his dead wife, climbed the stairs behind them and, when they had laid the body on the bed, settled down in an armchair. He kept thinking one thing: Now it's all over ... now it should be over. She will no longer speak or laugh, and the bed in which she now lies ... it is the same one that carried our happiness.

He lifted his head. Night had fallen outside, and through the window he saw a black-blue, brightly overcast summer sky. This sky only looked like a curtain, an elaborate, wondrously woven curtain, which, as fine as it is, conceals everything that lies behind it.

Apart from Eleagabal, who was sitting at the table with the paraffin lamp, there were no strangers in the room.

Kuperus had leant back in his chair and closed his eyes so that he appeared to be asleep.

All of a sudden Adalbert felt as if it wasn't true, as if it was all just an illusion, a bad dream. There were no realities to hold on to, nothing substantial, and he felt himself being slowly sucked in against his will by a bubbling mud volcano, without being able to grasp anything solid; the voice of a human being ... he wanted to hear the voice of a human being.

"Eleagabal ... are you asleep?"

Eleagabal was not asleep. He opened his eyes straight away, like someone who doesn't find it difficult at all.

"So it's true?"

"Yes, my poor chap - it's true."

"What should I do? I can't live without her. I'll follow her at dawn. I want to see the light once more, then -"

"You mustn't do that, Adalbert. You must first try to carry life. And only then, when nothing can hold you ..."

The words slipped past Adalbert and gained no meaning for him. Eleagabal was now so far away from him that he felt no connection with him. Adalbert realised with bitterness that Eleagabal had done nothing to save Regina. He had examined her and realised that she must have been killed the night before she was found. That had been all. And surely he possessed means that were unknown to others and that might be suitable for at least making an attempt. Of course ... there was no fighting death ...

Suddenly, however, he let go of the dead woman's hand, which he had been holding until now, pushed back his armchair and stood up sharply. Something had occurred to him, so large, so important, so heavy, that he was startled. He had remembered a conversation with the old man and a strange message he had given him then.

"Eleagabal ... I beg you for all mercy's sake ... you must not evade me now ... tell me the truth. Am I already insane to think of this, or is it really so ...? You once said you could call life back. You have a means of turning death into life ..."

Eleagabal had also got up and now came slowly round the table. He stepped to the bed, took Regina's hand and looked into her face. Then he turned to Adalbert: "It is as you say. I've done a lot of experiments. And some of them have been successful. Of course, I have never used my secret in earnest. Because you will remember what I said back then: Death is still too powerful in this world. Too powerful ... and then I have to ask something else before I engage in a fight ... She is your wife, Adalbert, isn't she?"

Adalbert bowed his head and remained silent.

"I imposed my commandment on you at that time, not for your torment but for your salvation. I foresaw what would happen. I did not know in what way and by whom. I was not able to see it. But I sensed this hour. I knew that we would both s t a n d by her body and that you would tell me ... what you had just told me. And I was determined to help you, but you yourself should also contribute ..."

"It was a time ... we believed in doom back then ... Should we be so ...?"

"I understand what drove you to do this. And I don't blame you. It was bound to happen. But you made it difficult for me ... I'm not saying it's impossible. Every human being is given a life force that usually lasts until the fulfilment of their natural destiny. As a rule. And the natural destiny of woman is love. Now you will realise that the life force must be stronger and more effervescent in a virgin than in a woman ... it would have been easier for me to save you if you had followed. But now ... it has happened and I must see that I still defeat death. Perhaps other forces have awakened in her, in that life has been fulfilled for her. I do not know. There is still much that is dark and uncertain."

Adalbert had sunk into Eleagabal's chair and had hidden his face in his hands. He felt anxious and uneasy, but hope would not be dispelled. Eleagabal would succeed ... he had to succeed.

"He will not be so easily deceived ... death ... he will demand another sacrifice for her. For you see, Adalbert, I speak to you of a great mystery of the universe. Throughout the universe, the sum of death and life is always the same. It is difficult for us to grasp this thought, for we only see a tiny piece of the whole immeasurable world. We are confined to the earth, or rather, in the true sense of the word, enclosed within ourselves. What we call development is a law of very limited validity. It relates to us and to our little piece of the world. Beyond that? Who can go beyond

... But the great mysteries are not seen, but felt. And so I tell you that the universe hovers in an unalterable balance of death and life. What is given here is taken away there. The one great power is always the same.

T h e r e i s always a balance. Every germinating thing here is contrasted with a dying thing there. Every first breath is countered by a death rattle. And when we speak of development here on our earth, that is, of an increase in living forces, who knows on which of the dark stars there, orbiting around the suns of other systems, the equalisation takes place at the same time, the unwinding, the sinking back i n t o death, through which the unchanging sum is preserved. And when we reach into the marvellous fabric with our clumsy hands, we do not know what will follow our arbitrariness.

When we call Regina back to life, we must be aware that death is looking for another victim." And murmuring softly, he added: "I ... I am ready ..."

Moved, Adalbert stood up and walked t o w a r d s Eleagabal, taking his hands and kissed them.

"I'm going now," said the old man, "I have to go into town ... I'll be back by morning."

Adalbert heard him walking up the stairs, talking to someone downstairs... Then the courtyard gate creaked open and, while all these sounds seemed to glide away into the night, Adalbert surrendered to his tiredness. He was so full of confidence that almost all restlessness was banished from him. The noises seemed to return, to repeat themselves, until a steady hum arose before his ears, in which he fell asleep, sitting beside Regina's bed.

When he woke up, there was already a tentative glimmer of dawn in the room. Someone was talking down in the courtyard. If it hadn't been for the soft chirping and piping in the large pear tree outside the window, Adalbert would have thought that only a few minutes had passed since Eleagabal had left. Then someone came up the stairs again, with tired, dragging steps ...

Eleagabal entered, and only his forehead and long beard were visible in the grey of the morning. They both gleamed silver, and there was a constant trickling over them as of illuminated water. Without looking at Adalbert, he approached the bed and took the dead woman's hand.

Adalbert had backed away, for he felt that he was too small and insignificant to be in the foreground of what was about to happen. But Eleagabal called him over and asked him to get clean sheets and water.

The miller's men were already up or still up; Adalbert did not ask for them, nor did they ask why he needed these things. Nor did they offer to help him, as if they understood that he could not allow anyone else to do anything for Regina at that hour.

When Adalbert arrived with what he had asked for, he stopped for a moment under the door. His heart stopped beating. In the meantime, Eleagabal had undressed Regina. She lay naked on her bed, her body shimmering dully in the dawn. The perfection of her beauty was sublime and touching, and the old man stood before her with his arms lowered, as if in prayer.

Then, with a silent wave, he wordlessly instructed Adalbert what to do. And when everything was ready, he set about washing Regina's body. He did it with such gentle and tender movements, with such light hands, that Adalbert, who had stood aside again, was not hurt by anything. When he had finished, he rubbed Regina's chest and limbs with a white ointment and then wrapped the body tightly in the cloths.

The sparrows outside the window had all woken up and started making their merry noise.

Adalbert wanted to close the shutters. "Leave it alone," Eleagabal fought him off, "Just let me ..." and then he added, looking Adalbert in the eye with a wide-eyed expression: "How I love you ... how I love you both ..."

The day had arrived. He stretched up on the hills behind the Villa Bezugs and looked over to the city, still wearing grey and rosy red

veil in front of his face, but he was already smiling and raising his hands to pull it away.

Eleagabal had returned to the bedside. In his hand, Adalbert saw a tiny, blinking syringe with a sharp, needle-shaped tip, which the old man was now dipping into a crystal glass. It was the jar that Eleagabal had shown him one night, the jar that contained the ferment, the ferment of life. Standing tall and breathing heavily, the old man looked upwards as if invoking all the good powers. Then he bent over Regina and, after a brief search, inserted the tip of the needle into her neck. Slowly the plunger went down

...

"Now that place is yours..." he said, stepping back.

And Adalbert knelt at her bedside, his breath restrained ... his whole being was given over in a single stream to the salvation of his beloved ... He did not know whether he had had to wait like this for a long time or whether he had only been lying in front of Regina for seconds ... Suddenly he became aware of a change in his beloved's face. The skin of her cheeks seemed to tighten, as if the vessels underneath were being filled; each cell was still moving on its own, as if none of them had yet been able to find its way into the larger context. Here and there, individual parts emerged from their torpor, came to life and gained colour and the untilgbare charm of an organism persisting in the change of substance. The dead parts of Regina's face disappeared more and more. They were encircled by streams of life, drawn into the vortex and flooded with new forces and lights. Adalbert felt as if he were witnessing a new creation of man from the inanimate. A spectacle so sublime was revealed before him that he almost forgot what his personal part in it was. So completely devoted was he to the miracle, so shaken was he in its depths, that at first he did not hear Eleagabal's whisper.

Eleagabal had to touch his shoulder. "Cut the covers," he said again, handing Adalbert a small, sharp knife.

Adalbert tore the cloths open with a swift cut, and he felt as if his whole body and all its pores were breathing more powerfully at the same time.

His ear was on Regina's chest and inside ... there was a soft, warm, only slightly timid sound, and then he felt a slight rise and fall. He began to sob, holding on to himself with difficulty, gritting his teeth so as not to wake his beloved prematurely. And then he saw a new sign of the return to life ... the fingers of the hand that lay at her side twitched, curled, and the nails were no longer blue but became pink ... with white crescents at the roots ... and then, then this hand rose a little tired and heavy and lay on Adalbert's head. He looked up and looked into Regina's eyes, which were open and bright and joyful. "Is the morning here yet?" she asked after a while.

Then he pushed himself higher, putting his arms around her shoulders and pressing his mouth to her lips, which were still a little chilly and trembling a little. He stayed like this until the chill had left Regina's body, until her lips returned his kiss warmly and firmly.

And then he remembered the Saviour. He wanted to fall at his feet and kiss his hands.

But Eleagabal Kuperus was gone. The room was empty and seemed ready to receive the morning sun, whose first rays were just coming over the heights behind the villa.

Reference new plans. Johanna's life story. Act conclusions

[Table of contents](#)

In the middle of that night, which followed the day of the end of the world, there was a knock at the door of Elisabeth's bedroom. A servant was there to tell her that her father wanted her to see him in his room.

Elisabeth had not gone to bed. She sat on the balcony and looked over at the lit window in Enzberger's mill. The light was on there all night tonight. It was the light of the dead. Sometimes you could see a figure in the open window, a shadow, but only rarely; it was as if the pain had stopped the movements of the people over there. Sometimes Elisabeth took up the binoculars that lay on the parapet beside her and kept them fixed on the square section of the enemy's castle until someone came into his field of vision. She saw Adalbert and the old man who used to frequent **t h e** mill and who had been present today when the body was found. She hadn't missed that either: seeing the dead woman being brought into the mill ...

Now the way was clear for her. It was a great triumph of her will that she had been able to remove the obstacle to her happiness. Her dagger had struck twice fatally. And that Regina was really dead, she had convinced herself once more the morning after the crime. She had been back to where the body lay, not caring if she was seen. If order was restored, no one would dare accuse her, because she was the daughter of Bezugs.

She reluctantly accepted her father's invitation, as she was reluctant to leave her post. But this summons had been so urgent that she could not refuse it.

Bezug was sitting in a chair and looking in front of him when Elisabeth entered. She immediately realised that a great disorder had confused the familiar impression of the room. The secret compartments of the tables and walls had been opened and not closed again. It looked as if Bezug had grown tired in the midst of some all-consuming labour and could go no further. And he seemed quite decrepit and old, with a yellow face and strangely protruding ears.

Now he raised his head and nodded to his daughter. Then he pointed to a chair next to a small table.

"I asked you to come to me," he began, "to tell you that we have to leave."

What was that? What did he think of? She put her knee over the chair and leant her arms on the backrest, looking firmly at her father.

"Yes, that's right," he repeated, "we have to leave. We have no other choice. The great spectacle is over. The fools have come to their senses. There's nothing more to see."

"I still don't understand why we have to leave," Elisabeth said calmly.

"Because now all the anger and bitterness of the crowd will be turned against us," and at a movement from Elisabeth he added, "against me ... if you like."

"Are you suddenly afraid of the people?" she asked scornfully, "after you have incited and tormented them, plunged them into mortal fear and amused yourself with all this?"

"You know that I have the means to defend myself. I am not afraid. They will not dare to attack me here. I am still the good friend of the authorities. And after all, I could protect myself. As wild and angry as they may be. They will arrive very stormily, it is to be expected; once the conviction has taken root in the dull minds that it was I to whom these lovely recent events are partly due ..."

"Do you think they've already come to that conclusion?"

"Hainx was in town and did a bit of listening around. Somehow it got out to the people. They're talking about it and getting more and more upset, and if I can believe Hainx, there's going to be a dangerous ferment. Now they attribute everything to me, even the things I didn't pull the strings on. It is the reversal of their fear, the switching of passions that are barely calmed. The switch to a rage that is directed against me. You do not know the people as I do, I have got to know them, I have seen them in my hands. They were as malleable as wax, and I did what I wanted to them by exhausting their instincts. When they realise this, they will come at me with the same fury with which they first tore each other apart. It's the last explosion ... before complete calm sets in. They hate no one more than the one to whom they first blindly surrendered."

"You've become an old man, Thomas Bezug, a weakling." Bezug straightened up in his chair from his slumped position.

Stance on.

"You have no right to think that way about me. When I spoke of the people's anger, I was mainly concerned about you!"

"They won't hurt me ... I'm just your daughter."

"That's why ... don't you think this is enough for them? You must come with me."

Elisabeth enjoyed tormenting her father even more as she saw him in real fear: "These are all nothing but excuses to yourself and your criticism, my dearest. You've simply collapsed, there's nothing you can do about it. You can only mimic yourself, but not your devoted daughter Elisabeth."

"I'm not talking about it anymore. So if you want to hear my decisive reason: I'm tired ... nothing but tired of all this. Do you know how an opium smoker feels when he wakes up?"

Elisabeth nodded. She was no stranger to vice.

"That's how I feel. I have enjoyed an opium dream that was great because of its opposition to reason and its artificial convolutions. All of humanity was mine. But now I have awoken, and it is unpleasant. The beast I have strangled is a little too tough. It has wriggled away from me and is rearing up all over again. And I'm too tired to throw myself into another fight right away. Too tired ... Elisabeth! I have put all my strength into this adventure. Now I have to retreat and gather new strength. Somewhere where I'm not known. And yet I will wait until I have grown to attack the earth even bigger and more terribly."

Now Elisabeth could no longer accuse her father of being a weakling. His eyes burned in her face.

"Some island in the Ladrones or Marianas should fit the bill. There I will conduct my business in secret ... no one will know where to look for me ... and I will not rest until I have spun them all. Tighter than this time ... you can believe me. And I won't take anyone with me but - you!"

"Me?"

"Yes ... you," his outstretched arms trembled towards her, "no one else. You will accompany me, and you will learn to recognise what unheard-of happiness lies in the wake of power if you know how to make the right use of it!"

"And the others ... the guard you have gathered around you?"

"They stay behind."

"And Hainx?"

"He mustn't know about my moult. Him least of all. I don't need him any more."

"And if the people really go against you and only find your accomplices ... if what you said about their rage is true, they will tear these people to pieces."

Now Bezug was puzzled by a hint of weakness in Elisabeth.

"What do you care what happens to them? But you can be just fine."

"I have no desire to die now, *my dear*; certainly not now. But I also have no desire to go to the Mariana Islands or Ladron with you. I want to stay here. Here! Here! I won't get caught. My career isn't over yet."

"What's wrong with you? You don't want to go with your lonely father?"

"I'm sorry ... even if you play the whining flute so beautifully!

I am armoured. I can't hear a sound."

Bezug now found himself less at ease with Elisabeth than ever. There had been almost a reproach in her questions about the fate of people who had been abandoned, a meekness that gave this connoisseur of the human soul pause for thought, all the more so as she so stubbornly resisted his own entreaties. Had she also been shaken to her foundations in the end and only endeavoured not to let anyone notice?

The old man slowly approached Elisabeth. She pulled her knee back from the chair and took her arms from the backrest, and as she stood erect in front of her father, there was no denying that she was a few lines taller than she looked.

"Remember that," he said with a sincere tone in his words,

"Think about it ... do you want me alone ... Arnold drowned! Poor chap. And your mother ran away from me. To that holy man, the bishop ..."

"You treated her badly, father!"

"Did you treat her better? You weren't like a child to her."

"I am your daughter, father! And she was a troublesome woman."

"But now you realise that I must leave. My wife has run away from me, the Thomas reference ... to this bishop who has paid for his witchcraft with my money. How I stand there ... what a joy that would be for the dear Publicus. It's certainly not pleasant for the bishop either ... but what do I get out of it? What laughter? I must go away and think somewhere about how to suppress this laughter. And you must go with me ..."

"And I'm telling you I'm not going!"

Bezug knew his daughter too well not to realise that her will was unbending.

But he had lost himself in a kind of frenzy of thought, so that now he could not immediately renounce his wish. He sprang at Elisabeth and seized her wrist with a hot, trembling fist: "And you will go with me ... we will go together ... this very morning."

It was not difficult for her to get away. Without saying another word, she walked to the door.

Then something happened that she would never have thought her father capable of. He completely lost his senses, stamped his feet, spun round a few times like a top with his arms outstretched and swept everything he could reach off tables and cupboards. He screeched a few incoherent syllables, in which blunt and shrill sounds swirled together. The precious bronzes clinked in the shards of the porcelain statuettes, and the swing of his arms flung books, papers and caskets far into the room, from which money and jewellery fell out as he opened them.

Then he ran back and forth around the room a few times as if he was looking for something, a weapon, a projectile. He knocked over chairs that were in his way and kept reaching into the air in front of him with horribly cramped fingers. Suddenly it was as if all the strength had been drained from his body. He suddenly turned pale, leaned staggeringly against the wall under the clock and shrank like a balloon that had burst. Only his fingers were still bent convulsively, searching the air. The shrieking had turned into moaning and gasping, with the voice always breaking up, so that something of the whimpering of an animal could be heard.

Then he brought his hand to his forehead and wiped away the sweat that was standing on it in large drops.

"Beast! ..." he muttered, "Beast! ... you are like your mother, like your mother! What's keeping you here? ... I do know ... you mean,

I don't know? Your inclinations are princely. A man I could have destroyed ... and he was too small for me! Adalbert ... a nothing, a wretch. I know everything ... I knew everything. And he spurned you ... threw you away, yes, yes ... threw you away!"

Elisabeth stood in the doorway and said nothing. She only saw her father to.

"Go ... go ... I don't want to see you anymore. I will leave the
To know how to endure loneliness ... I curse you."

Muffled and calm, she said: "You can believe me, there hasn't been a day when I haven't cursed being your daughter."

Then she left, while Bezug stayed behind, leaning heavily against the wall, staring at the open door. There was a roaring in his head, with hammer blows against the wall of his skull in rhythmic repetition.

After a while, he found his way back to himself. With an effort, he detached himself from the wall and walked back and forth in the room with swaying legs, turning over the papers lying around with the tip of his foot to see what was of importance and value; after a short time, he regained his composure. With a sharp eye, he separated all the records, documents and securities that he intended to take with him from those that could be left behind. And now, in this hour, he gained renewed certainty and confidence for the future from the joy of the sharp gaze with which he surveyed the entire state of his monstrous endeavours. Finally, everything he had to take with him had become a not too large parcel, which he could place in a light tin box; once more he examined all the secret compartments and drawers. There was enough money and jewellery left behind.

"The other to the vultures and ravens," he said with a smile, walking to the window. He opened it and leant out. The morning was fresh and cool. The road stretched white across the bottom of the valley. There was already a reddish glow in the fading veils of the night.

"It's going to be a good journey," he said as loudly as if he were giving someone an assurance. Then he took the tin box and went down to the courtyard, where the chauffeur had the car ready.

"I'll drive myself," he said when the man wanted to take his seat, "And if anyone asks, I'll be back later this morning." The chauffeur jumped to the gate and helped the guard open it. With an exuberant blow, the engine started up and then let out a powerful rattle. Bezug straightened up, lifted himself onto his seat like a rider in the saddle and set the machine in motion. Through the gate, over the meadow path and then he turned right onto the road, in the direction leading away from the town. -

After Johann had helped Regina to her room and gone back down with the others, he had left the mill again without saying another word to anyone.

He did not return until two o'clock in the morning and wanted to go to his room, but in the living room, through which he had to pass, Enzberger and his wife were still sitting awake and told him that Eleagabal Kuperus had gone to the city some time ago, but that he would be back in the morning. They wanted to hear from Johann whether there was any hope for him, whether he was capable of believing in the possibility of a rescue for Adalbert in this painful darkness. Regina was dead, but her husband should not also fall victim ...

Johann listened to them in silence for a while. Then he shook his head and went into his room. They heard him rummaging and mumbling inside. When he came out after a while with a small parcel, it seemed at first as if he was going to walk past them as he had done earlier. But after some hesitation, he stopped in the middle of the room, turned round and came to the table. Without letting go of his parcel, he sat down on the empty chair opposite Enzberger and sat there with a hunched back, his eyes fixed on the wet circles left behind by a bottle of beer. The miller's wife had recently taken it out of the cellar and tried to persuade her husband to drink it. But

Enzberger had not felt thirsty, just as he had not been able to eat anything since Regina's body had been found.

"I want to leave this morning," said Johann and put his parcel on the table.

Enzberger looked at him. The old man hadn't shaved for a few days and the white-grey stubble was prickly around his chin and on his cheeks. He was strange to look at with his old man's head, in his woman's clothes, which now seemed to have grown even wider, as if the last few days had dried him out even more.

"Reference?" asked the miller's wife.

"Yes ... I know it. He wants to leave this morning. My day is here ... my day is here ..."

His eyes had changed completely. They were no longer mad and tormented, but had a steady, determined and almost cheerful look.

"Your day?"

"Yes ... my day." Johann lowered his head again and let it rest between his hands for a while. "Today he is given into my power, today at last."

"What do you want to do?"

"He will leave his villa this morning. It's reference..." he paused and looked around as if he had forgotten that he was in a fortress about which his enemy knew nothing. "I still have so much time that I can tell you a little story. An old story ... about the man who this morning ... about Thomas Bezug ..."

"Perhaps it's better to go to bed ..." said the miller's wife anxiously, for Johann's nature had changed so radically that she feared the events of yesterday had confused his mind.

But Johann looked down at his fingers, let them fold on the tabletop and continued: "He wasn't always the great man he is today, the ruler of death and life ... he started from the bottom. And if he had come up by other means, one would have to ..."

What has always been greater in him than in anyone else around him was his will and his mind. His will, a skilful thief, murderer, hypocrite, liar and slanderer ... and his mind - a calculating machine. When he was a very young boy in Paris, he turned showcases in a jewellery shop. They didn't use electricity back then. The boy was locked in the big drum in the morning, locked up, and a bolt was put in front and a padlock put on. His food was pushed in through a flap. And he had to walk in circles all day long, in the dark, always in circles, turning the display case as he went. People stood outside and admired the jewellery ... the rings and bracelets and watches and brooches ... and he was always walking in circles in the dark. I know that because he told it to the man who was later his comrade ... and I know it from him. And he ... this comrade felt sorry for the poor little chap. He didn't realise that back then, in this twisting and turning and in this darkness, everything that later made him the greatest criminal had grown up in him. There the devil awoke in him, Enzberger ... it must be so, for it is not possible that this could come out of a man ... by itself, out of him like that ... it is not possible. The same man, this comrade, always believed that a person who has had such a bad life must be good towards all other people. Why? Precisely because he knows what it's like when you're in a bad way and when you only ever feel the heels you're being kicked with. That was very stupid of the mate. Because if he hadn't been so stupid and thought to himself: it's possible that it was just the misery that made the boy bad ... then perhaps he would have been more careful ... and he would have kept his straight limbs, the lad ... Yes, well, the good Thomas Bezug, who turned the showcase for his master, always in the dark ... and when evening came, they took him out of his drum and locked him in another shed, which was square and also dark. There was a bed in it and he was allowed to sleep there. But even behind

a locked door. And what he didn't think of while he was walking in circles and turning the drum, the dream must have brought him that night ... But once, they forgot to lock the shed. And in the night there was suddenly a great noise in the house. Up and down stairs running and shouting, slamming doors and a terrible weeping somewhere. Strangers were there and they were shouting in loud voices and you could hear the rattling of sabres and the terrible crying. When Thomas told this to his comrade, it was so vivid that he felt as if he had been there at the time. And Thomas's eyes sparkled, and he laughed so horribly ... and the stupid fellow, the comrade, could have guessed after all that the hard time had not changed Thomas for the better ... because that night, that rich man, the jeweller, was murdered, and half the shop was cleared out for him. And for a long, long time, Thomas said, he stood under the stairs in the darkness and listened to the wife and children weeping so terribly. He couldn't leave, he loved it so much. And he stood and listened for so long that he almost missed the opportunity to escape. But in the end he did manage to escape and he took a gold brooch with him so that he would have something to live on. And his comrade never begrudged him that ... for that is a man's right to live, and to live as he was created to live ... and whoever cuts another short deserves to be chastised twice and three times over ..."!

Johann's fist hit the table with a hard thud. Enzberger and his wife looked at each other; they sensed that the old man was about to reveal the secret of his life to them.

"He didn't help himself for long, Thomas, with his brooch. On the third day, when he was too hungry, he offered it to a junk dealer. He took it and told him to come back in the evening ... when he'd had time to look at it. And when Thomas came back in the evening, the junk dealer from the

Brosche didn't want to know anything, denied that he had received one and threatened to call the police. Then Thomas ran away ... and then there were bad times again. In a mine ... on a ship, as a labourer in foreign parts of the world ... I know his whole life. I know it all ... better than mine. Because mine, I wanted to forget ... but his, I have burnt it into my memory, and there is nothing that can ever erase it. I also know now how he got worse and worse. And then he was so far gone that he had the face of an honest fellow and a heart like a pitfall and a murderer's den. And so one evening he went into the sawmill where the sawmiller still needed a labourer. With his honest face and strong arms, he came just in time. And half an hour later he had already been accepted and had made the acquaintance of all his mates. The sawmill was outside the town, and it was a large and beautiful mill, the miller was rich and everything was well furnished, and when Thomas went through the mill the next day, it was not as if a new labourer was looking at the place where he was now to work, but as if someone who wanted to buy something or who was to own something went round first and measured it with his eyes to see if it suited him. And there was something in his nature that made the sawmiller, who showed him everything, almost proud when he finally heard from the new worker that everything was fine and dandy. Thomas was like that. But everything really was fine and dandy. There were a lot of new machines, driven by a big steam engine, and a big centrifugal saw that cut as many boards in a day as a poor ordinary saw does in a whole month. It whirred and whirred so beautifully that it was like the most beautiful music, and when Johann was on night duty at the saw, he always thought of the miller's girl, the blonde Agnes, and that was the best thing he could have wished for if he hadn't been able to see and speak to her. And there was half a forest in the courtyard outside, all beautiful, straight

Logs, healthy and strong, and as many new ones came every day, so many were grabbed by the centrifuge, pulled into the iron teeth with hooks and cut into planks. It was soft walking in the yard and mill on all that sawdust, which didn't get any less, even though they were always sweeping and carrying it away ... Blonde Agnes didn't dislike me, and I was also a capable lad, I can tell you that, Enzberger. I'd just come out of the army and there was a bit of a soldier in me, with everything you learn there, keeping straight and not complaining about work, even if it's up to your neck. And then there was something else: I always thought it would be good if the miller would realise that I was a capable worker and able to keep his business running smoothly, and perhaps the best person to whom he could hand over his girl and the sawmill. For a real miller loves his mill and does not hang it on the neck of the first best."

Johann met with Enzberger's approval: "A mill is as alive as a man," he said, nodding to his wife.

"But I would have taken the girl even without the mill, just as she was, and if she had walked with me in her petticoat and stockings. For I was fond of her, as one can only be fond of someone ... and I have not forgotten her to this day, and that is my hope, that after such a long wait ..." - Johann had lowered his head into his hands again, and when he raised it, he looked the same as before, cheerful, determined and confident. And so he continued: "She was a little fickle, but no more so than other young girls and liked it when people thought she was pretty ... But she liked me, always just me, I know that ... just as I know that it is still in me today as it was then."

The light was dim and Johann glanced at the windows.

"The morning has come," he said, "I must tell my story very briefly ... So he was full of hope, Johann: the girl was good for him and the old miller, who himself had to start at the bottom, was not one of those who want to rise above themselves with their children. So far was

Everything was fine. And now Thomas has come into the house, with his character and his ability to endear himself to everyone. On the third day, Agnes walked across the yard and the two of us were just about to put the logs on the big chute. Then he stands up and looks at the girl, just as he had looked at the house a few days before, just like the future master. 'Sapperment,' he says, 'the girl is the best thing about the whole mill. But I told him straight away that everything was just right between the two of us, almost ... and that his father wouldn't say no if we waited for a good day. And that he shouldn't go to any trouble. Then he immediately withdrew and apologised for not having known, and was so sincere and kind and looked so truthful that I believed everything he said and trusted him from that hour on. 'You get into the habit,' he said, 'of speaking so lightly of girls, because most of them are like that when you meet them in the world. And that's why you have all the more respect for those who aren't.' - He really didn't think twice about looking at her and getting in her way. But secretly he laid his snares and made his ways and managed to get the old man on his side. And I still didn't realise any of this and loved to see him when he sat down with me and talked about his life. Because he was so sincere and not at all deceitful, I told him everything that was going on between me and Agnes, what we were talking about and what we thought of our future. He listened to me like a friend, and like an enemy he was always thinking about how he could turn it all round and twist it to work against me. Because he was determined to get the girl, not because of the girl, but because of the mill and as the first step on a ladder he wanted to climb. And just as he was firmly baked in with the old man, he finally thought the time had come for him to play his trump card. And one fine day after lunch Agnes came to me, all red and weeping, and took me by the hand and led me away, telling me that father had just begun to talk about me and that there was nothing the matter with me, and she

would have to put me out of her mind. She would have to take Thomas, who has a few guilders of money besides, and would have travelled further in the world than I have, and would know much more than I do, and would be more skilful and capable in general. But she told her father at once that she had promised herself to me and that there was nothing to be done about it, and there was no question of her letting me go. Now my eyes were finally opened to the clean-cut mate, Thomas, and how cleverly he had done his business, and I set out at once and went to him. 'You, Thomas,' I said, 'Just forget about that, about Agnes. There's nothing to it. You can do what you like, she'll stick by me. And as long as I live and breathe, you won't get her away from me, even if you had travelled ten times as far and were twenty times cleverer. But then he laughed scornfully in my face, so that I finally recognised his true opinion: 'Well, let's call their bluff. Will she mourn you for long if she doesn't see you every day? And, as you know, the miller will give you notice the first day. - They tried it in every way, locked the girl up, maltreated her God knows how, but it didn't help: she wouldn't let go of me. Of course, we didn't really know how it was going to work out and how we could get together ... but we hoped and held out together, no matter how much the father threatened and Thomas made mocking faces. - I had been given notice and in a few days I should have been out of work. And that's when I had my last night watch at the centrifuge. It was a sad watch, as much as I usually enjoyed sitting by the saw and watching it whirring and whizzing as it bit the long logs into smooth, white boards. This time, the music of the saw told me nothing pleasant. And as I sit there pondering, the door opens and in comes Thomas, who I least expected of all people. And he comes up to me, as trusting as ever, and wants to shake my hand. 'Look, Johann,' he says, 'Do we two really have to fall out and part in anger? And we used to be such good mates. And we should

because of a wench. No, that would be too stupid, wouldn't it? Two blokes like us. And shouldn't we get along? Should nothing be found to bring us together again?' - 'No,' I say, 'there's nothing to be done. For day must be separated from night and black from white. And I didn't look at him at all, but only into the circular saw that flew before my eyes, and I set it to the highest speed so that the whistling became very fine and thin. - 'You've got to let me have that girl,' he said. There's no other way. Because the mill depends on the girl, and I must have her. You can't do anything about that. But I don't care so much about the girl herself ... Look, I've come ... I want to make you a proposition. The girl has a hard head ... If you persuade her to take me ... ' - 'I should persuade her to take you myself,' I laugh. 'Just wait,' he says, 'I've already told you that I don't care about the girl. But I have to marry her and I will, you can count on that. So help me so that she doesn't give me any more trouble. Then I won't mind sharing her with you.' - 'Say,' I shout, 'you're one of those, such a liar and a scoundrel. See that you get there ... I don't want to have anything more to do with you. - 'So you don't want to,' he says, gritting his teeth and his eyes take on a strange lustre. - 'No.' - 'Well, then I have no choice ...' and pretends to leave, but suddenly he shouts: 'Eha ... the saw ...!' I'm startled and turn round quickly because I think something has happened to the centrifuge. Then I get a push from behind that throws me straight into the teeth of the saw. I don't know how it happened ... there was a hot wind in front of my face and the smell of heated steel, but somehow I must have pulled myself back, only one leg gave me a jolt ..."

"For God's sake," the miller's wife cried out. Enzberger sat there, huge in the dawn and very pale.

"Yes, the leg ... that one ... was gone. After a few hours, the lads found me, half-dead, in a big pool of blood. That was a

A few nasty weeks in hospital. A very bad few weeks. The commission came to me and investigated how the accident happened. I didn't report Thomas to the police. I still don't know why he didn't kill me then. Did he run away in horror without seeing how it turned out? Did he think that was enough and that I would have to bleed to death after all? But I'm tougher than he thought. And I didn't report him. Because should I have left t h e p u n i s h m e n t t o the judge? No: I wanted to be the judge of him myself. What good would it have done me if they had locked him up? Of course, I lost Agnes to him. I was sure of that. She didn't visit me in hospital. They must have locked her up and guarded her. But even if she had come. Now I was nothing to her. The only thing I got for life were my healthy limbs. And now ... what kind of misery would that have been? What work c o u l d I have got and taken? And I w a s so terribly ashamed. Yes ... it's a disgrace when a person doesn't have straight limbs. I couldn't bear it. And when I was discharged from hospital, I put on women's clothes. And I haven't taken them off to this day ... you can see less of the stilt foot ..."

"And Agnes?" the miller's wife asked quietly.

"Yes, the Agnes! - She waited long enough for me and put up a fight against the bridegroom. But when I didn't let her hear anything more from me, she got tired. It turned out the way I thought it would ... I could almost say I wished it would. After a year, she died giving birth to a dead child. The Thomas reference, however, used the board saw as a step to his glory, started from there, with ever new and ever more grandiose undertakings, cut whole forests into planks and then threw himself into other speculations, then moved to another area, there, there, higher and higher ... and finally he came here, where I had been waiting for him ... for years."

"At Palingenius ..."

"Yes ... I was in this town as a soldier ... and once, on Sunday, I went to look at my garrison from the tower, that's when I met him and we became friends. A good friendship. I went to him when I didn't know where to turn, and he took Johanna in, like he used to take Johann in. I watched his girl grow up and brought her up ... and now she's dead ... and Palingenius is dead too ... only the reference is still alive ..."

Johann pushed back his chair, took his parcel and stood up. With the same cheerful and determined expression, he held out his hand to Enzberger and his wife: "I'm going now ... he's still alive ... but not for long ... I'm going now to get his head."

Then he walked out, leaving his hosts in a state of horror that had become cold and frozen by his last words.

Just as Johann was opening the gate, Eleagabal Kuperus came out of the town and looked at him as he passed, and it seemed to him as if his friend knew of his intention, and as he did not want to be approached and delayed, he merely nodded to him and walked on. After a few steps he put himself into a dog trot and walked along the ditch further and further into the dusk, passed the mouth of the path from the villa and, without stopping, walked further and further away from the town. He had merely scouted that Bezug would be coming out of his villa this morning, but he knew with unmistakable certainty that this exit was an escape. His old hatred was clairvoyant and clairaudient, and he read Bezug's plans as if he had learnt them from himself. He was sure that Bezug would not turn towards the city, but away from it. He was sure that Bezug was coming unaccompanied.

Johann was now far enough away from the villa. The car would have reached full speed by now. The old man stopped and looked left and right, then walked a few steps further and came back and examined the trees that stood by the road. Twilight still hung in their crowns, but the sky was already quite bright; yellow and red with fleeing blue shadows under the ever-increasing sky.

vaulted dome. Finally, at a dilapidated farmstead, Johann found two trees that seemed to serve his purpose. They stood straight opposite each other, two old, gnarled pear trees, their many-branched roots firmly anchored in the ground.

From the parcel that Johann had thrown to the ground, he took a roll of thin but exceptionally strong bluish wire, the coils of which lay smooth and supple against each other. After the old man had measured out a certain distance from the ground on both trees by hand, he attached the wire to one of the living posts. He wrapped the trunk countless times with the bluish loops, secured the measured height with nails and staples, then went to the tree on the other side and made arrangements with a system of pins and hooks so that the wire could be brought into its previously determined position with a jerk.

Then he pulled on the wire and stepped out into the street to look at his work. There was a very thin, fine line like two hands wide above his head across the road. Johann took a few steps back and ... the thin line had disappeared completely, invisible in the morning air. Humming happily, he returned to his seat and took the wire off once more, letting it sink into the street dust. It was possible that someone else had come along before him, a traveller, a farmer with his cart ... But he kept the end of the wire in his hand, like a fisherman holding the line, and he looked into the morning as comfortably as a fisherman who is sure of his catch. He repeated a melody consisting of only a few notes over and over again. His comfort was like a pleasant warmth that filled him completely, and he was completely without desire and not at all impatient, in the unshakeable confidence that he would not escape today. He almost felt as if he would rather the enemy waited longer. He thus prolonged Johann's hunting pleasures of lurking. For this hour was the climax of his life, his secret meaning and summit, his vindication, and in it Johann savoured the sum of all his powers, his decades of

thoughts of revenge, his burning, wild desires in full peace and serenity like a delicious flower or a wonderful, revitalising, happiness-giving potion.

Behind Johann was a large, overgrown garden whose fence had collapsed so that the chickens clucked in and out. A cock crowed somewhere, then a dog barked, far, far away. Johann absorbed all these sounds and felt in perfect harmony with everything around him. He had become young again, just like back then, when he couldn't let go of his strength in the morning and tested himself with all kinds of jokes on the heaviest logs in the yard of the board saw.

He felt a tug at the folds of his skirt. Slowly he turned his head and saw a cheeky chicken that had approached him and was pecking at his apron strings with its beak. Smiling, he let it be and was careful not to scare it away with a movement.

Suddenly, a distant, muffled, breathless rattling came into the silence.

Then Johann jumped up with a jerk, as if he had two healthy legs. With a clamour, the yellow-spotted hen fled through a gap in the fence. Johann looked down the road. A dark thing came towards him, rattling and puffing louder and louder. He pulled the wire through all the fuses, tightened it with a piece of wood he had broken off the fence in sharp turns and then stood there motionless, as if fused to the tree trunk. His hands clawed into the bark, his fingers felt over the cracks and grooves ...

A single man was sitting in the car. Johann couldn't see who it was ... the car glasses covered half his face. But he knew it even without seeing the face, it was Thomas Bezug ...

The machine approached at great speed ... it was in such a hurry to escape! ... the rattling and crackling grew into a roar that multiplied into thunder in Johann's ears. It was a storm of sounds, and everything began to sway under this onslaught of sounds ...

The tree Johann was holding on to shook in its roots ... Now the car was approaching ...

Now it shot through between the two trees ...

There was a bright ringing, the loud sound of a taut string suddenly being snapped ...

A dark, round object ... fell clumsily into the road dust and rolled towards the ditch, which Johann now leapt over in a single bound.

It was a head, a head with a car cap and goggles ... and cut smoothly and cleanly from its torso, sitting in the speeding machine, which had already disappeared in a cloud of dust far out on the endless straight road.

Johann knocked the cap off the head and tore off his glasses - it was the head of Thomas Bezug. He grabbed it by the hair on the back of the neck and lifted it up ... these were the eyes of the enemy, staring at him fixedly, these eyes that people had been afraid of.

"Thomas Bezug!" shouted Johann, close to his head, "Thomas Bezug!"

The eyelids twitched noticeably ... like a person expecting a blow.

"Do you recognise me, Thomas Bezug?"

Then came a look into those staring eyes, a realisation ... a terrible last flare-up of the senses and the mind ...

"Yes - it's me, Thomas Bezug! It's me ... your comrade Johann. Among those you destroyed on your way ... I was one of the first. But I avenged everyone else, everyone ... including Regina. Now you're finished! I cut off the dragon's head ... you dog, you scoundrel, you beast ...!"

And he insulted the head excessively, shouted threateningly at it, spat at it and struck at it with his fists, never tiring of repeating the same word and the same gesture, as if he wanted to fill the last remnants of consciousness in this head with his terrible and great triumph, as if he wanted to penetrate into these miserable

seconds to pour out all the abuse he had heaped on his enemy throughout his life.

The blood from his neck ran down his sleeves and over his clothes, turning into a soft, slippery jelly that he thought he could feel all over his body with a voluptuous shiver.

Johann climbed over the ditch again, holding his head under his arm, and broke a stick from the fence, a long, thin stick. Then he sat down on the embankment, put his head in his apron and took out his penknife, with which he cut the upper end of the stick to a sharp point, whistling to himself as he did so, as if he were doing a funny job. And when he had finished, he rammed the stick into the grass and impaled the head cover on the top, balancing it with a careful twisting motion. With both hands he pulled his field sign out of the ground, climbed onto the road embankment and started his way back. He carried the spear with his enemy's head high up. Blood ran down the length of the stick and over his hands, sticking his fingers and binding them to the wood

...

He sang and laughed and pranced despite his wooden leg ...

So he headed towards the city and towards a large cloud of dust that came towards him from there, filled with noise and threatening buzzing.

This was the crowd that had set out to attack Bezug and avenge their fear on him. -

After Regina had recovered from her weakness and regained the use of her limbs, she set off with Adalbert to visit Eleagabal Kuperus. Adalbert had only dared to tell her what had happened to her with great caution, and only very gradually did she find her way through the last memories before her death. How she had gone out to look for her lover and how Elisabeth had been waiting for her. And how she had led her to the river on some pretext or other and then stabbed her after an exchange of words. Of the state she had then got into, she knew nothing more than that it was a warm and by no means unpleasant one.

It was as if she were swimming in a dark liquid that flashed from time to time, as if moonbeams were streaking across a surface of water. It was swimming in circles, one of which was always deeper than the other ... as if on the inside of an enormous funnel, so that at the same time the feeling of gliding was associated with it. It might have lasted for days or just seconds, she didn't know, and during this sensation she had had no desire or urge to account for it. She nodded to Adalbert when he realised that she had been beyond time. Then this spinning, swimming and gliding had come to a halt, she had the feeling that she was rising steeply out of the dark tide, detaching herself from the monstrous funnel and beginning to float upwards. Through a zone where there had been nothing but an increasing brightness, she had returned to life.

She did not see her rescue as a miracle, like the others who stood around her, moved and awestruck, but took it as a completely natural occurrence, as she had never felt any sense of compulsion.

The deep connections between life and death were not accessible to her, but to her feelings. She lacked the words to express what she had experienced, but through the mysterious bridges of affection she was at least able to make herself understood to Adalbert and take away his fearful feeling that something had happened here that was against the unbreakable laws of the universe.

Now they wanted to visit Eleagabal Kuperus to thank him and at the same time to make a new request. He was to help save poor Johann, who was imprisoned as a murderer and whose mental state was being investigated by the lunatic doctors.

Adalbert and Enzberger had gained access to the old man. They had found him calm and cheerful, in male clothing, which he had now allowed to be put on without objection. When she had told him about Regina's miraculous revival, he had burst into joyful tears. "Yes ... now his power is broken!" he had said,

"Now all the good in the world will be free again." And he had added that he expected people to realise that he did not deserve prison, but thanks and recognition for what he had done.

On the day intended for the visit to Eleagabal, Marconianu had asked to say goodbye on behalf of the Romanians. Adalbert found it difficult to find words of thanks when he saw the faithful and sad eyes of his guards fixed on him. Moved, he shook hands with each of them and promised to look after the graves of their friends who had fallen here in a foreign land. They would not hear of any other thanks he promised them in the name of Eleagabal, and by the time Adalbert had fetched Regina and stepped out into the courtyard with her to shake hands with the good people, they were already gone and nowhere to be seen.

Enzberger and his wife wanted to accompany Adalbert and Regina. The mill remained under the care of a few servants who had returned to work.

In the town, people were eager to cover up the traces of the battle. The rubble had already been cleared from the streets, and the houses that had only been grazed by bullets or otherwise damaged in the melee already stood out with fresh plaster and paint. The ruins of the fire were swarming with hundreds of labourers, busy removing the charred beams and collapsed walls and at the same time building new ones from the still usable foundations. All the shops had already reopened and were endeavouring to fill the gaps in their stocks as quickly as possible. The whole town had been seized by a tremendous appetite for work, as if it were intent on tripling the circulation of its blood in order to quickly return to its former state and replace all the lost juices.

Everything was much fresher and livelier.

And Adalbert recalled Eleagabal's significant remarks about the necessity of such purifying and healing crises ... "in the case of such an illness, it is up to the prudent physician to wait and see whether the patient is strong enough to survive the crisis. Has

Once he has overcome them, he will be better and stronger than ever before."

And already the need of the barely rescued for distraction and pleasure again had begun again. Adalbert saw the pillars with completely fresh posters of all kinds of variety shows, garden concerts and circus programmes. A monstrously colourful rag caught his eye: Mr Longfellow's giant circus. A myriad of people, animals and abortions were performed there. Gangs of Negroes and the Setters brothers, Jim David's ten Bengal tigers and, at the end, the dramatic scene: "The Storming of the Railway Station", a topical act that was sure to arouse feverish interest. Smiling, Adalbert pointed to the poster and felt an echo of overcome terror in the pressure with which Regina pressed his arm against her. Then he led her through all the streets he had travelled as a fighter, past the post office building and finally the up the cathedral hill.

As he stepped out into the square, he could not help but feel horror. He saw the carnage of that rainy morning before him again, the reddish pools mixed with dirt and blood, the heaps of corpses among which he had sought his way, and the whole square seemed to him forever contaminated and cursed, so that he hurried to bring Regina quickly to the door of Eleagabal's house. They both looked at the old frescoes on the gable wall at the same time. But there was nothing to be seen, only the strangely vivid hand staring out of the stone, with slightly bent fingers that no longer held a key. Of all the banners and figures, the animal and tendril work, nothing was visible except the half-erased words above the entrance: Believe the miracle.

Adalbert was very surprised to find the door open. It was as if someone had left the house and not thought it necessary to lock it. And when they entered the corridor, the air was cold and hostile, as if they were entering a burial vault.

"Adalbert!" Regina whispered fearfully and squeezed her fingers in his hand. He stroked these fingers and led his beloved on through the twilight. Enzberger and his wife followed them, and Adalbert felt as if he could hear their rapid breathing close to his neck.

The fountain in the red room had dried up and the walls of books in the following corridor stared as lifeless and unstructured as only books that no longer have a master and lack the penetration of their owner's strong spirit can be.

The fearful premonition became clearer and clearer and lifted a Medusa head out of the chaos of the unformed. Two large, empty eyes looked at Adalbert and Regina, and they walked trembling into that terrible, sightless gaze.

The large domed hall also lay empty before them. There was no sign of Eleagabal or his servant. While Enzberger and his wife remained standing at the door, not daring to take a step into the room, Adalbert searched everywhere for a sign of the old man's absence. He could have shouted ... but he couldn't make a sound in the droning silence under the frosted glass of the dome, between the free-standing columns that had provided Eleagabal with light. As he passed the large marble table, he wiped his finger lightly across the top. There was a very thin, fine trace of dust on the top.

Suddenly Regina called his name. She stood by the wall with the pebbles of fine marble veins and pointed to a crack in the stone, just wide enough to stick her hand in. Behind it lay Eleagabal's laboratory, his museum ... his inner sanctum.

Adalbert reached into the gap and felt the wall slide away, as if it were running over rollers above and below. An entrance lay open before them ...

They entered, timidly and slowly ...

And as their eyes gained power over the twilight of the room - they saw the old man lying on the ground between the pedestals supporting his preparations. He lay very still, as if he had sunk down without a struggle, resigned to a fate he had long expected.

His eyes and mouth were closed, but an unfathomable smile played around both, like the reflection of sunken gold from great depths. One could see that death had not been able to terrify him.

There was no sign of the wolf-headed servant. Only a large dog, which no one had ever found at Eleagabal's, lay at the dead man's feet, its pointed snout stretched over his legs as if to protect him. And it was as dead as its master.

A deep breath behind Adalbert ended the great silence that had enveloped them all for minutes. Then someone began to cry softly.

And now Adalbert remembered the words Eleagabal had spoken to him that terrible night. About the balance of life and death in space. Had he perhaps fallen victim because he had snatched Regina from the jaws of death? And the longer he thought about it, the more certain he became of these marvellous connections. In his love, the dead man celebrated a transfigured resurrection.

And taking Regina by the hand and kneeling with her beside the corpse, he said softly: "He died for us ... and we want to honour his memory gratefully ... we want to remain faithful to miracles and love each other ... for is not love the miracle, and do not all miracles come from it ...?" -

Mr Longfellow, who had become Kutschenreuter's successor in the large circus building and who, after the weeks of doomsday madness had almost turned him into a beggar, was now once again shimmering with success, was able to present a very special, outrageously sensational, unprecedented programme number.

After this gruelling epidemic of fear, after all the bloody horrors, the audience was more eager than ever to free itself from itself, to turn away from itself, and would have filled the amphitheatre to the last seat every evening even without any special effort on the part of the management. And now Mr Longfellow was faced with a number of dramatic scenes resulting from the recent events, in which a great deal of shooting and murder took place; in which the audience, who had been watching the

The people who had seen the examples of these scenes play out on the streets were amused by the comfort they derived from the awareness of their safety. Thus there was a daily stampede to the ticket offices, a fight for tickets that caused the pleasure-seekers and onlookers to clash almost as fiercely as the madmen and criminals had recently done.

Today, however, the struggle for admission was particularly fierce, for Mr Longfellow had announced that a lady of the company would enter the cage of the ten dangerous and unruly Bengal tigers all alone, without a tamer. And the rumour which followed this announcement was so fabulous and incredible that everyone was inclined to believe it, so improbable that everyone wished it to be true. The posters had not mentioned a name, but the whole town was talking that tonight Elisabeth Bezug, the daughter of the Bezug who had met such a strange end, would be seen in the tiger cage.

Apart from the director and the police, there was only one person who knew anything definite about the rumour: Rudolf Hainx, who had returned to his city flat to bring order to the entangled affairs of the deceased on behalf of the heiress. He learnt about it from a letter he received from Elisabeth, who had stayed in the villa, on the morning of the day the appearance in the cage was to take place. The letter read:

" *My dear!* You are a brave man, aren't you? I know at least that you have always thought yourself a brave man and that you were very glad to be thought one. It is part of your profile, your relief, your cachet, so to speak, this line of determination and masculine strength. And that, my dear, is why I want to extend an invitation to you today, although you will need a little courage to accept it. You may already have heard that the lady from the highest society who wants to try out the sensations of a tiger cage tonight is your old friend Elisabeth. And since you know me, you won't consider this rumour to be completely false.

have improbably dismissed the rumour out of hand. Well - my dear - this rumour is quite right. The 'lady from the highest society' is really your devoted friend Elisabeth. And my invitation is that you would like to join us this evening. I will allow you to enter the tiger cage at my side and tickle the whiskers of the unfriendly head of the whole company, the supposedly very grumpy Sultan. I don't want to promise you anything, because that wouldn't be the kind of manly courage that looks for rewards first. But it could be that ... if you prove yourself, I will let you come closer to me again and resume certain friendly relations ... The reasons for my appearance in this new capacity, which I have not yet tried? I hope you are wise enough not to ask your old friend for reasons. - I think life ... I was just about to utter a silly aphorism. It could be that nothing else has brought me to this decision but a certain astonishment about some things. Do you think it is possible for the dead to rise again? That's a fairy tale ... it's madness, isn't it? But when you really experience something like that ... isn't there a certain amount of astonishment quite appropriate? I have become very curious about some things that I have not yet experienced. Quite curious. You have no idea what curiosity can do to us women. - In the event that you should prefer not to show yourself to the people at my side, and that I am forced to make the closer acquaintance of the striped gentlemen in the cage, I will of course leave all arrangements to you. You will take advantage of my good mum, who has carefully taken His Episcopal Grace somewhere where she will be less unpleasant for him. You may also confidently insist that some charitable and memorial donations be made. It is, after all, the memory of such an important man as Baron Bezug. I have only just realised how important my father was when I had to dispel certain concerns of the police. The name Bezug is still a talisman, even if people have tried to shake the belief in its power. - As I said, all these

Winks and wishes are just in case I don't have the pleasure of seeing you tonight at my invitation. But I am convinced that you will come ... Your Elisabeth."

The servant who had delivered the letter to Hainx stood waiting for the letter to be read.

"What else do you want?" asked Hainx.

"I'm to deliver the answer to the lady immediately."

"Tell the lady that I will send the answer in the course of the day."

However, Rudolf Hainx did not send a messenger out to the villa during the course of the day. He only endeavoured to get a ticket for tonight's performance at the circus, and as he had a pretty penny to spend on it, the servant finally got him a good seat in one of the first rows. When the evening came, he went in his dinner jacket, a bright yellow short overcoat over his arm, to the great amphitheatre, from which, dense and solid as it was, the restlessness of an immense crowd seemed to ooze through every crack in the stone.

The first programme numbers were already over when Hainx took his seat. He sat down, looked round the room, let his hands, covered with red glacés, hang carelessly over the balustrade for a while, and then took out his opera-glass, with which he scanned the tiers. There were many acquaintances, and he nodded to all of them in such a calm and friendly manner that even at the last moment there was some doubt among all who saw him as to whether Elisabeth was really the lady who wanted to enter the cage.

Hainx ignored the two pieces that came before the main point of the evening and continued his research among the audience.

Now there was a break, which was filled by preparations for the next act. A large empty cage with strong bars was pushed into the centre of the ring. This was followed by a carriage pulled by three pairs of horses. In this vehicle, which rested on iron wheel axles and was covered with heavy canvas, there was life, a

A life in danger, huddled together and ready to jump. The back of the cart was pushed against the large cage, then a guard approached and used an iron bar to open first a barred door in the large cage, then a slider in the wall of the cart.

It took a while before the first tiger entered the large cage. He walked along the bars, once, twice, and on his third visit he met the leader of the tigers, the infamous Sultan, just by the open carriage door. Growling, he drove back and made way for the old man, who slowly came to the centre of the cage and, blinking, looked at the people in the amphitheatre. After ten minutes, all the animals had entered the open cage. There were ten mighty fellows, magnificent, full-grown specimens ... Some of them, who were on friendly terms, lay close together in groups, others walked restlessly up and down, only Sultan was still standing motionless in the midst of the others, blinking at the humans.

Rudolf Hainx enjoyed the murmur and whisper of excitement all around him. And now this rustling and whispering rose up like a wave with a white-foaming crest.

Elisabeth had entered the ring at the hand of Mr Jim Davids. She was in a ball gown of white silk and lace ... her shoulders were like white stone in the electric light. Next to her, Mr Davids looked rather strange in his red groom's tailcoat, with his red, puffy face and large hands in white gloves. One could not help thinking that the woman had entered into a union with that person down there, which could not possibly be for her good; and the women in the audience especially felt that peculiar thrill which made them so comfortable in the pitying interest they always felt at the sight of a very unequal bridal couple at the altar; that thrill which has perhaps always been the greatest part of the pleasure of sacrifices. Mr Davids had strapped on a broad leather belt, in which

He was holding two revolvers, and now he wanted to force one of the weapons on Elisabeth.

But Elisabeth rejected his offer and, smiling, she bowed with a deep courtly curtsy in the centre of the ring to the audience, who sat there restless and unable to express their applause. It was beyond the zone in which clapping hands and cheers are able to show what feelings they have.

Behind Hainx, someone remarked that he thought the animal tamer must be drunk. And indeed, Mr Jim Davids was swaying around Elisabeth in a very suspicious manner, while he kept trying to force his revolver on her. She looked over the agitated man, quite a genteel lady, who smiled to communicate with the audience about the awkwardness of a neighbour and at the same time asked that he be given some credit.

The tigers had been alerted by the familiar sight of the red tailcoat and all crowded round the side of the cage facing the tamer. Sultan was also among them, rubbing his thick woolly head against the iron bars and yawning from time to time so that all his terrible teeth were visible.

Elisabeth stood at the wooden staircase that had been pushed up to the cage ... another deep knee and a smile in which each of the thousands sitting there trembling in the round of the amphitheatre seemed to have a share. The precious diamond necklace around her beautiful neck seemed for a moment to be a jewel of liquid fire. As Elisabeth straightened up from her kneeling position, her gaze fell on a pair of red glacés holding opera glasses hanging carelessly over the balustrade of a seat in one of the first tiers. She winced, then nodded to Rudolf Hainx. And he returned the greeting, as one waves to a good acquaintance whom one likes to see, but with whom one feels no warmer interest. They recognised each other and greeted each other with an augur's smile. Hainx knew what Elisabeth was thinking, and she felt an almost joyful surprise that he had at least come to see that someone was at the circus, one of

those thousands who knew how to appreciate the free grandeur of her irony and the grandiose trait of her comedy. Then she gathered up the train of her ball gown ... it was a tangled play of lace around the slender legs in the white satin stockings.

She ran up the few wooden steps.

The guard pulled back the slider and she stepped without hesitation into the anteroom, which was still separated from the cage by a grille. And when the man, to whom Mr Davids seemed to be shaking his head with violent hand movements in front of his face, shook his head apprehensively, she signalled to him impatiently ...

Then he slowly pushed open the small inner door and Elisabeth pushed her way through the narrow and low opening ... She was still holding the train of the dress with her left hand and had a thin riding crop in her right.

So she stood upright among the beasts, who looked past her shyly, as if they wanted to pretend not to notice her.

The tigers were obviously quite astonished to see a strange creature in their cage instead of their tamer, and settled down quite peacefully, so that the fearful among the audience began to hope that everything would turn out well. Sultan had not yet turned round to look at Elisabeth; he was still standing in front, rubbing his head against the bars and blinking at Mr Davids, who was standing in front of the cage and seemed to be endeavouring to keep the dangerous animal's attention.

Elisabeth had bent down and looked at the tigers with a smile, as one might look at a brood of young cats, confidentially and without any thought of any danger that might come from them. And the animals still didn't want to know anything about her, closed their eyes and huddled together, their sinews trembling under their striped, soft fur.

Then something terrible happened.

Elisabeth had taken two steps and quickly hit the old tiger twice over the head with the riding whip. Sultan shook the

His head and growled, but he still couldn't seem to let go of the sight of his enemy in the red skirt standing in front of the bars.

"Sultan! Sultan!" shouted Mr Davids threateningly and hoarsely.

But Elisabeth had already hit the animal over the snout a third and fourth time ...

Then the tiger threw itself around, the cage roared under a heavy impact. A shot was fired, another ...

And then it was as if the ferocity of the tigers broke loose with the force of an explosive. There was a roaring and hissing, a rattling and howling, and the ten bodies were tangled up in a single ball in the narrow cage, into which the tamer fired one shot after another, unable to dislodge them from the bundle of clothes that was being dragged back and forth under their claws and by their teeth. Three or four guards were beating them with iron bars, tearing at the animals' fur with the long hooks with which they usually pushed the meat into the cage ...

The audience sat completely frozen, no-one shouted, no-one rose and pushed towards the exit, the excess of horror had robbed them of movement and voice.

And so Rudolf Hainx was able to leave the amphitheatre in comfort ... The last thing he saw was the mighty head of the Sultan, who had been severely wounded by a blow from the iron bar and was roaring furiously into the ring, his throat dripping blood. A shred of a white dress hung down from one of his canines ...

Only when Rudolf Hainx had taken a few steps away from the circus did he hear the terrible scream of horror in which the agony of the people inside was finally released.

He hurried to get out of the area of excitement that was bound to flood the entire neighbourhood of the circus building in the next few minutes.

He was very pleased with the outcome of Elisabeth's adventure. She had wanted it that way, it was just a kind of suicide, which she had carried out in front of an assembled audience, in the uplifting feeling of asserting her dominance over the crowd one last time.

and to have submitted to it in fear and horror. And only now did he feel certain that he had been freed from a passion that he had not yet completely overcome.

He was liberated and saw his goals clearly in front of him.

The summer night was sultry around him, with old mysterious trees, for he had taken a path that led out of the city into the open. He stood still by a railway embankment and waited until the train, which he could hear approaching, with its illuminated carriages and the many people at the windows, had passed.

In the distance from Hainx, the weather glowed. And when he turned round, he saw the reflection of the great city in the night sky.

"The way is clear," he said quietly and slowly to himself ... "my way! They must have a Thomas connection. They don't want it any other way ... it seems that it is necessary for their comfort ... they want to have a fist to hit and kiss."

Then a star broke away from the heights and sank into the night beyond the distant hills, shining in a gentle arc.

"He has fallen ... I am rising." -

At the same time, Adalbert and Regina were standing at the window of the small room in Enzberger's mill.

"A shooting star!" said Regina.

"Heaven greets our love," replied Adalbert.

"He greets them every evening now. I see so many stars ... every evening I see so many stars falling."

"And it's not getting any fewer. There are still just as many in the sky. There are countless stars there. It is like love. It gives and always gives of its riches ... and the great golden treasure does not diminish ..."

"Like love, Adalbert!" ...

End

BERSERKER

BOOKS

