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Holiday Children
A Novel
by E. von Keyserling

[Translated by John B. Rutledge, following the first edition of 1919, Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag. Numbers in brackets in the text refer to the pagination in this edition.]

Dedicated to Baroness [*Baronin*] Marie v. d. Osten-Sacken,
née Baroness Behr.

In the Buchow's country home, Lalaiken, dark shadows loomed especially large on the white walls of the nursery on a certain November evening. A single candle burned on a low child's table and the nanny, Frau Müller, had moved it close to her. She sat there sewing with horn-rimmed glasses resting on her nose. The two children sat in children's chairs. Seven-year-old Uli was sleepy. He put his arm on the table to support his head, which with its disorderly blond curls appeared very large, and stared grumpily into the light. Isa, two years older, played with a little wooden doll. She stared ahead with her gray eyes and her narrow lips moved without making a sound.

"Time to go to bed," said Frau Müller [9] and lay down her work. "Now go wish your parents good night."

Uli made a whiny face. "Tonight I'm not going," he said, "tonight I'm not going to walk through those dark rooms. They're waiting in the dark corners and there are voices at the windows." Frau Müller shrugged her shoulders. "You know what your father says when you get scared." Uli was crying now. "No, tonight I'm not going," he repeated. Isa looked up in shock, knitted her brow as if she were feeling pain, and the corners of her mouth turned downward, making her look older and troubled. She couldn't stand for Uli to cry. She stood up. "Fine, I'll go by myself then," she said. She hesitated a moment at the threshold, then stepped out into the dark series of rooms. She was afraid too, but she bore it with the resignation of a child whose life is completely enveloped by uncanny events. At the end of the suite a light flickered where the parents were. [10]

Ulrich von Buchow had been reading aloud, but now he leaned back in his armchair and smoked. His wife sat opposite him at one end of a sofa. Her small form was huddled together as if she were cold. Her blond head was leaning back on the sofa and her young face seemed to be darkened by exhaustion. But when Isa appeared at the door, a smile crossed the young woman's face which marvelously brightened it. "Dear daughter," she said.

"Where is Uli?" Buchow asked severely.

"Uli isn't coming tonight," Isa confessed, "he's afraid."

"Well, it is scary tonight. I'll go see him," his mother, Irma von Buchow said.

Buchow knitted his brow, but said nothing. Isa went over to her father and offered her forehead for him to kiss, then to her mother; then

finally she went to the corner of the room where her grandfather, Count Pax, was sitting in a wingback chair sound asleep. She kissed him carefully on his white wig, then balling her fists, she resolved to go back into the dark room. [11]

“If we allow the boy to get away with things like that,” Buchow contested, “we won’t be raising a hero.”

“Oh, God,” Irma said and raised her eyebrows, “what do we need heroes for? This is a scary day all right. Uli came to me this afternoon and said, ‘I don’t know what games to play today,’ and really, I could have said that too, ‘I also don’t know what to do today.’”

“Games indeed!” Buchow remarked.

Irma’s narrow face blushed slightly. “Yes, games. I know you think that life is serious and that one has ones duties. Well, of course, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t have your little pleasures, because the great joys of life never come. So, I’m going to see my son.”

She stood up, lifted her arms up for a moment as if to give balance to her wavering, and disappeared into the darkness.

Buchow leaned his head back onto his armchair. His face, with its protruding forehead, deeply recessed gray eyes, [12] and strong chin, seemed to be held together by an inner energy. His mouth closed so tightly that his narrow lips were white.

The great pleasures, he thought—that’s what she’s waiting for? Where does she think they’ll come from? He had always regarded life as something that had to be subdued so that it doesn’t attack us from the rear. Days in November such as this one, with its fog and storms, ignited something in him, they intensified his desire to get things done and to create. He was one of those tough old birds and Irma, this gentle and delightful creature, expected to get the great joys of life from him. Where was he supposed to get them?

Meanwhile the grandfather had awakened in his wing chair. He straightened himself up and looked around dreamily for a bit, then smiled, and his small face under the big white wig became a mass of wrinkles. “I was asleep,” he said.

“Yes, you were asleep, Father,” Buchow confirmed.

“I had a dream,” the grandfather continued. [13] “I dreamed that I was walking—I don’t know with whom—along the main allee of the Bois de Boulogne. There were people and carriages and horses, very lively. I saw a carriage with yellow horses and there was a lady inside. Oh well, let’s forget it. The main thing was that I was walking. I tell you, my legs were so supple and so light that walking was a real pleasure, it was walking like it used to be when I was young. Well, that was fabulous. Now I’m going to bed, perhaps I can dream it again.”

He stood up and walked out in a dance-like fashion which was supposed to conceal the real weakness of his legs.

It was already late afternoon when Buchow went out to inspect the fields. The wind howled in the weeping birches and blew the smaller branches around like thongs on a whip; it blew holes in the thick fog, making it hang over the earth in big, gray clumps. Nature is really putting on a big show today, Buchow said to himself, and thrust his hands deeper into the pockets of his overcoat. [14]

Buchow stopped at the edge of a field where a man was plowing. He was a tall man who plodded behind the plow slowly and sulkily. The wind pulled at his work clothes and red beard; it tossed the horse’s wet mane back and forth. The plowed-up clods had a matte metallic gleam to them and wet crows picked at the earth. The man stopped, looked to the western horizon

where he saw gray clouds bordered by a rosy strip. He raised the plowshare and headed for the path. He greeted his master. "Andre," Buchow said, "you know your wife came to me complaining that you beat her."

"I know," Andre said sulkily, "if she would only leave me in peace, I wouldn't hit her."

"She doesn't want you to spend all the money in the tavern," Buchow said. Andre shrugged his shoulders, "If you can't drink a bit on Saturday, [15] what's left? That's all there is." And with that he urged his horse on, walked stiff-leggedly along the road, then disappeared, a gray shape in gray fog.

"Life's little pleasures," Buchow heard Irma say. When this man gets back to his simple home, his clothes will be wet, his limbs stiff, his wife will be crying, the children yelling, well, no wonder he looks for little pleasures.

Buchow had walked further along the road until he reached a bridge, and there he stopped. The bridge crossed over a marshy ravine to the market in Brixen. In summer the area was full of pools of greenish water. Peewits flew from pool to pool, a few cows grazed here, their feet deep in the swampy earth. But now the pools were black and dark water covered the area between the pools. Buchow looked down from the bridge. How he hated this swamp! [16] But he would come to grips with it. If only the water from the lake could be allowed to flood this area, then this useless, poisonous swamp would disappear. Next summer he would take on the project. Over in Brixen lights were already being lit in the houses, flickering yellow spots in the fog. He walked back home in darkness, and the wet road still had a matte, dull glow.

When he got back home, he noticed that light shone from the windows of the large hall. In the hallway he could hear waltzes being played on the piano. "Well, well," he said and smiled. In the hall he found the grandfather at the piano playing a waltz. Irma was dancing with Uli, while Isa, her hands at her sides, stood quietly. "Go on, dance," Irma called to her, and then she began to turn slowly. As Irma passed by Buchow, she nodded at him and said, "We're dancing because otherwise it's just too sad."

"That's fine," Buchow said and went into the living room. He sat down at the fireplace. He was tired and the heat felt good; it was [17] pleasant to stretch ones legs out. He could hear the dull tones of the waltz, due to the grandfather's weak attack on the keys, and the noise of dancing feet. Buchow closed his eyes, warmed by a deep satisfaction. Indeed, he thought, there are moments such as these.

The wind had died back; it was cold and a bit of snow had fallen. It lay on the rooftops, on the furrows in the fields, and created bright white spots on the landscape. It was already getting dark as Buchow went to Brixen to talk to his lawyer Viervogel.

Viervogel was an old friend of Buchow's from school days and had settled down as an attorney in Brixen, and because he avoided every opportunity to advance his career, there he remained. He went into town with his white horse pulling a hunting coach to take care of his torts and renter disputes; he had a room at the house of Frau Weidemann, a widow who also provided his meals. He often sat for hours in the tidy lodgings watching [18] the solidly-built woman with her pretty arms as she went around taking care of things. The few lanterns in the market had already been lit. In the nearest house there was light in the windows; it was the property of Kappelmeier, the gardener, and there was always movement and noise there because his large, blond daughters were busy all the time. One of them washed the hallway, and Buchow could see of of them at the kneading trough. They talked to each other and laughed as they worked. Old man Kappelmeier, an Anabaptist, a tall white-haired man, walked around in the garden among the beds that were covered with pine mulch. Buchow knew the whole family. Then there was the general

store that smelled of furs and pickles, and through the glass door you could see the wife of the owner, with her large, pale face, patient and angry. Then there was the pharmacy, bright and neat. The apothecary had a long gray beard and stood like a priest among the white boxes and bulbous bottles. Glaiksner, the handsome assistant apothecary, was not at home. [19]

Buchow found him standing at the corner of the house talking to the mail delivery girl, who loved him. They were having a spat. "But Glaiksner," the girl said, "it's no trouble at all to look up to the window when you pass by. I was so looking forward to it."

"It's always some nonsense," Glaiksner replied, "I have other things to think about other than whether to look up or not."

"But Glaiksner," the girl said, about to cry, "I waited for you all morning."

Then Fräulein Christa Hassel, the teacher at the elementary school, came towards Buchow. In tiny but firm steps she walked over the crackling pavement, turning her stocky shapeless form back and forth. Her round face with its wide mouth and good, brown canine eyes was reddened by the cold. "Oh, Herr Buchow," she said. "Good afternoon," Buchow replied, "I was just out taking care of some business." "I see," Fräulein Christa said. "And how are things at home?" [20]

"Very well, thank you," Buchow reported, "we're having a little celebration, you know, we're always having little celebrations. I think this one is in honor of the first snowfall. We sit around the hearth, eat roasted apples, and tell each other fairy tales."

"How nice," Fräulein Christa said, leaning her head back to get a better look at Buchow.

"Please don't let me interrupt you, Fräulein Christa," Buchow suggested.

"An interruption," Fräulein Christa countered, "now that would be a temptation. At home I have a whole pile of notebooks that have to be corrected. But—dear God—what else is night for? So I'll keep walking. Goodbye." And with that she continued on with her tiny, firm steps.

Now Buchow had reached the house of the widow Weidemann and he climbed up the dark stairway. When he knocked on the door, he heard a hoarse reply: "Come in." He found the lawyer seated at his writing table bent over some documents.

"Good evening," Buchow said. The lawyer's myopic eyes did not immediately recognize him, [21] but when Buchow got closer the lawyer jumped up. "Oh, it's you, my friend," he cried, "an unexpected pleasure." The two were always polite to one another. Viervogel helped Buchow out of his overcoat, pulled up a chair for him, offered him a cigar, and brought out a bottle of port and glasses, which he proceeded to fill. "So," he said, "in weather like this a bit of port will feel good. Winter is practically upon us." He sat opposite Buchow, waiting expectantly.

"I've come to you," Buchow began, "to ask you to write me another contract for the sale of wood. You know that last year my brother made quite a lot of demands on me, so I have to resort to selling off again. The conditions will be the same, but this time I would request that you write more particulars into it, because last year Aronsohn took all kinds of liberties. I want to place some restrictions on the place of storage and the time of removal."

"I'll do it," Viervogel replied, "we'll tie the boy's hands good and tight. [22] I'll have a draft ready to show you by tomorrow."

"Thank you," Buchow said, sipping carefully on his glass of port. "This is a good wine. How are things going otherwise?"

"Heavens," Viervogel replied, "it's always the same with me. That's actually a characteristic of my life, and I like it that way. You see, in dark days

such as this it's strange, but I can almost physically feel time passing. It passes very slowly and steadily and carries me along with it. I can feel it.”

“It carries you along?” Buchow asked, “Where to?”

“Towards the end,” Viervogel replied, “at some point there has to be an end, then perhaps something else will come along; that's the thing that bothers me sometimes. There are moments when I fear death and only out of indolence, you know. A different set of circumstances will come along, but I am so accustomed to just muddling through that change seems uncomfortable. That's what happens when you become accustomed to a life without purpose. [23] But you will of course take control of whatever is to come. Even as a boy you had goals and things you wanted to accomplish.”

“Well, now,” Buchow replied thoughtfully, “it can be painful when we suddenly come to realize that everything we do has no real purpose. Even as a child I had that sense sometimes. I would play or stand on a board out in the field and pretend that the board was a ship and the meadow the sea. But then I would suddenly realize that the board was not a ship, the meadow was not an ocean, and all around there's nothing but meadow and there's no ocean. Then I'd have to throw myself into playing so that I wouldn't lose all the joy of it. Even today I have such moments.”

Viervogel laughed. “Well, I always know that I'm standing on a board in the middle of a field. What I do has no purpose perhaps, but I'm satisfied with it. Once I wanted to have a little excitement in my life and I started seeing Agnes Kappelmeier; I thought that something like a fling would come from it. [24] The Kappelmeier girls are so pretty, but a bit too loud for me, too intense, so I'd rather just go downstairs and watch Frau Weidemann bake bread.”

“But you've kept on working,” Buchow objected.

“You've got to live,” Viervogel replied, “perhaps my life will have been good for something, and I do have a place in the order of things. But that place is like an 'and' in a manuscript—it is indispensable, but the role it plays is not very significant.”

Both were silent for a while. Buchow studied his friend's face for a while, a somewhat too large face with an aquiline nose, and blue eyes that peered out from behind round eyeglasses, and an underdeveloped, soft mouth. “It's really too bad for you,” he exclaimed.

Viervogel smiled. “You mean—yes, perhaps it is a shame, but my case is hopeless because I am satisfied with it. I have had [25] periods of turmoil, but that's past now. I sleep well now, and that is a sign of inner 'peace'.”

“Indeed, sleep is good thing,” Buchow said and stood up, “but I don't want to keep you from getting to your regulars' table.”

“Oh, God, my regulars,” Viervogel replied, “it's a matter of indifference whether they hear my lawyer's stories about the Camorra mafia now or later or what the pharmacist has to say about his assistant's latest pranks.” He held Buchow's overcoat for him. “Until tomorrow then,” he said and lighted the way along the dark stairs.

Buchow stepped out again into the cold night air. The conversation with Viervogel had made his chest tighten up a bit, so the penetrating cold felt good to him.

It was Christmas vacation when Ulrich's brother Achaz¹ came to Lalaiken. He was younger than Ulrich and was in the foreign service. His sled arrived [26] in front of the house with sleigh bells ringing. From the foyer they could hear his bright voice speaking to Klaus, the servant: “Good day, Klaus, it smells like a family Christmas in here.”

1 An unusual, but distinguished name. The -ch- is pronounced like the -ch in Scottish *loch*; the -z, like -tz. Emphasis is on the first syllable: ACH-atz.

When he stepped into the room, the whole family was expecting him and laughed when they saw him, if only because his appearance was so youthful and cheerful. "Ah, the whole family," he cried, "how pretty you all are. You not the least, dear Count," he said to the grandfather, "and Uli has grown, he may very well become a *bel homme*, and how bright it is here and how nicely it smells of Christmas trees and lebkuchen! I'm happy to be with you. Irma is still as beautiful as eternal blessedness itself."

Irma laughed. "He's handing out compliments like Christmas cookies."

Then they sat in the living room, the children stood next to Achaz and looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to say something funny.

The old Count had pulled his chair closer to Achaz, placed his hand to his ear [27] and listened happily to all the names that occurred in Achaz's stories, the names of theaters and restaurants; he greedily drank in the breath of fresh air from the city that seemed to surround this young man. Irma, too, had leaned forward listening, her gray-blue eyes glistened and her face took on that radiant glow that it often had when things around her were bright and cheerful. Buchow, at one end of the sofa, said little, but he did smile contentedly. He admired his brother, the mere appearance of whom seemed to make people happy and cheerful. Achaz was taller and thinner than Ulrich; he was like him, but his face was clearer, his eyes wide open, and his mouth had the relaxed smile of a boy. When Buchow got up to go to his study, a shadow passed over Achaz's features, he knitted his brow together painfully, and an expression of helplessness showed itself on his face, a moment ago so merry. "I have to talk to Ulrich," he said, stood up and followed his brother. [28]

He carefully closed the door to the study, and when he turned to face Ulrich, his face was pale though it still bore that boyish expression of helplessness. "Ulrich, I have to talk to you," he said, "and it's better to do it immediately, otherwise my pleasant days here will be ruined."

"What is it then?" Ulrich asked and turned away and looked out the window.

Achaz walked around the room nervously. "There has been another unfortunate incident," he began, "and I do know how irresponsible it was of me, but it happened. I allowed myself to be talked into gambling in a casino. I don't know what happened to me that night, but I gambled like a crazy man. Of course I lost." He was silent for a moment.

"How much?" Ulrich asked from the window.

"Five thousand!" Achaz replied. There was a pause.

Finally Ulrich turned around to his brother. "And you want me," he said with unusual clarity, [29] spitting out the words, "just to give it to you?"

"Of course that's what I was hoping for!" Achaz said, and blushed deeply, "you are my only recourse."

"You are overestimating my finances," Ulrich continued. "I have a family, I can't let myself be ruined because you have gambling debts. Last year all the money I got from selling wood went to pay your debts, and now you're asking again."

"You're completely right," Achaz interrupted, "and I'm not surprised that you're angry, it was irresponsible of me, I could kick myself. But something just came over me, and to tell you the truth, I hate myself, I despise myself, but it happened.... The drowning man grasps at anything that can save him, and you know that if I don't pay, then I'm done for, there is nothing left for me but a bullet. That is not a threat in bad taste, no, it's obvious. But if [30] I can just get through this, I'll never gamble again, I'll start a new life."

Ulrich had listened to this without moving. His face seemed to have gotten smaller, as if pressed together, and his lips were again tightly closed. When he began to speak, his voice was soft and a bit hoarse.

"There is no chance of your accomplishing your resolutions until you

realize that you alone are responsible for your life, in everything that you do you must be the actor—and you alone. Right now you think that I'm standing behind you and have to take care of you, but, dear brother, the time will come when I can no longer do that and no longer want to. As long as a person does not bear responsibility for himself, he is a ghost.”

“You're right a thousand times over,” cried Achaz, “I tell myself that all the time, and things really are going to be different now, you'll see. Of course I'm only asking to borrow the money you're giving me, I will repay you as soon as I can. My prospects are good, I'm on good terms with my supervisor, [31] and have the talent to be a diplomat, I can feel that I'm a born diplomat. I'm thinking that I'll have myself posted to Rome. You can learn a lot from the Italians. You'll see that my star is going to rise. No, I'm not worried about that, and on the morning after my bout of gambling I felt that my whole stupid life had fallen from me like a disease. I'm not a gambler, but sometimes something like intoxication overcomes me, but now that's over.”

“Good,” Ulrich said, and moved to the table and tapped with his fingers on the tabletop, “however that may be, in the future you will have to get used to paying for your intoxication yourself. If I help you out this time, I will be at the very limit of my ability to help you.”

“Thank you, old man, you are my salvation. You are like a father to me, but you'll see that my unstable life is over; I'm going to get serious, the Buchow in me will come out, [32] you'll be able to be proud of me. And do you know what effect those few words 'I'll help you out this time' have had? You have saved someone from death, quite simply you have saved someone from death.

Ulrich did not reply. He sat down out of exhaustion on the sofa and stared out with his deeply set gray eyes, just thinking.

“You said, you have to be responsible for yourself” Achaz continued, “that's well put, and that's how it is. If I do something reckless, even something stupid, but something that's a matter of life or death, or if I risk a large amount of money or something like that, then a kind of pleasant dizziness seizes me and I feel a delicious tension inside me to see whether I'll win or lose. Then I always think about our boyhood. Do you remember how we used to play on the seesaw? You sat on one end, I stood on the other. It wasn't easy to stand on it, but it created an enjoyable tension: will I fall or not? But that is [33] over now, *tempi passati*, I'm a different person now, really, I can feel excellence growing within me,” and he laughed his open, cheerful laugh.

Over in the hall you could hear shrill cries of joy from Uli: a waltz was being played on the piano. “What are they doing there?” Achaz asked. He opened the door and looked over to the hall, then he too slipped out, and Buchow soon heard Achaz's laughter mixing with Uli's cries of joy. Buchow stood up, closed the door, and sat back down at his place. 'Yes, he talks a good line,' he thought, 'they all do,' but the anger within him had vanished; instead he felt a sympathetic anxiety for his younger brother, from whom he, the more stolid one, had received so much merriment and sunshine. Someday the time would come when he could no longer help—what would become of Achaz then? 'Then I would be done for, for good,' Achaz had said, and it was painful for Buchow to think about these words. Life seemed to create some carefree and brilliant natures [34] just as temporary decorations, only to cast them aside as worthless later.

Over in the hall he could hear Irma's and Achaz's laughter, Uli's jubilation, and the grandfather played waltzes. Buchow was seized by a bitter feeling of loneliness. They can well be merry, because the burdens are on my shoulders, and I have to figure out how to handle them. There was a knock at the door and the overseer came in to talk about the day's work.

It was a holiday. The winter sun shone down brightly on the snow-covered land. The rooms too were full of golden light. Irma sat in her dining room at the breakfast table, flooded with sunlight, and comfortably closed her eyes. "Yes, that's the way to do it," said Achaz, who was walking back and forth in the room, "let the sun cover you, like a dragonfly that pauses its flight in a ray of sun." [35]

"Yes," Irma said, "when the sun shines, then you really know what you are here for."

"Well, if you know that," Achaz said, "then you know a lot. But you're right, this light is a proper part of a holiday. Nature looks like a room that has been tidied up for a holiday, and when I think of the Sundays of my youth, I always see the rooms yellow with sunlight."

"Without sunshine," Irma said reflectively, "you just wander around like a ghost."

"Good," Achaz began again and stopped in front of Irma, "the circumstances are right, now it's just a matter of developing a plan for what we're going to do in the situation."

"Of course," Irma said and smiled expectantly at Achaz.

"First, of course, there's church," he began to count, "I love these country churches, the people are always wearing their Sunday best, they put on pious faces, and you can hear the clatter of their Sunday shoes under the high ceiling. [36] You're a bit chilly—that's the beginning of the sermon. Then comes some organ music and hymns. People sing and open their mouths wide and stare ahead with empty, deeply-moved eyes. They're resting in something incomprehensible, which they worship. And after church there's the Sunday mid-day meal. With luck there will be bouillon with meatballs, that's the customary Sunday soup. Is that what we're having?"

"Here comes Christa," Irma replied.

"Oh, Fräulein Christa," Achaz cried, "she fits right in, she looks like a gingerbread woman herself and says such tactless things in conversation. I think Fräulein Christa was in love with me for a while."

"Oh, no," Irma contradicted, "Viervogel is the only love of her life."

"I see," said Achaz, "her life would have been greatly improved if she had sat alone in her little governess's room pining for me. But, my god, everyone can't be in love with the same person." [37]

"So, is that what you want?" Irma asked.

"No, not exactly," Achaz replied, "but still it's a pleasant feeling to know that your effect on females is like an electric spark. No matter though, in the afternoon we'll go for a walk, I'll go with you, and we'll take Uli along; Ulrich can go with Fräulein Christa and Isa, we'll go through the village and we'll see the daughters of gardeners standing in front of their houses, then we'll go further into the forest, which today will be wonderfully mysterious."

Buchow came into the room. "Ah, Ulrich," Achaz said in greeting, "you're wearing your Sunday face today, I see, and that's right, because today we're not going to think about business, we've already organized the whole day."

In the afternoon two sleds with bright sleigh bells ventured from Lalaiken across the bridge through the market. The girls of Brixen walked in a long line on the main street taking tiny careful steps. They were wearing new dresses [38] and new fur caps. Pretty gardeners' daughters were standing in front of their houses and they laughed when Achaz greeted them. Viervogel was leaning in the doorway of the Lehmann's restaurant, looking up at the sun, bored. On the sidewalk the assistant pharmacist walked alongside the mail delivery girl. He looked unhappy and was slow to lift his long legs. Each step seemed to be an act of grace.

"A pretty, festive ant hill," Achaz said.

"When the sun is shining and the girls have new dresses on, then it is pretty, but in dreary fall days when I go through the village, and raindrops hang from the roofs, and people with pale sad faces are standing behind small window panes, and the dogs, oh, my god, the dogs walk through the puddles, all shaggy and wet, then things are so ordinary, so heart-breakingly ordinary that I could cry." [39]

"Oh," Achaz replied, "I think that people here are as happy as people anywhere. They have their loves and their hates, they make a living, they have destinies to fulfill. Just look at the assistant pharmacist. Doesn't he look just like destiny personified? The dogs, I mean the dogs of a small city, are perhaps the most ordinary creatures in the world, but they have such a superior way of showing their boredom."

Behind the market began the Lalaiken forest; huge snow-covered fir trees lined the way, holding their burden of snow as if on gigantic splayed hands. Looking past them you could see through to the interior of the forest. Everywhere it glistened with whiteness: white places, white corners, white flowers, white monks' cells, and all of it very still, completely motionless. A rabbit started down the road into the forest. The snow made it difficult for him and with every step he sank up to his ears.

"He's going into his white world now," Irma said reflectively, "such a world must be good, all white, all bright, all pure." [40]

"Well, I think that in such a world we would pretty quickly be yearning for some darkness," Achaz responded.

"I have always found," Irma continued, "that something like silent laughter is always lurking behind blinding whiteness. My father once gave me a frock of white velvet. When I wear it, it always seems like I'm dressing myself in snow, and that silent laughter passes over me, and I have to smile, and even my chambermaid Minna smiles too."

"It must be pretty," Achaz said.

"I don't like for everything to be white," Uli suddenly said, "it ought to be like snow, but a pretty red color."

"You see," said Achaz, "the forest obeys you."

The sun was just going down. A purple light flowed over the white tree shapes, it lay on the covering of snow like puddles of blood like a sudden incandescence of the forest. A bird flew out of one of the fir trees, [41] a fluttering of black amidst all the red. Uli was thrilled. "Bravo," said Achaz, "Nature knows how to give us surprises like that."

"Yes," Irma offered, "nature always comes up with something pretty, but Ulrich always says he likes gray things: gray makes him feel productive and fresh and he's always especially cheerful then. Well, of course, he has his work, his thoughts, his 'round of duties,' as he likes to say."

"Round of duties," Achaz repeated, "the term itself smells of the schoolroom, of moldy ink and wet clothing."

"No, Ulrich is good," Irma said dreamily. Ulrich is very good, I wish I were as good as he."

"Why do you want to be so good?" Achaz asked quietly.

The red glow of evening was over now, and they turned off the forest path onto the road and walked beside the small lake. Twilight was falling on the white surfaces and the snow took on a blue aspect. On the other side was the market where pale lights had started to glow. [42] A few restlessly glittering stars were beginning to awaken in the darkening sky. Uli was heard to say: "Now everything is all sad again."

"No, my boy," Achaz said, "it is beautiful, but you're not yet mature enough to appreciate twilight. It's something you have to learn."

"I still find it sad," the boy said and snuggled up to his mother and

closed his eyes.

"I could go on like this forever," Achaz countered, "walking into the dusk, stars above my head, and you feel close to people, really close."

Irma said nothing and stared dreaming into the fading light.

Ulrich's sleigh, which had been following them all along, pulled up close to them now, and they heard Fräulein Christa's voice piercing through the sound of sleigh bells. She wanted to say something to Ulrich, but Achaz urged his horse onward: "No," he said, "that's not what we want, we want to have the feeling of being entirely alone in this gentle darkness." [43]

It was warm and bright at home. The grandfather rambled through the illuminated rooms impatiently, troubled by his loneliness. A fire was burning in the fireplace. Irma leaned back in a big armchair and half closed her eyes. The air had made her tired. Fräulein Christa sat opposite her and talked about what was going on at the market, about Widow Weidemann and the daughters of the gardener, about school—quiet little stories—and Irma's thoughts often drifted back to the snow-covered forest and the dusky world.

"I've been waiting for you, dear Achaz," said Count Pax, "we were going to play piquet.²

So the two men sat down at the gaming table. Ulrich walked to and fro, watched the game a bit, talked with Fräulein Christa, walked some more, then finally sat quietly in his room. He enjoyed, as all good workers do, savoring the quiet after a day's work. Irma too felt contented. [44] From the card table you could occasionally hear Achaz's warm laugh; the sweet-smelling fragrance of the Turkish cigarettes drifted around.

This was good, but tomorrow it would all be over.

"Tomorrow we have to celebrate leave-taking," Count Pax asserted.

"Klaus, bring me some wine, and some pineapple. Naturally we have to have some punch—how could I forget that?" And the old gentleman was totally occupied with the preparation of the punch.

When they were sitting around the table, each with a glass before him, the Count became quite the sophisticate, he spoke of the Duke of Urach and of the Duc de Broglie, of splendid dinners at Véfoux, and about balls and beautiful ladies. "Oh, God, my lost youth," he said. Back then there was still some dignity in youth, even dancing was not the chaotic storming around that it is now. He stood up. "Just a minute please, Fräulein Christa," he said. He took her by the hand, danced a few steps of a *française*³ [45], kissed Fräulein Christa's hand, then led her back to her seat. "You see," he said, "now **that** is *élégance*."

"True, we can't do that anymore," Achaz replied, "in those days there was something sacred about society life."

"Exactly, exactly," the Count confirmed, and in this room that smelled so pleasantly of pineapple punch and Turkish cigarettes and warmed by the fire, with the easy-going, lively conversation, life did indeed seem warm and friendly.

Achaz departed. He kissed Ulrich and said, "Thank you, old man, you are like a father to me—no, you're more than a father, you've saved my skin **twice** as one would a drowning man, and I'll never forget it."

Ulrich looked serious. "If I can help you," he added, "I always will do it, but you know that things can't continue as they are, and the moment will come when..." [46]

"You don't have to tell me a thing," Achaz interrupted, "I've already said as much to myself and in harsher words, too. No, I didn't spare myself, I

2 Piquet, a French card game.

3 A traditional French dance.

have become a different person, you'll see. So, farewell, old man, once again many thanks for saving my life, as it were.”

He left the room on nimble feet. He found Irma in her writing room standing at the window. Uli was standing next to her, crying. In a way, she was glad that Uli was crying because she could not and would not cry herself, but still she was in a miserable mood. “Well, goodbye then, Irma,” Achaz said, “it was nice being with you all here and just a damned shame that I have to leave. Now you're going to build a nest for yourself in your winter whiteness, sitting at your window next to your hyacinths and looking out at the snow. It really is pretty, but there are too many shadows in your life.”

“I'll get used to living in the shadows,” Irma said with a tired laugh.

“No,” Achaz countered, “some flowers are made for the sun and others for [47] the shade. I'd like to bring you out of the shade and into the sunlight where life is bright and full of laughter.”

“Just leave me with my shade,” Irma said despondently.

“Well, Uli, my boy,” Achaz said, “are you crying for me? That's nice of you. A farewell without tears is like a soup without salt. I'll be back when the swallows return. So, farewell to all of you, you good and beautiful people.” And with that he was gone.

As Uli stood at the window watching the departing sleigh, he said miserably, “Now the holidays are over!”

“Yes, the holidays are over,” Irma repeated.

Uli was sent to the children's room and Isa was told to cheer him up. The grandfather sat in his accustomed place at the window, watched the passing traffic and the dogs, or he looked up the road to see if a visitor might be coming. Ulrich stood in the courtyard [48] speaking with the overseer. The housemaids took down the Christmas trees and swept the gold glitter off the floor. The drab monotony of everyday life has inexorably retaken our house, Irma thought. She too had to return to her 'round of duties,' as Ulrich liked to say, but what actually was her round of duties? Taking care of the house? No, Mam'sell could do that better than she. She sat down at the window, as Achaz had said, and stared out at the snow, uncertain as to what she should do.

Fräulein Christa came that afternoon for the children's schooling. From the adjacent room Irma could hear the monotonous and hesitating voices of her children reading aloud, but otherwise the house was completely quiet, except for the occasional crackling of the fire in the stove. The rooms were full of the reflected light from the snow and outside it began to snow again very lightly.

'But it's very pretty,' Irma said to herself, 'it really is cozy,' and yet she was seized by a boundless yearning to hear Achaz's bright and cheerful [49] laugh, she longed for the sweet smell of his Turkish cigarettes; at the same time it was disturbing: it was unjust and ridiculous for a woman to miss someone so much. Something would have to be done, she decided, and after the lessons were over, she said to Fräulein Christa: “Let's drive in to Drixen, you said that Lehmann had set up a new, white room with marble tables where you can drink hot chocolate and eat apple cake. Let's go there.”

“Does it have to be today?” Fräulein Christa asked and looked apprehensively at Irma with her good canine eyes.

“Yes, it has to be today,” Irma replied.

And so they set themselves on their way. It was refreshing to travel through freshly fallen snow, past snow-covered houses; there was a red evening sky and crows flew black and silent through the soundless, white falling snow. At Lehmann's it was warm and comfortable. They sat with their cups of chocolate in front of them and Fräulein Christa was talking [50] about Viervogel. When this subject seemed to be exhausted, she began to talk about

Achaz.

The winter was harsh this year, the mornings clear and frost-covered, and snow lay on the ground well into March; the broad stretches of land in front of the windows at Lalaiken changed but little under the winter sky. The farmers' sleighs with their shaggy horses worked their way through the snow laboriously, looking like worn-out toys. Ulrich was often outside taking care of his agricultural interests, coming in only occasionally to ask for a schnapps. Count Pax ambled through the rooms, looked into the blazing stoves, or stood at the windows waiting to see if visitors were coming. Irma searched for her own round of duties. She talked with Mam'sell and was surprised at how much sausage and ham they had. She looked in on the children, but only Uli was difficult during these days. Even when he could dress up Frau Müller in a colorful cloth and red blanket and lead Isa around by a rope, he quickly grew tired of these activities; then he would walk through the suite of rooms with hands hanging low and whine to his mother, "Is anything happening today? There's just nothing to look forward to."

"But you can look forward to each day," his mother instructed, yet she felt deeply exactly how correct her child was. No, there was nothing to look forward to. Even when her father scuttled in and excitedly announced: "A sleigh just stopped in front of the house!" there was nothing she could hope from it. It was Baroness Brünner arriving, who then rushed in wearing a full-cut silk dress hung with jangling bits of gold. She then sat at the tea table, knitting with clicking ivory needles, and talked about rocky marriages in the neighborhood, about important people at the club in town, about servants and governesses, or about gentlemen. Or it might be gentlemen who came, and then the room would smell of cigars, and they would talk about [52] fertilizers and the people who took care of their estates, poorly. No, these are not really events, Irma thought. Achaz had said that only when life lifts us up like a wave in the ocean was it truly worth living. My God, was it her fate to be just a hyacinth in the window of a stately house?

In the evening Ulrich returned, warmed himself at the fireplace and felt very comfortable. He talked a lot about his work and his people. Irma lay in her chair and listened to him with half-closed eyes.

"This probably doesn't interest you?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes, it does," Irma replied, "just keep telling me your gray tales."

"Gray?" Ulrich asked, perplexed.

"Yes," Irma replied, "these men are gray, the women are gray, the rooms, the children, they're all gray."

Ulrich said nothing for a while and thought. Finally he said, "I think you should [53] have more contact with people. We have sick children, sick women. The wife of an owner of an estate should be something like a benevolent goddess, and that would be good for you...."

"I can't do that," Irma interrupted, "I can't stand to look at wounds, I have no idea how to handle sick people—that's why we have Dr. Bulster. And the smell of peasant cottages makes me sick. I know that sounds unsympathetic and not very virtuous, but I can't help it."

"Well, if you can't help it," Ulrich said, became quiet, and closed his mouth so tightly that his lips turned white.

On all of these quiet afternoons there was one festive moment: and that was sundown. The sun hung like a red ball on the edge of the horizon, purple and golden clouds glowed like flames in the pale sky, the flat plain became rosy red, and the house was full of red light. The Count scuttled from window to window, rubbed his hands together with a smile and whispered [54] out with a sense of satisfaction: "*Grand spectacle.*" Irma went out into the garden, walked along the snow-covered paths as if through white corridors, always heading

towards the sun. To bask in this red light was mildly exciting to her, it was like a promise, a down payment by life for greater and better things to come. A world so beautifully decorated surely must lead to something. The children went ice-skating on a small body of water in the park under the watchful eye of Frau Müller. The evening sun colored the ice. "It's like skating on a piece of red candy," Uli said. He spread out his arms and ran smiling towards the sun. "Be careful," admonished Frau Müller. But he said: "I have to go to that red thing!" and piped out shrill bird-like sounds. Suddenly, however, he fell, fell over backwards and lay there whimpering. They carried him back to the house. He had injured his back and his leg. Someone went to fetch Dr. Bulster. A small man with short hair, he stood at the boy's bed, made a serious face [55] and stuffed some snuff into his nose. Uli was in pain and had a fever, and from his sick-bed a terrible anxiousness radiated out over the entire house, which seemed empty because his little blond form was not there. The grandfather sat dejectedly at his spot at the window and looked down into the courtyard. Even the dogs seemed downcast. Ulrich visited the sick-room frequently and looked at his pale child with serious mien. 'Well I know,' Irma thought, 'that worry follows you around too.' It was the kind of worry that never left her the whole day through, as though something terrible were waiting for her, wherever she went. Irma watched over him through the night. She sat beside the night-light, a book propped open in front of her, but she did not read; she stared into the corners where dark shadows lay in wait. Uli whispered a bit in his fever, his face was pale, surrounded by an aureole of blond locks. The thoughts that came into her mind were as frightening as nightmares. How could something so small and helpless [56] struggle against grim Death? And yet, over there, on the other side there were angels, light—but now she could see the beyond quite clearly, and it was a vast expanse of terrifying strangeness, and in such a place Uli was supposed to wander around? Alone, helpless and small? And she was seized by a terrible fear that made her tremble so badly that she was unable to cry. And yet when Frau Müller came to relieve her around four in the morning, she lay down on the bed, dead-tired, and it felt wonderful to press one's head onto the pillow and to close one's eyes.

Uli's condition improved, but his back still hurt. But there were moments in which he could smile. Isa sat faithfully at the foot of his bed and watched him attentively with her gray eyes. The boy's constant companion, however, was the grandfather. The old man had done everything to put a smile on the child's pale face. He made knots in a handkerchief and pretended to be a clown and didn't stop until his antics [57] caused the boy to laugh out loud. He brought in all of the boy's treasures, Swiss wooden animals and little houses, stick pins, and pictures. He became the boy's childlike playmate and when Uli didn't laugh, but turned his face to the wall and whimpered, the old man was quite depressed and made a face as if he had podagra. Finally the day came when Uli was allowed to get out of bed for a bit, but he still had to support himself with a crutch. Walking was difficult for him, and the doctor, with serious mien, said to Ulrich: "We need to make sure that the boy doesn't develop a deformity."

Meanwhile outside, Spring had come, and warm sunshine, and the trees seemed covered by a green veil, and fragrant spring grass grew out of the moist earth. The blackbirds beat their wings as if intoxicated. Uli was allowed to venture down the paths of the park in a small wheelchair pushed by Frau Müller, while the grandfather, walking along beside him, attempted to call the boy's attention [58] to every aspect of Spring that might cheer him up. "Now we're going to go see the thrushes' nest," he said, "then to see the violets."

“Now we're going to see how the animals are put out to pasture.” He talked inexhaustibly. “We need to get a uniform for Frau Müller,” he said, “red with gold braid, then everyone you pass by would say, 'There goes young Baron Buchow.’” The child's pale face smiled and looked up at his grandfather expectantly to see whether he would say something else new and fun.

The evenings were still cold so there was still a fire in the fireplace. The grandfather slept in his chair, Irma and Ulrich sat close to the fire in silence. Ulrich said nothing because he was accustomed to handle pain by clenching his teeth and to bear the pain in silence. Irma cried occasionally, just staring ahead. “Please don't cry,” Ulrich said weakly. “I have to cry,” Irma replied, “when I [59] think about our poor little boy's back, when I think that his whole life will be one of pain and resignation.”

“We have to be brave, child,” Ulrich said.

“Brave,” Irma repeated, the blood rising to her cheeks a bit. “For whom should I be brave, for whom should I play the role of heroic mother when my child's life has been ruined?” Ulrich had nothing to say to this, but thought for a while, then said: “Viervogel says that no matter how careful you are in life, or hide yourself from life, it doesn't do any good. There's something waiting for you just around the corner and it hits you where you're most vulnerable.”

“Nonsense. Viervogel is a fool,” Irma said, “he has no one to love, he has nothing; he just watches while poor Frau Weidemann does her baking, and if it wasn't she, then it would be someone else. What could happen to him?” The conversation fell silent again, Ulrich leaned his head back on his armchair and smoked, the grandfather snored lightly in his chair. Then suddenly Ulrich said with a remarkably changed and somewhat [60] hoarse voice—as if he found it difficult to speak: “Listen, child, I'm a rigid, closed character who just swallows his feelings, but believe me, I understand very well what's going on with you, and I would so much like to help you and be your comrade in suffering. So, speak your mind, and let's get a little closer together. And even if I can't show it, what's going on inside you is exactly what I'm feeling.” And he stretched his hand towards her. She laid her hand languidly in his and said quietly: “You're very kind, Ulrich, but who could help me?” Then they both fell silent again and listened to the crackling of the wood chips in the fireplace. Suddenly they heard the sound of little feet running in the dark suite of rooms and Isa appeared at the door. She studied her parents with her gray eyes. “Well, my daughter,” Ulrich said in a friendly tone. Then she stepped forward and offered her forehead to her parents for a good-night kiss. Irma busied her forehead quickly; Ulrich stroked back her hair. Isa kissed [61] her grandfather's white wig and disappeared into the darkness again.

These evenings sitting around the fireplace were doleful. The couple was mostly silent, but occasionally they talked quietly and always of Uli. “We must do all that we can to make his life happy,” Ulrich said.

“Yes, of course,” Irma said, “but he's a child who cries and is angry if the sun doesn't shine.”

“Well,” Ulrich said reflectively, “life has established a difficult school for him.”

“That's not what I want,” Irma blurted. “Life should leave my child in peace. I want to watch over him and protect him from this school, and perhaps, just perhaps....” She didn't finish the sentence because her voice was trembling so badly. Ulrich leaned his head back on the chair and said after a bit, “Yes, well perhaps....” They both fell silent again.

The spring wind rattled the window panes and brought out shrill tones from the glass doors [62] of the great room, but it was not the same voice as a

winter wind, which always sounds as if some trouble were about, as if something were complaining. In this wind there was a certain joy, as if it were pleasurably burrowing in the tree-tops and shaking the buds. Irma heard in this wind something like a promise, that in spite of all the burdens of life, there was still some joy. This wind awoke in her a renewed sense of youthfulness and hope.

The sound of a sudden thud frightened both of them. The grandfather had fallen out of his chair onto the floor and lay there helpless, limp as a rag. They heard him whisper, "*en été, en été.*" [in summer, summer]

The poor man had suffered a stroke and was taken to his room. Doctor Bulster confirmed that his right side was paralyzed, and the otherwise merry old man lay small and pale in his bed and was mostly quiet. Only once he seemed to recognize Ulrich and said quietly: "*Fini.*" [It's over.] [63]

While the grandfather was sick, Uli went out into the park alone. Sometimes Isa walked beside his wheelchair, but that didn't satisfy him, he was in a bad mood and whiny. His missed his old playmate, and the things around him, lacking an amusing explanation of them by the grandfather, made no sense to him.

But old Count Pax recovered a bit; he could leave his bed, and supported by his old servant Lukas, he could walk slowly. The face under the white wig was smaller and more wrinkled now, his mouth a bit askew as if stretched by an ironic smile. "You see, my dear," he said to Ulrich, "that was a clue that I think was unnecessary, because what happens is what's supposed to happen, why do we need clues and intimations?" But it doesn't matter, I'm not so stupid that I don't understand. But one favor I won't do for the Lord above: I won't spend the small amount of life that is left to me [64] in the doldrums. I have ordered a wheelchair and Lukas will get blue and silver livery. Things can still look decent."

Uli burst out laughing when he saw the grandfather, opened his arms to him and cried: "You're back, Grandfather. Everything is right again, even though they said that you...." "The boy suddenly held back.

"...were dying," the Grandfather said, completing the sentence. "No, my boy, one does not just die at the drop of a hat during a beautiful spring such as this. I have ordered a wheelchair, you'll see it, and it's a veritable throne, and Lukas is getting blue and silver livery. I'm going to give Frau Müller a green hat from Helgoland and we'll all go outside together."

And they all did go outside together, out into the glory of springtime, a small wheelchair and a large one, with Lukas in his blue livery and Frau Müller in a green hat.

"You, see, my boy," the grandfather said, "we can look at things like this: every [65] person of quality travels by wheelchair; it's only unimportant people who run around on two legs. Doesn't it look fantastic when we venture out, Count Pax and Baron Buchow—that has a ring to it, doesn't it? So, now we're heading on the allee lined with poplars standing straight. We can imagine that they're soldiers who salute us and we return their greeting, no, not like that, just touch the brim of your hat—that's how the King of Belgium did it when he rode through Brussels. Now let's go to the tulips and see what they've been up to."

The tulips had come up beautifully and stood there like fiery red goblets. A few still had their tips closed and looked like some colorful exotic fruit. "Marvelous, marvelous," the grandfather said, "they're doing their duty. Now let's go to the pond and see the frogs. Looks at those strange, naked green fellows! Just look at him climb over that leaf! They're acting like that's how you're supposed to look." [66]

Uli laughed so hard that his eyes teared. Then finally they went to the

fence to see if visitors might be coming, but it was just turning dark and Frau Müller warned them to start back home. "But we want to see the sun go down," Uli said tearfully.

"Yes, we do," the grandfather said, "but we can do it from the gazebo in the garden."

And so the little wheelchair and the big one stood in the gazebo, and the setting sun cast a purple glaze over the bright face of the boy and the small, shriveled face of the old man. In the blue eyes of the child and the green eyes of the old man the sun was reflected like a tiny red dot. At times Irma joined them and said: "I'll join you, you seem so happy."

In the nooks and crannies of the house sorrows still sat and waited for their human prey, to surprise them without warning, but outside [67] Spring was bursting out more luxuriously than ever. The season of opaque green tree tops and the fluttering green veil was over, and now the trees created shadows, and the allees were full of subdued, greenish light; everything was in blossom and in flower. In the plant beds in the garden there was light and smells, and starlings and crows sat on the branches and beat their wings with all their strength, as if something huge had been awakened in these little creatures that needed to be summoned, even if it burst their breasts.

Irma too felt within herself the awakening of this disruptive force, an imprecise waiting and hoping, which sometimes cleared away her sorrow. In the evening, when she sat by the fire next to Ulrich the Silent, she crossed and uncrossed her feet, or, during the day, she walked without purpose through the long suite of rooms and let the parquet squeak under her restless feet. It was as if she heard something calling her, as if something were happening that she had to attend and was missing. [68]

Irma went walking with Fräulein Christa. A large bridge spanned a marsh, which was already full of bilious green stuff. The market area resounded with life: the gardener was working, tall blond girls, watering cans in their hands, called out to one another and laughed; an old man in a black cap barked orders; the postal delivery girl was waiting for the assistant pharmacist at the corner; and Frau Weidemann, the widow, had put two red roses on her straw hat. Even Viervogel was out walking, though slowly and seemingly bored. "Yes," Fräulein Christa said, "The market seems to be as busy as a beehive that's about to swarm. And I can see it in the girls in Class One: they have mostly vacant eyes and are thinking of something completely different than what I'm talking about in class. But that's just the way it is," she concluded with a sigh.

The market was behind them now and they had reached the little lake, which lay before them bathed in golden afternoon sun. Everywhere there were pockets of light that [69] seemed to be in motion, yet never moved from the spot. Horse tails poked their tips out of the water and coots swam around contentedly among all that blue and gold. "That really is pretty," Irma said, opening up her arms.

"Yes, it is pretty," Fräulein Christa repeated and made an earnest face, "but are we part of it? Yes, the mail girl waiting for the assistant, the silly gardener's girl, all the girls in my school in whom I see it—they all are part of it, but as for me, I feel that I'm locked out of it."

"No," cried Irma, stamping her foot, "I want to be part of it, no one has a right to exclude me from it."

"Yes, perhaps," Christa said, "perhaps you are part of it, but I am alone and unattractive, so what good is springtime to me?"

"We have to seize it," Irma cried, "in spite of all the sorrows and troubles we have, we can't let our rights wither away. I'm not going to sit still or sit in a corner and mope when everything is joyful and blossoming [70], no,

I'm not going to do that. If it's Spring, then I'm part of it, and you too, Christa. What's going on with your old Viervogel, why doesn't he love you?"

Christa made a tragic face. "Oh, him," she said, "his problem is that his life has been ruined. What's a clever man like that to do here? It has to be painful for him to hide all his talents."

"Nonsense," said Irma, "he should just marry you instead of sitting around at Frau Weidemann's place, no matter that she put two roses in her straw hat. It seems to me that happiness has been broadly spread about, and that it's calling to us in the breezes and in the branches, but we just don't know how to seize it."

"No," Christa said, still wearing the tragic mien, "behind all the beauties of Spring, pain and tears lie in wait, and if we try to seize Spring for ourselves, we just grab hold of the pain and tears." [71]

"No, this is not what I wanted to hear," cried Irma. "Why are you so gloomy today? I thought we would be happy together and now you talk about things like that."

"Excuse me," Christa said, and stared out into the rippling water, "but Spring always makes me sad."

"Even worse," countered Irma and shrugged her shoulders, "well, let's go back home then."

The reflected light on the surface of the water disappeared. Only occasionally did the setting sun cast a few moment's worth of purple light on the lake, giving it the appearance of a large bowl full of red wine in the midst of the forest greenery. Down in the village twilight was setting in, the transparent twilight of a spring evening. At the gardener's house they were still working and one could still hear the girls' laughter pealing out onto the street. All the houses had their windows open, girls were leaning out of the windows and looking pensively [72] into the growing darkness. Cats were slinking along the ridges of the roofs, and in the little garden that belonged to the Lehmann restaurant the fat waitress stood and allowed a young man to kiss her on the mouth. 'They want to be part of Spring,' Irma thought to herself, 'and they are.' At the big bridge she said goodbye to Fräulein Christa, and as she was traveling the stretch back home alone, she felt the secret life of the spring night.

When she got home, Ulrich met her, pale and serious; he said that Uli had been coughing violently. Dr. Bulster had found that it was bronchial, that Uli had some fever, and had urged extreme caution. For a moment Irma stared at him, eyes wide open. Then in a second, everything was gone: the Spring, her dissatisfaction with life, her hope for better things. Worry about her child returned and she saw dark creatures in the corners again, and in the flickering glow of the night light they seemed to be in motion. Her thoughts now took a joyless, anxious path [73] and everything beautiful seemed to have flown away.

A strange life began now for Irma and its sole focus was the child's sickbed and the pale, coughing boy. Anything else that occurred during the day, the meals with Ulrich the Serious and shy Isa, who looked anxiously to her mother, the conversations with Fräulein Christa—all of these things were ephemeral now. At times Irma looked out through the window, and, indeed, the trees were sprouting leaves and blossoming, and a spring breeze rustled the treetops, but Irma said not a word.

Old Count Pax allowed himself to be wheeled sleepily and grumpily along the garden paths. But their real world was the sickroom, where the windows were open and the curtains tightly drawn. The only thing that mattered was the labored breathing of the child and the terrible fear that kept her heart tightly bound up. At times Uli would whimper and demand them to make it lighter. Then Irma would open the curtains a bit and the sun cast a [74] ripple of gold on the boy's blanket and his small hands reached for it as if they could wallow in it, and a hint of a smile could be seen on the pale face of the

boy. "Why isn't Isa playing?" he occasionally whispered, but when she would come with her doll and start to play, he closed his eyes in exhaustion. The grandfather came too, but he was quiet and withdrawn. Uli smiled at the old man and he did then began to speak merrily and to make jokes, but Uli had stopped listening, he closed his eyes and struggled for breath. One evening, after a particularly bad day, Uli whispered, "The sun is going going down, let it in." Then when Irma pulled the curtains back, red light flooded into the room and rested for a moment on the bed covering, and it seemed that something splendid had blossomed around the sickbed. Uli grasped unsteadily at the colorful rays as if he wanted to pick them, but then after a few deep, rattling breaths from his chest, everything became quiet... Uli lay there dead, illuminated by [75] the gold and purple light of the sinking sun.

As Irma sat in her writing room, crying to herself and just staring into the void, she had the feeling that Uli was still there. She knew that he lay in the next room on his bed, dressed in his Sunday clothes and covered with a white veil, his face pale and earnest. He was surrounded by flowers and their fragrance made the air heavy and close. Irma could force herself to go into the room only occasionally because something strange lay over the boy's pale face, something alien that was painful to her. Then came the day of the funeral, dream-like and unreal with lots of people: ladies in mourning clothes surrounded Irma crying; the procession to the graveyard where the family vault stood. She heard the preacher's voice, looked at the tiny coffin for a moment, then someone led her away and she found herself back in her room, the people all gone, Ulrich stood beside her and stroked back her hair. [76] Christa sat next to her with a sad face. Irma felt completely worn out and she was hungry. She was a bit surprised, but actually glad when a servant served afternoon tea. She ate and drank with a burning hunger, and listened to the conversation between Ulrich and Fräulein Christa, and it was as if people at a great distance were talking about things that didn't concern her, she wanted to sleep, only to sleep. Her sleep was long and without dreams.

When she awoke, it was already twilight outside. Ulrich was standing beside her and looking at her seriously. "I've been waiting here," he said, "because I knew that waking up was going to be difficult."

Irma stared ahead for a while as if she were thinking of nothing, until the memories flooded over her again, then she said: "Yes, waking up is difficult." Ulrich put his arm around her, and they began to walk slowly back and forth through the suite of rooms. The evening song of the thrushes could be heard through the opened windows, and Isa appeared at the door of the great room, a little black [77] shape. She looked at her parents inquisitively and then followed behind them silently.

Then came days which seemed empty, completely empty to Irma. The sun shone into the rooms and the air coming in through the windows became heavier and heavier with fragrances; the grandfather, pale and frail, had his wheelchair pushed along the garden paths; Isa played with her dolls, moving her lips silently; Ulrich was outside taking care of business; and Irma—for her the day was completely empty. A purposeless disquiet drove her from room to room, the parquet squeaking beneath her restless feet. When she stopped in front of a window, she could see how the garden was turning green, and how the chestnuts and lilacs were blooming—but it meant nothing to her. She could not even think about Uli, burdened as this woman in long mourning clothes was by an unending tiredness. At times Fräulein Christa came and spoke about Uli in her determined way, spoke about heaven and God, but Irma pushed her away: "Don't talk about that," she said [78], "I'd rather hear about Viervogel." In the

evening Ulrich was there. They sat beside one another in the room with the fireplace and dim light, the windows wide open; bats were flying around emitting shrill calls, and a moth occasionally erred into the room and in the darkness the only sounds were those of its little wings that sounded like tiny propellers. Irma and Ulrich had been silent for a long time, then Ulrich took her hand and said in a soft, but distressed voice: "Oh, Irma, why don't we share our sorrows. Just talk. It will do you good."

"Talk," she said, "what should I talk about? It's all over. I never knew that great pain is an emptiness. Uli was a holiday, and now that he is gone, every day of the week is just ordinary, and they're all alike and have nothing for me."

"Weekdays uplift us," Ulrich countered, "we couldn't live without them. They help us to incorporate our pain into the holy [79] and serious melody that is life. Pain has no claim on us, but it is part of life."

"Yes, you have your work," Irma said, "but what do I have?"

"Life must begin again for you," Ulrich said.

"Yes," she said with a sigh, "perhaps it will begin again, that life, I can't prevent it, but will it have any meaning?"

"We have to give it meaning," Ulrich noted, then they both were silent and listened to the sounds of the May night.

At the end of May the days turned hot. The curtains in the rooms were closed to keep out the sun, and in the garden the lilies and roses began to bloom. Count Pax and his servant confined themselves to the shadiest corners of the garden and both of them nodded off. The courtyard had gotten quiet [80] and the dogs were looking for shady spots to take a nap. Things remained quiet until evening when someone started playing the accordion in front of the farmhands' quarters and girls walked down the highway in long rows singing. For Irma, this period in the heat of the afternoon, when sunbeams pierced through the curtains into the rooms like golden daggers, seemed doubly sad and tiring. She lay down on her couch and preferred to sleep, to sleep without dreaming, because the improbable and empty world around her would disappear and she would be free.

So she lay there one afternoon, her pale face calm and almost happy; she had slept for quite a while before she began to wake, a troublesome and hopeless awakening. She felt clearly that someone was looking at her. And it was Ulrich again, who wanted to make this moment a bit easier for her. But she did not open her eyes, she did not want to see the serious and sad face of her husband. [81] But someone walking quietly back and forth caused her to look up finally. Achaz stood in the middle of the room and smiled. "Is it you?" she said. Achaz quickly turned serious, made a face at once sad and miserable. He hurried over to her, kissed her hand, spoke quietly for a bit about the deep pain that he too experienced, and about the dear little boy, whom he also would miss.

"Yes," Irma said slowly, "it's strange how the passing of the little fellow with the head of blond curls has made this house and all of life seem so empty."

Achaz's eyes teared up, but he could not think of much to say. He was unaccustomed to being inhibited and it made him have to search for words. Then he heard the sound of the wheels of a wheelchair outside the window. Somewhat relieved, Achaz jumped up and said, "That must be Grandfather," and hurried out of the room. She overheard this conversation there beneath the window, quiet and measured at first, then Achaz's youthful laughter swelled up. Irma listened, [82] she had not heard that sound in so long, she had wondered whether it still existed. But there it was: bright and insouciant laughter. Shocked by the unaccustomed sound, Isa had crept to the door, a little black

shape, who listened, eyes round with amazement, to the laughter outside. Would he laugh again? Irma thought. The sound brought a message of life which she still wanted to understand but as yet did not. The wheelchair started rolling again, Achaz's steps crunched on the gravel, the voices grew distant, and the room was again silent in the golden sleepiness of afternoon.

In the evening Count Pax had his wheelchair pushed into the room with the fireplace, he wanted to hear what Achaz had to say. The gentle air of the summer night streamed through the opened windows, heavy with the fragrance of lilies and violets. Conversation was at first hesitant and low-voiced, but gradually Achaz got into narration, his voice grew lively and his laugh was carefree and merry. The old Count had [83] cupped his hand to his ear: the stories Achaz was telling hit him like the smell of asphalt from big city streets, and once again he heard the names of notable persons and of fine restaurants, and he sat up straight in his wheelchair, giggled and told some of his all too familiar stories from his days in Paris. Irma listened with half an ear, but that voice and those stories, that laugh—all of them just proved to her that life was waiting, and unconsciously she felt that it was waiting for her. But at the same time she felt betrayed by something and abandoned and she wanted to return to her sad thoughts, wanted to suppress this slight trembling of an awakening lust for life. Achaz had taken some days off because Ulrich had written him that his presence was needed here. And he thought it is so seldom that one is actually wanted that he had better seize the opportunity. And besides, he wanted to devote himself completely to life in the country, wanted to swim in the lake in the early morning, perhaps even tomorrow morning, and he wanted to talk with Fräulein Christa about religion. Someone in his profession [84] had a particular need to return to nature occasionally because diplomacy was the opposite of nature. When they parted and had wished each other good night, the old man rubbed his hands together and said with a grin, "At last, an evening the way they should be!"

Irma awoke very early the next morning. The sun was still low in the sky and its rays poked obliquely under the curtains. A refreshing morning breeze came in through the windows. Irma wanted to get up before it got hot so that she could fully absorb the coolness of the morning. Indeed, there was something about the day that allowed her to begin it with more courage, as if the day promised her something. But what was it? What was there that she could look forward to? Maybe it was Achaz, but her conscience immediately struck that idea down. After all, what could Achaz be to her? And yet, she was driven by a strange impatience to get out of bed and begin the day. She went out into the garden. A gray film of dew lay over the leaves and flowers, [85] and a pleasant coolness mixed with all the fragrances. Irma stood there for a while, her lips half opened, and drank in the morning air as if it were a precious elixir that allowed her to feel young and alive again, and her eyes were bright. But then something inside her recalled her to her duty to feel pain, and so she began to walk up and down the linden-lined allee. Occasionally she stopped and looked through the trees out at the countryside. The air was still sparkling, and white veils of fog drifted up from the marsh, and just beyond the little red houses in the village the lake sparkled. Then she spotted Achaz coming down the road, dressed in a bright summer suit, with a straw hat on his head; as he walked his hips swayed slightly and as he walked he cut off the heads of dandelions with his cane. Suddenly he caught sight of Irma and his whole face lighted up in a smile, he greeted her, and made a movement with his hand to indicate that she should come towards him. Fine, she wanted to walk toward him who stood smiling in the sunshine [86] big as life itself. She opened the little gate to the garden.

They met on the long bridge. Achaz's face was a bit red from

swimming, his eyes gleamed, he was intoxicated by the morning air. He felt the urge to talk incessantly and to move his hands, and to strike the handrail of the bridge with his cane. "Well there you are," he blurted and kissed Irma's hand, "just by chance I was looking out into the garden and I saw you among the trees having an orgy with the morning dew and the morning air."

"Yes," said Irma, "this time of day gives us a bit of strength to endure the long, hot day ahead."

"Yes, an orgy, exactly," Achaz repeated, "while we lie abed in the morning, nature is always busy preparing a subtle feast of gold and purple with fragrances and tastes, very refined. What are our urbane dinner parties in comparison to nature's fine wines and sorbets. And nature does not care a whit whether we come or not, she's just celebrating. And my [87] little dip in the lake! There was so much glitter on the surface of the water that I thought I was floating in generals' uniforms, and when you looked up, it was if you could actually drink in the cool, invisible blueness of the sky. I tell you, it was fantastic. You used to go bathing with your maid in the lake, I believe."

Irma smiled faintly. "Yes, I used to," she said, "I used to do a lot of things that I no longer do."

"And why is that?" Achaz asked, smacking his fist on the guardrail, "I know we're still missing our boy, but I think you're mourning in a way that he wouldn't want you to. He used to become unruly when he saw a sad face, when there was no prospect of joy. It's this sunny boy that we must mourn by offering him sunshine, pleasant smells, joy and laughter. You must keep on living, Irma, and then you will feel how he is still with us, that he experiences the same joys that we do, that he laughs with us, and is part of everything we like to do. You see, he was a special holiday child and it's he that we must cry for by smiling." [88]

Irma smiled faintly again, but the tears in her eyes gave them the translucent glow of sapphires and made them strangely more attractive. "If only I could," she said quietly, then both fell silent for a while. Irma looked out at the patches of green on the moor with its felt-wort and marsh hyacinths.

Achaz walked impatiently back and forth on the bridge. He felt the need to talk about something else now, something a bit more cheerful. "It was strange," he began, "when I was swimming in the lake, suddenly I saw a large figure rise up out of the reeds; it was a naked man, quite white from the water and sunshine. I could hardly believe my eyes, but it was Viervogel. 'Counsellor,' I said, 'this seems to be somewhat out of character for you.' 'Yes, well,' he said, 'that's possible, but if you never did anything like this, something out of character, you might as well go hang yourself.' He's a sad man, that Viervogel, to be talking about suicide in the middle of a splendid morning like this. [89] We walked along together for a while towards home and the fat, melancholy fellow philosophized about the joys of life: taking a bath—if the water is hot; bread and butter when you're hungry—those are pleasures in life that never disappoint you, 'and Frau Weidemann,' I said, 'yes, her too,'" he said. The village was already bustling. The gardener's daughters were busy setting poles in the vegetable beds; Frau Weidemann was beating a carpet, and little girls were on their way to school. Even from a distance you could smell the soap they had used, and their tightly woven pigtailed hung down their backs. Fräulein Christa was standing at an open window of the school and watched her pupils arriving. "Well, there we have it," Achaz said, striking the railing with his cane, "we sit in our offices and embassies carrying on our politics, writing agreements, forging alliances, and all of it only so that peaceful people such as these can continue to live their lives in peace, so that little girls can go to school undisturbed, so that Frau Weidemann can beat her carpet [90] and the gardener's daughters can set out bean poles. But that's the important thing, that's what it's all about, because if that doesn't work, something is wrong with the

government.” Achaz could not tell whether Irma was listening, so he stopped talking for a while and walked some more. Suddenly he stopped and asked: “Do you still ride that golden horse of yours?”

“Ride?” Irma repeated, drawn out of her thoughts, “oh no, I don't do the things I used to do.”

“Well you should,” Achaz said energetically, “we could still go riding today, couldn't we? Let's go for a ride in the woods that we saw with Uli. The boy will always be with us and we can see the forest in its summer splendor. So, it's settled. But right now I'm hungry. Viervogel was right: breakfast when you're hungry, a chair when you're tired—those are important things.” They walked along beside each other down the road, Achaz said nothing, while large tears dropped from Irma's eyes. [91]

“I'm grateful to you for coming,” Ulrich said to Achaz after they had lighted cigars in Ulrich's room after breakfast. “Irma seemed to be losing all interest in life, she just spent her days tired and indifferent, and me, well, I am a stiff fellow and I just stood around helpless. I can barely get through my own pain by throwing myself into my work. For a while life was truly miserable here, even Grandfather seemed to shrivel up, but now, it seems to me, things are looking up a bit and I think it's all because of you.”

“Don't worry about it, old friend,” Achaz said, “Life will find a way, we'll get things rolling again. Irma and I are going riding today.”

It was that time in the afternoon when the light was heavy and golden as Achaz and Irma struck out. Little clouds of yellow dust arose under the horses hooves and the warmth of the day lay like something pressing down on the shoulders of the riders. In the village everything was still and quiet; people [92] had retreated into their homes, but when they heard the hoofbeats of the horses they came to the windows and stared at the riders carefully for quite a while.

“This place reminds me of exhaustion and afternoon boredom,” Irma remarked, “and Uli wouldn't have wanted that.”

“Well, we'll soon be in the forest,” Achaz said, “it will be festive there.”

And then the forest was there, deeply fragrant and bright in the sunshine. They turned off from the road onto a swathe in the forest and set their horses at a trot on the hard floor, bright and brown with pine needles. Faster and faster they went.

“Do you like it like this?” Achaz asked.

“Yes, I do like it,” Irma replied and her cheeks blushed a bit from the rapid motion. Her half-opened lips were a luminous red once more, her eyes glistened.

“Just keep going straight ahead,” cried Achaz, “and don't think about anything!”

The branches of the tall fir trees grabbed at the riders with their green hands, the jays took to the air with loud cries, a deer darted across the path. [93] The summer stillness of the forest seemed to be brought into an uproar by the riders. They stopped at a little meadow in the forest, horses and riders out of breath.

“Let's dismount here,” Achaz said and motioned to the groom to come over, “the animals need to rest for a while.”

Irma and Achaz walked across the forest meadow which was filled with the colors of globeflowers and butterflies. “Just like Frau Weidemann's apron,” Achaz observed. On the other side of the meadow there was a stand of old firs and pines, powerful trees. The larger branches of the firs hung down to the ground like green trains, their limbs sported long beards of gray moss, while the pines crests rising to the sunlight on reddish trunks rustled a bit, and above them reigned the falcons.

“Let's sit down here for a while,” Achaz said, pointing to a moss-

covered hill, "it's quiet and festive here." So they sat down amid the trees. "It's good here," [94] Achaz said, "let's be as quiet as the trees and only rustle occasionally. To be a tree—wouldn't that be a perfect existence? You'd sit still, wait for sunshine, for rain, for wind, you'd wait to blossom. It must be delightful to wait until you bloom. You'd feel something inside you that is beautiful, that glows and wants to get out, then suddenly, there you are, like the most beautiful dream that you've ever dreamed."

"Waiting to bloom..." Irma repeated, "yes, that must be beautiful."

"Indeed," Achaz continued, "let's sit very still and try to think our way into that, and perhaps we'll feel something. And they did sit quite still and looked at the falcons flying above which looked like small silver plates against the blue. Finally, Irma shook her head and smiled, "No, there's nothing," she said, "I don't feel anything."

"I believe," Achaz said, "that something came over me, but then it went away pretty quickly." [95]

Suddenly a wind blew through the trees and the fir trees swayed and the crests of the pines were tossed about, then it got quiet again and the trees stood there motionless.

"I think I know how the trees feel when they're suddenly seized by the wind, and sway and rustle, then get quiet again."

"Oh yes," Irma said pensively, "the sudden bending and rushing, I know it well. When I was a child my mother used to read a sermon to us on Sunday in the blue room. This sermon always seemed long to me. As a diversion, I used to look out the window where the tall birches stood quietly in the sunshine, then suddenly a breeze would come, and all the leaves would be alive, and the tallest birches swayed and bowed to one another as if they wanted to say something, then they straightened up again as if they too had to listen to a sermon. This shaking and swaying of [96] the tall treetops seemed like something special to me then, and I would have given a lot to be a tall birch tree and have my treetop swayed by the wind—instead of having to listen to a sermon."

"Yes, indeed," Achaz replied, "I'm sure that is something special, and more precious than all our holy days. Be quiet for a second, the wind has just picked up; let's let ourselves be bent over by the wind like the birch trees." They sat there silently as the wind swept through the fir trees and the pines began to rustle metallically; and Irma and Achaz themselves began to sway, to bow to one another and bend away from one another. "This is wonderful, wonderful," Achaz cried, "I can feel the joy of being a tree."

Irma laughed. "Yes," she said, "I can feel something of the birch tree in myself as well."

Then the wind let up, the trees stood still, and Irma and Achaz also sat there quietly, said nothing but smiled at one another.

Night was coming on. The red rays of the sinking sun linked the trunks of the pine trees [97] together. Fog rose up from the forest meadow like a thin, white smoke, and at the edge, deer stood up to their knees in flowers and ate. "It's getting humid, let's ride home," Achaz said.

"Home," Irma repeated, "home is where we pine and fret and regret."

"Nonsense," said Achaz, "we can take the life of the forest home with us, and nothing can hurt us there and our dear boy will be smiling at us." He extended his hand to Irma to help her up and they walked through the moist lingonberry bushes to reach the horses. They rode home across a landscape that was painted red by the sinking sun. Herds of cattle headed slowly for home. In Brixsen people were sitting in front of their houses and talking; their quiet story-telling filled the streets. The windows in Fräulein Christa's house were wide open, Fräulein Christa sat at the piano and sang a choral melody loudly and with devotion. The letter delivery girl stood at the corner and waited for

[98] her beau. "All of them have made their peace with life."

"I certainly think so," Achaz replied and laughed.

Ulrich met her when she got home. He gave her a friendly hug and asked, "Did you find it refreshing?"

"It was nice," replied Irma, whose cheeks were slightly blushing and whose eyes were clear. "Finally something beautiful once more."

Isa stood in the doorway in her black dress, her face was pale and peaked, and she looked at her parents quizzically. Then Irma said in a tone of kindness, "Well, my child?" and Isa went to her mother and threw her arms around her waist.

"Did you go outside?" Irma asked distractedly, then she turned away from her husband, and wriggled free from her child's arms, and said, "Go play now, my child," and then Irma went slowly towards the garden gate. Ulrich watched Isa leave the room, then said: "The burden of being the [99] only child now is hard for her; we have to help her carry the weight." Irma turned around quickly and said, blushing: "Well who **isn't** having a hard time bearing this burden? I know I ought to be spending more time with Isa, but I just can't, not yet, not when she stands in the doorway like that, then I just can't."

"And yet," Ulrich said, "we can't burden that child with our own pain." Irma shrugged her shoulders and kept on walking towards the garden gate. On the steps to the garden she saw the grandfather. Achaz stood beside him and laughed, he was laughing because the grandfather was so cross. "You spend your whole afternoon carrying on outside!" he yelled, "it makes no sense. While I wander up and down the garden paths like a hermit and wait! 'Enjoy Nature, you say'--my God, that's *vieux jeu* [old-fashioned], you might as well be reading *Paul et Virginie*⁴ or Chateaubriand. What do I have to do to keep you? Next I'll host a breakfast; I'll have specialty foods brought in, cock's comb paté, caviar[100] and things like that, and I'll let you drink some of my old Château Yquem, that will make you think twice about 'enjoying Nature'."

The Count normally took his breakfast in the gallery. The table was decorated with chrysanthemums and irises, "Just don't give me flowers with a strong smell," he commanded, "that would be a mistake." At every place setting there was a little paper fan. Lukas was wearing his new livery, the Count sat at the head of the table in his black frock coat, his new wig on his head, very solemn and worldly-wise. "Please sit here on my right," he said to Irma, "Ulrich, you sit on my left, and Achaz will sit there across from Fräulein Christa, little Isa can sit at the corner of the table. Well, such a distinguished group we have here. It couldn't be better even at the *Frères Provencaux*.⁵ The cock's comb paté will be too rich for you, Irma, but Ulrich, you have some and chase it down with some aquavit. There is some *foie gras truffée* here for Irma, and let's have some St. Peray⁶ with it, please help yourselves, ladies and gentlemen; afterwards we'll have some cold lox and with the Yquem we'll have some crab and caviar on rolls, then finally some petits fours. Lukas, don't pour all the wines at the same time because people would make mistakes and drink the St. Peray with the lox or drink Hochheimer with the paté. Well, I remember once when I was at the *Frères Provencaux* in a pretty white hall; Princess du Chateau Loux and Countess Fitzjames were there. I was completely in my element and the ladies just couldn't stop laughing. So, we dined and then we went into a small hall in the Rococo style, blue with garlands of roses. The Princess was delighted, '*C'est charmant, c'est adorable*.' [How charming, how adorable!] 'All right, ladies,' I said, 'let's dine here again,' so we sat down to

4 A novel written by Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, first published in 1787.

5 A restaurant in Paris of the time.

6 A white wine from the Rhône district of France.

dine once more and things were possibly merrier than before. When we had finished and were about to part, we went to yet a third hall, decorated in the Chinese style, truly a doll's room, and I suggested that we dine yet a third time. [102] And so we ate three times, a truly splendid evening! Yes, in my younger days I was truly a first-rate *causeur* [conversationalist]. It's strange, though, how people can change. In the Fall when I ride through the allees here, past the naked bean poles, I think: Am I really the same person who was such a sensation in the salons of Paris? And Count Pax was frequently mentioned in *Le Figaro*, you know."

"One needs to be in the right milieu," Achaz said.

"Exactly, exactly," the old Count said reflectively. The others were all rather quiet, only Achaz laughed and talked, mentioned the names of important people, all of which was music to the old Count's ears. As the meal was drawing to a close, the Count's narrow, wrinkled face was flushed and his eyes glistened. "Coffee, coffee!" he cried impatiently, "my acolyte is a bit slow and loud. How different it was at the *Café anglais* or at *Véfour*,⁷ there you were waited on by gentle breezes wearing white aprons." Suddenly Fräulein Christa's deepest voice was heard to say: [103] "When I eat this kind of rare and expensive food, it seems to me that I am eating sins."

The Count giggled. "My dear miss," he said, "sins that are well prepared should not be despised."

After they had drunk coffee, Irma stood up, kissed her father on his wig and said, "Achaz, why don't we take a walk in the garden? Christa, would you like to come along?" The Count looked angrily at those about to break up the gathering, "They're probably going to go enjoy Nature some more," he murmured. Achaz said something to the ladies that caused them to laugh. "What did he say?" cried the Count, "that ladykiller. Lukas push me along behind the ladies and gentleman." And Lukas hurried behind the party, pushing the wheelchair. Ulrich too watched them, serious of mien, his lips tightly pressed together. 'So that's how it was,' he thought, 'that's what he wanted all along, and yet....' He turned around quickly and went out into his fields. Isa remained there alone. No one bothered about her, she stood there, a small black [104] figure amid the tall orange lilies.

Ulrich walked along the road slowly toward his fields. The rye had already risen quite high and the green stalks swayed gently, comfortably in the breeze, and it seemed that dark green and bright green shadows constantly flowed over them. They have it good, Ulrich thought. They were his creatures, he had prepared the land for them so that they could enjoy it, and now they swayed happily and enjoyed life, a life that included ripening and dying, a quiet serious matter in which every individual knows that he is a part of it. Their swaying pleased Ulrich so much that he sat down on the side of the road just to watch. The rocking of the green stalks was salutary, it took him away from the strains of human life and the suffering that all men undergo. Something inside him seemed to drift off to sleep as he listened to the silent lullaby of the plants. He lay down on the grass and the scent of the yarrow drifted over him [105] and the sweet smell of honey came from other plants. A bumblebee buzzed by sleepily until it finally slipped inside a bell-shaped flower. When Ulrich looked up, the pale blue sky was filled with singing larks. A sweet lethargy overcame him, all this quiet life around him lulled him to sleep, he stopped thinking and for a while he lay there motionless. In his sleep he heard the chirping of the grasshoppers; occasionally butterflies landed on his hands.

A light wind awakened the grasses and made the heads of flowers nod, and brushed his face like a cool and gentle hand. He opened his eyes, really, he had been asleep. He had to smile about this, but the sleep had done him good.

7 Both are famous and venerable restaurants in Paris.

Whatever it was that had tortured and troubled him before was now calmed down and he felt that life was so self-evident, just as the stalks and flowers around him surely felt it. He got up [106]--his legs had gotten stiff from lying down—and walked down the road for a bit. At a curve in the road were some houses where the farm hands lived, wooden houses with large roofs and dismal, small windows. Children sat in the doorways, their hair in their faces, and they looked at the lord passing by like shy little animals. In front of the door of one of the houses stood Andrä, waiting for his master, his cap in his hand. The wind ravished his blond hair and his face looked red and angry. As Ulrich got closer, Andre stepped forward and immediately began to talk about his issues in a scolding, complaining voice. No, he just couldn't stand it any longer. Since his child had died, who had been born only two weeks before, he simply could not get along with Trine, she was acting crazy, she cried and complained, and blasphemed against God, no, he could not keep on living a life like this. Ulrich looked at the man pensively, thinking what he might say to him, but he could find no words of comfort. [107]

“All of this will pass, my dear Andre,” he said, but Andre shook his head.

“I was thinking,” he said, “that if Master would just say a few words to her, well, perhaps that would make her more reasonable.”

“I'll be glad to do that,” Ulrich said, and went through the low door of the house into the man's house. There was a large room full of equipment, beds, a cradle and a cupboard, all of it covered with the golden hue of the afternoon sun that now poured through the small iridescent window panes.

“Here's a chair, sir,” Andre said and wiped off a wooden chair with a cloth.

“Thank you,” Ulrich said, “well, where is Trine?”

“She'll be here in a minute, sir, she's just gone to feed the pigs.”

“Feeding the pigs, is she?” Ulrich repeated, “well then” He wanted to add something to that, but the tense gaze of the farm hand's blue eyes drove him to silence. [108]

A door opened and Trine came into the room, a tall, blond woman. Her kerchief was tied in a knot over her forehead and blond strands of hair fell down over her face, which was red from crying. Her bright cotton jacket was soiled, her gray skirt a bit short, and she was barefoot. As soon as she saw the master, she ran to him, squatted down in front of him and hugged him around the knees and began to mourn and cry loudly.

“The child was so strong and so beautiful, and now it's been taken from me. Other women have seven or even eight children and they have all lived, and I just have Mariele and the boy who was just born. Why does it have to be me who loses a child? How could anyone go on living? You work and struggle, and if you get any joy of it, it gets taken from you, it doesn't matter whether you've done anything wrong or not. No, He just smites you as hard as He can.” And she covered her face with her hands [109], and her loud, almost animalistic cries filled the room.

Initially Ulrich could think of nothing to say, but finally he began to comfort her, he gently stroked her arm with his hand, and said, “Try to be calm, Trine, you know the Lord also took my son from me. We just have to bear it and keep on living. God won't give you any burdens that you can't bear. We just have to look at it the right way. It's like a sack of grain: you think that you'll never be able to get it onto your back, but if you know the right way of lifting it, then you can do it. And perhaps God will give you another child; and then it will be good that you have experienced what a joy it is to have a child.”

“No, no,” Trine sobbed through her hands, “I've always been unlucky. Like last year with the calf. It was such a handsome young bull.” Suddenly she straightened up a bit and looked out the window with an angry face and said

in a scolding tone: "That boy must be crazy, [110] where is he driving that animal?" She jumped up, scolded a bit more, and trudged out the door.

Ulrich watched her leave and pondered, then he got up and said: "So, Andrä, old fellow, she will calm down, she has her work, her pigs and her cows. If we just keep on living as we are accustomed to, then the wounds eventually heal. Just be good to her."

"I don't do anything to her," Andre said, "I don't scold her, I don't hit her, I don't do anything to her."

"Well that's the way it should be," Ulrich said, "things will turn out all right, and now good evening," and he went out, ducking his head under the low doorway.

Outside the little door the cow stall was open and Trine came out, a milk bucket in her hand. She nodded earnestly to Ulrich and walked with her bare feet quickly through the puddles.

"She has put her pain into the order of things," Ulrich said, "first she feeds the pigs, then [111] she cries and complains, then she milks the cow—that's how she will overcome it." And he started down the road again. Brilliant golden sunshine lay on the fields and made them glow like bronze. Shepherd children lay on their stomachs in the fields with their sheep and sang loudly and monotonously. Out in the fields the cows paused for a moment and gazed with their large, vacant eyes at the flickering afternoon light, then returned to grazing. When he reached his garden, he looked through the fence to see whether Irma and Achaz were there, but he saw only the old Count who was being pushed in his wheelchair along the allees. Still stiffly upright in his chair, a smile on his lips as if he were conversing with some marquise. When Ulrich turned away from the garden and stared at the landscape, he noticed two dark little figures walking towards the lake. Of course it was Irma and Achaz, and immediately something began gnawing at his insides again. He didn't want to give this feeling a name, but something within him laughed and mocked him; [112] it mocked him personally and injured him if he did not force himself to turn away from it. No, that was something he definitely did not want to feel.

Twilight descended and spread gray shadows over the countryside, wrapping all objects in an uncertain darkness; only the whiteness of the blossoming elder bushes and blackthorn bushes offered a ghostly brightness in the darkness. Achaz stood on the bridge that led over the marsh and was amazed at the marvelous fragrances that began to arise in the darkness. The big lilacs, the elder bushes, the gardens, the meadows—even the marsh with its orchids and waterlilies—all of them exuded their sweet and their bitter smells into the mild evening air. Achaz stood on the bridge and let these fragrances flood over him until his head began to hurt, then he went into the village and took a narrow path that led him behind the gardens. He could hardly see anything at all, the little houses were all dark, and from the wide street just beyond, he could hear the voices of people sitting in front of their houses and talking [113] and occasionally the bright laughter of children. As he passed by the small vegetable plots he could smell the odor of celery, aromatic herbs, and leeks. Finally he reached the Kappelmeiers' garden. Here it smelled strongly of the nettles and vines that grew in profusion along the fence. A cat, which had been silently hunting for prey, dashed away out of the thicket, surprised by Achaz's footsteps. Finally he got to a lilac bush that was covered with white blossoms, and there he stopped. He carefully moved the blossoms and branches out of the way until he reached the fence. Then he stood there, completely engulfed in fragrance and white blossoms and began to whistle softly. Then there was some motion between the rose bushes over in the garden. He could hear footsteps carefully coming closer to him: just beyond the fence Agnes, the gardener's daughter, stood in front of him. In the twilight he saw the outline of

her round head to which her blond pigtailed lent a kind of brightness. [114]

“Is that you?” she said quietly.

Achaz laughed. “Who else would it be?” he asked.

Then the girl stretched out her arms and wrapped them around Achaz's neck, pulling him towards her. The girl's round arms felt heavy on his shoulders, he heard her short, quick breath, he felt the movement of her bosom. The girl's broad lips burned together on his. The clusters of cool white blossoms covered them both, dropped a bit of dew onto them and surrounded them with a cloud of bitter fragrance.

“Why didn't you come yesterday?” said Agnes, “the day before and the day before that? I stood there every evening waiting for your whistle.”

“You shouldn't do that,” Achaz said.

“Yes, I have to,” Agnes assured him, “I cannot do otherwise. And when evening comes all I can do is just stand there and wait. And I think that Lene suspects something, but I don't care, everyone can know it, even Father. [115] They can kill me or point their fingers at me, but I simply must wait for you.”

“Dear girl,” Achaz said, stroking her back with his hand.

“And don't you feel,” Agnes continued, “that you have to come to me when it's that time? Don't you feel that you have to stand here in the lilac bush, no matter what happens? Isn't that what you feel?”

“Sweet girl,” Achaz replied, a bit bored, “why do you have to be so passionate?”

But then Agnes began to cry and he felt her warm tears on his face.

“Well, that's you,” she complained, “it's fine for you to be so cool, but what am I supposed to do if you stop coming?” –

And in the darkness Achaz could hear the passionate tone of her sobbing. “Just calm down,” Achaz said, a bit impatiently, “I heard someone in the garden. I don't come here to hear you cry—now I have to go.” [116]

“Please stay,” the girl begged, but he removed her heavy, round arms from his neck, kissed her tearful face, then continued walking along the fence toward the road. People were still sitting in front of their houses and were talking with sleepy voices with each other. Occasionally one of them stood up to go into the house and a loud “Good night” resounded over the road. A lantern was still burning in front of the restaurant, and under the lantern someone stood and waited.

It was Fräulein Christa and she called to Achaz as he passed, “Oh, Herr von Buchow, a moment, if you please.”

Achaz stopped in his tracks.

Christa came up to him, leaned her head back so that she could look him in the eye, and asked: “Would you permit me to accompany you down the street until we get to the bridge?”

“It would be a pleasure,” Achaz said. [117]

“You're always so polite,” countered Fräulein Christa, “well, let's walk then.”

She walked along beside Achaz in her summery bright cotton dress, with a black straw hat on her head. She took firm steps, her heels clattered on the pavement, and her body swayed a bit as she walked.

“Was there something special you wanted to talk about?” Achaz asked.

“Yes, there is,” Christa replied, “I did want to talk to you, but you're going to get angry with me.”

“No, I won't do that,” Achaz assured her. “You're clever and a good person, and if there is something you want to say, then there must be a reason for it, and one couldn't be angry with you.”

“So much the better then,” Christa said. “Well, you know, Herr von Buchow, that I am the watchdog over the young girls of this place, if I may put

it that way. All of them have been my pupils and I take some interest in what becomes of them, and I try to make sure that none of them goes astray. [118] True, I've had many a disappointment, but on the whole I've been pleased with my efforts."

"I'm sure that's true," said Achaz. "You can read these girls' minds like one would a good, if somewhat boring book and you have learned from it, for one always learns something when one takes an interest in the fate of anyone."

"Oh, do you think so?" Christa countered pensively. "Perhaps there is a kind of secondary wisdom. What these girls need is a course of life that unfolds in a straight line, simply and peacefully. And that brings me to a question, which is perhaps improper for me to be asking, but one which naturally falls to me as the 'watchdog,' but which may greatly annoy you."

"I already told you," Achaz replied, his voice strangely unsteady, "I've already told you that I cannot be angry with you."

"Good," Christa said, "then I must ask you, Herr von Buchow, why you are causing trouble for poor Agnes Kappelmeier? [119] There never was much wit in her pretty little head, but she has a good heart, and a passionate one. Just think how much disorder you are creating in this simple soul when you, who come from the larger world, and with all the tricks and lies of the seducer, approach the poor girl. She does not understand that some loves can last only a few weeks, that they only serve as entertainment. When she loves someone, she thinks it will last a lifetime. And if you hadn't come along, she would happily have continued to set out bean poles and would have married the gardener's boy. But now, she must be confused about who she is; and what incomprehensible pain she must be experiencing. And yet, you are no monster, you just want to have a bit of fun. You see, what I want to ask of you is that you not see Agnes any more. She will suffer for a few days, but then she will get back to trimming the rose bushes and the peas, and her life will again [120] be simple and understandable. I wanted to ask this of you, Herr von Buchow, and I know it's impertinent of me, but I want you to promise me that you won't see Agnes Kappelmeier any more."

They had now left the village behind them and were heading for the large bridge. White fog rose from the marsh and dew drops bedecked the elder bushes. Achaz had been silent for a while; he had taken off his hat, and now wiped his forehead with his hand. Finally he said: "Yes, Fräulein Christa, that I can promise you. What does this blond girl mean to me after all? But I don't want you to think of me as a pleasure hunter, a ladykiller, a skirt chaser, as someone who for a few hours of pleasure would injure a poor girl. I know that you understand, Fräulein Christa, and that I can say anything to you: I had hoped that my love for poor Agnes Kappelmeier could save me from another love, a love that is about to be born and about which I can do nothing, terrible though that is. But dear Agnes Kappelmeier cannot do that, so let her marry her gardener's [121] boy. I must bear my own fate and do injury to those to whom I owe only gratitude and whom I love. Do you understand what I'm saying, Fräulein Christa?"

"Yes," Christa replied very quietly, "I think I do understand. My God, that is terrible. And you think I am wise? But this seems like an unsolvable puzzle to me. How can it be? – You were prepared to sacrifice Agnes Kappelmeier for Irma? But Irma, my God, Irma is in danger! You have to leave, you have to get out of here. You can be magnanimous, you can be noble, I know you can do it."

"I must," Achaz repeated, "but can I really do it?"

They had reached the bridge and there they stopped. Both were silent for a while. In the marsh the frogs began to croak, and somewhere in the darkness a bird's wings beat against the night. "Good evening, Fräulein Christa," Achaz said with a subdued voice, "one should really not speak of

these things, they only [122] become darker and more confused when we do, and we cannot escape our destiny.”

“My God, my God,” Christa moaned, and her tears made her voice tremble. “If only I could take my Irma and raise her to the bright and quiet heights where she belongs.”

“Where she belongs, indeed,” Achaz repeated, “but even your skillful hand, which is accustomed to organize human affairs, can do nothing to help.”

“No, I can’t help,” Christa repeated and let her arms fall down limp in an expression of deepest despondency. Then they parted.

Achaz walked through the fragrant summer night back to Lalaiken. On the grass and in the bushes he could hear the sound of guardedly light footsteps: probably hedgehogs and weasels sneaking about after their prey. At the edge of the forest a coot called out its ghostly love song and from further in the woods came an answer to it. Achaz walked [123] on, head bowed, his brows drawn together, deeply worried. Life was an unpredictable, dangerous thing, and yet, behind all the sorrow and care shone something like great joy, something like the expectation of delightful things to come. He must find a way to get through the care and then—he hardly dared think it. He removed his hat and let the evening breeze blow through his hair, then walked on into the night whistling loudly and joyfully.

The sun sank pitilessly on the grassy spots in the garden giving them an autumnal-yellow sheen. The flowers hung their heads low and all Nature seemed to thirst for coolness and water. Count Pax had retreated to the shadiest part of the garden and was having himself fanned by his servant. Achaz wandered through the allees of the garden. In a bright summer suit, his straw hat raked back, his face reddened, he seemed quite unhinged by the heat. On one of the allees he encountered [124] Irma, she smiled when she saw him in this condition. “You look pretty uncomfortable,” she said.

“Of course I’m uncomfortable,” Achaz replied, “some suffering you can escape, but how can you escape the air that we breathe? We are born to suffer.”

“Oh, God, how tragic,” she said, “come, let’s go visit the creatures who enjoy this kind of heat and who only come to their own when it’s hot.”

“Who are these creatures?”

“Just come along,” said Irma, and they walked together through the garden to a spot where the vegetable beds lay in long rows and the hot-house plants were surrounded by glass. Here the sun shone down directly, and all the leaves and fruit seemed to stretch themselves and open up in the heat.

“Just look at how they sit here,” Achaz said, “they drink in the heat and become round and plump. That’s their business, it’s their duty to become round and plump.”

“How peaceful that must be,” Irma said. [125]

“Do you yearn for that kind of peace?” Achaz asked in astonishment.

“At times now I do,” Irma replied.

“Right now?” Achaz replied and smiled.

The onion stalks stood upright like slim candelabra, the asparagus like a forest of green feathers; there were leeks too, their leaves like long green blades, and finally the curly fat leaves of lettuce. And how strong it all smelled, stringent and savory! The air itself was as if filled with the smell of hot soup. “Just look at the hotbeds,” Achaz said, “the cucumbers, how they stretch, all covered with warts.”

“Yes,” Irma said, “and the green noses they’re starting to grow.”

“Yes,” Achaz said, “they’re not worried about aesthetics, all they want to do is proliferate and grow. Just look at the little gherkins, don’t they remind you of little toads? And these bend themselves up like leeches, and all of it just grows and blooms unconcerned about its ugliness. Look at these melons, how

they [126] swell and smell sweet in the heat, and over there, that pumpkin, no one wants a pumpkin that big, nobody knows what to do with it, but it keeps on growing and growing. It pleases the pumpkin to be so fat, he's proud of it, he wants to be gigantic." Voices could be heard coming from the nearby allee: it was Ulrich talking to the gardener. "Oh God, they're coming this way," Achaz said, "but they haven't seen us yet."

"Let's go in there," Irma suggested as she opened the door of a little shed made of boards where the gardening tools were stored.

They went inside and Irma closed the door. Now they could hear the two voices clearly; they were talking about the hotbeds. It was cool and clammy in the shed and it smelled of earth and seed. There were harrows and rakes and shovels, and a thick golden ray of light was piercing through the darkness from the narrow window that had been cut into the wall. [127] Irma and Achaz stood opposite one another, smiled and looked each other in the eye, looked so intently that they got dizzy from the blue transparence. Outside the voices were getting fainter until finally it was quiet all around. Achaz took one of Irma's hands and began slowly to kiss first one finger then the next. But she withdrew her hand from him, her cheeks blushing slightly, and from her blue eyes came a strangely intense flashing. "Don't do that," she said, "if you love me, then tell me so, tell it to me every day, tell it me every hour—that's what I want to hear, that's what I thirst for, but I don't like these stupid adolescent things. Our love, if it exists at all, should be brave and uncompromising."

"Brave," Achaz repeated, "I would fight off the whole world for you."

"Could you really?" Irma asked, and smiled.

"Yes, I could," Achaz repeated, "and I don't care who or what gets destroyed in the process." [128]

"My God," Irma said and all the joy fled from her face, "let's hope it can happen without injuring others."

"It doesn't matter," Achaz said, "don't be sad—we can't be sad. Let's go out into the sunshine."

Achaz opened the door and they went out into the hot air which was heavy with the smell of herbs.

"It's like hot soup out here," Achaz said.

Irma laughed. "Yes, but this evening let's ride out to our trees again, let's allow ourselves to be shaken and bent by the wind."

"Yes, let's do that," Achaz said, "and when the wind blows me in your direction, I'll still say the same thing."

"And I will always want to hear it," countered Irma. Then they went into the house. Isa was standing on the stairs, her pointed pale little face with its worried mouth and serious eyes. She was staring pensively down at the sunny garden. Irma stood [129] still for a moment, her face contorted with an expression of simultaneous pain and impatience. "Isa, child, go to your room and play with something." Isa went into the house obediently.

Achaz was wandering idly around on the grassy areas of the garden. He could not find the resolve to do something. He could have gone to this room and read some; he could have entertained the grandfather; or he could have gone to the lake for a dip, but he could not decide what to do. He cooled his hands by touching the blossoms of the lilies and hollyhocks; he listened to the grasshoppers in the yard. That was all he could do, and yet in the deepest recesses of his heart he could sense great joy. Suddenly Ulrich stepped up to him. His face was pale and had the appearance of being compressed—something Achaz knew well from their childhood. When he was not speaking his lips were so tightly clenched that they were white.

"What are you doing here?" Ulrich asked. [130]

"I'm not doing anything," Achaz replied, "this heat has just wiped me

out.”

“Ah, the heat,” Ulrich said, “let’s take a walk under the elms, it will be cooler there and we can have a chat, we haven’t really spoken with each other in a long time.”

“Fine, whatever you want to do,” Achaz replied, casting his brother a quick inquisitive glance. They went to the allee. Ulrich lowered his head and seem to be deep in thought.

“Yes, the heat,” Achaz said, “it just saps me of energy. We just don’t have a culture of heat.”

“Who does have it?” Ulrich asked.

“Well, people who live in the tropics,” replied Achaz, “and of course the cucumbers and melons.”

“Do you think so?” countered Ulrich, “I don’t suffer from the heat, I find it rather pleasant to feel how my whole body gets warm, because usually there is something in me that’s cold.”

“Really?” Achaz asked, showing interest, “is there really always something inside you that’s cold?”

“Yes,” Ulrich answered, “I’m a person [131] who doesn’t thaw out very easily.” – Then they were silent again for a while. The shadows of leaves trembled in the allees around them and in the tips of the elm trees the starlings flapped their wings. Ulrich pensively drew lines in the sand with his cane.

There’s something he wants to say, Achaz thought, but he can’t get it out—what could it be?

Suddenly Ulrich stopped, planted the cane firmly in the ground, and said, “Isn’t your vacation time about over?”

“Yes, in a few days,” Achaz replied, his voice somewhat uncertain as he studied his brother, “in a few days, but I just wrote a letter that I want to send in which I ask for an extension of my vacation. But there could be difficulties.”

“I see, I see,” Ulrich said and began to walk on, his head lowered to look down at those trembling shadows of leaves at his feet.

“Please don’t hold what I am about to say against me,” [132] he continued, “brothers, who have spent their youth together, understand each other so completely, even their most hidden emotions, and it’s good for there to be complete understanding between brothers.”

“Just go ahead and say it,” Achaz said, and it sounded almost like a challenge.

“I was thinking,” Ulrich countered, “that it would perhaps be better for us, for all of us, if you did not extend your vacation.”

Achaz smiled. “That’s fine. I can leave tomorrow.”

“It is not jealousy,” Ulrich continued, “I did ask you to come, and you have done me a great favor by bringing Irma back to life, you have taught her to love life again, and I am grateful to you for that. You know that I am a dull and melancholy person, and with me she only burrowed into her sorrow. And so I am grateful to you, but I also feel that Irma has grown a bit distant from me, and that is not how it should be with a married couple. For that reason I asked you [133] to leave us. A married couple should feel close to one another, and as long as you are here, she will just forget me. I said before that it is not jealousy. You will remember that when we were children together, you were always generous with your things, while I was jealous and guarded over the things that belonged to me. And woe to him who tried to take anything away from me.” Ulrich cut off the head of a dandelion with his cane. “It’s just that I can’t compete with you, and I think that at this point Irma is strong enough to be able to live with me. She will miss you, yes, but it will be that kind of loss that we so often encounter in our lives: people with whom we were happy together leave us. But it passes.”

“It’s settled then. I’ll leave tomorrow!” Achaz stated.

“Again I thank you,” Ulrich said, and extended his hand to his brother. “You were able to understand me and the difficulties I was having, I will not forget it.”

And with that he headed for the house where the overseer was already waiting for him. [134]

But Achaz kept walking up and down the alley. His face revealed a rarely-seen state of agitation, his eyes flashed: no, he would not say anything to Irma today; but tomorrow, what would happen tomorrow? Married men like Ulrich were all alike for they all thought that they were the ineluctable fate of their wives.

Achaz had gotten up early. He felt a joyful disquiet, a feeling that he had to do something, that he must fight for the good fortune that was coming his way, had kept him from sleeping.

He went out into the garden. There was still dew on the flowers and leaves. Many of the blossoms were so heavy with dew that their heads hung low. The air was full of a cool, wet fragrance. This is good, Achaz thought, this is how my lucky day should begin.

He walked back and forth in front of Irma's windows and waited for her to appear. Finally she opened the window and leaned out. Her face was rosy, her hair glistened in the sun and she smiled at him. [135]

“Up already?” she said.

“Yes,” Achaz said, “come down here, I have something to tell you.”

She disappeared from the window and quickly appeared on the stairs, her blond hair, alive and colorful, stood out distinctly from her mourning clothes.

“What a wonderful day!” she cried. “My Uli used to say, 'Mama, why do the flowers always cry in the morning?' Well, they're crying out of the sheer joy of being a flower.”

Achaz went toward her, took her hand to kiss it, and said gently: “I will be leaving today, he wants it that way; he told me that if I stay here, you will become more separated from him.”

Irma turned pale, but then she laughed and said, “The poor man, yes I am separating from him and will do it even more, because if you leave today, then I will come with you. You go ahead and I will come a bit later. I need to fight my battles alone.”

“I would gladly fight them for you,” Achaz said. [136]

“No, you can't,” Irma protested, “I'll follow you. I can stay with Papa's sister, Countess Korthow, until, until what?”

“Well, until...” Achaz repeated and both of them laughed.

“I can no longer live with Ulrich,” Irma continued, “I am dying here; wherever Ulrich is, life just passes you by, flags unfurled.”

“But we want to be part of that parade,” Achaz said, and he took Irma's hands dancing round and round the grassy yard, without regard for who saw, and the dew that her black veil kicked up glowed like little sparks.

“We will have a real life,” Achaz said, “an exemplary life. Hundreds of years from now they'll read about us in schools as a classic example of happiness.”

Then Ulrich appeared at one of the windows and watched in all seriousness as Achaz and Irma danced on the dewy grass. —

A carriage appeared before the door at ten o'clock to take Achaz to the train station. He kissed [137] Irma's hand, looked her in the eye and said gently, “Until we meet again.”

Irma smiled and said just as quietly, “Until then.”

The old Count asked plaintively: “So you're leaving us?”

Achaz shrugged his shoulders and said: “I'm not welcome here any

longer.”

“You mean they don't want you here?” countered the old man, “*Jalousie* perhaps? That's been known to happen, nothing to do for it. If you had stayed I would have hosted another one of those breakfasts, but now nothing more will happen. I'll make my way through the allees and think about the end. No, no. Don't say anything, that's just my fate. You brought some life into this place and now that life will leave us; it's as if we were sinking into a grave, but nothing for it. Have a wonderful time.”

“Might you come to Berlin or Rome?” Achaz asked.

“Except for one trip, my traveling days are probably over.”

Ulrich was quite cordial at the departure, he [138] kissed his brother and thanked him for lending his aid. “And I also thank you for your understanding and that you didn't get angry with me.”

Then Achaz departed. Isa stood on the stairs and watched him go. From the allee the old Count waved with his handkerchief. Achaz leaned back and looked back with satisfaction at the beautiful countryside where his destiny had been fulfilled. As he went through the market, Agnes, the gardener's daughter stood at the fence and cried. From the window of the schoolhouse Fräulein Christa waved a farewell.

Ulrich remained seated on the sofa of his room. He heard steps going back and forth outside. He heard Count Pax's voice say something loudly, Achaz laughed, then the carriage pulled away, and Ulrich leaned his head back and closed his eyes. It was as if a burden had been taken from his shoulders: why shouldn't he be happy now, why should he not now live quietly and happily with all that was in place. Outside [139] the footsteps and the voices had gotten quiet, and in the big ash tree in front of his window a crow flapped its wings, and so passionately that his breast might have burst. Today Ulrich felt as unburdened and as quiet as he had in a long time. ‘We must force life to follow our will,’ he thought, ‘that's the only way to live’ and savoring the beneficent quiet, he sat there with his eyes closed.

Then he heard his door being quietly opened, the waxed floor squeaked under footsteps that walked up to his desk and stopped. That sounds like Irma, Ulrich thought, and it was infinitely pleasant to sit there with eyes closed and to experience this blessed moment, as refreshing as a summer breeze that blows through a field of beans. But when everything in the room suddenly became quiet, he opened his eyes. Irma stood at his desk, both hands propped on the desktop. She had the habit of supporting her small frame on something when she was wrought up, or to wrap her arms around something, a pillar [140] or a post and at the same time to wrap herself around something like the branches of the small white roses in the garden outside. It struck him that she was pale, but her face was nevertheless so wonderfully young under her tangle of blond hair. She looked at him with her bright blue eyes, and saw a harshness that her mouth, with its short upper lip and the slightly upturned corners, sometimes revealed. Ulrich smiled at her and said kindly: “Irma, my child, have you come to talk to me? That's good. Come over here and sit down, now we can be together without any disturbance. From now on we'll grow closer and closer together.”

“I wanted to talk to you,” Irma said, and her voice sounded a bit hoarse.

“Well, child, speak then,” Ulrich replied, “now we can tell one another everything, there will be no one to disturb us.”

“Achaz has left,” she was able to say with some difficulty, and in her state of agitation her hoarse voice resembled a boy's. [141]

“Yes, he has,” Ulrich replied, “and it's probably better for us and for him.”

“I just wanted to say,” Irma countered with a strangely trembling and yet sharp voice, a voice that seemed like the string of an instrument about to

break, "I wanted to let you know that I will be leaving too. I will be following Achaz, because I cannot live without him and that I cannot live here with you." She said no more. No one said another word and the silence in the room was filled by the melting tones of the thrush in the ash tree.

Ulrich still sat where he had been sitting, but his whole body was tense like that of an animal about to strike. Irma looked at him, waiting for a reply, her eyes a penetrating blue. Finally Ulrich got up—slowly and as if it took a lot of effort. He took a few steps towards the desk and stood opposite Irma. He looked at her, but he could not face the gaze of those blue eyes, so he looked down and he picked up a piece of marble which served as a paperweight [142] and weighed it in his hands. It seemed that he wanted to say something, but had difficulty in opening his tightly closed lips. Finally he was able to say: "You seem to have forgotten that you are my wife."

"No," Irma replied with a metallic edge to her voice, "I have not forgotten that I was your wife. You said to Achaz that 'I had become distant to you,' but I was always distant from you and you were always very distant from me. I knew nothing of your pain or your joy, and when we were together, when we sat still beside one another as you liked to do, it always seemed to me that we were waiting for some common misfortune to befall us. Oh, no, I can't keep on living a life like that."

"We had one great sorrow in common," Ulrich said quietly, "and that still binds us."

"You mean our boy," Irma countered, "no, your pain and mine were of different sorts. The boy you lost [143] was not the same one I lost. You didn't know my sun-child who hated the everyday things and hated sadness. He is still with me, I feel it, and I intend to take him with me out of this sad house."

"You are forgetting," Ulrich started anew in a hissing tone, "that you are mine, my property, and that we belong together, bound inseparably."

"Oh, no," interrupted Irma, "I was your wife, but not your slave. Nothing, absolutely nothing about me belongs to you. Our marriage was an attempt to see if I could belong to you, but I see now that I cannot."

"And the child?" Ulrich asked, "is she not a bond that unites us?"

Irma's eyes teared up. "My poor, dear Isa. No, she shall stay with you, she will understand you, she is so much like you. She will forget me."

"Do you really believe," Ulrich said, "that people have a right or even the possibility of dissolving such bonds?" [144]

"You can't keep me here," Irma cried and her words sounded like a challenge and a triumph, "I'm going on the sunny path and want no part of your dark ways. You can't keep me here; you can kill me with that paperweight that you're holding in your hand, but, oh, I am not afraid and I will not stay with you."

Ulrich rested a strangely shy and sad gaze on Irma, then laid the piece of marble down on the desk. "No, I'm not going to do anything to you," he said, and slowly went back to the sofa, sat down, and then –

It seemed to Irma that she was now experiencing the strangest and most terrible thing in her life for he then cupped his face in his hands and cried. –

Irma stared at the crying man without moving. Her face twitched as if she wanted to cry as well, but it was not sympathy, but rather something like painful shock, something like fear. At the same time, she had the feeling that she needed to do something, to say something, and [145] she blurted it out involuntarily: "Ulrich, you're crying?"

"Yes, I'm crying," Ulrich replied and turned his tearful face towards her, "but you're not bothered by it, so just go—go on your sunny path, as you said. Whether I cry or don't cry is my business."

Irma took a few steps towards him and said softly, "Ulrich, I didn't know..."

“No, you didn't know,” Ulrich interrupted and his voice sounded harsh and loud, “you never knew anything about me, so go, just go. I'm releasing you, the very sight of you is painful and insulting, so go!” he said, almost screaming the last word.

Irma bowed her head, went to the door and opened it quietly and closed it behind her. She stood there benumbed and she felt how tears began to stream from her eyes.

Fräulein Christa and Isa were standing in the room. Fräulein Christa rushed to Irma, took her in her arms and said: [146] “You're a sight, child! Come over here to us,” and she led her to the sofa. All three sat there and cried. The aroma of flowers from the peak of summer floated through the window, as did birdsong—all the ecstasy of Nature. In the distance they could hear the rumbling of the old Count's wheelchair. Isa stood up, wiped away her tears and said: “I have to go see my father.”

Count Pax sat in a bower, smoked a cigarette and had a servant fan him with a dry palm leaf. When Irma sat down with him and motioned to the servant to leave them, the Count leaned forward and said, “Irma, my daughter, come see your old father. My old head is just aching from loneliness. You're probably missing dear Achaz as well. That boy brings joy with him wherever he goes, but now he's gone again and, alas, the joy goes with him when he leaves. It's like being in church here now.”

“Yes, Papa,” Irma began, “I came to tell you that I too am leaving.”

[147] The Count leaned forward: “What are you saying?” he asked.

“I'm leaving,” Irma continued, “I'm going to Berlin. I will go to stay with Aunt Krothow and live with her until—until everything is in order. I'm following Achaz.”

“But, child,” the Count said, making a serious and sullen face, “you're a married woman, you can't just follow some young man to Berlin. What would people say?”

“No, I can't stay with Ulrich,” Irma countered, “I have spoken with him and he let me go. I'm dying here and I can't live without Achaz.”

“But, child,” the Count said, “that will surely cause a scandal and there has never been a scandal in our family. Ulrich certainly isn't cheerful, but he is, after all, a noble person.”

“It's no use to say anything,” Irma interrupted, “it's all decided and I'm leaving today.”

The Count shook his head. “Child, [148] child, how can you do this to your old father? I won't survive it. And I'll be left here all alone. But don't forget that when you two set up an apartment you'll need to keep two rooms ready for me. We'll go to the theater, we'll dine at the Kaiserhof or at Borhardt's. Or will you be going to Rome? No matter! They can push me around the hills of Rome in my wheelchair. And then the company we'll keep! I know Princess Paterno very well, and the Odescalchis and the Borgheses. It could turn out very well! But the pain you're causing me!”

“Please don't be sad,” Irma said, trying to comfort him, “you can come live with us and life will be lovely.”

“Yes, I know,” the Count replied, “when I get back to the big city I'll be like a fish in water. I can well imagine that you can't live here, and as far as money goes, well, you know that you will have enough. Come here, my child, and let me bless you.” And he laid [149] his trembling hand on Irma's head. “May God protect you,” he said somewhat tearfully, then added: “And don't forget about those two rooms for me.” –

Ulrich was still sitting in his room, but he was no longer crying. His pale face had a strange, powerful expression. He listened tensely to the sounds that penetrated into his room from outside. Footsteps came and went. Someone

was carrying something—it was probably the suitcases. He heard Christa's voice, then Irma's, and both of them had that strange glassy resonance that tears held back give to women's voices. Someone was crying very loudly; that would have to be Isa. A carriage drove up and the loud voice of Count Pax said jokingly, "Well, the unfaithful wife is leaving us now."

Someone laughed, a carriage pulled up, the voices became more distant—people were probably going out onto the steps. Only Isa's loud, childish sobbing could now be heard. Then [150] the carriage drove away. Ulrich looked out the window; he saw the barouche drive along the spiraea hedge, he saw a gray veil billowing in the breeze. Feeling tired, he sat back down on the sofa; so, this phase of life was over and now he would have to strive for a new phase. How much he hated all of them, they who stood outside laughing or crying, playing like children with this cruel, unfathomable thing called life. "She was going to follow her sunny path," Irma had said. He knew this sunny path well enough, and it would not be long before the darkest shadows crossed it. No, he wanted to grasp a new life with full vigor, he wanted to hold the reins, he wanted to be the master.

Summer passed. In the gardens at Lalaiken the dahlias bloomed in long rows in their beds, wine-red, white and yellow balls of velvet. Myriad butterflies flew slowly over the wilting sweet-scented flowers⁸ as if the colors made their wings heavy. [151]

The garden smelled of apples and plums and wilting leaves. Occasionally you could hear the dull sound of an apple falling onto the gravel path, and high up in the pale blue sky wild geese chatted noisily as they flew by. Count Pax still had his wheelchair pushed along the allees, but he was silent and grumpy. Only when he encountered Fräulein Christa did he seem to come out of himself.

"I've just gotten a letter from Irma, the divorce process has started. She speaks of loneliness, about melancholy and penitence, but all of that will pass." Fräulein Christa nodded and stared ahead. Her kind brown eyes teared up and she said: "Yes, our poor Irma is wandering alone on unknown territory."

The Count shook the locks of his wig involuntarily and said: "Nonsense. What do you mean 'alone'?"

Ulrich stood there on the road with Isa and stared pensively at the waving field of wheat.

"We'll mow this field next week," Ulrich said, and Isa looked up at him seriously. [152]

"Yes," Ulrich continued, "that will be the beginning of the harvest and that means that work starts again, and that's a good thing. Don't you love to work, dear?"

Isa thought about that for a while and then said: "Yes, I like working with Fräulein Christa. Then on Sundays the mornings are nice and it's as if the trees and the flowers are solemn too. But then Sunday afternoons are so sad, and on Sunday evening, when I lie in bed, I sometimes have to cry. And then I'm glad when Monday comes again."

Ulrich smiled and gently stroked Isa's back. "You really are my daughter," he said, "you understand the ordinary days." Then they went back into the garden and walked back and forth along the row of ash trees. The dried leaves crackled beneath their feet and the sparsely covered treetops began to sink in twilight.

8 *Matthiola incana*, or stock.

