

# *Charlott – a bit loopy!*

A novel by  
Wilhelm Speyer (1927)



Translated and introduced by  
C. D. Godwin (2025)

<https://beyond-alexanderplatz.com>

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## INTRODUCTION

I discovered Wilhelm Speyer through a reference by Alfred Döblin, who delivered a funeral oration for Speyer on behalf of the Mainz Academy in 1952.<sup>1</sup> He was one of that small group of exiles provided by MGM with a one-year contract in 1940 – a kind of welfare for these traumatised writers as they adapted to refuge in the California sun.<sup>2</sup> So for a year Speyer and Döblin drudged away in the same scriptwriter complex.

A little searching showed that one of Speyer's novels from the 1920s had recently been republished. I acquired a copy – and my goodness! What a wonderful complement to the glorious 2025 English summer (our first real summer for three years)!

*Charlott etwas verrückt* was published in 1927 – peak year for the Weimar Republic, as it recovered from the hyperinflation and was not yet overwhelmed by the looming calamities. The novel was at once made into a film, with silent star Lya de Putti.<sup>3</sup>

Then, between its last Weimar reprint (1932) and its reappearance in 2008 – it completely vanished from sight. Yet Speyer easily stands comparison with foreign contemporaries like Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford.

So, yet another notable work of early 20<sup>th</sup> century German-language fiction that fell victim to the enormous cultural breach of 1933-1945.

### Who was Wilhelm Speyer (1887-1952)?

Speyer was born into a middle-class Berlin family of Jewish origin, but baptised Protestant. He rejected the formal oppressiveness of the Prussian high school, and was sent away to a pioneering rural-life boarding school Haubinda, which he always looked back on fondly.

After service in WW1, he headed to Berlin, where he wrote several novels including, in the mid 1920s, a pair of best-selling Young Adult books: *Der Kampf der Tertia* (The Third Form Goes to Battle<sup>4</sup>) and its sequel *The Golden Horde*, in both of which teenagers take on overbearing bureaucrats. His equally best-selling novel for grown-ups, *Charlott etwas verrückt*, was reprinted several times up to 1932, only to vanish until the new edition appeared in 2008.

Speyer went into exile in 1933, and in 1940 ended up in LA. Like Döblin he was unable to meet the requirements of the movie business, and lived in poverty until he returned to Europe in 1949. There he wrote a very large family novel, which went almost unnoticed. He died in 1952, and was then forgotten for half a century.

### Contemporary reviews of *Charlott etwas verrückt* <sup>5</sup>

"A book like champagne: fizzy, cheerful, bubbling over. Here financial speculations and deep passions are directed lightly and playfully by charming female hands."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Döblin: "Without any concessions to snobbish sophisticates, Speyer knew how to reflect in his books the fluctuating conditions of the age, the charm of its jauntiness and grace."

<sup>2</sup> See [Döblin in Hollywood](#) on my website.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018760>

<sup>4</sup> In English as *Galahads & Pussy-cats*, Cape 1929, now almost unobtainable.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in the Afterword to the 2008 edition.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Sieburg, in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Feb. 1931.

“... starts at a 120 kph tempo ... a fresh and successful document of our time. Assuming that ‘our time’ means Berlin of the last few years, between the Potsdamer Bridge and the golf club. ... It’s the fairy tale and the harlequinade of our age. It has miracles and heart-restoring face-slaps, the newest technologies and most ancient love, there is searching, yearning, a wedding with three jazz bands and everyone joining in ... the abandoned husband, the newly chosen, even the wicked witch guarding treasure from the dragon. ... Since the War and despite the War, a reality has arisen where fairy tales can again be put into play.”<sup>7</sup>

“... written by a man who knows this world too well to take it too seriously. ... has a buoyancy all too rare among German writers ...”<sup>8</sup>

“... a witches’ brew of automobiles, golfers and millionaires. In Charlott’s world there are no proletarians, and the Soviet Union exists solely to provide fake papers.” And yet: “... German novels up to now have lacked tempo and rhythm; the Americans and Russians are ahead of us. ... This novel attempts to match the modern taste. ... As amusing and amoral as this world we do not love but have to live in. ... Crazy times.”<sup>9</sup>

“Above all I recommend it to our ladies, who will feel every sympathy for Charlott, their dark-haired long-waisted sister. But when you, my lady, reach the part with the tea afternoon and Charlott stands in the doorway clad in the most elegant half-mourning, all black and white with a whiff of tabac blond, cheeky, modest and cool; when you see how the charm of her invincible little doggy nose and her bold personality deliver knockout blows to her enemies – then you will for sure cry out in delight: Charlott’s a bit *loopy*!”<sup>10</sup>

“Speyer proves once again that he is the most cultivated and charming storyteller in German literature. His books are entertainments, but in the best sense of the word.”<sup>11</sup>

### The current critical view<sup>12</sup>

Money, generations and sex – the three pivots around which the world’s instincts orbit. All the participants – the well-to-do older generation and the younger eager to inherit, men and women both, it’s all about the money, about having and not having, about making gifts and paying with dud cheques, about living on credit and fake bankruptcies. ... Appearance and reality become the same: all is swindle.

The older generation mistakenly believes it holds the lives of the heirs in its hands. In the course of the novel they learn better, for the future heirs reject the union of capital and power. The ‘gilded youth’ try in various ways to assert control over their own lives, here and now. Above all it’s the women who take charge, no longer willing to wait on chance.

What actually motivates the main characters – Justus and Charlott – to become swindlers? Here again we have a game, this time in the genre of the entertainment novel which (like a fairy story<sup>13</sup>) ends in a wedding. But both characters must deceive in order to achieve a happy ending: Justus plays the bankrupt for love – it’s the only way to win Charlott back. Charlott

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<sup>7</sup> B. Olden, *Das Tagebuch*, 1927.

<sup>8</sup> H. Michaelis, *Die literarische Welt*, 1927.

<sup>9</sup> Fr. Gross, *Bücherwarte* (a socialist journal), 1927.

<sup>10</sup> Polly Tieck, *Vossische Zeitung*, 1927.

<sup>11</sup> A. Vigoleis Thelen, *Het Vaderland*, 1940.

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from the Afterword to the 2008 edition.

<sup>13</sup> Or a Shakesperean comedy! [CDG]

requires her inheritance at once, for love – it's the only way to rescue Justus. But love – this subjective word – is never uttered. Apparently it's a coin no longer current, whose value must be rediscovered even at the cost of a big dose of loopyness. Or that's Camilla's cryptic explanation to Holk: "Charlott's marrying Justus not just out of sympathy, but for another very definite reason that you can never understand... Don't worry! She's a bit loopy, but she always knows what she's doing."

Yet Justus and Charlott begin their hunt for happiness from different starting points. Neither money nor love can offset the most essential difference: their completely different relationship to Time. Each represents a diametrically opposed concept of the present. In the novel it's the young who test the present against the rest of time; with their 'speedy' contemporaneity they are far ahead of the older generation. Charlott is the speediest of all.

In Charlott, one of the most astonishing female figures of literary male and female phantasy meets the Twenties – a "boyish gazelle with the inner resilience of a dangerous little predator", as one reviewer put it.<sup>14</sup> Young, self-assured, sporty, sassy, naturally with shingled hair, short skirts, made-up face and a cigarette, she is the very embodiment of the 'new woman' (unlike Irmgard Keun's less confident heroines a few years later).

She's "a woman who knows what she wants."<sup>15</sup> Yet she's no mere literary template of the type, but a trend-setter who constantly emphasises her uniqueness.

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In recent years a few writers from the Weimar period have become available in English: Hans Fallada, for example, and Irmgard Keun. My efforts to bring Alfred Döblin to wider attention have so far led to book publication of five of his epic novels.<sup>16</sup>

My website [beyond-alexanderplatz.com](http://beyond-alexanderplatz.com) now showcases (alongside much more of Döblin's output) several other authors from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century German language world, including Leo Perutz, Günther Anders, Robert Müller, Paul Gurk. Some of their works are already in the public domain; others will become so in the next few years. I hope some adventurous publisher will be bold enough to give them the attention they deserve, in a publishing environment now increasingly dominated by formulaic forgettable fiction.

C. D. Godwin  
Stroud UK  
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#### NOTE

An asterisk \* in the text points to an endnote.

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<sup>14</sup> See note 10 above.

<sup>15</sup> A popular song by Fritz Massary.

<sup>16</sup> <https://galileopublishing.co.uk/authors/alfred-doblin>



.I.

Charlott swept through the AVUS track's\* southern entrance, heading towards Berlin. By the time the gatekeeper came running from his guardhouse, Charlott had already sped past at 70 kph. Holk leaned out to show his face. He waved his enormous gloves: It's us! The gatekeeper stared after them: "What a pair," he thought.

Holk pulled his felt hat tighter over his leonine skull. "You should have hooted, Charlott!"

"I'm not from Magdeburg."\*

Air blasts from the compressor howled their ghostly warnings: Watch out! Now people! Watch out! They were doing a hundred.

- If I say something stupid, she'll take a hand off the wheel. I shall keep quiet.

Dapolin – Stellin – Stellin – Dapolin. They roared past the advertisement hoardings along this Domain of the Steel Ox, and the letters stabbed the brain like lightning. Every tree along the verge soughed and cried out, but in no particular tone, for one collided with the next and the third and the fourth.

"I'm ecstatic!" said Charlott.

"No talking, sweetheart! Hundred and ten! It's been raining!"

Charlott showed a three-quarter profile of a smiling boyish face under the cowboy hat. Admittedly it was a face such as no boy on this earth ever had, only a woman of our time.

"Justus is bankrupt! You really should see what that means!"

"It doesn't affect you, does it?"

"I'm going to marry him again."

"Gosh," said Holk. He accepted it. Indoors he would have wept. But they were doing a hundred and twenty. It wasn't concern for himself alone that made the backs of his knees seem filled with carbon dioxide.

- If she capsizes us I shall fly six somersaults through the air and stand up thirty seconds later, I know my strengths. But Charlott, what'll happen to Charlott?

He whimpered: "So marry him! I mean, you've been divorced a whole eight months already!"

"You think I'd leave him in an attic room smoking Marylands? I *shall* marry him."

"That won't make him any more solvent. You're no better off than him!"

"We'll see about that," Charlott growled triumphantly. "I'm fed up being broke. Tomorrow they'll try to repossess this lovely car, when I've already paid one-sixth."

She lowered her forehead tenderly to the steering wheel: "I shan't hand it over voluntarily! I shall put my foot down!"

Holk cried: "What nonsense is this, sweetheart? You're fed up being poor, so you marry a bankrupt?"

Charlott sang out a few wild sounds over the engine: "You'll be surprised, all of you!"

Holk heard this with horror. It sounded like a swansong.

"I've got hold of his new address. We shall fetch him away! Breakfast at Horcher's! Do we have cash?"

"Slow down, sweetheart! We'll put it on the slate."

"Faster!"

They were doing a hundred and thirty.

"When we come to the exit you *really must* hoot, darling!"

"I was born in 1906 in Matthäikirche Strasse."

"That's good. Nearer my God to Thee!"

They exited the north gate at ninety, without hooting. Holk was one of the bravest men of his age, combatant in the greatest battles of the century; now his hair stood like a mountain range. The felt hat almost flew off, so powerful was his fright.

Fifteen minutes later the three of them were sitting together at Horcher's: Charlott, Holk (her friend from nursery times, and preferred companion these last eight months), and Justus, the man from whom she had been divorced for just as long as her current liaison with Holk.

"We did a hundred and thirty. I can make the car do whatever I want!"

She had knife and fork in her hands. She drummed with them on the tabletop. "Food! Food! But something zany!"

Young Horcher leaned enraptured over the table.

"I want crayfish mayonnaise with pineapple slices. No meat. Nice thick asparagus. Manhattan cocktail, garden potatoes, gorgonzola, and done."

She whipped the hat from her head. She puffed air up over her forehead, her eyes squinted high. Her movements were those of an overheated person about to leap into a swimming pool.

Suddenly she directed a stern look at Justus, who was waiting in devoted, amicable, nonchalant silence for her magnificent display of graceful agitation to conclude.

"You've no money left, Justus?"

"None."

"You've sold Petersdorf?"

"Let, for the time being, Charlott."

"Who to?"

"Some director of a dyestuff trust. My only condition was that I must be interred in the park. The official permit has already been issued."

"How much does he pay?"

“For my funeral? Nothing.”

“No jokes please! How much does he pay?” Charlott was insistent.

“Twenty thousand.”

“A year? With furniture?”

“Yes.”

“Well then! You do have something!”

“It’s all spoken for, Charlott,” Justus countered, as courteously as if he were smoothing over a little faux pas in the conversation.

“Spoken for? And you have more debts on top?”

“Seven times a hundred thousand, Charlott,” Justus replied, submissive and meek. He gathered all his amiability, making ready to share with his ex-wife further revelations of his financial status.

He was a tall, stout, elegant gentleman, a miracle of corpulent grace, loose in every limb, better dressed than any sporty Adonis of our age, an excellent albeit lazy dancer, golfer and polo player – a man with a high round brow and bright coolly ironic brown eyes that gazed meditatively out onto the world. The contours of his body and his face proclaimed a blazing protest against the current ideal of the straight line, for he was everywhere a contented three-dimensional shape – all muscle and fat.

Charlott pulled out a mirror. Head tilted, she regarded her chin. She had some reason at this very moment to inspect the state of her chin. Then she drew a ring finger along her black mascaraed eyebrows. It was a miracle of a finger, an entire religion of human beauty.

Charlott cast a glance at Holk over the mirror. “Do you think he’s taking us for a ride, sweetheart?”

“No, sweetheart.”

Justus lowered his face over his plate. Secure and comfortably bedded as his opulent body was in the fragrance of his delicate underwear, he now showed signs of mild confusion.

Charlott snapped the mirror determinedly shut.

“Something doesn’t add up, young man! When we agreed to divorce, you offered me a hundred thousand a year. I thought it wasn’t fair to accept more than twelve. Because in the end it was I who ran away for no reason. Well then. Today, by chance, at the golf club I heard that you’re living furnished in Kant Strasse, in a room with no running water and without your dreadful valet Teppich. That’s the kind of poverty you find in Reinhardt’s *Everyman*. \* Nobody loses all his money from one day to the next.”

Justus kept his hands folded over his plate. “There are said to be examples in our own time, Charlott.” He added, as if merely showing Charlott a simple courtesy: “Anyway, you know none of that matters to me in the slightest since you went away. I’m only sorry now for your own situation. Because starting next quarter I can’t provide more than half of my income, meaning two hundred and fifty Mark a month.”

“So I’m to blame for your misfortune?”

Justus was shocked. “For God’s sake, darling! I don’t blame you at all! You were free to leave or to stay! You do as you please – I mean, you – a woman like you! – In these times!”

Any other woman, hearing this confirmation that we men are now denizens of Aphrodite’s slave state, would have been content. But Charlott had lost none of her interrogator’s zeal: “Well now! You had a stake in Rhodes in New York, ships at Bremen, Canadian lumber with Wells Brothers, in Argentina, in Holland, I don’t know – and it’s all melted away? Suddenly all these businesses have collapsed?”

“I cashed in most of them when you left, my dear,” Justus murmured. “I bought French francs. I was in bad odour with my banks. I had to hand the rest of my goods and chattels over to them as security.”

“Including the fish in your aquarium?”

“Of course! Along with its eggs, every one of my seahorses carries in its pouch the seal of the court receiver. The entire progeny is mortgaged while still in the father’s body. They developed a whole new process for the insoluble glue that fixes the seal. Only the electric rays were a bit too much for the court gentleman.”

Holk was sketching on the tablecloth using Charlott’s mascara pencil. It was a sketch of Charlott’s head with the cowboy hat. The hat lay on his plate, he squinted at it, sketched Charlott wearing it. Meanwhile he whistled his little Negro Charleston song: *Yes sir, that’s my baby! No sir, don’t mean maybe!* But he wasn’t satisfied with his Baby! He was furious! But he was far too polite, far too much the scion of good old Berlin, to show his friend and rival in love just how angry he was at him. The rotter speculates in francs, he thought. He laid a hand on Justus’ arm:

“I feel so sorry for you, my good Justus, to see you now as poor as us. Chin up!”

Holk had a father who was a little more than well off, so he believed life would never throw at him anything too daunting. Whenever a shop assistant asked: “Herr Holk, when might we finally see a settlement of your outstanding account?” Holk would counter with his dazzling smile: “I really have no idea, honey! Chin up! Be brave!” And off he’d go.

Charlott was wolfing her crayfish mayonnaise with pineapple slices like a predator. Then, sated, she turned her blue eyes, now grown quite tender, towards Justus: “Good, Justibus! We shall get married again! Make the arrangements!”

Justus at once glanced up anxiously – almost shocked – from his breakfast: “But darling! You really must not inconvenience yourself on my account! Please, you really need to think it over very carefully! ... Jumping in like this! ... But I really am ... Anyway,” he gulped down his cocktail. “Charmed!”

Charlott removed the mascara pencil from Holk’s hand, and stroked the hand. With the other hand she laid Justus’ fork aside, and stroked Justus’ hand.

“I shan’t leave you in the lurch, Justus! We shall starve together. And anyway, over the last eight months I’ve had enough aggravation with him.” She indicated Holk.

She clapped her hands, as if summoning a bevy of Negro waiters: “And now we shall eat something r-e-a-lly good! Sweetheart, this evening we shall go dancing at Ollivier’s!”

We shall order the whole menu. But get tickets for Bergner\* first. I have to see Chaney's end again.”\*

She gave Justus a beguiling smile: “I have to see *everything* again.”

## .II.

Dr Justus Verloh held to ideals of life opposed to this slimness-obsessed age, which turns the necessity of indigence into a virtue of style. He once heard of a President of China who never moved from his palace and weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. He intended to emulate this oriental sage. He seldom walked, played hardly any sports. During his marriage to Charlott he was forced to dance. He danced lightly and with zest. As soon as he returned to the table he uttered imprecations against dancing. He showered with scorn the heated dripping slender men around him; his own sallow East Asiatic skin was always cool and dry.

When they were in London, Charlott demanded that he accept the invitation from a club, and ride a polo pony. He rode a friend's six ponies to sweaty ruin, and achieved the greatest success as Back, to the juvenile applause of his British clubmates, who stood in their stirrups bent over with laughter, like Grand Viziers bowing to the Sultan.

Now and then he drove out to the new golf club at Wannsee. He did not drive himself. His chauffeur had strict instructions never to burden him with technical details. Ever since he heard of a film where Jackie Coogan drove from one green to the next in his car, he fervently desired to follow the example.

He hardly ever stayed in the big city; it repelled him. He had a country estate in Brandenburg, with extensive lawns, gardens, woods and a lake, but no farmland. He had heard at some point about farmers who, in spring, rise every day at five. Ever since then he tolerated no member of that profession anywhere near him. He believed they were marked out by Fate to bring him misfortune. Not that he was a late riser; mostly he could be found in his library by six a.m. and felt nothing but intellectual sympathy for all those condemned to early-morning physical activity.

In the basement of his mansion he had installed one of the loveliest private aquariums in Europe. These were creatures he adored for their noble lack of busyness and their silence: anthozoans, medusas and seahorses constantly drifting along in convoy, or pampering themselves in a fizzing stream. He spent most of his day within these walls formed of bubbling water, sitting in one of the many club chairs, issuing instructions and conferring with his valet Teppich.

Teppich – Justus' “dreadful valet” as Charlott called him – was one of the stupidest people of the age, and for sure the most incompetent manservant of his epoch. He hadn't a clue how to perform the obligations of his profession; his laziness, negligence and arrogance set everything askew. But he loved animals and cared for them wonderfully, including the underwater kind. In terms of practical knowledge he could take on any oceanographic expert. He felt a kinship with these creatures that goggled into vacancy, silent and at ease with themselves, that never reproached themselves for idleness, and never on any account let themselves be bossed about.

Justus often flew into a rage over Teppich. He felt like pummelling him whenever he saw that smug, puritanically severe servant-face with its absurd dirty-brown outmoded mutton-chop whiskers. But he would never willingly be parted from the fellow.

As a bachelor before the War, Justus had used some of his assets to fit out an oceanic expedition to the Pacific. Life on board suited him admirably. Despite bouts of mildly pathetic seasickness, on board a yacht you never have a polo pony to ride, or any reason to practice the standard physical activities of the age. Plenty of sleep, excellent food and even better drink; you can smoke, work and dream, and you're pursuing the hobby you most love. He meant to return home like a pirate, with a rich haul of booty that he would sell off to aquariums and biological institutes in Europe and America.

The outbreak of war found him off the coast of Java. He had been living on the island with good friends, a Dutch couple. He had no objection to spending the war years in Java engaged in scientific research. But one day he ventured too far out to sea. The Britishers took great pleasure in hauling such a lovely prominent German onto their warship. He spent rather more than a year as a prisoner in India. The war had interrupted his correspondence with scientific friends and colleagues in London, New York and Paris, but he had cultivated relations in neutral countries good enough to ensure that his assets were well looked after, and came through the critical years with no significant damage. So he returned to Berlin. But he had no fondness for Berlin. In Petersdorf he barricaded himself against the spirit of the age.

All said he was old-fashioned, except in his clothing. He sang Lieder by Schumann, Loewe, Franz, his favourite writers were Storm, Fontane and Keller. He drank more than one was supposed to in this incipient Age of Sport, but was never drunk. His only friends were a pack of German mastiffs, which were already no longer in fashion. When he took a stroll in his lonely woods and gardens, on the shores of the lake – his figure tall, gigantic even, surrounded by mastiffs young and old, cherrywood cane in his hand, his face spirited and cantankerous – he looked like a Frondeur\* who has retired to his estate in order to rail against the ruling spirit of the towns, to mock and deny.

Then he came to know Charlott. Within three weeks, he who had never made a big deal of women was married to Charlott and – aah! – sixteen months later divorced already.

His marriage was destroyed – by Berlin! From there the enticements came that pulled Charlott away from him: Holk and the numerous companions of her youth, men and women both. The separation from him was a flight back into girlhood.

He remained in Petersdorf. Tormented hours he now spent within the glass walls of his aquarium. In eight months he never visited the city once. He hated Berlin! There Charlott was surrounded by all the usual amusements society could offer her – the older sort to which she was well used, as well as the newer sort now emerging. He heard by telephone from Camilla what Charlott was up to now. (Camilla was Charlott's cousin, and the only one of the whole bunch who enjoyed Justus' trust.) No grand ball, no premiere, no six-day race, no revue, no party of any kind without Charlott! In late summer with friendly families at the beach, in autumn back again in heavenly Berlin, the city she literally worshipped. There in her two-room apartment on canal-side Cornelius Strasse she received her daily telegrams, long-distance calls, couriered messages, the flowers and

little fripperies with rococo mottos. Oh how he knew them! Painted cups with their inscriptions (*Quand ce coq chantera, mon amour finira!*\*), the exotic dolls, animals made of offcut fabrics, with a flower or a slip of paper in the mouth.

He lived alone, he was no longer happy, the radiance had left him. The mastiffs of his bachelor days had long been disposed of; only one bitch was left. He coddled her. He made up a club chair for her, which no one was allowed to use, for like every predator the mastiff loved anything soft, sentimental, cosy. They gazed at one another, both had acquired eyes that glistened with grief. They spoke of Charlott like old people in a rest home, of her magnificent youthfulness, and both bragged a little about Charlott's missing presence and grace. The mastiff harkened to snow sliding from the roof, lifted her head, sighed, and slept.

Intolerable the thought of Charlott's affairs falling into disarray, that she was amassing debts, and for all the glamour in her life must now and then be suffering want. Justus heard about it. When he heard it he couldn't breathe! He was becoming asthmatic over Charlott's debts! He lay every night on his back struggling for air. Air!

Of course, at some point in the future Charlott was due to enter into a great inheritance. She would become a wealthy woman. But wasn't she thoughtless and ill-advised enough to manage those future assets badly, squander them on the companions of her youth?

Those heavy winter evenings, divorced from Charlott – so many cares, so many misgivings, so much despondency!

Then a bright light burst through the darkness! Look, look: bankruptcy!

### .III.

Justus – the bankrupt man with seven hundred thousand of debts, whose seahorses carried in their pouches the seal of the court receiver – Justus allowed himself on this mild early-spring evening to be conveyed by Hispano-Suiza thirty houses down Kant Strasse, to Ollivier's. He had turned up late, and with morose courtesy had only just fended off the boisterous greetings of various acquaintances when Charlott and Holk arrived, Charlott in daring décolleté in a dress of white satin-silk with a long chain of fake pearls down the front.

As she held out her hand to Justus she said: "Wasn't that your car I saw just now? Or am I mistaken?"

As Justus pulled up random chairs for Charlott and Holk, he stammered: "Whatever are you thinking, Charlott! My car! ... of course I had to sell it – to my aniline chap. He was so kind as to lend it me this evening ..."

Justus began to natter away splendidly: "Good evening, my dear good Holk ... D'you know, Charlott, those chaps from the Badische Soda\*, they're almost princes among men ... So touching ... I'm simply lost if I have to go on foot – and Kant Strasse, for goodness sake! I can't manage a droshky these days, and can't fit into a sidecar. A student with

duelling scars who acts as taxi driver in the evenings tried to entice me into that hell. Thanks a lot! But the soda chap has helped me out again with my old Hispano.”

Charlott wasn't listening, she was too busy greeting and being greeted. She was made up like a great wild goddess of antiquity. An ivory tone was the base colouring of her face – at least the chin, nose, brow and lower part of the cheeks; then rising up to her cheekbones a pink that shaded to ochre at the smudged edges, while in contrast the big rather too wide mouth was daubed in a very bright, hard, jolly and rather cheeky red; and then again the eyebrows drawn dead straight across the forehead, and the long black eyelashes with their oily gleam. The hair on her head too, oiled hair flashing black, the rippling waves pressed tight to the very narrow skull, trimmed on the slant so as to not quite reveal the shapely ears. This artistic concoction of a young female face was homage to a bizarre and amusing fashion: nowhere was there any planful improvement of some defect in natural beauty, instead, any sign of Nature's negligence was emphasized rather than suppressed. One almost had the impression that the deep blue eyes and big healthy teeth were no product of Nature's workshop, but invented by some genius of the palette.

This then was Charlott's evening and night face, in contrast to her day face, both no more alike than the faces of twin sisters, one of whom, in a spirit of satirical whimsy, plays the other on stage.

Suddenly the National Anthems of the age struck up: blaring Negro dance numbers. The gentlemen of the orchestra who had just now gazed so benignly and relaxed out over the room seemed to have been struck by a religious frenzy, beginning at the tips of their lacquered shoes and ending at the top of the skull. Their bodies, the contortions of their legs, their shouts and the instruments called to mind the militant rhythms that accompany circumcision ceremonies in equatorial Africa. Charlott was at once dancing with a somebody.

As she stood up she said, nodding to Justus as if greeting him for the first time this evening: “Bergner was wonderful, as always. I've sent her two hundred roses from Rothe's.”

“Would have been cheaper by the two thousand,” said Holk as he went. Justus was again by himself. Holk was not the man to spend the evening chatting, or even sitting quietly somewhere, if no female was present. Males bored him dreadfully. He never knew what he was supposed to say. And then he always had an urgent telephone call to make. A Berliner at this time never says around noon: “I'll be with you in an hour,” but instead: “I'll call you again shortly before one.” It was a benign weakness in Holk that he could never refuse an invitation. So it happened that he committed to three different parties in three different theatres and had to rush off in the middle of the play, eyes moist behind the horn-rimmed spectacles because of some marvellous bit of acting or an especially fine play. If he had caused enough confusion to freeze the blood in his own veins, he would telephone directly from the theatre lobby.

Charlott spent not much time at her table. “You will dance now, Justibus,” she said, fixing Justus with an eye at once stony and mild. Now and then she had the not at all cold but thoroughly clear and precise gaze of a twentieth century city girl. In this respect, Berlin girls – and not only in the expression of their eyes – greatly resembled Parisiennes.

“Mercy, darling! Don’t we – shouldn’t we – have a little talk? Or – of course! Whatever you say, Charlott.”

To this Charlott made no reply. She danced with Justus because it pleased her to dance with Justus, and as they danced, her painted lips with their slightly turpentine aroma glided fleetingly and seemingly by chance over Justus’ eyelids.

“It’s going very well,” she said, with a smile of acknowledgement to the ecstatic gentlemen of the orchestra, who for their part rolled their eyes and flashed their teeth in Justus’ direction: he’s the right man and dancer for you, hoho! Fat, rich, intelligent – you have to take him back!

“The thing is this,” Charlott’s lips hardly moved. “I want to marry you again, but we can’t possibly live in poverty. We must do something to ensure sixty thousand a year. At least.”

The orchestra sang, in the nasal twang of New York’s Jewish quarter, “No sir, don’t mean maybe!”

Justus froze. He groaned. “Sixty thousand.” He met Charlott’s stony gaze. “Fine, darling. I shall look for work.”

“Selling cat sharks?” Once again Charlott’s mouth wandered teasingly over his eyes. Justus began to shiver. He raised the kissed eyebrows as if every hair was eager to receive once again that beloved touch.

Charlott whispered: “I’ve often longed for you!”

At the same time she nodded to someone: “Good evening, Thankmar. How’s Sonia?”

They returned to their table. Charlott’s hand received numerous squeezes, greetings were exchanged, while Justus from his seat muttered bitterly about physical activities.

Then they were alone again.

“So, now I really do have to talk to you about something really serious!”

Justus knew what a really serious talk with Charlott meant. Conversations in Negro rhythm, conversations in a Charleston tone, you touch the knees together and the soles of the feet begin to twitch.

“I thought it all out very carefully and from every side, driving along the AVUS this morning.”

“At a hundred and thirty?”

“Yes. Now I’d like some of those little pork sausages. Ask if they have them, please.”

“Gosh!” Justus reacted not at all to the sausages.

“Darling, you already know: when I reach twenty-five I come into an inheritance from Mummy’s only brother, my late tea-uncle in Colombo. My big one-and-a-half!” She meant one and a half million dollars. On the tablecloth Charlott wrote with her lipstick a great big 1½. “But then there’s this Cornelia Fisher in Colombo. I don’t know if you remember who Cornelia Fisher is?”

“I know everything that concerns you!”

“Well!” Charlott swiftly interjected, “really?” – clearly intent on laying out the whole situation once again regardless. “Cornelia, the daughter of some earl or knight or Sir So-and-so, is the widow of Uncle Jacob’s business partner, Sir Herbert H. Fisher, and on top of that she was Uncle Jacob’s great love in his bachelor days! She’s a slick operator, that lady! Not only did she have her own husband, but she inherited the tea company’s entire shareholding from Uncle Jacob, so that today she is so to speak the sole owner of this great enterprise. Thank God she only inherited the business, and not Uncle Jacob’s other assets! They come to me in any case!”

Charlott gazed proudly into Justus’ eyes.

“Now this Cornelia, as stipulated in the will, administers my big one-and-a-half until I reach twenty-five. And she insists there’s nothing in the will to say I have a right to one red cent from the interest before I reach twenty-five! Until I attain my twenty-fifth year, the interest is assigned by Uncle Jacob – I mean Uncle James, sorry – to her, to Cornelia!”

“Yes, alas, it is, sweetheart. I know the will by heart!”

“Good! But could Uncle James have foreseen that we’d lose all our money in the inflation? If he’d known, he would surely have assigned a benefit in the interest to me! And so it would have been his intention that the interest should be paid over to me every year!”

“You’ll never convince an English court with that argument, my poor girl!”

“So? Well then! I’ve had it *up to here* with whole affair! In her last letter, this English lady writes that I should be ashamed of myself and thank God that dear Uncle James died just a few months after the Versailles peace, otherwise there would never have been a penny coming to me! This Englishwoman has long ago forgotten that her late *ami de coeur* was once a German and that her own husband, the late Sir Herbert H., was also descended from a German family called Fischer – the little c fell out of the crown a bit later on, with the tea-fishing! Of course both the partners, Herbert H. and Uncle James, became British thirty years before the War and felt they were equals of the Dukes of Rutland and Devonshire. Cornelia most of all! To forget all about the Fischer side of it she’s become a total Germanophobe, and she beats herself black and blue because she can’t devour my one-and-a-half!”

Justus asked eagerly: “Have you tried cadging, Charlott?”

“Cadging?” Charlott was most indignant. “I wrote to her that I was fed up to the teeth with waiting and will she kindly remit my one-and-a-half forthwith by post!”

Justus was amused. “And how did she respond, sweetheart?”

“The manager of their business, a certain Cecil Dell – I believe he’s now Uncle James’ successor *in every respect* – this Cecil replied that at Lady Cornelia Fisher’s suggestion, the tea company is prepared to advance over a five-year period a monthly sum of one hundred and fifty Mark at four percent! He calls it ‘an up-front payment of one thousand eight hundred Mark annually’! I’d like you to give him a good kicking anywhere but up front!”

Suddenly Charlott emitted a loud peal of laughter. What she had just said she thought quite wonderful.

“So now we’re both totally broke, you and I. I’m already economising on makeup; none of this is the genuine article, Justibus. And I have debts. I’ll be right back.”

Charlott danced with a young, very pretty and elegant Thankmar.

Justus folded his hands. He regarded his stomach like a Buddha, a long while. Charlott did not come right back at all, because they were playing ‘Valencia’\* with six encores to imperious applause from the dancers. Valencia, again and again Valencia, with the three drum-rattles at the end.

Charlott, escorted back by this iteration of a Thankmar, dropped into her chair. She took five little sips of champagne.

“Darling, can you ask if my little pork sausages will be here soon.”

Now she embarked on one of the age’s most riveting performances: the restoration of her melting beauty while peering into her little golden mirror.

“Justibus! Pay attention. I am absolutely determined to acquire my big one-and-a-half right away! I will not leave it another five years to that awful Cornelia Fisher with the s h when both of us, you and I, will be ruined the whole time and grow old in poverty with rheumatism in the paws. Starting tomorrow we shall be in a state of war! Yes indeed! I hereby declare war on my enemy in Colombo. I shall wrest my one-and-a-half from her very teeth, using cunning and guile.”

“But how will you manage it, Charlott? Your chances of success are practically nil! Because Cornelia Fisher – who from what you say must be a very clever and energetic lady – actually has use of the interest from your big one-and-a-half until you attain your twenty-fifth birthday. She must be earning at least six percent on it from the business! Over five years that brings the whole amount to two million Mark! She’ll never hand it over to you!”

“Justibus, tell me why do I have three miniatures of Napoleon on my desk? My campaign plan came together today! I conceived it on the AVUS! As soon as I do a hundred and thirty, I start getting the finest ideas! I shall conquer Cornelia! She’ll hardly have read my declaration of war when I’ll already be standing outside her Indian Ulm, her Austerlitz, her Jena. And in the end this angel will have to negotiate with me, like Queen Luise with Napoleon.\* Can you guess how I shall set it all up?”

“No, really I cannot!” Justus assured her.

Charlott stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. “Then you’re not much of a guesser! Naturally! You only mix with giltheads and cat sharks ... Here’s Holk! Now, Holkeman, where have you been all this time?”

“I do beg your pardon, sweetheart. I’ve just fetched Camilla from a talk at Police Headquarters, then I had to show the Ginzburghs from Brussels around Luna Park and then telephone Aunt Henrietta in Wannsee and now I just have to dash back to Camilla. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Don’t you dare! You will not move from your seat!”

Behind the glasses Holk’s grey eyes turned sulky, like a scolded middle-school boy’s. He did not move from his seat.

But Charlott stood up, to dance with yet another Thankmar.

“Didn’t you understand me then, Justibus, just a little bit?” she asked slightly over her shoulder.

Justibus half-rose: “Hardly, dear Charlott ... that is actually ... really not the least little bit ...” He sank back, rather perplexed.

Now even Holk was dancing. But during the dance he led his partner towards the cloakroom, and then suddenly disappeared.

This time Charlott was soon back at Justus’ side. “I have an tremendous plan, Justibus! Something gigantic! And patriotic as well! I’m going to bring a good chunk of Anglo-Saxon capital into Germany ... Holk’s not reliable enough. You’re the one I shall accomplish this with!”

Justus put his hands into his jacket pocket. Uneasily he raised his mighty shoulders:

“With me, darling? War against a woman – with me? Actually I had every intention of never going to war again.” Politely he added: “What I mean is, whatever you say!”

Charlott whispered passionately: “You’re my husband again! ... You were always my husband! ... I shall teach you how to steal horses! Tonight I shall come to you ... But now, let’s dance!”

They danced.

The untameable gentlemen of the orchestra played: “Aaaah-*ha*!”

#### .IV.

Holk’s main profession was umbrella-holder and escort to lovely women and girls, with a subsidiary career as art dealer and interior designer. Some months earlier he had received a commission from Justus: to acquire at an art auction in Amsterdam a certain work by Cezanne, one that Justus loved, with apples, carp, crustaceans, oysters, lemons, greenery, tulips and mignonettes. Holk had taken no money along to this auction, because his and Justus’ names were well known to de Graaf, the prominent Dutch art dealer. Every year de Graaf sold several big items to Petersdorf, mostly through Holk as intermediary. Justus passed to Holk a cheque for twenty-five thousand Mark as soon as the picture arrived. But now de Graaf was travelling in South America and the USA, and Holk was holding on to the cheque until de Graaf returned from his trip.

The morning after the night at Ollivier’s, it suddenly occurred to Holk as he awoke that for the past three months he had been holding this cheque for twenty-five thousand securely in his office safe. He emitted an Indian whoop – not of dismay, but of joy. Now he’ll see just for once if he can’t serve Justus a somewhat sour dessert.

Holk was a large man, thirty years old, with broad shoulders, and round rather feminine hips that lent to his gait a languid slinking character, like that of a young wild creature.

Holk had a wonderful way of dressing, elegant and unconventional, in the prettiest, most comfortable and loosest-fitting fabrics that the clothiers and shoemakers of Berlin

and London could create. His business and leisure jackets alike were so loose-cut that he could shed them quick as lightning, because he almost always found his surroundings too hot. Wherever he might be (provided it wouldn't be at all indecent) he would ask permission to sit in shirtsleeves. In winter he hardly ever wore an overcoat. His collar, a mere finger's width, gave his neck enough room to move. Below it he wore a cravat that Picasso might have painted, and on his head, casual and elegant, sat a felt hat with an enormous brim, in recent times much in the same style as Charlott's hat.

Strange, the face of this refreshing and exhilarating phenomenon! For each cheek was scarred by two deep intersecting furrows, one extending out from the edge of the nostril, the other from the brow down to the chin. Did these hint at some mischief? Were they the beds of four streams of tears? Or redolent of a personal sorrow? Or were they the mark of a venerable lineage's decay?

Before the War, Holk's father, the massive unsociable grouch Antonius, had controlled a major part of Upper Silesia's ironworks industry. A story was told of him in Berlin. As his seventieth birthday approached, he requested from his relatives in Berlin, Breslau, Vienna and London a set of photographs, a simple compilation of family faces, complied into an album. A mood of affection spread among Antonius' hitherto neglected nearest and dearest: so a new era of family life is dawning! On the same day that the seventy-year-old received his present, he went down to the porter's lodge. "Wilhelm! Keep this album up by your window! Study the faces carefully! If you ever let even one of them into my house, you'll be out on your ear."

Antonius had retired shortly before the War. He lived alone on the upper floor of his house in Viktoria Strasse, down in Tempelhof. He had a very few friends, of whom his son was definitely not one. Over the years he had assembled artworks of a quality never found in private hands in Berlin: the best Dutch, the best Italians. Sometimes he wandered downstairs to view these pictures that hung forlorn and gloomy as forces of immutable capital in lower rooms which had once, when Antonius' wife still lived, been the scene of parties.

At eighty-two, in the second half of the Inflation, when he had already lost a large part of his assets, he rented an office and began a clear-headed, energetic and dogged campaign to defend the last outposts of his property. For a long time he failed to understand what devaluation of the currency meant. But he had been too clever his whole life not to learn lessons, and finally he prevailed. As the economy stabilised, he embarked on major projects. It was his habit never to give his son a penny. He relished this habit, to which he clung with an old man's obstinacy. Holk could always come to him for advice, as much as he wanted. But he'd never come away with money, not the smallest coin! If the talk turned to money, Antonius' face would close up with the stubborn expression of an old man's pig-headed sense of what will extend his own life. One of Antonius' principles of longevity was: never to give any money to his son.

For the first time in twenty years, he visited the theatre when Barnowsky\* put on *Back to Methuselah*, a play, Antonius Holk had heard, in which people lived to three hundred and sixty or even older. "So there!" he thought happily, "What sensible plays people write these days!" At once he resolved to attend more plays. But never again did he find one to his taste, meaning one where people live to more than eighty. And so he began to collect

reports of centenarians. In 1897 a veteran of the Grande Armée had appeared on the Russian border, coming out of Siberia. In a Persian village a peasant had celebrated his hundred-and-fortieth. A woman in Turkey had her hundred-and-seventieth birthday.

Antonius Holk thought longevity was one of the leading values, and he was right to do so, for he was a splendid old chap, with splendid character defects as old as humanity.

\*

Holk whistled for his bitch Acacia, a bull terrier. She was a gentle refined creature, whose squashed head bore a slight resemblance to a bulldog's, in that three little teeth protruded from the lower jaw over the upper lip. Her white body dreamily suggested a big slender smooth-skinned fox terrier.

Acacia was currently going through one of her famous hysterical phases. The last time had been a phantom pregnancy. Her body grew round, showing every sign of incipient motherhood, but then proved to be nothing but a pathologically enhanced imagination. This time the cause was more serious. As little as Holk understood a woman's accusation that he doesn't love her anymore, so little did he understand the analogous message Acacia was trying to impart. Although she slept on his bed, was carried everywhere with him, and accompanied him day and night on his excursions in the Flea (this was Holk's ridiculous miniature automobile, he had never made it to anything bigger), Acacia played the role of the neglected female. At a street corner she would lift a front paw with its long pink toes, first the left, then the right, and wait pale-faced and mistrustful to see if Holk really did mean to take her on across the intersection – an absurd apprehension that could arise only in a female brain! Or she – who in her mentally stable phases was always the first to jump into the Flea – she would now hesitate, remain standing by the street door, squinting up at Holk distraught and defiant as he urged her into the car, all of it merely to provide herself with an excuse for grief and suffering, which as soon as the whistle came would be transformed into gratitude and cuddles.

Today Holk had to go on foot from his apartment along Schöneberger Ufer up towards Französische Strasse. His miniature car had packed in again yesterday, because Holk mistreated the fragile engine in every possible way, and allowed it to deteriorate without maintainance. Now it stood abandoned in Friedrich-Ebert Strasse, a short walk behind Potsdamer Platz. Twenty-five automobiles and ten busses had queued up behind Holk to see if he could shift the Flea, but she would not be shifted. The traffic policemen, who knew Holk, laughed. They pushed the Flea into Voss Strasse. Holk picked his Acacia up by the scruff, stuffed her under his jacket, and disappeared. The Flea can go to the Devil! Vile machine! Minx! To the Devil! Hulk was rage personified.

But that evening, after leaving Charlott and Justus at Ollivier's, he headed to Voss Strasse. There he found his little car. It started to rain. She stood wet and ignored in the dreary night. Holk stroked her. He went off home with a sigh.

Today, having sneaked along the edge of Potsdamer Platz past the traffic policeman, the car was not there. Towed away! Dead and gone! Holk looked at Acacia, and Acacia at Holk, the latter with an expression that said: "See what you've landed us in."

His heart leapt up when he entered the bank in Französische Strasse. Because going in ahead of him was someone he thought he recognised. That studiously refined way of

walking, that puritanically black coat, threadbare from excessive brushing, and the much too small bowler on the broad skull, the enchanting way the spine was held so rigid, elbows in the ribs, the whole body spoke silent commands: Honour me! Respect me! For I am honourable, and respectable! The slightly fishy whiff he spread about him clinched it: this can only be Teppich, Justus' *dreadful valet*.

Holk crept in behind Teppich like a Red Indian. He knew that Teppich held it beneath his dignity ever to look behind him.

Teppich greeted the cashier with a cough. Without a word he passed a slip across. Holk seized the moment. He peered over Teppich's shoulder. He recognised at once the big legible letters and numbers in the same hand that had written his cheque. Top right: "M.30,000." Signature below.

"My master requires the equivalent sum to be paid out in English pounds."

"Do you have a written instruction to that effect? Or else we shall have to receive the instruction by telephone."

"My master is well known not to be reachable by telephone," Teppich countered, wounded in his dignity. He drew a letter from his coat pocket. "Here is the aforesaid instruction."

"So, tomorrow we shall place an order at the Exchange for English pounds to the equivalent value of thirty thousand Reichsmark."

"My master requires the pounds right away."

"Right away?" The cashier looked up at the clock. "We shall have the foreign currency at your disposal by noon."

Teppich turned away with a cough. He recognised Holk. He blanched.

"Ho, my good Teppich, are you after today's best price for Scyphozoans\* at the Exchange? Everyone says sea urchins are about to boom."

In actual fact, at this moment Teppich had the look of a sea urchin displaying its quills. A curt greeting, and he was gone.

Holk pondered. Well now, our bankrupt friend still has an account at the bank. Thirty thousand Mark in English pounds, by twelve noon. Is he off to England with Charlott? Thirty thousand! He can live well on that for a good long time. Humbly Holk asked how much he had left in his own account. A short time later he was informed, with sympathy: one hundred and seventy-one Mark thirty-two pfennigs.

"Good," said Holk. "Give me five hundred, please. You can keep the thirty-two pfennigs."

The cashier hesitated. He and Holk stared over their spectacles into each other's eyes. "Very well, Herr Holk. I hope we may expect a swift deposit to cover the difference."

"Chin up! Head high! You may so hope, my dear beadle!" Holk signed the receipt.

"Before I forget! I have another cheque here."

The cashier inspected it.

“Withdrawal?” he asked at once, without a trace of puzzlement.

“Please.”

“In twenty-fives?”

“Please.”

Holk left. He had twenty-five thousand five hundred in his jacket pocket.

He whistled for a taxi. Sitting there he made a speech to Acacia: “I tell you, in Berlin there are astonishing bank accounts held by bankrupt people who live in furnished lodgings in Kant Strasse, with no running water and no servants.”

At that moment a Hispano-Suiza rolled by down Unter den Linden, a mighty mobile monument to this capitalist age. Justus was inside. At once Holz sat up and waved his hand vigorously.

Hesitantly, reluctantly, Justus allowed the car to draw to a halt. The two vehicles stood one behind the other at the kerb. Holk got out, walked over to the Hispano, and laid an arm comfortably on the doorframe like a countryman leaning on a neighbour’s fence, ready for a good long chat.

“Morning, Justus old man! How are you today?”

“Quite well, thank you,” Justus replied, rather cool and mistrustful, with the rapid flitting gaze that fat people sometimes have. “Alas, I am in rather a hurry.”

“I say, Justus old man, could you possibly help me out with five hundred Mark? I’m about to make a little purchase at Worch’s over there ... and I’m rather embarrassed,” Holk added, with the twenty-five thousand five hundred in his jacket pocket.

“My dear good Holk, whatever can you be thinking? Five hundred! You know how I’ve always helped you out before ... but all my creditors allow me is five hundred for the month.”

“Hah!” Holk the Sensitive was today curiously insistent. “Can’t you write me a cheque?”

“But my dear good Holk!” Justus’ laugh was actually embittered, his belly heaved with indignation, so awkward and embarrassing was Holk’s persistence. “I no longer even know what a cheque looks like!”

“Devil take it!” Holk made a move as if to strip off his jacket right here and now on Unter den Linden, he seemed to have grown so heated in his desperation. “So what about that cheque for de Graaf, now that you’ve gone bankrupt?”

Justus’ eyes seemed to crawl in horror all the way to Holk: “What cheque for goodness’ sake in Heaven’s name? I haven’t been allowed to write a cheque these past two months!”

“Have you forgotten this trivial little matter, Justus? The cheque for the Cezanne? I still have it in my safe.”

Justus cried: “You haven’t presented it yet, you vexing fellow? While I was still rich?”

Holk lit a cigarette: “I do apologise, Justibus! But has it been logged against your account?”

“Yes, in full,” Justus countered, frustrated and annoyed. But then he gathered his dignity. “Don’t worry, Holk! I won’t let you or de Graaf suffer a loss. Send that cheque to me in Kant Strasse. But whatever you do, for God’s sake don’t present it at the bank! I no longer have an account there, you won’t get a pfennig for it! I shall touch my aniline man again for it. He’s a prince among men! Adieu, Holk.”

“This prince among men has helped you out with his Hispano again! Might I be introduced to him sometime?”

“Of course! But he’s very busy. These great men from the dyestuffs industry have so much to do. Adieu, Holk.”

“Adieu, Justibus. Lots of hand-kisses to Charlott!”

“Thank you. Adieu, Holk.”

“Adieu, Justibus.”

#### .V.

After spending an hour and a half with his secretary, sorting through English cretonnes that had been delivered to the office, Holk went to visit Camilla, Charlott’s cousin. Fräulein Doctor Camilla Blank was a participant in an enterprise that called itself the Criminal Psychological Institute, which she led all by herself since the proprietor, an older man, was usually away travelling. The task of this Institute was to prepare materials for overworked expert witnesses to include in the evidence they were frequently called on to present before the courts.

Camilla’s *modus operandi* will become clear from the telephone conversation she is engaged in just as Holk steps into her office.

Camilla had armed herself with her telephone console’s headphones, which emitted steely flashes amid her dark golden hair, like a technological diadem. She stretched an arm towards Holk, half in greeting, half to hold him at bay and, as she did so, flapped the small energetic hand like a bird spying on its quarry over a particular spot. Holk gave the hand a slow, repeated, tender kiss, while Acacia leapt onto the most comfortable chair from where she could keep an eye on Holk, attempting as she did so to give the three little teeth protruding from her lower jaw a menacing aspect.

Meanwhile Camilla continued her telephone conversation. “We urge you, Privy Counsellor, kindly to entrust this assignment to us. Even though we are *dreadfully* overworked at present, we shall nevertheless give this task top priority. We have undertaken exhaustive studies of Branoschewski’s handwriting, which reached us via certain of our connections.” (Branoschewski was charged with multiple murders.) “We have achieved quite extraordinary results, which will be of great interest to you, Privy Counsellor ... Of course! We currently employ ten scientifically qualified staff.” (That’s a lie, thought Holk.) “On top of that, we have compiled a biography of the accused, and identified twenty-five stages in his development, with graphical illustrations, such that a man of your scientific accomplishments, Privy Counsellor, will be able within a few minutes, a couple of seconds actually, to orient yourself to all the essentials ... Many thanks, Privy Counsellor! I shall be with you at seven o’clock on the dot!”

Camilla bowed twice respectfully to the console and pulled the left earpiece away from her ear. "Good day, beloved Holk!" she said. (She said 'beloved' in English.) She raised splayed fingers to her temple, military-style. "I have just six more calls to make. Please help yourself to the other phone. And then I must sketch out Branoschewski's twenty-five stages of development before this evening, because obviously we haven't made the barest start yet. I have no idea what Branoschewski is actually like."

Holk didn't need to be asked twice. Visiting someone and being allowed to telephone without attendant scoldings – it was heaven on earth! At once he sat down opposite the console, and then caller's number, requested numbers, conversations and petty complaints filled the room with a birdlike twittering. It was as if swooping crisscrossing swallows were trying to build a nest here.

Once Holk had accepted three breakfast meetings and twice as many dinners, he met in the end with an awful disappointment. Twenty times he tried to get through to one particular number: Charlott's. It was engaged, engaged for a whole twenty-five minutes. Holk waited for the connection to become free. All his attention in his angry obstinacy was focused on finally getting through. But the other end spoke: engaged. Always engaged ... Camilla kept sending mildly sympathetic and slightly mocking glances his way. During one very lengthy conversation she laid a hand over the mouthpiece: "Still engaged, my little Holkie?"

Holk returned a glare of dumb misery, and with a cruel flash of triumph in her lovely grey eyes, Camilla resumed her conversation.

Breathing deeply, heated, limp and discouraged, Holk looked around the familiar room. The walls were covered with graphic depictions of psychological developmental phases – maps of human criminal souls! E.g. "15<sup>th</sup> phase of married R. C., murderer by poisoning. (File No. XII 14379)."

Circles cross-hatched in different colours, of different sizes, with different labels, intersecting or separate or concentric. Holk shook his head. Damned if he could make head or tail of it! One circle bore the label "Repressed mother-love". An enormous black-specked circle: "Foundational resentment". A third: "Schizophrenic zone". A fourth: "Death-wish elements, inhibited by mental attraction to locksmith M. P.", beneath which could be read: "Migration of newly-formed and detached sexual feelings towards the periphery, targeted at locksmith M. P." The desk covered in half-completed analyses, a psychiatric coursebook, accounts ledger, chequebook.

Camilla removed the headphones. "Now's your chance to get through," she said in a jolly and friendly tone. "I've just finished a twenty-five minute call with Charlott!"

Holk slammed the earpiece into its holder. He collapsed into himself with soft senile yelps of grief. Camilla sat comforting on his knee. She was a charming little personage with short dark golden hair parted in the middle. Her face was fresh, always active with intelligence, the sharply-cut nostrils of uneven size, the eyes slanting, grey, with a soulful cheeriness. The pretty upturned mouth had acquired, from all the shrewd things it was made to say, a shrewd curvature. Her round broad forehead offered plenty of room for good thoughts. She had such funny little habits. Towards men she respected she was happy to play the servant. She bowed and said "Your servant, Privy Counsellor!" or "How

are you today, Doctor?" and so on. Sometimes, in satirical imitation of military practice, she would greet someone with an open hand, palm outwards, up at her curls, which was also her way of showing respect. As Camilla perched on his knee, Holk studied her hand with its pretty fingers.

He enjoyed annoying her: "You know you have the thumb of a murderer?"

"You are very much in error, my love!" Camilla protested. "A murderer's thumb looks like this!" And she sketched a murderer's thumb with a red pencil, and coloured it in. It looked like a robber band's secret sign. She marked thickenings and shortenings a, b, and c. "You can find it in the Criminal Museum at Alexanderplatz,\* my sweet. Take a look at the cabinet with Grossmann's thumb."

"Thanks a lot, Camilla. But talk of murderers makes me think right now of Justus. I need your advice about him."

Camilla stood and returned to her own chair. She looked at Holk as if ready to begin a consultation. But there was too much ardent sympathy mixed in with that look, which was aimed not at Holk's mouth but at his brow, for it was from there, as if from the very fount of thought, that she awaited a message or a piece of information that would either gladden her or sadden her.

Holk began to lay out all the tribulations that had beset him since yesterday. He went into detail about the business at the bank and the roadside conversation with Justus.

"But it's all a swindle!" he declared indignantly. "Our good friend Justus has been pottering about at Petersdorf these last six months, ogling his golden carp and working out how to get Charlott back. Because he couldn't manage it with wealth, he's trying it on now with poverty. Unfortunately he has worked Charlott out like an arithmetic sum, because even though she's the most thoroughly decent creature in the world, she would never let him go to the dogs! Normally Charlott couldn't care less what people say about her, but I'm sure the word around Berlin will be that she foresaw Justus going bankrupt and that's why she abandoned the sinking ship ... Of course, for her it's just one more reason to marry Justus! On top of that, in five years' time she will be a wealthy woman ..."

"Nobody's going to lend her a penny against that inheritance, given the currency situation today! Colombo and Lady Cornelia Fisher are a long way off. Not even speculators show any interest these days in such dubious schemes. They graze in other pastures now."

"Exactly. Charlott too is poor these days, and she has loads of debts. She's hardly paid off a sixth of her Mercedes. And yet, with an eye to the future, she sees Justus as somewhat creditworthy again. And to think this whole bankruptcy thing is definitely nothing but high-class fraud ..."

"So low class."

"Low class!" Holk repeated, outraged. "To think he still has at least his four million, and plays the beggar in all the places where Charlott might turn up."

Holk fell silent, his mouth still working away. Camilla regarded Holk with the tenderly covert gaze of a decent girl who never makes a scene because it wouldn't be nice for another woman.

Then she too fell into contemplation, like Holk. She sketched murderers' thumbs on her blotting pad, big and small, a whole host of murderers' thumblets.

"That's a really interesting theory, Holkeman! But I think you're mistaken. I'm convinced Justus really is bankrupt!"

Holk was shocked. "And the cheque, please, this morning? Twenty-five thousand all in one go?"

"Paid out from a conto separato, that Justus reserved for a particular creditor. The good fellow really has lost his head these last few weeks, and he forgot all about your cheque."

Holk was astonished. "How do you know all this, Camilla?"

"From Justus himself. He phoned me ten minutes before you arrived."

"He phoned you? Discussed it all with you?"

"Yes indeed. He's been confiding in me for simply ages! Anyway, five minutes after your chat on Unter den Linden, Justus went to his bank and learned that you've cleaned him out and made a fool of him."

Horried, Holk dived into his trouser pocket where he had stashed – not twenty-five thousand now, but twenty-four anyway. "So, as an honest chap, I should return the money at once?" Holk ruffled his Negro-curly blond hair, in despair passed a hand across his leonine skull.

"Hang onto it!" Camilla advised. "You still have to pay de Graaf, sooner or later."

Suddenly Holk became deadly serious: "You really believe Justus is telling the truth?"

Camilla made no reply. She looked at Holk. "What's the real reason you won't marry Charlott yourself?"

"I? Can you possibly think it wouldn't be the happiest event of my life? But where can I find even a pfennig for my pockets?"

"That's not logical. Charlott wouldn't reject you on the exact same grounds that she's now going to marry Justus."

Holk fell silent. Acacia in her club armchair thrust three mocking smiling teeth over her upper lip.

"You see, dear boy, something doesn't add up. I'll let you into the secret, because Charlott has just told me over the telephone. Charlott is to marry Justus not simply out of sympathy, but for an additional quite different reason that you could never understand. And then there's all the aggravation you've caused her these last eight months! You say you love her, that the only true goal of your life is to make Charlott yours. And so you apply yourself to your work. But you don't work methodically enough. So you should stop being so harum-scarum. Now, how many other people, for example, did you agree to have breakfast with this morning, apart from me? You really must give up your flirting. But you flirt with at least fifteen girls and women, you take them dancing and to the theatre, provide them with dogs and mosquito nets and sleeping car tickets, you even," here Camilla grew rather pale, "sometimes you even go out with *me* and run errands *for me*! Of course we're all really too much for you, for there are not many men

in Germany as ready as you are to be at a woman's beck and call! Such a shame you can't see it: that approach will never work with a girl like Charlott! ... Now, let's go to breakfast! How many today? Just us, my boy! You'll leave the others in the lurch, just like you left me last Monday!"

Camilla put on her coat. She stood at the mirror to adjust her hat, used two fingers to pull hair from under the hatband, applied lipstick, and inserted a hand into Holk's capacious sleeve as if into a bag.

"We shall talk more about Charlott at Pelzer's. If she's about to marry bankrupt Justus, then she must know exactly what she's doing! Don't fret about it! She's a bit loopy, but she always knows what she's doing.!"

## .VI.

In this epoch, Berlin began to show a face that awakened love. The earlier shamefaced affection of the inhabitants for their city, and the bad conscience to which this affection gave rise, had yielded to an open, almost passionate affirmation. Parisians had taken over from ancient Athens a quasi-religious sensibility for a nook, a candelabrum, a bridge whose only trace of anything remarkable or holy resided in this sensibility; no need even to attach to it some great memory: not the blade that struck down le Roi Henri,\* not the human heads rolling across the cobblestones, nor the heaped up domestic furniture as the breastplate of a new radiant freedom – lacking any of this, there prevailed a sense of something Significant. From their own perfect power, all by themselves, bare spaces had become numinous.

Something similar was now to be seen in Berlin. The quiet graveyard-like basin on the Landwehr Canal opposite the club on Von-Der-Heydt Strasse which once housed the Chinese Embassy; life along Kurfürstendamm Boulevard oriented south towards open air; the candelabra of the linden trees; the vehicle exit from the Hotel Esplanade; the Eternal Flame embedded in the asphalt at the corner of Tiergarten Strasse; the ever more attractive environs of Berlin with their newly-discovered river channels, canals, lakes; the newest settlements and sports complexes – all such places at once became noticed and cherished by Berliners, and in the natives of even our most doltish and stuck-in-the-mud provinces they awakened a reverential yearning for their capital city, and constantly formed one of the delights of our better literature.

At the same time, there emerged the first stirrings of a *joie de vivre* appropriate to a democratic capital. The limbs of this once so maladroit city, stuffed so full of Protestant state and military philosophy, began to twitch with the first sparks of life. A desire for frivolity, especially in the spring and summer months, activated the body of the metropolis with its first not entirely gauche motions. Even police officers learned to laugh now and then at some confusion; they no longer roared through the bristling moustache and the curled lips. They were grand figures, the gestures of their upraised signalling arms were disciplined, and yet in the old sense unmilitary. The daily growing beauty of blithe and unconstricted women and children of every class was incontestable. And so the big city no longer destroyed beauty, but awakened it, promoted it, allowed it radiantly to thrive. In the streets you no longer saw the grumpy citizen in his threadbare over-

brushed coat and horribly over-starched linen. The dress sense had become less dramatic, more democratic, and hence more elegant.

Nothing uncomfortable or contrary to the prevailing sport-mindedness was tolerable by day. In this respect – and not just in this – the residents of a city of millions undertook a new return to Nature. They wanted to bring something of a holiday temperament back into the city, to extend the weekend's relaxation into the working day.

Admittedly, political conflicts had never been more acute. However, man does not live from politics alone, but also from the living bread of his human instincts, to which he is drawn the more powerfully the more he has been alienated from them by the catastrophes of the age. The first, admittedly delicate, shoots of a striving for concord, for a comradely urban community, were becoming apparent in this world city, a "Nevertheless...!" to the fissures of Politics, which from now on will not be permitted to steer the fate of the metropolis with its dead concealed hand. Rather Politics shall grow from the city's blooming body to become its willingly helpful, enthusiastically acquiescent daughter.

One bright pastel-coloured early spring evening, Justus was on his way to pick Charlott up at the golf course's twelfth green.

Of all the sports complexes in Berlin's young life, none had grown more lovely than the golf course between Wannsee and Potsdam. Expanses of lawn, spruce copses, here and there secluded bungalows, descending at a gentle Brandenburg incline to a small lake or to more copses and more expanses of lawn. If you stood on the terrace of the clubhouse, the widely dispersed golfers and their brightly costumed caddies seemed in the clear pure dry Brandenburg air to be assembled within the observer's purview, as if in the rise and fall of their clubs they were the delicately composed and drastically foreshortened figures of a Japanese etching. Accompanied only by the bag-carrying youth, far apart from other players, the golfer had in his deportment something of the pious self-imposed hermit zeal of Paul of Thebes. In religious devotion, every sense not necessary for the game was banished to solitude and mortification; the youth was sworn to silence and immobility; the player tested the swing of his driver, and subjected the stance and consequences of his body to thorough inspection in terms of balance and mental calculation.

Justus made the long walk down the greens and through the copses with elastic ease, and not the slightest complaint about exertions. A gazelle overcoat lined with imaginatively colourful pelts hung on his arm.

Various golfers near and far, male and female, greeted him as they returned to the clubhouse. Every face revealed that consciously amused sympathy that Justus usually encountered wherever he went. They laughed to him, signalled with club or arm, they were pleased to see him stepping out so cheerfully in such a good mood down such a long path strewn with obstacles of every kind; but at his goal, there stood Charlott – Charlott who called across to him, laughing and blushing.

They were happy, too, for Charlott's restored harmony, for Charlott had become an essential component of Berlin. Much was said about her, stories were told of her. "Have you heard the latest about Charlott?" they said, launching into some amusing little

anecdote. Of course she came in for criticism, heads were shaken, they found her a little loopy, but she was invited everywhere, a welcome guest even after her latest adventure, whatever it might be. She was missed when she wasn't there, eyebrows were raised and apologies made: "Alas, Charlott couldn't make it." She was the happiest exemplar of her beloved time and beloved city. There was never any real scandal attached to her, only trivial affairs, "des histoires" as the French call them. For example, nobody puzzled their brains about her relationship up till now with Holk, or whether Eros might not have brought her into rather too close association with some of her many young friends of either sex: friends with whom she danced, played golf, drove her car and even – now and then – went on little trips. Never just two of them, but always in a larger crowd.

There was a story about the friends of her teenage days. Charlott had once, as a fourteen year old, become friends with a sports partner, a young lad called Thankmar. Ever since then it was her habit to call any elegant lively young man who loved sport, and who stood out for a kind of negative intelligence, by that name – Thankmar. She would say: "I met a Thankmar on Kaiserin Augusta Strasse. He accompanied me to Matthäikirche Strasse." She made use of these Thankmars for every kind of sport, went out with them in the evening, no doubt compromised herself even with those who knew nothing of her personality (Thankmars who escorted her back home at night were never allowed more than the customary kiss on the shoulder). But for a serious play or opera, at the Philharmonic or the Sing-Akademie,\* she allowed no Thankmar at her side. Holk, for example, was no Thankmar. "You're no Thankmar," Charlott would say with a sigh whenever she was annoyed with him yet again; "You're my night-mar."

All things considered, everyone in Berlin needed Charlott a little, in order to ratify this new age. She was never allowed to grow tired, or sad, or stay away from Berlin too long. She was always shown to the best seat in the city's new Life-Express.

And Berlin society welcomed Justus, the man who never harmed anybody, but had actually done some good deed for almost everyone in his class. They all knew how he suffered when Charlott left him. They lamented his melancholy widowerhood in Petersdorf in the company of his dog, his fish, medusas, starfish; and now every eye laughed to see him stride so energetically across the greens in the rosy evening glow, trouser cuffs flapping about his ankles. His silhouette was that of a stout young peasant, heading into the sunset to retrieve the favourite of his herd.

As he went he whistled and sang, for he loved music; he was himself music on this Brandenburg evening. It was his old favourite – Fontane's "Archibald Douglas"\* set to music by Carl Loewe: *Mount up! We're off to Linlithgow, And you'll ride by my side. There we'll fish and hunt with joy, As so many years ago!* And he did not tire of encores, equally lively and rollicking. Other lyrics went through his head there on the greens: the words of the forgiving king: *He's loyal to his deepest soul. Who has more love for this land than you!*

"There you are!" Charlott cried, and she was as flushed and almost a bit embarrassed as a small child caught romping by its parents. "I made the twelfth in five! Good evening, Justibus! Here's a lovely kiss for you."

They kissed. Then bankrupt Justus handed the caddy five Mark, rolled his eyes like a Masai on the warpath, and roared: "Be off with you!" At which the lad ambled away. As

he headed away, bag on his shoulder, he looked like a colourful little Cupid who has just let fly two love-arrows and is bearing away the rest of his armoury at a stiff swaying pace.

"I've brought your coat, darling! It's cooling down. You'll catch cold!"

"Not a bit, Justus! You're so kind." Meanwhile she snuggled into the coat like a polite little child. Now she looked like a female human in animal form, the gazelle-like body, the legs, arms, the narrow head, the nostrils. "Now we really do need to have a serious talk! You must tell me everything, darling! I haven't seen you for simply ages!" Simply ages meant that same morning.

She held her little mirror up to her reddened quivering nose. Then off they went into the cool evening glow, greeted by a twinkle from the first golden star, arm in arm, thoroughly old fashioned, from the times *when Grandfather took Grandmother to wife.\** Justus actually whistled through his soulful chanteur lips a few quite lively bars from Schumann's *Carnaval*. But here we must note a slight deviation from the Biedermeier norm: Charlott kept her hands hidden in her coat pockets, and it was Justus who held her firmly by the arm.

"So we can get married this very week, Charlott," he cheerfully declared. "For an extra fee and with the help of a sympathetic contact at the Interior Ministry, we can skip the banns."

"Wonderful! Give me a cigarette! We'll do it tomorrow. That is, I don't have anything to wear at the Registry Office. And I'm already booked up for tomorrow morning. So the day after. Or rather let's do it tomorrow anyhow! On with the programme!"

Justus gazed awkwardly at the sky: "Well, I still have a little bit saved from my bankruptcy, for special occasions. About fifteen hundred English pounds. We can use it to travel."

Charlott lifted up her startled forehead: "Travel? Where to?"

Justus stammered a little: "I had a share at one point in an oceangoing yacht ... But you know it: the *Charlott*. Magnificent vessel! They're about to fit out an expedition."

"They?" Charlott enquired.

"Well, the other owners ... who now own the whole boat. Because I had to sell them my share. They've taken me on as a deep-sea sailor ... at a pretty good salary."

Justus gave Charlott's arm an enthusiastic squeeze: "The yacht will be ready for action day after tomorrow at Cuxhaven. We'll cruise for three years in the Indian Ocean or off Java, along the Japanese coast! I've long wanted to instal some depth and temperature measuring equipment, because since the last earthquake the seafloor has sunk to a depth that can never have been observed since the dawn of humanity." Justus was eagerness itself. "You must come down to the seabed, Charlott! But only two meters down! You'll have a diving suit made to measure by the best tailor in Paris! None of the crew must find out that you're my wife. You'll be taken on as ship's boy!"

Charlott gave a little skip: "With bell-bottomed trousers and spitting over the side! Starboard ahoy! or however you lot say it! And then down to the bottom of the sea to play mahjong or rummy with the pretty little fish!"

Justus at her side gave a merry laugh. Yet Charlott was now staring ahead, eyebrows raised. "But I have not the slightest intention of leaving Berlin!" she cried, sounding quite surprised, as if she had just made a profound discovery in her soul.

Justus, anxious and none too gentle, pulled her along. "Whatever will you do with yourself in this horrible city, Charlott? Where all the silly young things are who love you? That's my greatest good fortune: to tear you away from that lot, once and for all!"

"But I do so enjoy being in Berlin just now, where it will all be so wonderful and we'll be married and we're going to have masses of money!"

"You forget, my love, that we shan't have a pfennig."

"You forget, Justibus, that I'm going to make sure of our big one-and-a-half pfennigs! You forget that I absolutely must be in Berlin just now! Because it's from Berlin that I shall mobilise my troops!"

"Your troops!" cried Justus, rather testily. "You're determined to keep from me whatever it is you're planning. But now you've let slip that it will be – a contest between two women! But I shan't wage war on any woman in the world! It doesn't suit me! It goes against my upbringing. I've done enough fighting, and done enough suffering! As a prisoner of war, as your husband, in my solitude! Now I want to live with you, happily and harmoniously and calmly!"

"Really? That's what you want?" Charlott mocked. "And chew our well-earned ship's biscuit on your yacht, as the handbook tells us to? No thanks, Justibus! If it's up to me I shall fire broadsides at the Indonesian Archipelago! Napoleon failed to push on to India! Just you wait and see how swiftly *I* shall advance! I mean to deploy enormous firepower! A few days after we marry I plan to launch a campaign such as Europe has never seen!"

"My child," said Justus gravely, and now they walked along side by side like any married couple of the age, "any such enterprise aimed at a widow living in India is beyond our means, and beyond our upbringing! These are all childish fantasies! You'll be banging your head against a brick wall!"

Now Justus was revealing his agitation. His voice shook:

"Charlott, my most precious creature, I know being a philistine will be out of bounds once we're married. Perhaps I was one, the first time. I shan't ever be again. I'm ready for any adventure, however sporting or loopy. We'll grip the blade between our teeth, hitch up our trousers, and slink through the most depraved cities on this planet. But please, no European social scandal that'll get into the papers and make you and me look ridiculous and bring to neither of us anything but shame and mockery!"

"I'm not just turning my life into a film!" cried Charlott indignantly. "Whenever I do anything, it always has a practical goal."

"But I don't want practical goals!" cried Justus, equally indignantly. "I thought you wanted to marry me so we can be good companions in our poverty. But if your only reason for marrying me is to use my name to promote a boxing match between two women, then ... then ..."

"Then what?"

Justus turned deathly pale: "Then we have to drop the whole idea."

And Napoleonic Charlott quite simply burst into tears. Three paces from the eighteenth green she held her hands up to her face so that the two little fingers squeezed the nostrils. But the tears were real and honest and healthy, not those of a hysterical or slyly manipulative woman.

"You'll see soon enough what it's about," she sobbed. "Once I'm already dead ..."

"Dead?" Justus, unfamiliar with this kind of sentimentality from Charlott, was thunderstruck. "For God's sake, why dead all of a sudden?"

Charlott sobbed like a little child: "You may as well order the gravestone right away ..."

"Gravestone?" cried Justus.

Charlott sobbed. "...have a gravestone made ... 'Ci Gît Charlott',\* and for all I care 'a bit loopy. Mourned eternally.'"

Horrificed, Justus explored Charlott's body with his gaze. "Don't you feel well, darling? Something in the appendix? Temperature in the lungs? Good God in Heaven, you're hands are so hot! You'll have a heart attack! Of course! After a whole day on the golf course, moving about! You dear creature, how often have I begged you to have your tonsils out? We shall go to Bumm right away tomorrow morning."

Charlott sat down on the grass, and burst out laughing. "To Bumm?" she cried. "He's been dead for ages!"

She sat there on the grass like a child that wants to play with pebbles. Then she raised her 'feverish' hands to place them in Justus' hands. But behind the last trickling tears there gleamed again the eyes of a quite new lust for life. Justus pulled her up by those hands. He enclosed Charlott in his arms.

"Really?" he asked, his voice tender and gentle. "We shall get married this week, and that very evening depart for Cuxhaven ... Or we'll go to Paris first, and you'll order three hundred dresses and seven hundred pairs of shoes for India, Bali and Japan ... and we'll have the yacht pick us up at Brest or Cherbourg."

Unlucky Justus, he keeps forgetting he's no longer a rich man!

Charlott laid her forehead against his forehead. But – Justus couldn't see this – between her eyebrows two furrows had appeared. They were two sharp and dangerously tipped arrows beneath the bow of her bold taut-stretched forehead.

At that moment a shout came from the clubhouse: "Sweetheart! Charlott! You coming? We're off to Potsdam, crayfish at the Klosterkeller!"

Charlott directed an enigmatic gaze towards the clubhouse: "Do let's stay in Berlin, Justus. You can see for yourself how wonderful it is here!"

Baffled, Justus wiped his brow: "Now I truly have no clue as to what's going on ..."

Holk together with Acacia took a running jump into the new Flea he had bought just this morning, and steered it directly at Charlott and Justus.

“I’m giving Camilla a lift! We’re going to look out at Peacock Island for a few minutes from Nikolskoe,\* then drink beer in those special Potsdam glasses!\* We’ll all meet in the Klosterkeller with a hundred and twenty crayfish, morels, Moselle wine and Apollinaris! Chambertin all the way to Oude Genever! Adio!”

Charlott darted a quick sidelong scrutinising glance at Justus, with a flash of tenderness that quickly faded. “They have wonderful crayfish at the Klosterkeller,” she said.

Justus’ eyes looked round about. “Now I really am all at sea ...”

## .VII.

Early next morning, at around eight o’clock, Charlott drove her car from Cornelius Strasse towards the golf course, at a speed that literally brought tears to the eyes of traffic policemen and the AVUS gatekeepers.

For two hours she played a match with some playmate or other from her childhood. This was a Thankmar who had once wasted many hours in a French high school in order to escort Charlott to Fräulein Kollmorgen and then join her in beginner foxtrot lessons. The match was so exciting, it wasn’t until twenty past ten that Charlott, with a little scream, remembered her appointment with Justus, who would be waiting at Cornelius Strasse to carry her off to the Registry Office. Charlott was never unpunctual – she thought it an outmoded and effeminate custom – but to make her appointments on time she always started with a very unfavourable handicap, because always, at a certain much too late point in time, she would pull herself together with a little scream, and then with enormous spurts and in magnificent style catch up with the clock and usually arrive whipping off her hairband, eyes bright blue, black hair streaming, and complexion carefully refreshed.

“Adieu, Thankmar! I’ll have to do a hundred and thirty to tie the knot! If I crash now I shall die a Vestal!”

And away she leapt on her lovely long legs towards her car.

The Thankmar, in shirtsleeves, leapt after her: “Take me along, Charlott! I have to go to the bank.”

So they drove back to Berlin at a hellish tempo. The Thankmar at Charlott’s side thought long and hard what a Vestal might be. Just as he was about to ask, Charlott decanted him unceremoniously onto Cornelius Brücke, i.e. he was required to jump out at full speed, and would thereby certainly have landed on his nose and fallen under wheels, had he been anything less than a Thankmar.

At once Charlott hurtled into the two-room apartment with its numerous gaping wardrobes in the first garden villa on Cornelius Strasse.

After pulling a helmet of bronze-coloured plastic over her head, she stood stark naked in the shower. She looked just like a modestly bathing Athene Parthenos. As it touched her body, the water glinting in the sunlight emphasised the tangy aroma of her skin. Drips enthusiastically given and enthusiastically received trickled down the rounded shoulders to breasts that allowed them to slide as if from round bronze shields, down to the lovely

wide well-honed raptor-hips where their path now diverged: on one they atomised dancing over knees and feet, on the other they spilled in an ecstasy of love into the cleft of her thighs.

Seven minutes later, during which interval she was interrupted by two telephone calls, Charlott was dressed to the nines with the aid of a personage who served her all at once as old biddy, chambermaid and cook. Now she and the maid began to complete the packing of her suitcases.

Suddenly, however, something that yet again seemed deadly serious occurred to Charlott, because she ran from the packing, retreated to her bedroom, locked the door, and retrieved from a rococo casket a certain document that she unfolded carefully, and read. It was an utterly uninteresting piece of writing, but one of those papers that were inescapably necessary here for a wedding, whatever one's influence with the Ministry of the Interior. No joining in matrimony on German soil without such a paper! All it noted, attested and officially stamped in emphatic lettering was that Charlott is a citizen of the Prussian State – nothing more. Charlott thrust out her upper lip. She screwed up her eyes, so avidly did she scrutinise the wording. The merged eyebrows formed two charcoal pencil lines across her face.

At that moment the maid knocked at the door. "There's a gentleman here who wishes to speak with you, madam."

Charlott tucked the uninteresting document carefully back into the casket.

Now she was on the move, in haste and rather flustered – so she allowed the gentleman in to the jumble of her living room without much enquiry as to his name, because she assumed it was some Thankmar needing a quick word.

She was surprised to see a total stranger walk in, a young man, what's more, pretty as a picture, with laughing blue eyes and soft brown hair, one small lock of which fell untidily across his brow and caused him to give a little toss of the head now and then. He had the cheekiest and most amusing little boy-nose that Charlott had ever seen: a teensy little bit upturned, with rather rounded nostrils. His clothing was mildly reminiscent of Holk's, but a bit more divinely raffish. His trousers, a loose-cut grey check, dropped quite wildly down over his shoes, Oxford hose such as matched the exuberance of students in England, a dark brown golf jacket the exact same colour as his hair – a jacket that emitted a slight aroma of English tobacco, Richmond blended with Navy Cut. He was medium-sized, his figure incredibly regular, gifted with healthy, strong, pretty limbs. All in all he might be around twenty-four and (Charlott saw at a glance) he was a most stupendous bounder, his lackadaisical air just as charming and comfortable as his Oxford hose and his golf jacket.

Charlott's surprise mounted to a rather moronic amazement when the young man held out his bronzed hand for an actual handshake, at the same time executing a little reverse shuffle.: "Hallo, Charlott! How's it going? I'm delighted to see you!"

Of course a woman like Charlott, a Berliner of our times, could never remain baffled for more than three seconds. She held her hand out to the fellow.

"The delight is all mine. Who are you, actually?"

The young man's lips in the fresh healthy face twitched as if about to laugh, only to be held back with enormous exertion. "You don't know me, Charlott dear? But I know you!"

Charlott chewed a little at a corner of her lower lip. She looked sideways at the youth: "Really?"

"Yes! You drove past me this morning at around eight, when I was taking breakfast in a café on your renowned Kurfürstendamm. I'm actually staying at a horrid little hotel by the Zoological Gardens, where they can't manage a decent cup of tea. And there's no jam, and the black bread leaves much to be desired. I recognised you at the first glimpse, and it made me so happy!"

"What a surprise," said Charlott.

"I should say so!" The young man seemed to have lost none of his earlier delight. "Because I saw your photograph once in a magazine I bought in London. I think it was called 'The Lady'. I keep it at the bottom of my suitcase. You were driving your car and there was a lovely black mastiff at your side, you looked really topping! I fell in love at once with both of you."

Charlott stared at the youth, eyebrows raised, gnawing at her lower lip, her eyes took on an enamel-coloured sheen from the strain of guessing, thought-tracking, pondering.

"I recognised the car at once, it's parked downstairs," the young man added, his eyes laughing as if expecting praise for his acute powers of observation.

"So, young man, having seen my picture in a magazine, you come to my apartment just like that, to look me up? What a splendid notion! Please accept my congratulations. And on the very day, at the very moment when I am just about to go and be married!"

The young man gave a little start. He slapped his knees with open hands.

"Why couldn't you have waited a couple of days for me? Marrying you would have made me so happy!"

"I would gladly have done so," Charlott replied politely but with the force of an incipient thunderstorm, as menacing sharp arrows formed between her eyebrows. "So now perhaps I may be permitted to know ..."

The young man took both Charlott's hands in his, in the way that one draws closer an object on which one wishes to gaze to one's heart's content in order to arrive at a true assessment of its worth. Then, quite satisfied, charmed even, he shook those hands: "Stanley!"

"Stanley?" Charlott repeated, thoughtfully. "Stanley?!"

Suddenly she planted a mad passionate kiss on the intrusive stranger's face. "Stanley Fisher? With the s h?"

She pulled them arm in arm down onto the sofa. They were at immediate risk of falling off, so delighted were they with one another. They sat like two urchins on a fence who have scared a flock of sheep and now let their heads go dizzy as all go galloping past.

"Stanley, dear boy!" Charlott cried, real tenderness in her tone. "I've never had such luck in all my life, seeing you here!"

“Really? They all say that when I show up. Even when they’re about to get married. Must be something about me!”

Stanley laid an arm on Charlott’s shoulders. “I think we can talk like friends, can’t we, right away? No formal nonsense? That’s what I find so nice about you Germans!”

“You seem to have picked our nice habits up very quickly, dear boy!”

“Haven’t I? But then we used to send each other little letters and presents when we were still babies.”

“Yes! You sent me homemade sweets, and Pears soap, and Old Lavender!”

“And you sent me Prussian tin soldiers! Prussian cavalymen were in huge demand among us boys out in the Indies! Imperial Lifeguards! At the front a fellow with an enormous beard, beating a drum, that was our Queen’s son in law, your Kaiser Frederick!”

In their bliss, each gave the other a little shake.

“How long have you been in town?”

“Arrived this a.m. from Moscow. I’ve been crisscrossing Europe for the past year. Might I stay with you? I still have two dollars, one-and-a-half chervonets,\* and one Mark thirty.”

“One-and-a-half chervonets? One-and-a-half!? So you’ve no money? How wonderful!”

“It would be wonderful if you could do something about it. Can you, perhaps, lend me ninety-two Mark?”

“Is it really true, Stanley?” Charlott asked, unable as yet fully to believe her luck. “You want money from me? Is this really not a dream? You have nothing? No bank account here in Europe? No letter of credit, no traveller’s cheques?”

“Nothing!” Stanley countered pitilessly, like a man who will not be trifled with. “Two dollars, one and a half chervonets, one Mark thirty, and a horrid hotel by the Zoological Gardens with no jam or grapefruit.”

Charlott rushed to the door.: “Fanny! Mr Fisher will be staying with us! Mr Fisher will sleep in my bed! And now cocktails and cigarettes – right away!”

Fanny had long stopped being astonished. She made a mental note that a rough strange fellow completely unknown to Charlott just two minutes ago will be sleeping in Charlott’s very own bed this evening.

Charlott stationed herself before Stanley, who looked up at her with his mouth slightly open, giving him a charmingly foolish look such as only highly intelligent people can have. Like a beautiful insect he flicked back the hair that was over his eyes. Charlott’s body quivered in absolute delight beneath the light summer dress.

Question and answer followed at lightning speed.

“How do you get on with your mother?”

“She never gives me money.”

“Nor me!”

“Oh, I know!”

“And my husband is bankrupt.”

“That occurred to me this morning, as soon as I saw your car!”

“And I still have friends and a sweet little cousin on my father’s side – but nobody here in Germany has two pfennigs to rub together!”

“That’s OK. I’ll be moving on.”

“Shall we work together?”

“Yes!”

“Clean your mother out?”

“Oh yes, Charlott!” This in English; in their glee both suddenly lapsed into English.

“We shall initiate a pirate action against the Tea Company Ltd, Hankow and Colombo!”

“That has been my ambition ever since the first childish sounds emerged from my sweet little boy throat!”

“Stanley! I have a tremendous plan! Are you the type of youngster who’d help me steal a horse?”

“A herd of elephants!”

“When I get hold of my one-and-a-half, that very same day I shall lend you ten thousand pounds.”

“Grand!”

“You’ll pay me back once you have some money.”

“I’ll be disinherited, for sure.”

“No matter. You’re an only child. You’ll have your legal share.”

“Oh good!”

“Is your mother over there in India?”

“Here on the Continent! She’s trying to pour some ghastly new blend of cheap tea down people’s throats.”

Charlott screamed: “She’ll be in Berlin?”

“I don’t think so.”

“So where then?”

“She’s been in Italy, Yugoslavia and Paris. She’s now in London. But I think she’ll soon be back in Paris.”

“Paris? Very good! And you – you’ve just come from Russia?”

“Yes.”

Charlott chewed feverishly with little nibbles at an index finger: “Russia’s good!”

“It’s all right. Could be better.”

“Any good friends there?”

"A handful."

"Any of them important?"

"Some."

"Officials?"

"Some."

"Is it once again possible to obtain in Russia anything you want?"

"Anything."

"Luxury goods?"

"Certainly!"

"Marriage certificates as well? Baptism and birth certificates? Passports?"

Stanley leaned forward politely: "Pardon?"

Charlott repeated impatiently: "Birth certificates, passports ..."

Stanley regarded her up and down, head to toe. The nostrils of his cheeky nose flared: "I think that if we're going to marry, we can manage it even without Moscow."

"No, darling! Be serious! Think!"

"I am very deep in thought."

"Certain papers from Russia, please. I'll provide more details in due course."

"A mere trifle."

"Are you in their good books over there?"

"Tight as two thieves! I'll tell them we're going to give the Anglo-Saxon tea capitalists one in the eye! For that kind of thing they'll hand over all the Kremlin's treasures! We shall travel together to Crimea, or the Siberian frontier."

"You don't look like someone a decent girl could travel with to the Siberian frontier."

"Oh!" said Stanley (or perhaps "Ow!").

Charlott dragged him to his feet: "You beloved angel! Now you must go, at once. You hear! At once! Fetch your suitcase. Here's three hundred Mark. My husband will be here any moment."

"Oh! I shall be so sorry to miss him. I'd have loved to touch him for a loan."

"No! He must not see you! None of my people must know about you! Only my cousin Camilla! You understand me? I shall be back here tomorrow morning. Then we'll talk it over. Now you must drink up the cocktails all by yourself."

Charlott rummaged in her bag. "Here's another two hundred Mark! You must find yourself some wonderful entertainment this evening! Go and see Massary\* or Bergner – they're the best we have to offer – or go to La Scala!"

Before Stanley could utter a word, Charlott had vanished into her bedroom. She opened the casket, took out her certificate of nationality, considered – for a moment.

Then she tore the document vigorously into many tiny pieces. But her face still had a look of wildly excited tenderness.

Thus did she reappear to Stanley, the afterglow of that tenderness still in her eyes.

“Be very careful, Stanley! Take this bag – there’s nothing in it – and throw it into the canal in front of this building. It’s essential that this bag must have been lost!”

“Oh, a thousand thanks, Charlott! I love throwing pretty objects into a canal. Such a charming bag. One could never drown it deep enough.”

“Yes. But don’t go giving it to some woman of the night! Throw it in the canal, right by this building!”

“Confirmed!”

“Every minute counts! All will be at risk if you don’t leave here within the next minute!”

“I had a notion this morning that you might throw me out like this.”

Their kiss was torrid, their eyes laughed – and not, as you might think, just for one fleeting moment.

Stanley dashed like a happy and not at all unexcited young ram to the corridor door. He was already on the doorstep when Charlott called out to him:

“Hey, Stanley! What are you, actually? Do you have a profession?”

“A penman!” came echoing back. “A typewriter man! A pencil man!”

Charlott leaned over the handrail: “Journalist? Writer?”

“Both!”

“What do you write?”

“A novel!” His voice came from ever lower landings. “For the *Saturday Evening Post*!”

“What’s it about?” cried Charlott.

“A sweet woman! A bit loopy! I love her dearly! Goodbye!”

“Goodbye, Stanley! I look forward to reading your novel! Goodbye!”

## .VIII.

Fifteen minutes later, Charlott was driving, Justus at her side, towards the Registry Office. When they had to stop before Potsdamer Platz, she asked: “Should we bring melons from Pelzer? Have you ordered everything? Shall we have cold venison with Cumberland sauce? Has the court receiver out at Petersdorf pawned your silver? Should we take mine? But all I have is six knives and six forks, and what’s the table linen situation?”

Justus calmed her concerns, and as he did so peered, not without concern, towards the radiator. He was no longer used to driving with Charlott. He had trained his own chauffeur to be a perfect Buddhist. “I always have plenty of time, I am never in a hurry,” he told the man when he hired him.

Suddenly Justus thought of something: “Did you bring your certificate of nationality?”

“What do you mean?” Charlott asked, and with a sharp flex of the elbow roared rightwards onto Voss Strasse.

“Back, darling! Home! Turn around!”

“Turn around?” For twenty meters Charlott doubled the car’s speed.

Justus cried: “But darling, I told you, without that document we cannot be married! I obtained it for you from Police HQ! It must be back at your flat!”

“O-o-o-h, you mean the certificate of nationality document?” Charlott blushed a little. “I have a confession to make, Justus. I lost my bag yesterday, no idea where! I think the certificate must have been in it, and five hundred Mark!”

Justus had long abandoned the habit of pressing fists to his brow whenever Charlott once again gained the upper hand. He murmured sadly: “Now you tell me!”

“O la la darling! I had a splendid game of golf this morning! And there was no time yesterday evening to think of such nonsense. But we can marry without that sort of thing. If the registrar proves finicky, I shall make squirrel-eyes at him.”

Justus’ own eyes now grew quite mournful, his Petersdorf winter eyes, when he conversed with his mastiff.

Camilla was waiting for them at the Registry Office dressed in a dark blue suit, on her head a dashing little felt hat. Holk hadn’t arrived yet. Camilla placed her energetic little hand in a military salute at the downturned brim of her hat, palm out, the fingers splayed to a ridiculous degree, turning her into a polite devoted bridesmaid to her cousin Charlott, who opened her inimitably blooming mouth in a laugh, and they kissed.

“Your maid, your maid, my dear Charlott!” said Camilla.

And then, after the cousins had chatted a while together in the anteroom, and Justus had negotiated in vain with the registrar, Holk turned up, on his head cowboy hat.

“Next time I shall take you by the ears if you turn up late to my wedding with Justus. And *what* are you wearing?!”

If Holk’s ruddy tanned complexion had offered the possibility, his face at this wedding would have been green with vexation. Sweat trickled like four streams of tears down the furrows in his cheeks. He flung off his gabardine jacket. He had had no time at all to make himself half decent. He kissed Charlott’s hand and exchanged a handshake with Camilla.

“Won’t you apologise for being late?” Charlott asked.

Holk, disgruntled, muttered: “A chap can’t keep apologising all day long.”

Charlott and Camilla laughed. But now Charlott grew impatient. She started off towards the room where the wedding was supposed to take place, when a thunderous “Halt!” boomed out at her. That one piece of paper was missing! Without that paper, no wedding!

So Charlott made her squirrel-eyes, negotiated, telephoned her lawyer, complained to every office, put all her charms into top gear – all for nothing! Verily, whatever ye shall bind on Earth showed itself to be the only power on Earth, uncorruptible in the face of Charlott’s lavishly applied seductive arts.

The wedding would have to put off to another day.

Charlott left the Registry Office with a tiny quivering tender smile at the corners of her mouth. Camilla's nostrils too were quivering. She stared at her cousin Charlott amazed, bewildered almost. Holk blossomed like a new rose. Justus was downcast, but much too well brought up, much too polite and in love to show his dismay.

And yet, inwardly all seemed hopeless to him. He could repeat as often as he liked that their goal would be attained in the next few days. He was superstitious, and in his innermost being deeply depressed.

In the street Charlott planted a vibrant caressing kiss all over his lips. "Justibus! What do we care about that slip of paper! From today we're quite simply man and wife again!"

To Justus, these were magic words. His breathing came easier; he was almost happy.

Charlott sat behind the wheel. "Children! Now everything shall proceed as if our business up there was successful! We shall fetch our wedding breakfast in hampers from Pelzer's, and away to Petersdorf!"

This proposal transformed the mood. At once everyone began to tell the wildest jokes.

And so the thwarted wedding party landed up two hours later in Petersdorf. The kindly industrial magnate from the dyestuff works had recently announced that he would not be moving in for another six months. And so he had placed the premises at the disposal of the former owner for the honeymoon.

Shortly before they entered the estate, a remarkable ceremony took place in the wedding car. Charlott stopped the car, stood up, and put on the thickest and most resistant of all the available leather coats. For now was the time to beware of a certain personage that dwelled at Petersdorf – one who had not seen her for eight months, could not have been alerted to her imminent arrival, and so it might be feared that in the fury of her love, she would at best strip the clothes from Charlott's back; and at worst, the flesh from her bones.

As the car turned into the palace's plane-tree drive, in the master bedroom a black mastiff in her armchair was assailed by the first utterly improbable atmospheric waves. The mighty beast stood up, almost laboriously and on stiff legs as if rheumatic; the face scowled suspicion, for in the past eight months so many approaching sounds and smells had dashed all her hopes that in her heart she bore the sad and rather stubborn grief of Ithaca's loyal queen. And yet, something else began to pulsate and tinkle through space, the atmosphere took on an almost epic character. Of course it might be just one more of those myriad disappointments – and yet! Now there can be no doubt: from somewhere, wafting into the room, came the one most desired, the one most essential scent!

And so Bosco placed her forepaws on the window ledge, toes widely splayed; she pricked her ears up to the maximum possible, though the left required further aid, a clipping mishap having left it flapping loose. She stretched her neck like an Arabian stallion, and opened her mouth, whereby folds similar to those on Holk's cheeks formed. She was a pitch-black mastiff with a snow-white tummy, a snow-white patch on her throat, and snow-white paws, the white slanting up the leg to give the impression of kid gloves with the cuffs turned down. All in all she was a gentleman-dog, who wore her pelt

like a frock coat with shirt-front, bow tie, and four gloves pale as anemone flowers. Nature had also decked her out with some white about the lips and beard, which imparted a more senior and respectable appearance than she really deserved. She was barely three and a half years old, but earlier, in those happy days, she had been so foolish and so unfamiliar with the decimal system by which her years should really be counted, that now and then she played the three-month dog, plodding around on artificially thickened paws and drooling mouth looking for some meaningless thing on which to inflict meaningless bites, all the while uttering “ruff-wuff”, or when the play was becoming even more childish, “ruff-huff-wuff!”

At the window now she stiffened to a statue of obsidian, like an Egyptian cat. But she was a mastiff, reliant not on smell alone but also on her sharp eyes – hunter’s eyes inherited from ancestors who once chased lion and boar. She made a furious 180 degree turn, scrabbled at the door handle, and not until she came dashing down the stairs did she emit a sound, a wail of foreboding at yet another disappointment. At the first landing, of course, she misjudged the curve, tried to adjust her centre of gravity with a galloping leap on the spot, which caused her to fall on her side and tumble head over heels down the whole flight. But no matter! She’s made faster progress! Outside she hurled herself headlong at Charlott, who as a precaution against the expected assault was supported like a praying Moses in front of the car by Justus and Holk on either side. No use! At the second love-lunge the frontal breach was achieved without further ado; Charlott was felled, Justus and Holk fled, and Bosco pinned Charlott down with her whole weight, seized the leather coat at the chest and worried it, uttering grandiose guttural barks. On this occasion they formed clear unmistakable words: Wrath! Wrath! Wrath! You left me here for eight long months, Charlott, you crushed the heart in my body!

The beast shook her prey, Charlott laughed and screamed. She tried to kiss her murderer’s breast, but the beast would tolerate no interference. She alone was the prime actor, hers alone the agency, the ravaging, the doing.

Amid great alarm, Charlott was pulled to her feet. She held a hand out to the dreadful valet Teppich, who found the whole performance disgraceful, and condemned both lady and dog.

“Such a wonderful way to greet a visitor...!” Charlott laughed and tittered and giggled. She stuck her arm deep in the dog’s mouth, and, as if eaten up by love, entered her husband’s house.

## .IX.

Petersdorf, a palace erected in the Berlin Classical style after the Wars of Liberation, had been renovated a few years ago by Justus and Holk in collaboration, in such a way that every room that was colourful, baroque, amusing and graceful was decorated by Holk with Charlott in mind, while for his own rooms Justus preferred the building’s more severe character from a hundred years back.

While Charlott, Camilla and Holk, assisted by the gardener’s wife, were sorting out the wedding breakfast in the kitchen – apart from Teppich and the gardener’s family, there were no other staff at Petersdorf now – Justus, inspecting his aquarium, was surprised by

news that his agent, Counsellor Hergatz, had just arrived by car. Justus received him in his workroom, where, among other items, the Cezanne procured by Holk was on display.

"My dear Justus," said Counsellor Hergatz, an older gentleman with a bald pointed skull on which the Organ of Intelligence stood out, "I've been trying to reach you for the past week on a most urgent matter. But you are nowhere to be found, either by telephone, or by mail, until today on the telephone I squeezed from Teppich the information that you would be coming out to Petersdorf."

"I do apologise, Hergatz. My head has been full of all sorts of other matters. On top of that, I got married this morning."

Justus blushed rather at this little lie.

"Congratulations." Hergatz was not a man who shocked easily. "Am I acquainted with your spouse?"

"You mean my first?"

"Of course I know your first wife," Hergatz replied, a bit taken aback.

"Then you also know my second, good Counsellor."

"Charlott?"

"Bravo! She's down in the kitchen, preparing our little breakfast."

"Charlott?" Hergatz said again. "But that is a shame."

Now it was Justus' turn to be taken aback. "How is it a shame?" he asked, almost aggressively.

"Charlott won't improve your creditworthiness, Justus. She too, as I have heard, has debts ... Well, that's all neither here nor there, of course."

"I hope so!"

"All I am concerned about is your good reputation. The wildest rumours about you are circulating in Berlin."

"Really?"

"Yes indeed, Justus! I consider it my duty to inform you that you are said to be bankrupt!"

"Dreadful!"

"Isn't it? You, you of all people – bankrupt! The rumour persists quite stubbornly, despite my denials. Indeed, some assert that you yourself have confirmed it, that Petersdorf has been let, that you are living in a garret – in short, absurd! In the end I spent an evening with my secretary going over your affairs, and ascertained that your assets are not only fully intact, but thanks to favourable developments, various of your holdings on the Berlin and New York exchanges have risen over the last few months by around twenty-five percent. The value of your shipping shares requires further investigation. But I estimate your overall worth, all things considered, to be not less than four and a half million Mark. Now, because these bankruptcy rumours, even for a man of your stature,

could give rise to unpleasantness with your bankers, I propose, Justus, that we take vigorous action to counter the slanders.”

Justus stared directly into the Counsellor’s eyes. “If you do that, I shall sic my mastiff onto you, and feed your corpse to my sharks, lobsters and crayfish.”

“I beg your pardon, Justus?” said Hergatz, rendered quite timorous by the mastiffs, sharks and lobsters.

“I have spoken, Hergatz. You surely don’t want me to initiate a bloodbath, here on my wedding day? I am bankrupt, and wish to remain bankrupt. I authorise you to pay anyone who asserts to you that I am ruined a prize of one hundred Mark, in token of my especial esteem for his slander. Please join us for breakfast.”

“I shall take my leave, Justus. For the first time in my forty years of practice, I feel not quite well. I am not on my best form. I believe neither are you. Please kiss Charlott’s hand.”

“Thank you. Until next time, dear Counsellor.”

Justus went back down to his aquarium. He was not in a jolly mood. Where was everything heading?

He felt an urge for activity. He took up specialised brushes and busied himself a while at the corners and walls of the tanks, and with a window scraper scraped algae from the glass, in order to provide Charlott with a clear view of every creature.

It was March, the season of carbon dioxide deficiencies was past, plants in the tanks were thriving, fanwort, elodea and spirals of eelgrass were shooting up to refresh and enliven the fish. Was the temperature in the paradise-fish tank set warm enough? Justus read off the thermometer: 20°C. He decided to increase it by two degrees, and left a note for Teppich. Oh look! The stickleback in its wedding dress! We understand one another, today more than ever.

Bosco came bounding down the stairs wearing her laughing face. The black “gentleman” could not completely forget her companion in sorrow today of all days, she really must convey to him what a joyful hour it has been for her, and she must show her gratitude that the human brain has succeeded in fetching Charlott back. Thus had it been for millennia between Bosco and Justus, man and hound. Master had been lucky with his plans, his cunning and his fictions; but she, the dog, had dragged the woman back into the house with the strength of her own teeth and paws! Wasn’t that something, eh? Millennia ago she had performed similar deeds, when captive childless women sought to escape from her cave.

The mastiff stood, placed forepaws on Justus’ shoulders, and blew hot happy breath into his face. The two of them stood there – the “gentleman”-predator and the gentleman-human – until Bosco turned about.

Quick! Back to the kitchen! To Charlott, to Charlott!

In the kitchen the newly captured female was toiling away, and Camilla, Holk and the gardener’s wife were also busy. None of the female beings was as adept as Holk. He was the best cook, the cleverest restaurateur. He dug out the prettiest glasses, accepted the

key to the cabinet of ancient porcelain with the bird designs. He juggled porcelain, pans, Bohemian glass, Queen Anne silver, cream-whippers, and cut melons into slices more delicate than any woman could achieve. Charlott and Camilla looked to him for advice. It was quite natural for them to ask this man, so conversant and experienced was he with all of life's sensuousness, about matters that really, were they not so completely women of this age, they should have known about better than he.

Holk was therefore in a radiant mood. If only someone had mentioned to him this morning, when he woke up feeling so awful – Charlott's wedding breakfast, but no wedding! Now, in some way, he had caught a whiff of something from Charlott! He sensed she had changed direction – but what direction? Surely not towards him! He'll see about that. What the Devil is Charlott up to? She's so strange, so happy and excited, so flushed, and a tad sentimental. One minute she looks as if she might burst into tears, next minute she's again sweet to the whole world, not only to Justus, but to him, to Camilla, and – this was the point – to something as yet unknown!

"Darling Holk, take this bucket and bring some ice up from the cellar! Here's the key."

Charlott handed him the key gazing straight ahead, lips parted with a hint of bliss.

Obedient Holk abandoned his task of sorting out the silverware. He took the bucket and key. The gardener's wife came with him. Charlott and Camilla were alone in the kitchen.

Two days ago, they had enjoyed a long and meaningful girlfriends-and-cousins confab in Camilla's office. Meanwhile momentous events had intruded, which absolutely had to be talked over here in the kitchen. Camilla, whose nose picked up Charlott's scent much more sensitively than Holk's, was determined to help Charlott wherever she was heading, for hadn't she been born with that irresistible "drawn somehow to Charlott" that was usually termed "love"? Nature had administered to her an especially large dose of this "love for Charlott". It was no sedative, this medicine. Taking part in Charlott's life and fate, Camilla had only to take care not to lose her own strong personality. It was not by chance that she loved Holk, and that the second man in the whole world she could have fallen in love with was none other than Justus. Of course she wanted nothing whatever to do with all those Thankmars. She was even offended with Charlott, and thought it snobbish to mix with the Thankmars.

Charlott whispered to Camilla as she carved the haunch of venison: "Do you have a passport?"

"Of course."

"Photos often show a family likeness. Does your passport photo look a bit like me?"

"With a hat ... I think ..."

"Will you lend it to me?"

"You want to be me?"

"Yes!"

"And I you?"

“No!”

“Shame! I’d love to be Charlott for a while.”

“So live like *this*, Cammie!” Charlott turned the carving knife sharp edge upwards.

Camilla gazed at Charlott like an enamoured slave. She curtsied, almost unnoticeably: “I’ll give you whatever you need, Charlott. But prudence, please! In my profession I must be especially cautious. You shall have my passport, but please spare me the rest of the game!”

Charlott’s eyes glistened: “Thank you!”

Camilla regarded her with serious caring eyes. “Should I do an analysis of you?”

“Yes!”

“Sketch the present phase of you the criminal?”

“Yes!”

“The director of the Criminal Psychological Institute cannot be deceived! You are in love.”

Charlott breathed: “Yes.”

“And not with Holk!”

“No!”

“And you arranged matters so that you would not be married today!”

“Yes!”

“That’s a very shabby way to treat Justus!”

“No!”

“No?”

“No! It’s best for him! It’s got nothing to do with my being in love!”

“No? Really not?”

“Not at all! Or ... I mean ... a little bit ... possibly ... you ought to meet him ...”

“Him?”

“Yes. We’ll tell you all about it. This very evening! A big pow-wow!”

“This evening?”

“Yes. I’ve been thinking it through. Tonight I shall go back to Berlin. He’s staying in my apartment. I spent the night at the Esplanade ... Hush! Go now to Justus!”

Camilla took the stairs down to the aquarium. She felt not only love for Charlott, but a big chunk of affection and respect for Justus. She was constantly alert to keep Justus from anything damaging that might reach him with respect to Charlott.

So down there in the aquarium, facing Justus, she put on her your-servant-sir face, with a friendly, sympathetic, encouraging smile, accompanied of course by the clownish military salute.

She knew that nothing would please Justus more than the request: "Please introduce me to your lovely creatures!" Justus laid a brotherly arm on her shoulders.

"What do you think about this wedding business, Camilla?" he asked quietly, leaning his broad forehead forward a little, the better to see Camilla's expression as she answered.

Camilla dropped her gaze. "You'll be married in the next few days, I'm sure of it."

Justus' mighty breast rose and fell with a sigh. "You really think so?"

Camilla shot a rapid sideways glance. "You have doubts, Justus?"

"Maybe ... A little ... There was already a slight altercation on the golf course ... Charlott can tell you about it ..."

He pulled Camilla along. "Let's just enjoy today!"

Now Camilla emitted little yelps of delight. "Justus! You've kept all this going so splendidly, despite your financial worries! You've spared no expense!"

She put her hands behind her back and inspected the creatures in the tanks. Even here, face to face with Nature, she seemed to show her reverence: "Such strange creatures we share the world with! These creatures vindicate our craziest painters! This stargazer with the head of an old usurer! Good day, dear Mr Hornfrog!"

Justus led her to the tank with the flat fish. "Can you see the electric ray, Camilla?"

"No!"

"He buries himself! He plays dead! But two eyes are always peering up out of the sand. Can you see him now? He's waiting for prey. If a grey mullet comes along, he stuns it with his electric charge. He plays dead but has voltaic piles left and right along his body. Strong enough to light a light bulb!"

Camilla studied the ray. Suddenly she burst out laughing.

"Why are you laughing, Camilla my dear?"

"He buries himself! Plays dead, and can turn on electric light bulbs!"

Justus, a bit nonplussed by Camilla's merriment, laughed along. "Yes! It's funny, no?"

Charlott called down the stairs: "Breakfast's ready! Justus, you've been deceiving me. I've looked over all the furniture, and can't find a single court receiver seal!"

Justus was shocked to the core. "But darling, what are you thinking? My aniline man has redeemed the entire premises!"

"So come up and eat! Hold on – let's eat in the aquarium! Holk! Teppich! Justus! Camilla! All together now!"

They laughed. They clapped their hands, as if invited to a children's party.

Holk was the busiest. He bore the round table down to the aquarium on his mighty shoulders. He looked like a creature of fable, the way the four curved table legs rose from his bent back into the air like a snail's feelers. Bosco carried down, a wobbling basket of silverware, the handle in her conceited mouth. She tried to share her exuberance with Acacia, but Acacia maintained a quiet and refined, albeit relatively approachable, stance.

Teppich found the whole business deplorable. Dining in the aquarium – how demeaning, when there’s a whole dining room! “They’ll stir up my fish,” he muttered to Justus in passing. Justus pointed an index finger at his brow.

So now the meal was served. Charlott and Holk took turns to storm upstairs and fetch down the crayfish and melons and haunch of venison. Camilla mixed cocktails. She stepped up to the cat sharks and showed them in their tank how it was done. They drank cocktails and champagne, champagne and cocktails. Fish positioned themselves wide-mouthed at the glass walls and peered out at the strange company from their corals and greenery. Moray eels weaving their bodies through pots and urns lifted snakelike heads.

Justus passed a plate of crayfish with pineapple slices to Charlott.

Charlott leapt to her feet. “Let’s cool the Irroy\* in the paradise-fish tank!”

She put a loop around the neck of the bottle, climbed up to the ground floor and lowered the champagne into the green water. The fish sped away, but the elodea and watershield bowed unsurprised to the intruder, for there was nothing ever created by the human species that did not eventually drift down to the bottom of the sea, and even the fish came back at once and surrounded the bobbing bottle in concentric circles.

“Look at the creatures!” Charlott cried. “Just look at them!”

Justus down in the aquarium saw the champagne bottle in the water. For a moment a sense of distress clutched at his heart. He almost felt this insult to the companions of his months of sorrow as a betrayal by him, of them, now that Charlott was back in his home. But it was Charlott who put the champagne-marionette to dance in the water, so he pressed his thick lips to the glass wall while his eyes turned reverentially up towards her.

Meanwhile Holk and Teppich had manhandled the gramophone down the stairs. Even though Teppich insisted that a seahorse had once died from shock when it heard an American dance tune, Holk was adamant. He forced Teppich to carry the gramophone – the executioner of his little sea horses – down the stairs with his own hands.

At once Charlott danced her wedding Charleston with Justus, and Camilla with Holk. They turned off the electric lights. The only light came green-gold from the glimmering water in the illuminated tanks. The creatures behind the glass walls revealed their boldest and most glorious colours. They came stage-front and vanished into wings made of greenery and rocks, like dancers at a revue where coloured lights keep time with the beat.

Teppich interrupted the dance to report that Madame Grace Ginzbourgh had telephoned from Berlin to ask if Herr Holk would bring a pair of black swans back to Berlin with him, if at all possible.

Charlott came to a stop. “A pair of black swans?”

Yes indeed. Madame Grace Ginzbourgh needs another pair of black swans for her residence at Brussels.

Charlott fixed Holk with her most glacial gaze: “Very well, Teppich. Please tell Madame Ginzbourgh that Herr Holk will unfailingly bring a dozen lovely black swans with him to the Esplanade this evening. If Madame Ginzbourgh should happen not to be present, Herr Holk will deposit the swans in the cloakroom.”

Camilla and Justus plumped themselves down on the stairs. Holk, in a rage, leapt over them: to the telephone!

Charlott called up the stairs: "Teppich! Coffee on the lawn! We need huge amounts of rugs! We'll have a nice snooze on the lawn!"

So all of them – people and dogs – lay in the last of the March sunlight there on the lawn. Holk's head was snuggled in Camilla's lap, Justus and Charlott lay side by side looking straight into each other's eyes, and each one of them – people and dogs – had a stalk of grass between the teeth.

When Holk looked up he saw Camilla's eyes, which betrayed a happy servitude, a humble, healthy and happy readiness to be accepted by each of the three friends here on the lawn.

Holk remembered, as he watched the early spring clouds drift across the evening, that he had a new Flea in the garage. He dreamed big dreams. He whispered: "Soon I shall finance all of you – Justus too! I do love our Justibus! He will never be Charlott's husband, and still he doesn't realise!"

Camilla laid a hand over Holk's eyes. She glanced to the side. She whispered to the air: "Maybe each of us will have all kinds of experiences – and still we don't realise!"

Holk sat up, puzzled. Camilla held a finger to her lips. A little growl came from her throat, as from a fox trying not to bark.

Justus had turned onto his back, hands entwined behind his neck, and as he sang to himself his enormous body rippled up and down like an excessively lush field of corn in the wind. He sang: *Mount up! We're off to Linlithgow, And you'll ride by my side. There we'll fish and hunt with joy, As so many years ago!*

Charlott whispered, pointing to a beech-hedge arbour: "Is that your resting place?"

Justus nodded, still singing: *And you'll ride by my side.*

"Have the Church authorities given their consent?"

Justus nodded: *There we'll fish and hunt with joy.*

"For both of us?"

Justus nodded: *As so many years ago.*

Now he reverted to the middle of his song; this time it was: *King James, I beg you look kindly on me, And hear me with patient heart.* But the "King James" made them both laugh, thinking of the late tea-uncle James in Colombo. Charlott slid her arm under Justus' head. Again they lay face to face, nose to nose, very close, and now Justus merely hummed, for it had grown cold on the lawn.

As Charlott constantly passed her slightly opened lips over Justus' hand, she whispered into this hand: "Justibus! I must go back to Berlin tonight. I have an important meeting there ... I'll be staying at the Esplanade ... I'll take Bosco with me ... Give me a call!"

Justus' song trailed away. It died in his mouth, like the dying March day beneath the vault of the heavens.

Charlott placed her gentle hand around Justus' neck. "I have a confession to make. But you must promise never to ask me about anything I don't tell you!"

Justus' long, dark heavy eyelashes stroked her lashes, which slowly grew damp.

"What happened at today's wedding was all my fault. Or actually, I put it in the lap of fate whether the registrar would marry us even without that certificate. I really tried my utmost, you saw! Now it's definite. We cannot marry for at least half a year."

Justus opened his mouth ready to pose a passionate question. But Charlott laid a finger to their lips. Their faces were so close that the finger touched all four lips.

Next morning, before he could telephone to the Esplanade, Justus received a telegram from Berlin. "darling must travel and shan't be alone stop." (The "alone" was underlined.) "please go aboard your yacht stop I know this hurts but we shall be brought together again stop whatever I do is for the benefit of all of us stop am out of reach of any reply kisses darling charlott."

Two days later at Cuxhaven, Justus along with his valet Teppich boarded the yacht *Charlott*, destination unknown. He received no more mail, no telegrams, no news of any kind. No one on the mainland knew what course *Charlott* would take.

## .X.

Eight days later.

Holk and his crew of decorators, electricians, radio and telephone engineers swarmed through the family bungalow on the golf course that he had designed for a friend. He had set out to create a sports lodge, but as happens with any man of imagination, the task blossomed under his hands, the ideas born of his bounding spirit were just too rich and alive. Before he knew it, there stood a veritable country mansion, almost a haunted house such as you see in cartoon films. Press a knob, and a sofa-bed falls out of the wall, washstands and bathtubs open out, the room expands to nooks and little chambers of every kind. In the main living room the carpets, curtains and cushion covers were all of the very same French pattern: on a cream-coloured background, a Persian on a blue ostrich rode up to an airy pavilion, and Turks sat smoking away on the pans of a scale, blinking at one another. Little chinoiseries were scattered everywhere about the room, dancing figurines over the fireplace, actors' masks, Japanese medicinal flasks, animals and flowers of jade. The walls were hung with colourful English sporting engravings, and with Constantin Grips, Chodowieckis and Daumiers.\*

Holk, under Acacia's watchful eye, went with big long strides through the rooms, called out and whistled and sang, smoked cigarettes and handed them out to craftsmen young and old, knew everyone's name. His broad shoulders, sturdy legs and rounded hips kept knocking into things, but strangely whatever was about to fall he set back upright with amazing dexterity.

Holk was not really satisfied, but still he whistled his little tune: *Let me linger in your arms!* The bungalow was a great success, brought him lots of recognition and more commissions. It had taken a long time, but still, it was all ready by the spring and lo! it was good!

But Holk, at bottom, is anything but a USA-Berliner. There are more important things in the world than careers and earnings and making progress!

For example, Charlott had bolted.

\*

On the evening of their “wedding day” she returned to Berlin with Camilla and Holk and the mastiff, dropped Holk and Camilla off at their respective places, and then went to her room at the Esplanade. Five minutes later she phoned Holk at his place – he was just changing – and conducted with him a brief, masterfully precise conversation:

“I shall be off very early in the morning. I shall not be travelling alone. I shall not be travelling with Justus. Marriage for the moment out is of the question. I shall be away for quite some time. The black swans thing really annoyed me. You will never change. I shall see you again once I have enough funds to put you into a barbarically strict educational establishment. I hear that Schulpforta\* is still going strong. Good at character building. Adieu.”

Done. Call ended.

When Holk tried to phone Camilla, he learned that she was not at home. We dropped her off ten minutes ago, and she’s not there! And as time went on, despite a dozen calls to Charlott during that evening and night, she stayed out of reach. Fanny’s response from the Esplanade: “Madam is resting!” Or from the switchboard: “Gone out!”

Out! Charlott had quite simply walked out on him and Justus! But who with? That was the big vexing question. Charlott was not the kind of woman to go travelling alone with a man! Charlott was utterly incapable of that, because Charlott had some regard for her social standing. She had never done anything like this! And who could she possibly have gone with, anyway? Holk went through all the likely Thankmars. Not one was missing from Berlin, not one whose address and circle of friends was not known. It was an curious puzzle, both painful and intriguing, this puzzle of Charlott’s last few days.

Holk stood in the bungalow’s doorway to catch his breath. He squinted into the sun. Strange, so many familiar figures on the course, among them many Thankmars, not playing golf, just standing around, apparently discussing or arguing about something. Holk tried to spot Camilla. Camilla was nowhere to be seen. But it was hardly to be expected that hardworking Camilla would appear on the course at this hour of the morning.

Actually, these last few days any sensible conversation with Camilla had been impossible. For the first time in his life, Holk felt a passionate wish to spend an entire evening alone with Camilla, at Horcher’s perhaps, or the bar at the Esplanade, no play or revue beforehand, no dancing, no music, no telephone interruptions – simply a whole evening devoted to intensive discussion of Charlott! But Camilla evaded him. For the first time in his life Camilla could spare no time for him, she wasn’t at her institute, and could not be reached by telephone.

Such strange goings-on! Holk recalled certain gloomy passages from Shakespeare – blood moons and artificial sprites, witches and ne’er-do-wells shrieking across the moor. Horrifying and ominous incidents crowded in on Holk. He noticed a reddish dampness

oozing from the corner of Acacia's eye – tears that flowed upwards – and the new Flea, as he drove home along Tiergarten Strasse beneath a slanting moon, produced sinister motor-melodies, horribly atonal passages; and most uncanny of all, Antonius, for no obvious reason, had suddenly presented him with five hundred Mark. After all these oppressive portents, Holk flung himself distraught into bed, Acacia at his side.

\*

Holk called it a day.

“Karlemann, old chap, you'll bring me the worktop for the kitchen tomorrow,” he said to a grizzled old joiner, then went to wash his hands. He worked up a good lather. Smoke from his cigarette stung his eyes. His face twisted to a petulant tormented grimace.

Someone came dashing towards him with long leaping strides: “Holk!”

Holk mumbled something. A Thankmar stood there excited, nervous, pale –seldom seen in a Thankmar. This was the same Thankmar who had cadged a lift from Charlott on the “wedding day”, and spent the trip wondering about Vestals.

“Holk, have you heard?”

“No.”

“Dreadful! ... Awful! ... Horrific!”

Holk had no time for stories that were dreadful, awful and horrific. He was determined to brush it off. “What, my lad? Has the golf club dissolved to atoms from a lack of cash in hand?”

The Thankmar stammered: “N-no ... but Charlott!”

Holk continued soaping his hands and rinsed off. Then he turned round. His face was threatening, almost vitriolic. “What do you mean, ‘but Charlott’?”

“Charlott's dead, Holk!” the Thankmar stammered, as if begging forgiveness for still being alive after such world-historical event. “They're all talking about it ... she's died! ... They say there's a telegram ... from Russia!”

Holk's face took on an appearance similar to those East Asian actor masks he had just been mounting onto rough brick over the fireplace. Water dripped from his hands. His hands seemed to weep shining blood.

The Thankmar was devastated – now more by Holk than by the news he had just imparted. “What possible reason could the Bolsheviks have to execute her?” he asked, and his voice quivered with the civilised world's fury against the Bolsheviks.

Holk held his hands out like a large dog as it stands up solemn-faced, making itself look pretty. “What possible ... execute ...” he repeated.

## .XI.

The news of Charlott's sudden death aroused nothing short of outrage in Berlin. “Can't be! But that's just ...” people said, mouths hanging open. For sure, so many hardships had

been observed and suffered these last few years, but to think of Charlott snuffed out from one day to the next, with no sign, no warning. It really was the limit!

Charlott! Twenty years old! In glowing health! Her body inured by all those sporting activities against every infection! And so full of life! She seemed day by day ever more full of life, just like the beloved city in which she lived! Lived? Devil take it, she can't possibly be dead! No one was prepared to believe it without further evidence. In such cases you call on doctors, experts! To hell with the cost, why do we have all these world-famous specialists for every kind of ailment, right here in Berlin? Back in the day, didn't they bring in that sort of chap to care for the Tsar, and Lenin? So why, please, not for Charlott? And don't we have aeroplane connections Berlin – Königsberg – Smolensk – Moscow?

And Justus – charming fellow, of course, but a bit of a loner, and eccentric! A teensy bit suspect, anyway. When you think about it, it's not for nothing a grown man keeps aquariums and terrariums in a house in the wilds of Brandenburg, like some third-form schoolboy! And then – does he actually like anyone? He's always friendly, polite, amusing even, but doesn't this plump man with the dry sallow East Asian complexion harbour something mysterious, something averse to society and good companionship? Is it not obvious how he always strove to lure Charlott away from her city and her social circle? No, Justus in all likelihood was not on his best form as a life and death matter played out for Charlott in Russia! And who on Earth heads off to Russia with such a delicate lady, so early in the year!

"What – 'delicate lady'? I thought she was in glowing health?"

"Well now, glowing health and being delicate are by no means a contradiction!"

The ladies of Berlin's best society wept a little – a few copiously, others rather less. None had ever been Charlott's enemy. This was Charlott's secret, she had hit upon one of humanity's greatest discoveries: most men were in love with Charlott, they loved Charlott or at least preferred her company to that of any other female, and yet Charlott had not left any real female enemies in her wake. Probably because in her dealings Charlott always proceeded with decency. She quite simply cut certain men who might have left her lady friends and girlfriends in the lurch. And on top of that she had even brought about a few happy relationships, insofar as happy relationships were a feature in Berlin at this period.

And yet almost all the society ladies leapt to Justus' defence. They viewed Justus as completely innocent, for along with all their affection and love for Charlott, one little fact must not be overlooked: that Charlott had become a bit loopy – *un peu toquée*!

"What does that mean, *un peu toquée*?" asked a young Briton, appointed to Lord d'Abernon's embassy so recently that he had never got to know Charlott.

"Permit me to explain," an elderly lady responded. In Berlin, people are always happy to explain something to a foreigner, and they always explain it in great detail. "Charlott was a little defective in her instincts, and now and then, in matters regarding the body, somewhat inclined to self-destructiveness! Her self-preservation instinct malfunctioned in some way. This would not be puzzling in a person who has a screw loose somewhere in the mind, which might bring with it a secret desire to put an end to everything. But Charlott was one of the few inhabitants of Berlin who had no screw loose, and she would have loved to spend another three hundred and fifty years in this city! And yet she treated

herself so impetuously. Take for example someone with the 'flu, who jumps into icy water with a temperature of 39° and emerges fully recovered, as all sorts of cases have attested. But Charlott jumped in at 39° and emerged at 40.8°! It's a miracle she made it to her twentieth birthday, when you consider the hundred and thirty kilometer tempo at which she lived."

"Oh!" the Englishman replied.

The view expressed here gradually became general. Justus was found not guilty, and absolved of everything. But wait, please, don't we have a right to know details? When? How? And where? And why no notice in the newspapers – *with great sadness announces sudden death of his beloved spouse* etc? And why not? Details, please!

But no details came. For Camilla, the only one to whom, as people said, several telegrams got through, declared to the few who managed to speak to her (the telephone at the Criminal Psychological Institute rang day and night, even though Camilla was hardly ever to be found there) that she too was confronted with a riddle, but unfortunately there could be no doubt about Charlott's death. And that a cable had reached her from a small remote town on the Dnieper, mentioning a sudden lung infection with a fatal outcome. Charlott had been cremated there, and the urn would be quietly laid to rest at Petersdorf in due course .

A cable from a small Russian town on the Dnieper? Yes. Who sent it, please? And a cable from Justus agreeing to her cremation?

Well! This led to a minor uproar against Justus. So at the drop of a hat our Charlott is cremated on the Dnieper and the ashes are to be laid to rest all hugging-mugging at Petersdorf? What business had Charlott on the Dnieper? Have people started to take honeymoon trips to one or other of the federated socialist republics, rather than the Riviera? Another fine example of Charlott's eccentricity! As if she had ever had anything in her entire existence to do with a federated socialist republic! Nobody dies expressly in a Soviet republic, dammit!

And so in the end Camilla, however painful it might be for her, and however firmly she had held back out of respect for Charlott – now she was forced to reveal the whole truth. Charlott had not married Justus at all! Justus, a broken man, had been despatched "in the service of his creditors" onto the high seas, he was not contactable by radio telegraph, as Camilla had ascertained from the port authorities in Hamburg, for the yacht *Charlott* had no such apparatus on board. Justus' whole intention had been to seal Charlott and himself on the yacht away from the whole world, and especially from the well-known "Berlin influences" that had destroyed their first marriage.

But it was not to be! The affair, in short, was as follows: the telegrams had been signed by a certain Stanley Fisher. Stanley was the son of the late Sir Herbert Fisher of Colombo and his wife Lady Cornelia Fisher, and Charlott had travelled to Russia with this man. Camilla professed her deep concern, for she had never once set eyes on this Stanley.

As soon as people heard it they were in tumult! Stanley Fisher! – No one in society had ever come across an individual of that name! Were there no relatives of Charlott who could set the matter straight? Well, there were Charlott's parents, elderly persons afflicted with ischias and arterioscleroses, presently resident at Bad Gastein and most reluctant to

abandon this pre-eminent health-preserving spa merely on Charlott's account. They had always prophesied a terrible end for Charlott. The dear child was always so headstrong and undisciplined! The two of them, Camilla's parents, had suffered too much grief and unpleasantness in their lives, for the younger of their sons had fallen in the War, while the older son had been shot during the revolution by a superior officer following a political disagreement in the officers' club. And so, with the resourceful obstinacy of the aged, they guarded one another strenuously against any fresh excitements, and would have nothing to do with anything unless it directly concerned Charlott's wellbeing.

And as for Camilla, she seemed to have come to terms, for better or worse, with Charlott's demise. Yes yes, everyone said, she might be a splendid creature, and ever since childhood she had been a devoted friend to her cousin Charlott, but now she shows herself to have, at bottom, an unfeeling nature. Berliners, who are themselves unfeeling natures, often hurl this accusation at others.

And now only one was left who had been closer to Charlott than any of her relatives.

Holk!

Camilla had not had the heart to convey news of Charlott's death to him herself. Camilla, clever woman, could calculate anything. She could take apart the mental machinery of a contemporary human being – especially a Berliner –and put it together again. But to predict how Holk would take Charlott's vanishing from the world was beyond her powers.

As soon as Holk arrived back at his apartment, he collapsed. He lay face down on a little sofa and wept streams and streams of tears, which did not flow down the furrows in his cheeks but dripped directly onto the English calico printed with all the pretty pictures. Acacia came and sniffed about him. So Holk did something completely out of character: he punched the little creature full on the nose. At that moment, Acacia revealed what she was made of. She, the over-sensitive hysterical creature – she understood the blow, indeed she even approved of it. She lay on her tummy six feet from Holk, stretched out her delicate forepaws, and watched Holk through ghost-pale eyes of profoundest sympathy. Eventually she wept along with her beloved Holk. Tears dropped from her red-brown eyes.

To this extent, all the grieving over Charlott took its natural course. But now came a peculiar reaction: Holk got to his feet, and his face, that masculine face of such benign weakness, grew harder minute by minute in a furnace of the heart that forges steel.

"Now!" he said. "Now!"

He didn't have the whole picture, but he knew it! A man he had never met - that man had murdered Charlott, or by his negligence had caused her death!

Well then, this affair must be approached quite differently from anything else he had ever done in his life! He always had a tendency to vacillate Hamlet-like between the things of this Earth. He was thirty years old – it was perhaps a little late, *but* he was now determined to be a man in this affair! A man, moreover, of quite a special kind! The foreigner over there on the Dnieper or in Colombo – he'd better watch out! "I shall forego

proper meals, forego drinking, forego sleep, look no woman in the face, until I have him in my grasp!"

At that moment the telephone rang. The telephone! The symbol of his life so far! Of fickleness, of temptation, of absent-mindedness! Ghostly intermediate life-form between human and machine, this new species of living organism such as he had seen in the aquarium at Petersdorf – intermediate between animal and plant – fitted out with organs of predation, dangerous as a shark, cruel as a tiger, this entity there on the table groping thousand-armed to snare a soul, pull it close and strip it to the bone – Holk picked up the telephone and hurled it with a low howl of rage at the wall, where it burst apart and collapsed with a piteous abject whimpering.

Camilla, back in her office, had plucked up the courage at last to give Holk a call. The connection had hardly been made when she too emitted a scream. She leaped up horribly rigid, clutched at her hair in bewilderment.

– Holk has shot himself! I heard it, just now! I heard the shot, clear as anything! He shot himself right by the telephone, earpiece in his hand.

Camilla began to squeal like a tormented animal. Holk, the dear child – Holk has shot himself! She'd predicted everything – but not this! Not this depth of emotion!

She stumbled across to her coat, dashed down the stairs, hand on the wall, face white as snow.

A taxi. It took her almost half a minute to utter the words *Schöneberger Ufer*, Holk's street.

She hurried across the front garden. No alarm yet? No crowd to be seen? No rushing up and down the steps? Yet the shot had rung out so loud. Up the steps, into the house!

She rang, rang like a madwoman. No one opened. The most hellish moment of her life. She rang! Hammered on the door with her fists. She cried out: "Holk! Holk!"

Now! Footsteps!

Steps? Steps?

The door opened. Holk stared at her, unwelcoming, almost glowering. "What do you want?"

Camilla smiled, swallowed, smiled.

In the passage she stammered: "I *really* wanted to see you, this very minute." Quickly she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. In the room she powdered nose and chin at the wall-mirror, and in the mirror she had a view of the whole room. Oh look, the telephone set's all broken – broken like the Flea, like Acacia's nervous system, like so many creatures in Holk's ambit. She turned around. Now she can smile.

In her boyishly courteous way she lifted her brow, leaned forward a little, and with her left foot posed a teeny little bit forward, like an apprentice in the *Meistersinger*, she asked: "Did you just try to shoot me with the telephone, Holk?"

Holk made no reply. Speechless he gazed at the big photograph of Charlott that stood in an old smoke-stained carved frame on his desk. Camilla sat on a swivel chair, hands in

her lap, gazed into Holk's tormented face, and with a gentle sigh said: "People often die by the means by which they have lived – my child."

Holk wept like a child.

## .XII.

One late afternoon in May, a man was standing in the Gare du Nord in Paris. He was waiting for the Channel Express to arrive. He wore grey check Oxford bags that fell loose in waves over his shoes, and a nondescript brown club jacket. No hat. His hair was ruffled a little by the breeze passing through the concourse, and now and then he flicked it back with a little twitch of the head. He was smoking a pleasantly aromatic blend of Old Bruyere, Grösse 69, London Made, and of course his hands were in his trouser pockets, dragging the trousers down. His whole attire and attitude seemed intent on disparaging Paris in May, for he was treating Paris as one treats Montreux or Cannes. Had it been warmer he would have thought nothing of strolling through the station in shirtsleeves.

He paced up and down with a sailor's expansive gait, but flexed a little at the hips like one who considers leaping at one bound over some obstacle, he came to a halt, his face ruminative and preoccupied, and then resumed his rolling progress, which had something about it of a young shepherd's practice moves before going off to inflict damage on the giant Goliath's head.

The express drew in harried, nervous and juddering like a distance runner, with a kind of Gallic heroism. The young man thought the locomotive should be draped in damp cloths, and patted benevolently on the chimney.

He spotted at once what he was looking out for. He took two big steps to the running board, pipe in hand. "Hallo, Mother! How jolly to see you!"

A thoroughly elegant lady of quite indeterminate years – eighteen, or forty-eight? – held out to her son a strong pretty hand white as snow, or rather snow sullied with specks of coal dust – that is, she actually held out her detached gloves rather than the hand itself, as if letting a dog take the gloves in its mouth would prevent it from tearing her to pieces in its excitement.

Which she had no cause to fear. It would have been quite out of the question for Stanley Fisher to tear his mother to pieces here in the Gare du Nord. Already he was standing by the carriage smiling, pipe in his mouth, little backward flicks of the head, hands deep, deep in his trouser pockets, watching amiably as the maid rolled more trunks from the compartment than he had ever seen heaped together in two baggage cars of an international express. It would have been equally out of the question for him to offer the slightest assistance with this benison of leather goods.

"You're such a loafer, dear boy!" said Cornelia Fisher, whose lightning-fast glance usually acquired instant knowledge of anyone in her vicinity, even her own family.

"Thanks a million, Mother, and how are things with you?"

This was met with a flash from a pair of implacable eyes appalled by life. "Is the car from Meurice here?"

"I have my own car, Mother."

"How can you afford your own car?"

"Yesterday I shot down a Citroen, just after breakfast!"

"Foolish boy! Take this luggage chit."

Foolish Stanley took the chit, turned forty-five degrees, and held it out at arm's length to the driver from the Hotel Meurice whom he had brought along.

Meanwhile Cornelia Fisher was greeting all kinds of acquaintances off the train. Cries and counter-cries: "Goodbye, darling! Day after tomorrow, two-thirty, the palace in Madrid!" – "Yes, Cecil will follow in a few days, he has business in London!" and so on and so on.

Her son's greeting had unsettled her. She was not at all gratified to have a grown man hail her at a station in front of the whole world with "Hallo, Mother!"

She was a tall lady with wonderfully taut shoulders, breast and arms. In any age but the present she would have achieved an impressive fullness of form. But now, with energy and vigour spreading across the twentieth century, she fasted two days a week, keeping to it more punctiliously than any religious fanatic, ate strictly according to the calorific table whose numbers she knew by heart, preferred vitamin-enriched foodstuffs, and performed Swedish drill for twenty minutes every morning at an open window. Though Cornelia Fisher had attained her forty-fifth year, her maid surmised that with a slight backwards bend she could easily touch her heels with the back of her head. In the Orient she had suffered her hair to be dyed with henna ("People in Europe don't know how it's done!") so it was now a reddish-brown with wonderfully fake-looking shadows shimmering with the strangest hues: lilac, violet, even a touch of bottle-green. She had also managed to achieve a totally wrinkle-free and white complexion, like Chinese cherry blossom. The mouth with its long upper lip and the thicker slightly protruding lower lip was as fresh, healthy and youthful as Stanley's own mouth. All these endeavours had done their work well, and there were other successes too that lay beyond any human effort: the brown, round, sun-bright eyes; the broad, high, domineering and wildly twitching brow; the powerful eyebrows that formed a single bronze bar above the bridge of the nose; and the nose itself, bold, shapely and sensuous with a utterly delightful flattening at the tip such as one sees now and then in women of antiquity; and finally the goddess Hera's majestic chin! This leaves the neck, which alone would have rendered vain the best human efforts at improvement. It was the neck of a forty-five year old woman.

"Cecil will follow in a couple of days, he has business in London," Cornelia repeated the news to her son.

"Charmed, Mother."

"Do you have a room at the Meurice?"

"Wonderful rooms, Mother!"

"How many?"

"Bedroom with bath for you. Bedroom with bath for Cecil. A sitting-room in between. A room for the maid."

This arrangement of rooms was to Cornelia's satisfaction. "Good, dear boy. And how are you, really?"

"Thanks, I am well, Mother. And how are you, really?"

"Tiresome business affairs, my dear. So many acquaintances in London. Awful food. Cecil had bad luck in the golf tournament. I cannot stand the tea in Europe. All Europe's drinking water is polluted."

"Drinking water?" Stanley repeated in surprise. He added: "I've never had much to do with it."

"When it's boiled, it tastes of chalk. It's scandalous how little interest you take in the business," said Cornelia, and climbed into the downed Citroën with the dashing brio of a sixteen year old boy.

They drove from the station to the hotel, Stanley at the wheel, his mother at his side, maid at the back at constant risk of suffocation under piles of luggage that reached to her throat.

"So you've acquired more debts?" enquired Cornelia, sniffing the air of the Rue Lafayette as if assessing the aroma of a tea variety in Hankow.

"Lots and lots, Mother, thanks."

"Have you bought this car, Stanley?"

"Rented, Mother."

Cornelia let out her breath. "I have brought a thousand francs for you."

"So kind, Mother. The pound is at a hundred and fifty-five point five."

Cornelia cast a suspicious sidelong glance. "Do you mean to imply that a thousand francs is not very much?"

"It's the same enormous amount, Mother, as six pounds. My heartiest thanks."

"Whatever are you thinking! Business these days is going awfully badly, dear boy!"

"I know, Mother."

These days Cornelia's businesses, like the businesses of business people all around the world, were always going awfully badly. In the last year the firm's net profit was a mere one hundred and ten thousand pounds.

"Will your business trip take you to Berlin, Mother?" Stanley asked, as they waited stuck for five minutes on Boulevard Haussmann.

"You know I never go to Berlin, dear boy!" Cornelia replied petulantly.

Stanley sucked air in through his nose – air of satisfaction. "What a shame, Mother. Berlin has become such a delightful city." And he pulled up outside the Hotel Meurice, where they were welcomed by seven pageboys and three directors.

"Bye for now, my boy. I can't keep you company this evening. I'm dining with the Broughams and the Brändli-Ochs from Basel, and I know you can't stand them."

"Dreadful people."

“Well then,” said Cornelia, relieved. “But I can fit you in for half an hour at seven-thirty. I shall expect you. Be on time, for once. Bye-bye, my boy.”

Stanley took good care not to say, here outside the hotel, “Bye-bye, *Mother!*”

At ten minutes to eight Stanley was sitting in his mother’s room, dressed just as carelessly as before. But Cornelia was magnificent beyond words. She was like a muscular, sinewy circus horse, snorting fervidly as it awaits permission to launch into a gallop – a dapple grey with a powerful chest, hennaed mane falling over its eyes. Throat, breast and every possible limb were wound around with flesh-coloured pearls, through which, now and then, flashed the apricot hue of her dress – if a few loose scraps can be called a dress.

Cornelia, cigarette dangling from her lips, held out a hand with its bright pink fingernails so that the maid could place on her finger a brilliant, the same exact colour as her nails.

“What other news do you have, my boy?” she asked in an offhand manner.

“Oh, nothing,” Stanley murmured, staring into the distance.

“You have been in Berlin?”

“Hm.”

“Did you enjoy yourself there?”

“Wonderfully.”

“I’m always happy to know you’re enjoying yourself,” said Cornelia acidly. She took two giant steps to the mirror. “It helps me to work twice as hard!”

Stanley studied his shoe. “Do you remember Charlott, Mother?”

“Do I remember Charlott!” Cordelia turned in fury from the mirror. “I have been engaged in a deeply unpleasant correspondence with that girl! She keeps sending me the most impertinent letters.”

“Hm.”

“I might have known! You feel quite at ease consorting with my enemies!”

“Your enemies, Mother?”

“Of course she’s my enemy, writing to me in such aggravating terms!” Cornelia flexed her vibrating shoulderblades so the maid could apply powder. “Well? What is Charlott up to?”

“Not up to very much, any more.”

Cornelia lifted her arms so the armpits could be somewhat over-powdered.

“What do you mean, my boy?”

“She is dead.”

For several seconds Cornelia maintained her pose, arms spread, cigarette dangling. Suddenly she was standing very close to Stanley: “Charlott, dead? Is this a joke?”

“Alas no, Mother.”

Cornelia bent down to her son. "And you wait until now to tell me, just as I'm about to go to dinner? Are you out of your mind, dear boy?"

"Oh, one is not always in a mood to mention such things straight out."

Cornelia turned away in a huff. She paced up and down the room. The maid stood there flabbergasted, powderpuff in one hand, pad in the other. She had no idea who Charlott was, but she could see it was a serious matter when one of the quality passed on.

"Poor thing!" Cornelia cried distraught as she paced across the room. "Poor thing!" She went back and forth on impetuous boyish legs. She looked a little like her son when he used to go for noonday walks, but her steps were more confident, resolute, tense, forceful.

Cornelia harrumphed: "I saw her once in Berlin, when she was a year old! She made not the slightest impression on me. I really have only the haziest memory. I think it was her mother – dear Margaret – who showed her to us – or was it some other baby? ... Really, she has aggravated me with her letters my whole life. Even as a five year old she wrote in the most irritating way."

"A five year old?" Stanley was astonished. "Poor thing! Poor thing!"

Cornelia dabbed around her nose. Suddenly she came to a halt: "What did the poor thing die of?"

Stanley considered for a moment. "I think they call it an embolism, Mother. Blood clot in the lung arteries."

"And you visited her, my dear boy?" Cornelia asked almost tenderly. "I hope you brought her some comfort?"

Stanley gazed into the distance: "Oh yes, Mother!"

Suddenly Cornelia burst out in a rage. "So tell me all about it, for goodness sake! It's intolerable, the way I have to drag every word from your mouth!"

Cornelia had spoken thus to five year old Stanley, with the same outburst of rage and the same lack of effect.

So Stanley kept mum, and Cornelia couldn't think what to do, so she studied herself in the mirror. A lady so full of life that she need fear no embolism in the next thirty years.

Now Stanley spoke: "Actually, there was no one else there apart from me to bring her comfort."

Cornelia turned to him. She was the embodiment of perplexity. "What do you mean?"

"The poor thing died, as we novelists say, in my arms. In the middle of Russia."

Cornelia stared as if she was about to box his ears: "Middle of Russia? ... In your arms? ... Middle ... Russia? ... arms?"

"Yes, Mother."

Cornelia lowered herself onto a most uncomfortable chair. "Stanley," she asked in despair, "were you perhaps ... married to this girl?"

Stanley was quite taken aback: "No, Mother, not as I recall."

“But you had some ... relationship with her?”

Stanley reluctantly shook his head: “No, Mother.”

“You travelled with her to Russia and were not married to her and weren’t having an affair with her?”

“In a nutshell, Mother,” said Stanley, with surprising energy and alacrity, “all I wanted was to alert you to a little matter that concerns you and our family.”

“Oh?” said Cornelia in a matter-of-fact tone. She stood up, and from her expression seemed to be pondering what price she might offer for a sizeable portion of Ceylon’s tea harvest.

“You must prepare yourself, Mother! You had better advise your office in Colombo to hold Charlott’s assets ready for payment.”

“Charlott’s assets, my boy?” asked Cornelia. Her hennaed hair with the unlikely shadows flared up in surprise.

“Indeed, Mother.”

“I think, my boy, that I shan’t need to pay out one penny for the next five years!”

“I think you’ll have to before then, Mother.”

“Absolutely not, my boy!”

Stanley thought his mother had never looked so beautiful as now. She positively glowed in her ardour to defend her position. Stanley, not unrelated, lifted his boyish nose to observe his mother.

“Pay out a million and a half, just like that? Three hundred thousand pounds, just like that? What notions you have! Especially just now, when I’m about to close some important deals! The business is doing well at the moment. Flourishing, even. There’s a lot one can do with one’s money!”

Cornelia called to the next room: “What time is it, Grace?”

“Twenty past eight, my lady.”

“And to whom am I meant to pay it out, my dear child? Has the girl left a will? I hardly think so! A young penniless thing, leaving a will!”

Stanley was no doubt practising fakir arts on himself. His enthusiasm had evaporated. Now he had reached the chapter about adjusting every facial muscle to that of a corpse. But suddenly his mouth gaped: “I think she *did* leave an heir!” He made a great play of rising to his feet and testing his weight on legs that had gone to sleep.

“So? And who might it be, this heir? You perhaps?” Cornelia eyed her son sardonically.

Stanley straightened up, fluttering his arms. With a yawn he hunted in every corner for the hat he hadn’t actually brought with him. He even went a little way into the next room, to see if it was in the bath.

“I think, Mother, you will receive a visit in the next few days. From one of the poor creature’s relatives on her father’s side. This other creature is a Doctor of Philosophy and

a criminal psychologist; she's a female Sherlock Holmes. A great big beast. She is the heir. She has more hair on her teeth than I have on my head."

"I don't give a fig for your great big beast!" Cornelia cried, standing up in a cloud of powder like a raging Mother Goddess hurling shiny thunderbolts from her loins. "I shall pay out, in accordance with Uncle James's stipulations, one and a half million in five years' time. I have not the slightest intention, my dear boy, of presenting this ridiculous female Sherlock Holmes – of whom I know nothing – with anything at all! I must send a telegram to Cecil at once. We need the interest for our business, especially now that competition is everywhere so fierce! We are entitled to five more years of that interest!"

Cornelia let the maid place an ermine stole across her shoulders.

"You're quite mad, my boy! Our firm earns eight percent interest on that capital. That's roughly twenty-four thousand pounds on one and a half million dollars. You can work out what that comes to over five years. Am I to hand a hundred and twenty thousand pounds over to this young woman who means nothing to me?"

Stanley was standing by the door. He was suffering an appalling attack of the yawns. The pretty blue little-boy eyes were streaming tears. His words vanished in a most unmannerly way down his throat: "Goodbye then, Mother! You will soon find that I'm not in the least bit concerned. You know that sort of thing means nothing to me."

"I'm so sorry, my dear," Cornelia interrupted him, looking agitatedly at her watch, "it's almost half past eight! Of course you were late again. They're coming to fetch me! I really must go! I'm so sorry that Charlott is dead, but it's really such a bother, and I still haven't the faintest idea what sort of relationship you had with the poor thing. But it's really no concern of mine, either."

"I agree *completely* with everything you say, Mother. Goodbye, and I do hope you have an enjoyable evening! We'll meet for lunch at Larue tomorrow, around one thirty, what?"

Stanley stumbled sideways through the doorway

His mother caught up with him in the corridor, intending to stride past. But instead she laid an arm on his shoulders and said in the friendly tone of one who has come victorious from a fight and is entitled to act magnanimously: "Goodbye, my dear good boy!" And she stepped into the lift.

Their paths crossed again down in the lobby. They waved at one another, and went their respective ways. Stanley kept to the lobby for the next half hour, as pensive as a horse in rain. Then he scribbled a two-line note to his mother.

He approached the desk: "Please book me a ticket on tomorrow's flight to Berlin."

### .XIII.

Holk had initiated enquiries in Russia and at the Russian Embassy in Berlin. The results were both curious and meagre. Charlott and Mr Stanley Fisher from Colombo had both been issued with Russian visas on the same day, with a swiftness that in Holk's view could only have been facilitated by unusual sponsorship. But Holk was unable to ascertain whether these two had in fact crossed the Russian border, together or separately, or how

long they had stayed in Russia, or whether Stanley had departed from that mighty realm via whatever border crossing. There was no question that Stanley had good friends among the Russians, and even at the Soviet Embassy. Holk sensed that the official he was dealing with knew more than he was saying. The strangest thing was that some secret force beyond the embassy seemed to stick very close to him and eavesdrop on his conversations whenever he seemed to be closing in on the truth. Holk felt surrounded by spies, especially in restaurants where he dined alone or with Camilla. For how else could the specific focus of his enquiries, which his conversations with Camilla had helped to clarify, have become known the very next day in quite other quarters?

Case in point: Holk was interested in the whereabouts of the Mercedes. Did Charlott take the car with her into Russia? Or was it left at a garage in Berlin for safekeeping? What technical issues arise for anyone thinking of a pleasure trip by car in Russia? And what is the attitude of the Russian authorities in such matters? Had they issued a Triptych?\*

When Holk appeared at an office in the Embassy the day after sharing his questions about the Mercedes with Camilla and was kept waiting a short while, an attendant with whom he had often chatted about his business there asked: "You're here about that dead lady's car, aren't you?" You could have knocked Holk down with a feather! He felt like a man who shares room, bed and board with ghosts.

Holk lived alone. He saw Camilla. Now and then he went over to Viktoria Strasse to see his father, and take lunch with him. His telephone had been reinstalled, but Holk was available only for professional calls.

The whole of Berlin set out to console him. They telephoned, women sent flowers, he received friendly little letters advising him to eat in this or that restaurant, spend his evenings out in the open at Wannsee or Potsdam, everywhere the same almost tender admonition – not only from women but also from men – not to give in entirely to his grief, but to seek out little diversions. Holk declined every approach. Some ladies, left high and dry by Holk's lack of attention, began to venture their first little attempts to see if he might help them with sleeping-car tickets, tennis racquets, black swans, bobtails, furnished apartments. For almost the first time in his life, Holk applied energy to turning such requests down. He declined to waste his time on other people's petty concerns.

Antonius observed the changes in Holk with ironic suspicion. He took an interest in his son. He calculated that Holk had suffered a breakdown every couple of years since he first came into long trousers. As a tender youth the breakdowns were caused by health issues, later also by issues of a moral or economic nature. During such episodes, Holk usually thought of Viktoria Strasse. He went through the ground floor rooms long abandoned by partygoers, saw the pictures and the furniture, and thought of his deceased mother. Upstairs, old Antonius prophesied to a friend with whom he sometimes discussed his son: "The death of that girl has really affected him! This time it's lasting longer. But give him five weeks and he'll be right as rain, never better!"

Of that there was at present no sign. Holk concentrated with earnest diligence on his work. He spent day after day in architects' studios and with furniture designers and decorators, who couldn't believe their ears when they heard Holk utter coherent sentences in flowing speech that all made perfect sense, uninterrupted by telephone calls. He even refrained from first names, to the regret of the master craftsmen and

apprentices. And he no longer lost important contracts, now that his aggravating unpunctuality and trivial complaints were a thing of the past. He turned up exactly on time at the building site or the premises that were to be remodelled.

In the evenings he went for a stroll, after dining in a little restaurant at Potsdamer Brücke alone or with Camilla. Acacia followed at a laggardly pace. During these grief-filled days she had surpassed herself in gracious forbearance and denial of her own tender wishes. Holk had never in his life been a walker, at least he couldn't remember having been one since his sixth year of life. Now he found it calming and consoling to wander along the canal on mild May nights, down from Cornelius Strasse, then stand for a good while outside a certain house, then on across Cornelius Brücke towards the Zoo entrance, and finally back along Hofjäger Allee or Lichtenstein Allee, or cut diagonally through the built-up zone along Drake-, Stuler- and Rauch Strasse. It really looked as if Antonius had miscalculated: for the first time in his life Holk had acquired a Grand Purpose.

He listened out for ghostly signs from the Realm of the Dead, for a voice that might bring a solution. Dead people who once were loved often appear to the bereaved in dreams, angry or tender. But Holk never dreamed of Charlott. The air of the living was quite filled with Charlott, but the air of the dead held no trace of her.

One day Holk did something simple and remarkably pertinent, but which he had thus far omitted from his investigations. He made a call to Petersdorf. No reply. Then a voice from the Post Office: "There has been no reply from that number for four weeks."

"Is there no one there from the staff?"

"We are unable to provide any information." Then, after a pause, confidentially: "They say the house has been let. The new tenant is not in yet."

Holk sighed.

He felt a longing – for Justus! Fraternal collaboration to clear up the mystery! Arm in arm with him! Pay back the common enemy! And talk about Charlott!

But where was Justus? To think the dreadful news might not reach him in some distant part of the globe for God knows how many years!

Now Holk worked day and night to earn money. He needed to accumulate a substantial sum – to finance his campaign! Then he'd be able to employ every method of modern crime detection to track down Stanley Fisher!

Holk strolled down lonely Lichtenstein Allee.

"If I may no longer enjoy the perfume of those hands, or the blue gaze of her sweet eyes, if there is no more of all that composed such a powerful and unique and irreplaceable phenomenon as Charlott's personality, that 'everything about her', then I still have my big target: Stanley the foreigner!"

At that moment, Holk's heart skipped a beat. He had heard a sound, distant as Paradise, yet approaching with ever increasing volume! Charlott's horn, which she so seldom used!

Where? No doubt about it! ... Where, in the name of immortality?

A huge car roared past at full speed, up Lichtenstein Allee towards the Great Star, Charlott at the wheel, a man beside her, at the back, closed in, the silhouette of a huge dark beast ...

Holk stared into the light. A familiar licence plate floated before his eyes.

“I’m going mad! ... Having apocalyptic visions!”

He ground his teeth. This big strong grown man who never in his life spoke out loud to himself, he shook his fist and roared out over the road: “Darling! Darling!”

And at once collided with a tree. He was embarrassed by the vision. Ghostly apparitions in the big city, in the twentieth century! He regarded Acacia with a wry smile.

Acacia had lifted her head. A strange tormented look in the ghost-pale eyes as she sniffed the air. She sifted, sorted and laid out each smell for inspection. Had one not just wafted past which held within it all Earth’s bliss for the beloved? There could be no doubt, her atmospheric analysis was a complete success, the results laid out tidily to her senses.

Acacia looked at Holk. She lifted a tentative forepaw. She spoke to Holk in her silent language, tried to convince him. But nothing, nothing would this human being with his sluggish mind comprehend!

Then Holk experienced his second miracle of the evening. Acacia began to act up in an almost epileptic frenzy of antics. Acacia? Acacia? She darted around Holk in tight little circles, dashed like Faust’s poodle past nocturnal lawns and rows of trees, dashed back and seemed ready to do headstands or tear open her own breast with her teeth.

Holk watched her in deep, attentive, wary wonderment. Now he too lifted his head to sniff the air. A waste of effort! For what can a human avail himself of, when his world has disappeared?

Holk’s gaze was drawn upward with yearning. Might something of this woman’s supernatural perfume have been caught in the branches, just as the day’s light sometimes lingers as night’s desolation draws in?

#### .XIV.

Justus, in white trousers, upper body provocatively bare, was sitting upright on the deck of the *Charlott*, his back against a wall of cool brass rails. He had put on his tortoiseshell spectacles so that he could now and again glance at his sketches. Fanned out at his feet were his assembled congregants: helmsman, sailors, cooks, stokers and lascar servants. They squatted on their heels or lay on their side, cheek supported by an open hand, or on their stomach, chin embedded in both hands. For all their attentiveness to Justus’ narration, their blue or grey mariner eyes kept sweeping the open sea, from which playful dolphins or flying fish sometimes emerged.

Teppich, who abhorred lounging about on the ground ‘naked as a dirty beast’ had made himself comfortable on a folding stool at Justus’ side. With a stern censorious expression he tidied the sheets of paper that Justus carelessly let fall once he had done with them. It was beneath Teppich’s dignity to wear tropical togs. He would rather die of

heatstroke than make concessions in this equatorial zone. He was wearing his striped trousers from the Brandenburg marchlands, black jacket, black waistcoat, black cravat.

A sail had been stretched over this South Sea lecture hall, for the afternoon was sultry, and the sun was reluctant to part from the Earth's sweet face.

"These comb jellies cannot be caught either by bottom trawls or by silk-gauze drift nets. You've seen it yourselves, often. We have to scoop them from the water with extreme care, and the day we choose for this activity should be cloudy and still, for these creatures shun sunlight and disturbed water. On sunny days like today they retreat to the depths, and seek out quiet shady spots. Because their bodies are as transparent as the medium in which they dwell, they easily evade their enemies. But they themselves, because they blend so well with their element, are fearsome predators. Here in the gastrovascular cavity of a medusa you can see a small fish, which will soon be completely dissolved by the digestive juices. And finally, here's the Venus girdle that we scooped from the sea this morning. It moves through the water like a shaped and convoluted part of that same medium. You see the delicate transparent girdle-shape. When the heathen goddess Venus lays it about her lovely loins, she'll reveal to us everything we love to see on a woman."

Justus removed his spectacles, signalling the conclusion of his lecture. The sailors climbed laughing to their feet, and thanked him for the talk.

Teppich, shocked by the frivolous conclusion, shook his head, and his tongue made a tut-tut against the gum, indicating extreme disapproval. Again and again the laboriously won respect for his master, to whose scientific knowledge he allowed full justice, had to be rocked by such a "cynical manner of speaking". He glared mistrustfully at the Venus girdle in the glass jar. Such an unseemly life form; he'll have to settle accounts with it when the time is right.

"A fine thing," he said contemptuously.

"What's that?" asked Justus, well used to Teppich's critiques following a lecture. He shuffled the pages on his knees, humming quietly. It was Wolf's *If you would see your lover die*.

"That there salacious creature in the jar."

"Aha!" said Justus, and he sang: *Do not wear your hair in tresses, love*.

"Fancy telling folk on the high seas that kind of thing! T'ain't decent, that's what it is. All it does is stir them up!"

"The Venus girdle?" Letting out his belly, Justus sang: *Cascading freely from your shoulders!*

"Only God knows why he gave that creature such a name. When you're doing Science you should avoid anything dubious. It only riles them up to mutiny on the high seas!"

Justus gave voice to a few more enchanted bars of the song.

Here on board, Teppich lived in constant fear of mutinies. "What I've always found is, bothering yourself with dissolute creatures like that there in the jar makes human beings dissolute, and the same goes for love and politics."

“So?”

Justus’ song began to fade: *Countless threads of gold, of silk, exquisite hair, exquisite she who combs it!*

“Back where we come from, they’re going to make a law about filth and smut.\* Good! Because all the world’s troubles come from females and shamelessness.” Now Teppich had had his say, and he departed, the carefully combed golden tips of his beard jutting proudly into the air.

Life on board wasn’t half bad, but he could have done with some of that good old German discipline against filth and smut, here in this somewhat wanton portion of the Earth’s surface.

Night fell on the vessel as suddenly as if a fish had flown on board and collapsed by the mast.

Justus sat at the tiller in a deck chair, whisky in hand, gazing through the glass at the golden yellow stars reflected there in delirious profusion.

*A chap must work, then even the worst comes easy!* he sang to a self-made rather futuristic tune.

“Sir?” asked the lascar servant.

“Let’s have something to listen to, my lad!”

At once the loudspeaker in the cabin came alive with the piping squeal of the radio set. The lascar twiddled the dial.

Hissing voices with no resemblance to human sounds circled the globe. A choir of dead people and animals came howling out of inconceivable spaces, assailed by nameless fears, horrors and regrets. Ever more spirit armies sped in impetuous orbit about this vain recalcitrant spinning ball, harassing, overtaking, drowning out, chasing one another with whistles and whipcracks. Justus closed his eyes, the vision was so overwhelming! In an incomparable terror he waited to see if, among all the hollering from the aethereal realm, that one voice, that one sweet voice, now degraded, undone and horrid, might push through to his ears. Then, as shattering as the act of Creation on the first day, out of the formlessness there emerged a shrill grasshopper-like melody, still thematically disjointed and fragmentary. Suddenly it resounded clear and firm, delightfully structured, limpid and human: Schumann’s *Carnaval*! Those unforgettable rhythms that Justus had heard Kroll play in Berlin before the War, with Karsavina and Nijinsky dancing to them. And then – Justus laughed at the emotional jolt – the merry festive air *When Grandfather took Grandmother to wife!*

“Imperial! Tokyo!” the lascar announced.

It was an English ensemble. Playing Schumann. Justus howled like a dog. Blissful German sentimentality! His tears made the whisky salty. He had sought Charlott’s voice in the spirit choir of the Earth’s foes. Here was his answer: his ditty from the golf course, as they went arm in arm across the green one early spring evening.

The orchestra in Tokyo fell silent. Justus sprang to his feet, light as a feather.

“Singapore! Raffles Hotel!” he commanded. Now he was no longer afraid of the howling dervishes of the aether. And hey – in Singapore there’s dancing!

“Singapore! Raffles! Charles-ton! Ah-hah!”

“Ah-hah!” Justus cried, clapping his hands.

The sailors, some of whom had been scouring the vessel, put down their buckets. On the gangways, on deck, in the galley and the berths: “Ah-hah!” It was their favourite from the gramophone, a faux-savage dance tune.

Alone or in pairs they danced the Charleston so that their white sailor trousers twirled. Justus danced with a barefoot lascar who lifted his shoulders like a New York lady, let his arms dangle and the long lean lower legs bend like an X in time to the Ah-hah! rhythm. Here, four degrees south of the Equator, their youthful raucous Ah-hahs landed on the exact same beat as the Ah-hahs cried by dark gentlemen of the Malayan Peninsula. The leader, a mighty Negro, naked as a black Adam, emerged rambunctiously from below deck. As his arms and legs performed their miracles, he flung his upper body backwards in rhythmic dancing jerks, like a coachman trying to hold on to runaway horses, then made a deliberate stumble as if about to smash his skull, recovered and threw his whole body forward like a cyclist in a six-day race. The captain and the helmsman, crouching, clapped at him, Justus’ lascar struck out with his bare feet between the whirling legs, like a kicking pony. Justus danced like the God of the Charleston. While his mighty torso seemed hardly to move, below the belt he looked like an epileptic dancing his ailment’s dance of triumph. His sweat-gleaning face was lifted, and along with the Negro and his lascar he roared out: “Ah-hah!”

The stars were abashed by these sailors’ marvellous antics. The sailors could hear applause in Singapore, and they joined boisterously in with their human comrades up there on the Equator. At once came the young intoxicating wild foolish grandiose notes of *Yes sir, that’s my baby, No, sir, don’t mean maybe!*

Teppich stood shadowed by the mast, wringing his hands. Mutiny might break out any moment! He turned away, went to his master’s cabin. Grimly determined, he seized the jar with the unseemly creature. He poured the Venus girdle overboard, into a sea shimmering all the way to the horizon with licentious medusas.

## .XV.

Holk began to travel. He could not go on living so passively, he needed action. His trips led him from the Berlin hub away to Europe’s peripheries. They were random undertakings without sense or purpose, yet he accomplished them at a Napoleonic tempo, multiplied by the speed coefficients of our age.

He flew to London to “speak to someone” there who might offer advice. She was Mrs Virginia Todd, widow of a famous journalist. Holk sat with her one evening at her fireside, told her about Charlott, received advice full of high-minded but nebulous and rather content-free admonitions. It ended with a kiss on the forehead and repeated assurances of “My dear good boy”. At midnight he flew back to the Continent.

The next Saturday he was at the Hotel Miramar in Genoa, because a Thankmar had told him an acquaintance had spotted Charlott there in the company of an older lady and a younger man. Holk was lucky enough to encounter the young lady. She was a Bolivian. She did resemble Charlott, with a similar restlessness and way of speaking. Holk wished to make her acquaintance, because on that first evening he was seized by a passionate yearning for his late friend's double. He stalked the South American girl and her mother and brother down the street, into cinemas, into shops, on excursions along the Ligurian Riviera; he experienced the sweet terror of sudden encounters when their paths crossed, then of a trail grown cold, and eyes that flashed looks fiercely questioning, haughtily contemptuous, mysteriously alluring.

On the third day he managed to drink a cocktail beside her brother – who was dreadfully bored in Genoa – at the counter of a bar. That evening, although not introduced by the Bolivian boy, he approached the two ladies with a deep bow. So shaken was he by attaining at last to the bliss of this encounter that he could hardly speak. For two days he was the escort of Señorita Maria Juanita Conception de Gomes Meta. By the fifth day of his stay he found her so ineffably vapid, so brainless and un-Charlottish, that he could discern in her external appearance not the slightest resemblance to his late lover.

He raced back to Berlin as swiftly as possible by train and aeroplane, stayed there two days, and on the third day was in Vienna meeting with a police superintendent who promised to track down Stanley's whereabouts.

Clever Antonius interpreted these weekend trips across the globe to his own satisfaction: "It's the old Adam in him! Only people in the Bible and in legends of the saints and in modern novels dash about from one day to the next. In all my eighty years I have never noticed any renewal of the human soul. Once this period of restlessness is exhausted, my son will no longer take walks in the Tiergarten with his pet dog. Instead he will put on his dinner jacket, make dates with twenty women, and dance with forty!"

Antonius took Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* down from his bookshelf and read the poem he had sidelined in faint pencil sixty years before, when he still read poetry:

"Thy song wheels round as does the starry frame,  
End and beginning evermore the same!  
And what the middle brings we clearly see  
In what the opening was, the end shall be."\*

June had already arrived when Holk and Acacia came travelling back to Berlin from Moscow. This June was cold and wet as November, scorning the human desire for warmth.

Holk sat at the compartment window in pyjamas. Acacia had settled down on a cushion in the luggage net. If so ordered, she would stay there not moving for thirty-six hours. She knew one must be alert for sleeping-car conductors. If necessary she would play possum under the bench seat for a day and a half, like a corpse. Smuggling her across any frontier would be child's play.

Holk checked to see she was all right. Then he gazed out onto the plain. Birches along the line bowed to a north-east wind – bowed to the wind, bowed to grief, unable to believe in summer comforts and scented southern breezes.

Holk had shrunken into himself, he looked old and wizened as a monkey. Nothing had been achieved in Moscow. He was received ironically in the various offices, as if a romantic and rather ridiculous Europe of love affairs had come cap in hand to men of iron-hard thoughts and deeds. “What are you looking for here, about this dead lady and her lover? We’re searching for a hundred thousand dead,” a former professor at the university told him, his gaze drifting evasively to the side.

Holk smoked his cigarette, stared at the evening rain, defeated, all courage gone – and he was bored! Dreadful to think he’s been sitting here ever since half past three in the afternoon, and now must look forward to a night, a day and another night alone with no company in this narrow compartment. He put on his day clothes and went into the corridor. He paced up and down three times. Every compartment was closed; only one – the one next to Holk’s – had an open door.

If only there were some female to meet! Even if she bore no resemblance to Charlott, just being the same sex would be enough for Holk. He wished for a young woman nearby, who would sleep with him these two more nights. He wished for a clever, multilingual Russian girl with a zest for life, on her way for the first time to the great world of the western Abroad. Her giddy joy, the passionate unpredictability of her character would remind him of Charlott. He would converse with her until three in the morning, drinking and smoking, cigarette after cigarette. Then, not led on at all, driven solely by the hour and the circumstances, she would sink into his arms, the red raw mouth at his chest biting and kissing! Her first European adventure ...

Ridiculous dream! There was no such female on the train. The corridors were deserted, all doors closed except for that one, the ever-darkening rain gusted rattling against the big window. The locomotive blared its long-drawn-out complaint into the landscape, as if the enormous machine dreaded the dreary secrets of this night.

But now, standing in contemplation at one end of the corridor, Holk suddenly recalled an image that his retinas had already registered thrice, but without penetrating to the consciousness preoccupied by his vivid fantasies. He turned around.

Ghosts and nonsense! he thought, when he saw the corridors of his and the next carriage empty of passengers and occupied only by the attendants. The evening’s over! People are dreaming, and having visions, just like me!

He retraced his steps, came to a stop at the open door.

There it is! On the folding table under the window, in the gathering gloom, he saw the most remarkable object he had ever seen on his many travels in a sleeping-car. A funerary urn of black polished marble! A garland-engraved chalice of stone, fated to contain a nobler substance than wine, resting on a heavy round base but swaying slightly to the rhythm of the train.

But on the couch, fully dressed, head at the corridor end, was a man, hands clasped behind his head, observing the urn. He was singing softly to himself ...

Holk listened. Was it a sad sombre liturgy of the Orthodox Church? He leaned his head forward a little, the better to hear. He started. The man was singing: *Yes sir, that's my baby, No sir, don't mean maybe*. His feet were twitching to the beat.

"What a beastly boring night this is!" cried the clearly very young occupant of the compartment, in German, as he lay there. He couldn't see Holk, unless an uncertain reflection appeared in the window when the train passed a darker background.

"Boring ... Yes," said Holk, not stepping in.

The man said nothing, just lay there. He maltreated the blanket with his big shoes as his feet twitched. Then he said: "What say we open the communicating door tonight? I've a few bottles of Black & White, which had better be drunk before the Polish frontier."

"Fine by me," said Holk. He was amused. He returned to his compartment, and opened the communicating door.

"We'd better turn on the light," suggested Holk.

The young man said: "Yes, honoured sir, please do make light!" He jumped from the couch, and with a little jerk of the head flung hair back from his eyes. "I'm so glad you're camping next door!" He held out a bronzed hand, open, manly and expectant: will you shake it?

Holk shook it. "Handsome lad!" he thought. "Friendly English boy with a charming little nose!" He saw the golf jacket and the comically wide trousers. Holk liked English lads. He had spent two terms at Oxford.

"Oxford? Vincent's Club?" Holk asked.

The lad nodded: "And you?"

"I was there once. Before the War. Rhodes Scholar."

"Sit on my couch," said the lad, pushing his suitcase off with such a crash that the urn was almost sent flying. "Let's get stuck into an enormous drinking party, in memory of our Oxford days! And then towards dawn, just before Minsk, I shall touch you for a loan."

"You will? – Why?"

"Because I need your money, my dear sir!"

He pressed the bell, and the ghost-train attendant appeared.

"Soda water. And two glasses! *Skoro*, sir!"\*

"Yes, sir," the Russian said.

Holk was delighted. This fellow is almost better than my imaginary Russian girl! He offered an Egyptian cigarette from his hundred-strong case. He had already stepped in to sit by the folding table.

"I guess you're in that line of business?" Holk indicated the table with a smile.

"You mean I'm an urn salesman? No, sir, this is my first foray into such an enterprise."

"Is it ... occupied?" Holk was curious.

The lad sighed: "I think so! Alas, dear sir! Alas! Ow!" The lad screamed.

“What’s wrong?” Holk was startled.

“Rheumatism, sir! Rheumatism in the back! We went swimming in March in a river down there, when the ice had only just broken. I caught rheumatism, sir – in the back. My companion’s back at once found itself in an urn. Would you be so kind, I wonder, as to give me a rub down with my liniment, later? That would be spiffing!”

Holk was no sentimentalist – oh no! Twenty-four hours on in the journey – that will be where, eleven years ago, a cavalryman on his horse, he had seen enough corpses, had lain beside corpses in mud, in fogbound barns and woods. And it was there that he received a lance wound. Back home in hospital, March 1915, where everyone was agog for rumours and war stories, someone asked him how he was finding the war. He had turned to the wall: “Moronically dangerous, and moronically boring!”

Here he sensed no danger, and neither was it boring. He was spooked a little by the human remains in the marble chalice just beside his whisky glass. So much eternal prison for such a brief swim!

The young man sat in the corner, legs tucked under like a Turk, smoking his pipe with rapid puffs so that his lips emitted muffled pops. One hand was in his trouser pocket, with the other he stroked Acacia, who sat now on the couch between them, unconcerned about pursuers. Acacia seemed to have acquired a rather hysterical liking for the young Englishman, who gazed at the bull-terrier bitch with amiably smiling dark-blue eyes that appeared almost black. Acacia had snuffled a little at the urn and then lay down, having found nothing to interest her there.

“I think we’re almost the only passengers on the train,” Holk said, watching the lad.

“I think so.”

“Did you enjoy Moscow?” asked Holk affably.

“Splendid city,” the lad replied, but he seemed to be thinking of something else. “I was there three times in seven weeks,” he added.

“In Moscow?”

“Yes. Dreadful.”

“Wouldn’t you rather be dancing in Montmartre than spend the evening on this train?”

“Dancing?” the lad repeated.

“I heard you humming a foxtrot to yourself!”

“My dear sir, you try travelling with that thing for three whole days. You wouldn’t only sing hymns.”

Holk nodded: “A silent travelling partner.”

The lad nodded, almost sorrowfully. “It starts off *yeah* big” – he pointed to Acacia – “grows a little and takes spoonfuls of medicine from the offerings of this world. Then its being, its charm, its thoughts fill every star. At last it shrinks all at once and becomes *that*!” The young man’s hands seemed to hold a tennis ball.

“Its charm,” Holk repeated.

With a smile, the young man tossed hair back from his forehead. "Now! What it is you say in Germany? Prosit! Well then, prosit!"

They drank. They fell silent. The locomotive howled like a dog terrified of poking its nose into the dark wolf-plagued forest.

"Was it an old man?" asked Holk gently.

"Oh no! Quite young! And so – what's the German word? So – attractive."

"A woman?"

The Englishman nodded. "A very young woman. A beguiling creature. A German lady."

Holk was startled. Must he sit here and talk of such things over whisky? Couldn't he walk up and down, seize on a decorative idea and develop it farther, telephone or make a sketch, write letters, or give his hands *something* to do?

The lad watched him with a benign smile: "So? How did it turn out at the Miramar?"

The terror that struck Holk at the word Miramar was quite dreadful – as if he'd committed a murder there! An icy chill permeated his bones.

"Wh ..what do you know? What are you up to? What's your game? Were you in Genoa?"

"Of course! Was I so indiscreet? But I think you really were chasing after that young lady!"

Now Holk laughed, quite relieved: "Yes, really! I had a bee in my bonnet. Did you really observe it all?"

"It was *such* fun to watch! Then I had to leave. Did you get to know her?"

"Yes." Holk frowned. He sighed: "She turned out to be awfully stupid."

Stanley was astonished: "So do you really find it annoying, when a girl turns out to be awfully stupid?"

"Oh no! Not at all! But in this case – I was looking for something else – a resemblance – quite, quite different!"

"Oh." The young man was puzzled, apologetic. After a while he added: "Resemblance! That can be a significant matter. Shakespeare knew something about it."

"Yes," said Holk. He stroked Acacia. He was almost jealous, the way she sat a little nearer to the Englishman than to him.

They swigged their drinks and puffed away. Now and then they both stroked the little dog at the same time. Her coat smelled of doggie sleep. The young man stared into the cloud of smoke from his pipe. Quietly he quoted a line of verse: *For she was sweet as childhood, and as grace.*

Holk listened as the lad said this to himself.

The young man gazed out beyond the urn. "If by some miracle the dead could be resurrected ... do you think people would treat them more decently than before?"

"For a few days, yes. Not longer."

“That’s what I think. Not longer.” The lad slapped his knee, laughing. “I’m convinced that after a few months, the madly jealous King Leontes in *A Winter’s Tale* would again start taking it out on his wife in the beastliest way!”

Holk looked out of the window. They were moving through dense forest: “But now let’s start drinking properly. No soda!”

“Good! Long live King Neat!”

Holk took a great swig. Suddenly a thought popped up which had occurred to him ten minutes earlier, before King Neat made his appearance, but had not been expressed: “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“May I now be a little indiscreet, in turn? All right?”

“Oh please! Be as indiscreet as your nature will allow! Or else the night will be just too tedious!”

“Good. Did you perhaps not treat this –“ he indicated the urn – “this lady well enough while she was still alive?”

The young man regarded the urn with an endearingly foolish smile, his mouth slightly open. It was an Anglo-Saxon smile, appearing to be stupid but thoroughly shrewd.

“This young lady – she never let anyone treat her badly. She used to say, ‘If either of us two friends ever treats the other badly, then it’ll be me.’”

Holk was trembling. It even seemed his spectacle lenses were trembling.

“I heard something like that once ... Or maybe I dreamed that I’d heard it? ... I must be drunk ... I can’t think ... You often think you’ve lived it all before ... Schopenhauer had a theory ... I forget what it was ... But the lady, the young lady in the urn, she treated you badly?”

“Oh no! Not at all! We weren’t acquainted long enough to have heartfelt reasons to be beastly to one another! People are rarely beastly at the start of a relationship. We never had enough time.”

The skin over Holk’s cheekbones tightened. “You met only recently?”

“Yes, I came to know her, and then a few days or weeks later – she was dead. So funny.”

Holk gritted his teeth: “You find it funny?”

“What?” Holk spoke so softly he hadn’t caught the words.

“I said, do you find it funny?” Holk repeated even more softly. He was as hoarse as if he was already on the platform at Minsk tomorrow morning after downing five bottles of Black & White all by himself.

“When you know the circumstances of her death, my dear sir, it’s screamingly funny! You’ll never believe it, but I think the young lady in the urn is the first since humanity began who died because she believed her death would be so frightfully amusing.”

Holk banged his fist on the table. The urn wobbled. He really was drunk! “What nonsense it this you’re telling me?”

The young man stared at him, surprised but composed: “I think that if I don’t spout nonsense that makes you bang your fist on my table, the night will pass much too slowly. So it’s better that I do so!”

Holk’s fist closed around the urn in a threatening manner: “Out with it! What kind of young lady do we have here, who on her own deathbed laughs about her death? I know of only one creature in the world who would be capable of that. Out with it!”

“So?” The young man was still affable. “How can you possibly have known her! Are you coming to the funeral? I’ll invite you, then you can pay your last respects, sir!”

“What are you saying?” Holk roared. “Where will she be buried?”

“Some insignificant place not far from Berlin,” the young man replied. The round nostrils on his lifted nose quivered a little. “On some estate. I think it’s called – just a moment, I wrote it down somewhere ...”. He rummaged in his pockets, pulled out whole wads of paper slips. Apparently he jotted down every incident in his life. Of course the search took a while. “Here it is!” he cried out in joy, and he laughed a little, so proud was he of his filing system. “The place is called ... Petersdorf!”

Holk lifted the urn above his head with both hands. He roared: “You watch out now! I’m going to smash your skull with this urn! *You are Stanley Fisher!*”

The lad removed the pipe from his mouth. He nodded slightly in acknowledgement: “You have a most ingratiating way of forging an acquaintance. I’m going to bed now. If you’ve finished using the urn as dumbbells, kindly replace it on the table. Good night, dear Herr Holk!”

The train came to a stop. The conductor called through snorting squalls of rain: “Smolensk! Smolensk!”

## .XVI.

The scenery changed very little after midnight. Stanley, his skull not the least bit smashed, was in his bed. Acacia lay across his stomach, and he was playing with her ears. Holk was sitting on the bed, by Stanley’s knees. The urn, sombre and grave as at the start of its journey, stood on the table under the window.

“I really must ask your forgiveness, Holk,” Stanley began, and he managed to perform great tricks with Acacia’s ears, pushing one into the other like two paper bags. “I allowed myself a joke back there, just to startle you a little. I never was at the Miramar. They told Camilla about your adventure there! And Camilla told me!”

“That’s neither here nor there,” Holk grunted, his brow gloomily furrowed.

Stanley gave a dull groan: “I was also afraid that, in order to retain an undamaged skull, I would have to launch into the longest tale I’ve ever told in my whole life. Would you be so kind, my dear Holk, to pour me another glass. With soda this time. Thank you so

much. Now, prepare yourself to listen, and consider how to arrange yourself to sit quietly here on this bed, and go only a little bit wandering, and don't interrupt."

Stanley tried to sip the whisky like a patient his medicine.

"You must do me the favour of holding my head up, Holk, or I shan't manage to swallow. Oh! Thanks a million! I've really annoyed you, I know. You were looking for me for ever so long. I'm sad to think you never found me sooner."

Stanley sank back, a seriously ill man who has exerted himself grievously. "Acacia's a splendid little beast," he said with a tender sigh. "But Bosco too is not to be despised."

"Who is Bosco?" Holk asked with the black humour of a desperate man. "Is he in the urn as well?"

"In Berlin, sir ... That is, near Berlin. Now, let us begin. It's the most fantastical story you could imagine, and yet it's really only about catching a chill! I shall make use of the whole thing in my novel."

"Of course!" Holk gave a bitter laugh. "That's why sweet wonderful Charlott had to die! Just to provide material for your Saturday Evening Post ..."

"Did Camilla tell you about that?" Stanley's face flushed as he interrupted. "It'll be a fine book, you wait and see!"

"Oh you ... you *trivial* Englishman!" Holk's teeth were grinding again. "You have no idea what Charlott was to us ... to us in Berlin!"

"Oh, I greatly appreciated her Berlin charm! She was quirky and clever and oh so delightful! So pay close attention. Within the first two minutes of our acquaintance, Charlott challenged me to procure a death certificate for her from somewhere or other – rather as you, sir, within the first two minutes of our acquaintance wanted to crack my skull! So that's how they do things, in Berlin. Charlott's challenge I found ravishing! I at once declared my readiness to obtain one for her, in Russia."

"Why on Earth did she need a death certificate?" Holk asked, aghast.

"If you could spare me the interruptions, good sir. It was the simplest and cleverest idea that ever was engendered in a female brain. She wanted to be dead, to make Camilla her heir, Camilla was to be paid off by my mother, and Camilla for her part was to hand the proceeds over to Charlott. Then Charlott would be resurrected. My mother would then launch a legal case in Germany that she was certain to win. Charlott would ensure that it lasted at least five years."

"But that's ..." Holk folded his hands like a good little boy in church. He was beaming, so enraptured was he: "Charlott!" he burst out in his delight.

"If I may continue? Charlott went off with her mastiff to somewhere near Berlin – not Petersdorf, but to the Waldspree, or how do you say it – the Spreewald. And I completed preparations for our trip to Russia."

"Why was Charlott doing all this with you?" Holk broke in. "Why was it you exactly who had to procure this certificate?"

“Oh God, how many death certificates have I procured in my life so far! They helped me create an enormous boom on the Chicago Exchange. I drove up the price until no one in the whole country could afford one.”

Holk had simply stopped attending to Stanley’s poppycock.

“But Charlott didn’t know you! Why didn’t she plan it all with her husband – I mean,” Holk corrected himself, “her divorced husband.”

“Oh, I think her husband would never have countenanced such a major con job.”

“And I?” cried Holk indignantly. “Did she perhaps believe that *I* wouldn’t countenance it?”

“Please forgive me, Herr Holk, but our mutual friend spoke often with me to the effect that she considered you not reliable enough for this kind of con job. Such schemes require the most exquisite exactitude and precision.”

Holk deflated. “Well,” he mumbled in dismay, and kept mumbling for some time. Stanley let him mumble to his heart’s content.

“Yet she thought to find exactitude and precision in you?” Now Holk really was bitter. “You sure look the part! In other words: she was in love with you! Don’t imagine it for a second. Charlott was always falling a bit in love with someone or other right off the bat. She had a thing about shallow good-looking boys. But it always faded remarkably fast.”

Stanley regarded Holk with an infatuated glance from his fabulously lovely eyes – eyes that only the sons of beautiful mothers can possess.

“That’s what I thought – that she always had these passing fancies – as soon as I saw you, Holk!”

Holk growled: “Continue, please.”

“If only you wouldn’t keep interrupting, kind sir! After I’d made all my arrangements, we travelled via Moscow down to Alexandrovsk on the Dnieper. I knew lots of people there who could help us. It cost a heap of money. We had a wonderful time. Those toil-worn small-town folk had never seen such a miracle as our Charlott! I believe she’s the only person in the whole world who could learn Russian in a week. She went with priests up into the tower, and rang the bells. She paid visits on Soviet officials and comported herself like Gogol’s Government Inspector. She drove the only serviceable automobile in town, a three horsepower Benz, Model 1898, Comfort Style, and drove her Comfort down those bumpy lanes like the very devil ...”

Holk groaned. He rubbed his cheek against the urn.

“But this Model 98 was her ruin. I could provide more details, were Acacia not lying on my stomach. But best not disturb her. Our policy in Alexandrovsk was Disraelian, or as a favour to you, Bismarckian. We dealt with truth as if it was a lie incarnate. It was the negation of all diplomacy. Quite simply, we told all of them down there the whole story from A to Z about why we had to have the death certificate. The local officials found it such fun to reel in my super-rich Mama from the Indies! Especially as most of the China tea trade used to pass through Russia. That’s the whole story, which I’ll write about in a novel: *How I Procured My Death Certificate*. I think there’s not a single civilised

publication that won't pay a decent sum for a story like that. In short: the young lady declared she would write a cheque for ten thousand Mark for the poor of the town, postdated six months hence, because that's how long she needed for her scheme. One noontime we obtained what we had so earnestly desired the whole time: Charlott's death certificate! Such rejoicing! Charlott handed over almost all the dollars and Reichsmarks we had left, we filled up the Comfort Style, and drove like the hounds of hell down to the Dnieper, where we picnicked in rain, hail and mud."

Holk wiped moisture from his brow with a sleeve of his pyjamas. He was going to drain what was left in his glass, but he put the glass down. Unthinkingly he picked up Stanley's glass and drained it, grimacing at the staleness of the lukewarm drink, and again wiped mouth and brow with his sleeve.

"Well then, Charlott came to a halt on the bank of this wide brown river, flourished the death certificate like a flag over her boyish hairdo, declared she felt hot and was going for a swim. Of course she felt hot; she'd just had a fever from the neverending sniffles and draughty trains and cars – the weather in Russia during those April days was never less than appalling, sir. Just like today, out there. I don't know if you recall how this companion of your youth never let herself be talked out of anything. No method, no tactic ever worked, my dear sir – at least none I ever discovered during the brief blessed time of our acquaintance. If you pleaded with her not to do it, she'd go ahead and do it anyway. If you pretended disinterest, maybe said 'Be my guest, do what you like for all I care', she'd still go ahead, though with rather less elan, but still she'd go ahead! In a word, before I could take a proper look around, there was Charlott stark naked on the bank of the Borysthenes, which is what the ancients called this river, ah, she stood there like an ancient goddess, but with twentieth century hips and breasts."

Holk had gone. Stanley was puzzled. He heard only the violent slamming of a door.

Holk paced up and down the corridor. Five minutes passed before he sat again on Stanley's bed, his slightly shaky hand stroking Acacia, who had enjoyed this night the attention of four manly hands, and dreamed lovely dreams of wonderful human males.

"Continue!" Holk commanded.

"So there we were, swimming like shameless naked savages through the rushes of the Borysthenes. I won't make a song and dance, my dear sir, of the *dreadful* rheumatism in the back I acquired from that swimming bath. Westerners like ourselves should never go bathing in a Soviet river. You won't leave me in the lurch now, will you, you'll give my back a nice rub? Good. Now here is my diagnosis: Charlott's foot entered the tumultuous brown flood at a temperature of 38.5°C. She climbed out like a foam-born goddess, teeth chattering with cold, at 40.5°. Anyway, two hours later she had an inflammation of the lungs. There is no need, I believe, to describe the progress of that inflammation, my dear Mr Holk. Just my big scene! The first fact since humanity began! Viz., how Charlott, three hours before she died, had to burst out laughing when she realised she really was going to die with the antedated death certificate in her hand! And this laughter, this constant joking – to the extent she was still conscious – about her already documented death only brought it on faster. Then with what remained of our money I summoned a famous doctor from Moscow. He was there at the end. He could do nothing other than continue what we'd already been doing there in Alexandrovsk: give her camphor injections and

champagne and make sure she kept sitting upright. Thus, sitting up, face to the west, like a great warrior and the chieftain of all women of our time, she entered into Eternity.”

A long silence. Soon it will be obvious that Stanley was thinking of something else entirely.

“She was cremated?” asked Holk tonelessly.

“What? Who? – Oh, yes! The Soviets dealt with the crematorium stuff. It took a long time to obtain permission to export the urn. I flew from Moscow to Paris, where I had urgent matters to discuss with my mother. Then I went back to collect the ashes.”

“And Camilla?” asked Holk.

“Camilla wouldn’t believe it at first. That Charlott *really* was dead, good sir.”

“But when Camilla told me and the whole of Berlin about Charlott’s death, Charlott really was not ...”

“Oh! Ow!” Stanley let out a yell, and Acacia, coat bristling, jumped to her feet.

Stanley too stood up. He took a bottle of liniment from his toilet case. He took off his pyjamas. There in the compartment he stood bare-naked as on the banks of the Borysthene. He poured liniment into Holk’s cupped hand. Holk began to rub mechanically. If anyone had asked him, he would have picked up a broom and swept the corridor, so far away was he. The Britisher Antinous howled like a Homeric hero.

But Holk paused his rubbing. He leaned his head forward and spoke over Stanley’s shoulder: “There’s something in your story I don’t quite understand. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of May this year, did you not pass by me in the Lichtenstein Allee, in a Mercedes, with Charlott and Bosco?”

Stanley groaned. “Lichtenstein Allee? Where? Vienna?”

“No. Berlin.”

Stanley shook his head, grimacing in pain: “Charlott’s death certificate says 4<sup>th</sup> April. She died in Alexandrovsk on 8<sup>th</sup> April. So I can’t have been driving her car in Berlin on 6<sup>th</sup> April. Please keep rubbing, my good Mr Holk!”

With mighty bunched fists Holk massaged the liniment into Stanley’s ice-hard, muscular, wonderfully tiered back. The boy writhed in pain, like Laocoon in the coils of the serpent.

Over the towers of the dull grey town of Borisov now rushing past, dawn was breaking.

## .XVII.

Cornelia, Cecil Dell and Stanley were waiting for Camilla. Charlott’s heiress was expected for tea at five o’clock. It was now twenty minutes after. Cornelia and her maid Grace were busy with the tea things. Cornelia always brought her samovar along on all her travels, in a specially made hand-case, as others carry a typewriter.

“This lady likes to keep people waiting,” remarked Cornelia, poking the charcoals under the samovar.

Stanley regarded his mother askance, like a canary: "I think it's all calculated! Make no mistake, Mother dearest, she's trying to make us nervous. She's awfully cunning."

For some days now a divine peace had reigned between Stanley and his mother. Stanley addressed her as "dearest" and "baby". He had assured her almost passionately that in this battle over the one-and-a-half he was entirely at her disposal. "I am totally on your side! Your well-being is paramount, dearest! I have absolutely no interest in this criminologist woman!"

Cornelia had clapped him on the shoulder with a "Dear good boy!", and given him five pounds.

As for Cecil Dell, his reflection was yawning in the shine of his white spats. He had no confidence that the visit of this girl from Berlin would afford him a particular pleasure. And he hadn't spent two years in Colombo looking forward to this Paris trip only to endure the company of a German woman with a doctor's title. He would know this kind of woman anywhere in the world. Especially, he believed, if she were German: they all wear loden skirts held up with braces, extraordinary boots, and little round Tyrolean hats, and they go through an enormous number of highly polished monocle lenses. He had read plenty of reports in the English and French satirical press.

Cecil Dell, 36 years old, had three notable characteristics. He loved his sleep. With regard to sleep he was one of the champion athletes of his time. His feats were accomplished with amazing ease and elegance. He had no need of Veronal or other sleeping aids. Nor did he need to watch his diet, whether food and drink or his other appetites. His sporting genius lay in every limb; he had no need to conjure it up with drugs or an ascetic lifestyle. Unattended by cramp or obstacle, his eternally even and delightfully silent breathing gathered beneath the splendid musculature of his belly and percolated up through his mouth and nose. This sport claimed his attention at any hour of the day or night, for example at half past eleven in the morning, or half past twelve in the afternoon, or at eight or nine in the evening. The training session might last one and a half minutes or a whole seven minutes. He might even organise his own Six Day Race, which he would undertake impervious to the cries of astonished onlookers.

His second notable characteristic was that he kept changing his clothes when not practising his sport. He owned more suits than Beau Brummel, Prince Pückler-Muskau\* and King Edward VII combined, and he wore them all.

And then alongside sleeping and dressing there remained two other activities: his profession, and women. Here his third characteristic came to light, the strangest and most remarkable of all: everything he did between sleeping and changing his clothes happened with clear intention and a certain professional intelligence. For example, during two hours in his counting-house in Colombo he achieved more than others in six hours. To say nothing of love.

All in all he was a gentleman, kept slim by his favourite sport. Over his upper lip was a trim, pointed, blue-black little moustache like a compass needle with a spike at each end. There were two pretty little freckles on the bridge of the narrow curving nose; the golden-brown eyes, set close to that nose, each had two reddish trout-marks that lent them a

special charm. The complexion of his face and his wonderful hands attested to the diligent application of various creams.

"I do not understand," said Cecil Dell – and he spoke slowly and with precision, as if delivering an academic lecture – "why Grace woke me up at half past four this afternoon. I told her expressly not to wake me until ten minutes *after* half past four, because I had foreseen that this German girl would certainly not be punctual. I would then have had an ample half hour to change my clothes. Why did you do so, Grace?"

"I do beg your pardon, Mr Dell, but Mr Fisher wanted me to."

"Why did you want to do this, my dear Stanley?"

"I do beg your pardon, my dear Cecil, but Mother wanted me to."

"Why did you want to do this, my dear Cornelia?"

Cornelia was standing nervously at the mirror. She tidied her already tidy hair. She was like a sculptor never content with his work. She spoke acidly: "I cannot castigate myself enough, Cecil! You can't have produced nearly enough red blood cells during your snooze today."

"Please understand, my love, that this has nothing to do with the production of blood corpuscles, but rather with the fact that nobody in this hotel shows the slightest consideration for me when I happen to lie down for five minutes."

Stanley went over to Cecil. He laid a hand on his knee: "But I am considerate for you, Cecil old chap. You don't look too well. You need a good long lie-down. Have another go, with some Antiphonen."

Cecil gave a friendly nod. Then he said: "Could I have a very strong tea, Grace my dear, so that I may be perked up a little?" To Cornelia: "Or is it impolite to ask for tea before this dreadful German girl arrives?"

"I don't think it at all impolite, my dear Cecil," said Stanley, as he poured him a cup .

Cecil sipped his tea. "Of course she will crow about her Will. You must be ready for that, my dear Cornelia."

Cornelia turned indignantly to him: "I shall be ready to throw her out if she does not behave herself here! I consider it tremendously decent of me to even receive her here instead of directing her to my lawyer!"

"I too consider it tremendously decent of you," said Stanley after he had chewed it over for a while. "And I think she will comport herself most improperly. She'll bring a black mastiff with her that she inherited from Charlott. A panther with a white chest, even Theseus would tremble at the sight."

Cornelia's nostrils flared ecstatically in justified outrage at Camilla's improper behaviour: "If this heiress of Charlott's dares to show up at my tea party with a ravaging beast, I shall at once order her and the beast to be thrown back downstairs! I shall summon the manager! There shall be a scandal such as this hotel has never known!"

At that moment there came a rather loud knock at the door, and without a pause Charlott's Heiress stepped in. There was no sign of a ravaging beast.

However much of a well-brought-up gentleman Cecil Dell might be – for five whole seconds he just sat there, gawping like a schoolboy, teacup in hand.

Into the room had stepped a lady who would not have needed even five seconds to catch a man like Cecil Dell completely off guard. An exact description must be provided of this lady's attire, in order to make Cecil's stupefaction understandable. She wore half-trousers, that is to say a short black and white check skirt, and a snug-fitting black jacket over a white *creme de Chine* shirt-blouse – an outfit that must have been made for her by absolutely the best dressmaker in this entire vale of tears. She also wore a small black felt hat, dreamed up by some milliner in the one blessed moment of genius in all her milliner-existence. And here it became apparent that Charlott's Heiress had indeed brought with her a ravening beast, for on the upturned front brim of the simple little hat was a mastiff composed of brilliants, platinum and onyx. Charlott's Heiress also wore black suede gloves with white-spotted cuffs, totally transparent stockings and low black sports shoes in lacquered calfskin. She was holding a snakeskin handbag with a zip fastener which she undoubtedly maltreated in the most impetuous manner.

Cecil felt a stitch in his ribs when he saw the edgy casual salient of those wide hips, the ingenious shape of the hands with the long fingers in those gloves, and below those hips the loveliest limbs he had ever consciously noticed. And that face ...

Stanley leapt to his feet, and literally hurled himself at his mother's guest: "Oh *Camilla*, it's so good of you to come! May I introduce you to my mother? She has been so looking forward to meeting you! And this is my friend Mr Dell!"

"Oh, I am so grateful, Lady Cornelia, for your kindness in permitting me to call on you!"

Charlott's Heiress shook Lady Cornelia's hand. "Good day, Stanley! Good day, Mr Dell! Lady Cornelia, I really cannot express how happy I am to meet you!"

Cornelia led her guest to the tea table, arm in arm like old friends, with her most beguiling little-boy smile. She actually looked like a schoolboy visited by another schoolboy and eager to show off his things. Only in her eyes was there a residue of bewilderment, and of rage against the third schoolboy in the room: Stanley, whose unruly mouth had once again fed her false information.

"Your visit makes me so happy, dear Miss Blank – oh, how should I put it? – dear Miss Doctor! You have no idea how much respect we all have here for a young woman who is a German Doctor of Philosophy. Just look at Mr Dell, he still hasn't recovered ..."

"I do beg your pardon, but I had imagined it all quite differently," said Cecil in the aggrieved tone of a man who has had the wool pulled scandalously over his eyes, and everyone laughed and Cecil Dell laughed along. The cheeks of Charlott's Heiress grew quite round and radiant, because it was *such* a pleasure to be able to visit Lady Cornelia and because Cecil Dell was so put out at having imagined it all so, so differently. She sat there on her little chair looking so polite, natural and relaxed, and when spoken to she looked the speaker attentively full in the face, and only that curve of the long hips had something of a boy's bold impetuosity as he hastens to finish his cup of tea and be excused to dash away. For the moment, however, she accepted the teacup from Cornelia's hand with such charming good manners – her little respectful bow seemed so quaint.

“You must be having a lovely time in Paris, Miss Blank?”

“Oh, I do *love* Paris! Paris is *such* a lovely city! And the weather is so nice! And you can see such lovely things in the museums, and on the streets! And the ladies, especially the Americans and the English, all wear such *lovely* clothes! And such *exquisite* food! And the chauffeurs pull out so skilfully! And everyone is just so polite and charming!”

“I am glad you’re enjoying your visit. We ourselves do like it here. We find everything we come across so delightful. I hope you have found a good hotel?”

“Oh, Lady Cornelia! I’m staying in the countryside outside Paris, with my Parisian aunt! You really must be introduced to my aunt de Pourtales, Lady Cornelia! She treats me so delightfully! Just think, three years ago when I came to Paris, my aunt de Pourtales had me informed via a cousin that, fond as she was of me, it was impossible for her to see me! And today I’m allowed to stay with her! I am so, so happy that these horrible antagonisms are starting to be resolved.”

“Oh, so true!” cried Cecil, almost vivaciously. “So absurd! I too am so *very* glad to see them resolved.”

“We are all very very glad to see it,” said Lady Cornelia, shooting Cecil a warning glance.

“I’m so glad! Social antagonisms always endure much, much longer than in politics or economics. So now we have *such* an encouraging sign that even here things are beginning to change.”

“It is a truly wonderful sign, my dear Miss Blank,” said Cornelia, proffering petit fours, “and we are *all* so delighted. Aren’t we, Cecil? Even Mr Dell is delighted ...”

Cecil suddenly had the look of one whose temple has almost been grazed by the razor-sharp knife slung by a Chinese juggler into the wooden board behind him.

“... for Cecil is an ardent pacifist!”

“Oh, I’m so delighted to know you are an ardent pacifist, Mr Dell!”

Cecil Dell creased his brow in deep thought. Whenever deep thinking was required, his expression always suggested great exertion: “My profession allows me insufficient leisure to occupy myself with politics. But I think pacifism is a most respectable thing for anyone to dabble with.”

“I too think that people should always dabble with things that cost so very much less than bellicism.”

“Than what?” asked Cecil, with a panicky glance at Cornelia.

“Than bellicism,” said Charlott’s Heiress, very softly.

Stanley blew quite rudely into his tea: “Pacifism comes free of charge, and I think that three minutes ago Mr Dell became the greatest Germanophile that England has given the world since Carlyle.”

Charlott’s Heiress laughed, as one laughs at what one has not at all understood. “I find that so nice of Mr Dell,” she said, inanely.

She had not brought a predatory animal with her, apart for the one made of brilliants, platinum and onyx on her simple little hat, but she seemed determined to subdue all the wild beasts in this room with idiotic comments.

But now, after this first surprise attack, Cornelia Fisher began to marshal her defences, like a kangaroo in a tight corner that turns about, ready for a boxing match. With the expression of a reproachful Sybil she said: "We were so *awfully* sorry to hear of your cousin's death. Really! It struck all of us quite hard, even though we *all*" (she laid great stress on the 'all') "barely knew the poor thing."

"I knew her quite well," said Stanley, raising a storm in his teacup, but he was quickly interrupted.

"My dear Lady Cornelia, you can have no idea what I felt when I heard the news! All so sudden! I was quite flabbergasted."

"We were all flabbergasted."

"But it's really quite impossible for you to conceive, Lady Cornelia, what this loss means to me. She was my best friend. I don't know if your son has told you just how close we were to one another. Just imagine, was it not adorably touching of her to mention me – me, and nobody else – in her Will?"

"It was adorably touching of her," said Cornelia Fisher, setting her teacup down on the table with a slight crash. "It was very decent of her to think of you. But I believe, my dear Miss Blank, that your cousin might not have been entirely *au fait* with her own legal situation when she wrote that Will. She certainly had a big-hearted nature, but perhaps not the most logical!"

"Oh, Lady Cornelia! You have no idea just what a logical nature my friend had! It's really quite incredible how a young person in the bloom of health, who should never have been thinking at all about death, could have arranged everything in her Will so logically, right down to the teeniest detail. I really can't express, Mr Dell – but as a businessman you will surely understand *perfectly* – just how *truly* grateful I am to my poor friend, and just how *nice* it is for an unbusinesslike girl like myself to find herself overnight so rich. To think my poor friend arranged it all for me so conscientiously! I must say, Lady Cornelia, that you really have no idea just how conscientiously. So that the Will can give rise to absolutely no problems for me whatsoever."

Beneath this murderous assault from her strangler, Cornelia's face began to twitch. She grew noticeably older. She was sixteen when her teatime guest arrived. By now she had brought it to at least forty-six.

"Well now, dear Miss Blank, I shall be heartily content if everything should turn out for you as you imagine!"

"A thousand thanks, dear Lady Cornelia! I find your good wishes so charming, and I do believe it will all turn out splendidly for me. I spoke in Berlin with one of the most eminent lawyers we have there, and on his advice I travelled to London, where he furnished me with an introduction to the most eminent lawyer there, Sir Robert Born – I don't know if you have heard of him, Lady Cornelia? And just imagine how lucky I am! Both gentlemen told me it would all turn out splendidly for me! It makes me so happy!"

Stanley, you will understand, because you know me a little, and you know how I like to steer clear of any difficulties! Lady Cornelia, I don't know if you are the same, but as for me, I absolutely *detest* difficulties! For me it is always so much more pleasant when everything proceeds smoothly from the start, instead of difficulties turning up!"

Cecil lent these remarks his hearty applause. He too found that in life it is much more pleasant when things proceed smoothly from the start, instead of difficulties arising.

But now Cecil received from Cornelia a Great British glare signifying: "Advance! The Iron Duke to the charge!" The Iron Duke hadn't completely slept his fill, but he had been very well trained, and he now charged ahead splendidly. Cecil cleared his throat, studied his striped trousers, and let his gaze linger on the white spats that covered his shoes like angels' wings:

"I think Lady Cornelia would not be sorry were this conversation over our teacups to revert to our little business matter. I don't know whether you too would share this opinion, Miss Blank?"

Charlott's Heiress radiated gratitude to lady Cornelia: "If it pleases Lady Cornelia – oh how happy I shall be to discuss our little business matter! It would really be such a pleasure to do so over this delightful tea!"

"I am happy to do so," said Cornelia Fisher in a deep voice, as she lit a Henry Clay cigar.

"It's fine by me, it would make me very happy," said Stanley. They all stared at him.

"Very well then," said Cecil Dell, no trace now of tiredness in his voice. He spoke precisely, fluently and logically, though with an obsequious undertone: "It is true, my dear Miss Blank, that your late cousin was the beneficiary of her assets and Lady Fisher merely the administrator until her twenty-fifth year. It is also true, furthermore, that in his Will the testator did not envisage that your friend might pass away before coming into her inheritance. Here we have a lacuna. In such cases the judge normally tries to divine the intent of the testator by asking: how would he decide, were he still alive?"

"I understand, Mr Dell! What you have just said is extraordinarily clear, and you have such a charming way of putting it!"

"Really?" Cecil was surprised. He blushed. "Now, my dear Miss Blank! There can be no doubt that it was the testator's intention that our friend Lady Cornelia Fisher and the company she controls shall, in the coming five years, *regardless* of the circumstances, retain enjoyment of the sum specified in the said bequest and the interest thereon for the purpose of assuring the capital foundations of the business. A thousand pardons," Cecil added, blaring like a drunkard towards the mouth that had opened slightly in objection, "but are you not of the same opinion on the matter, Miss Blank?"

"I think, my dear girl," said Cornelia in a low consoling tone, "that you are not just a very pretty and elegant young lady, but also a very clever one, for whose intelligence we all have the greatest respect. And for that reason you will surely share our view of the matter!"

Stanley backed his mother up: "I too think you're a very pretty and elegant young lady," he said, and once again they all stared at him in surprise.

But Charlott's Heiress suddenly looked utterly defeated. The previously radiant eyes were now clouded with sorrow, so heartfelt was the demurral she was now compelled to make:

"I am so awfully grieved, Lady Cornelia, I am filled with such anguish, Mr Dell, I am so sorry, Stanley – but now, for the first time, I am not totally of the same mind as you. Here our opinions diverge ever so slightly. BUT ...!" she let out an impetuous cry, as if a light had come on in her head, and she swiftly unzipped her bag and scrabbled around in it and a handkerchief fell to the floor: "Before we continue this conversation, would you not like to read my cousin's actual Will and," Charlott's Heiress sniffled, "the death certificate?"

With an imperious gesture Cornelia took hold of the death certificate, and Cecil Dell took hold of the Will, which he immediately began to read with close attention. It was only a few lines long. Meanwhile Cornelia murmured the Russian text of the certificate to herself. She was familiar with the Russian language, for until 1916 Russia had been the tea company's major customer. She quickly handed the certificate back.

"That dear Charlott is dead, my dear child, no one in the world could doubt for a moment," she said, drawing powerfully on her Henry Clay as if on a symbol of life and fertility. She took hold of the Will. She held it before the glowing end of the cigar that dangled from the corner of her mouth. "As to whether the Will is in order, I shall leave that verdict to my lawyer. But I *think* it is in order. Let us therefore speak further about our slight difference of opinion."

"Yes, do let's!" was Charlott's Heiress's enthusiastic cry. She put the documents down on the table. "My beloved parents, my friends and I are all of the opinion that the testator did not intend that dear Lady Cornelia and the business should retain enjoyment of the capital and the interest thereon for the next five years quite regardless of *any* circumstances, as you mentioned just now, Mr Dell. No doubt at that time he proceeded on the assumption that my cousin would have received an inheritance from her deceased parents, and he certainly could not have foreseen the German inflation that rendered my friend almost penniless!"

"But she married a very wealthy man," Cornelia cried, pulling the cigar from her lips and waving it in a semicircle for emphasis.

"From whom, scarcely a year later, she was divorced, Lady Cornelia," was Charlott's Heiress's demure objection.

This irritated Cornelia: "I cannot understand how someone could divorce such a wealthy man after only a year of marriage!"

"I can't understand it either," said Stanley. He looked at Charlott's Heiress as if expecting an explanation, and as he waited filled his pipe. He was treating his mother's salon like a railway station.

"Well now," Cecil sought to smooth things over, "there can be many reasons. I can imagine that a woman might divorce her husband because to her he is not sufficiently well-dressed. Or that kind of thing," he added apologetically, having noticed how Cornelia's shoulders were twitching.

"You have hit the nail on the head, Mr Dell!" cried Charlott's heiress, overcome by such shrewdness of observation. "I believe that really was one of the grounds on which my friend obtained her divorce. But having regard to our little matter here, it is important to note that this man, like so many others in Germany, has meanwhile become quite poor!"

"Aha! So now I understand Charlott's divorce after just one year!" cried Cornelia, her tone bitter.

"Oh please, Lady Cornelia!" the tea guest countered, rather tartly. "Now I really must come to my friend's defence! Charlott obtained her divorce *before* she had the slightest inkling that her husband would lose his entire assets! This is well known in Berlin ..."

"Well! I have other information! Let us set that aside, dear Miss Blank!"

"I should very much like to know where you obtained your other information, Lady Cornelia! For then I would be able to call the person who provided that information a shameless slanderer!"

"Oh, don't be so cross, dear Miss Blank! Let us set it aside! Set it aside! I have a quite distinct impression of your poor deceased cousin's character. Even as a small child she would write me the most impertinent letters. The poor child was badly brought up by her mother, dear good Margaret – and she no doubt had a screw loose somewhere, she was always a little toquée, the poor thing ..."

"It makes me so inexpressibly sad, Lady Cornelia, that you have formed no good opinion of me ..."

"Of you?" Cornelia asked in astonishment. "What do you mean, of you?"

"Of me?" Charlott's Heiress asked in astonishment. "What do you mean, of me?"

"You said 'of me'. But we were not speaking of you at all, but of your late cousin."

"Did I say 'of me'?" Charlott's Heiress looked to Stanley for help.

Stanley grinned, nostrils flaring, straight into the face of his mother's tea guest: "I believe you said 'of me', my dear Camilla." Cornelia kept her eyes on Charlott's Heiress. An idea seemed to lurk veiled before the gate of her consciousness, but her guest's lively utterances again demanded her full attention.

"I feel a quite justified sorrow, Lady Cornelia, that you have formed no good opinion of my poor friend. I for my part have always held you in high – in very high – regard. And what do you think, Stanley?"

"It's already two months since she passed away over there, and yet – and yet – I still think of her now and then. And I too always had a high – a very high – regard for you, dear Camilla."

"Thank you, Stanley," said Charlott's Heiress, looking for her handkerchief. "It's so kind of you still to be thinking of her now and then, even though it was more than two months ago that she died over there. You were the only person who kept close to her – very close – right up until her death. I don't know if perhaps you were too young to appreciate the heavy responsibility that you took upon yourself ..."

“My dear Miss Blank!” Cornelia hastened to interrupt, “let us please return to the matter at hand! My business friends and advisers, my son and I, are unanimously of the opinion that, despite my lively affection for your most capable characteristics, which in contrast to Charlott’s characteristics I know how to appreciate – that I have no reason to hand over to you right away this enormous sum of one-and-a-half million dollars. You will have to wait five years, just as Charlott would have had to wait.”

Charlott’s Heiress took a sip of her tea, now grown cold. As she lifted her lips from the rim of the teacup she was once again, as when she entered the room, a stunningly idiotic creature from whose mouth flowed the most brainless babble.

“It would make me so awfully unhappy, Lady Cornelia, if you and Mr Dell were to misunderstand me! Please don’t believe for one moment that I need this one-and-a-half million dollars, or rather more than six million German Marks, right this very afternoon! Oh no, not at all! I totally understand! Such a large sum cannot be transferred just like that! I would find it quite satisfactory if you would be so good as to arrange for one-third to be deposited in – let’s say fourteen days, at my bank in Berlin, and the second one-third in let’s say one month, and the third third, as far as I’m concerned, can wait until 1<sup>st</sup> October.”

“Really? That would satisfy you?” Cornelia’s smile was sardonic. Her face now bore some resemblance to those sun-bleached bones of animal faces that one comes across in the desert.

“Absolutely, dear Lady Cornelia! You must not think me a gold-digging berserker! I have even obtained advice that if one were to place one’s assets in certain German stocks on the Berlin Exchange, one would see them multiply their value in the shortest time. There is also the slight possibility that by proposing these deadlines I might suffer a substantial loss, and would therefore be compelled to hold everyone who fails to meet the deadlines punctually legally liable for significant lost profits. Do you know, Mr Dell, of my special interest as a criminologist in the corrective training of neglected children?”

“Pardon?” Cecil was taken by surprise.

“Yes. And I think that you too must often have been engaged with this deeply serious problem.”

“Oh, rather!” Cecil replied. He dabbed his brow with a wonderfully scented handkerchief, staring as he did so at the angel wings on his shoes.

“So you see, that’s what I shall be using a part of my money for. I think you will approve, as any judge who hears of it will approve my intention, don’t you think?”

“Oh, rather!” Cecil replied, completely broken.

“Well then! As said, Lady Cornelia, we are both faced with this scandalous risk! Namely, if I am unjustly deprived this afternoon of this little matter, it is always possible that in five years’ time the judge will award me, not one-and-a-half million, but four-and-a-half. I am almost afraid that my dear parents and friends will outright insist that I increase my demand by at least four-and-a-half million! And that would be nothing less than a tragedy for us all, Lady Cornelia! And so you can depend on me to stick by my

initial demand, and with regard to next fortnight's deadline would be quite prepared to negotiate with you ..."

"That is extraordinarily kind, Miss Blank, and I consider it awfully decent of you! But if my company were actually to arrive at the absurd thought of paying you one-and-a-half million dollars, then there would be no need for deadlines and grace periods! My firm, thank God, would have no need of such!"

"Hallo!" cried Stanley, utterly amazed, like a child who has suddenly seen the light. "Never in my whole life did that occur to me, dearest! I am so happy! It means I've misunderstood you dreadfully all this time!"

"Misunderstood me, how?" screamed Cornelia, with a gesture suggesting that she was about to tear at her beautifully coiffured hair.

"Oh mother dearest! I'm bowled over and so happy to learn that the company is in such good condition! I'd always thought it would be a fatal blow, that it would mean the absolute ruin of our beloved company, if it had to pay out such a sum all at once! But if it really is the case that it's a mere triviality for you to pay out one-and-a-half million dollars overnight, then I would like to propose to you, dearest, that you quite simply write a cheque this afternoon for the one-and-a-half. It would be so lovely to settle this tiresome matter once and for all, to the satisfaction of everyone concerned! What do you say, my dear Camilla?"

Charlott's Heiress lowered her head to the rim of her teacup: "Of course I have no objection to accepting a cheque here and now, in the presence of this delightful tea!"

"Idiot!" said Cornelia quite loudly. She stood up from her chair.

Apparently she meant Stanley.

Her teatime guest likewise stood up at once, as befitted one so well brought up and civilised.

"It has been awfully, awfully nice meeting you, Lady Cornelia! I really must not keep you any longer, I'm sure you need to change for dinner. Adieu, Mr Dell! You too will be anxious to change! Adieu, Stanley! It was awfully nice to see you again after all the grief we have suffered. Many, many thanks, Lady Cornelia – my aunt de Portales' car is waiting below. Many, many thanks, Lady Cornelia – it was so nice, Mr Dell, and till next time, Stanley! Till next time!"

So now Cornelia, Cecil Dell and Stanley were once again bereft of Charlott's Heiress's presence. Cornelia strode back and forth at an almost furious pace. She looked like the goddess Nike of Samothrace, except that, rather perilously, she still had her head and arms.\*

Embarrassed by the ineptness of his behaviour, Stanley stayed by the window and looked down on the street. His shoulders were shaking, though whether from weeping or from some other feminine emotion was impossible to tell. He watched as a lady emerged from the hotel holding her gloves or something else up to her mouth, bent over at the hips like someone unable to hold back either anguish or laughter, sailing towards a car where she was greeted by an exuberant mastiff in a coat of half-mourning, which planted its snout on the substantially smaller mastiff of brilliants, platinum and onyx.

Meanwhile Cecil Dell's gaze was fixed on the door to the corridor, as if he had discovered there a masterpiece by Lorenzo Ghiberti.\* He was in a trance of rapt amazement, and for the first time in his life forgot what to do when a guest had left the room, which was: have a good yawn.

"I think we would do well to give this lady her cheque as quickly as possible," he said suddenly. "She's quite capable of demanding twenty million if we delay a few days."

Cornelia laughed, as the great Corsican used to laugh when surrounded by nincompoops: "I shall have this Berlin girl locked away!"

"Locked away?" Cecil asked, flabbergasted.

"Delusions of grandeur! Institution for the mentally deranged!"

Her foot snagged on a handkerchief. Absent-mindedly she picked it up from the carpet, and absent-mindedly her gaze passed over it. "To think I came to Paris for rest and relaxation!" She narrowed her eyes, so cross was she about her Parisian hopes. "At least you all enjoyed the spectacle!"

"Bits of it," said Stanley.

Cornelia regarded the monogram on the handkerchief. She laughed out loud: "That girl even helped herself to the poor dead thing's accessories! 'Ch.V.'! Before this Will came along that Berlin girl must have had not a single handkerchief in her trousseau!"

Cornelia strode to the door. She called for Grace. Suddenly she froze. Once again she regarded the monogram in her hand. She seemed to be straining to comprehend some unfathomable occurrence. But unwilling to credit the capriciousness of her thoughts, she let the handkerchief fall.

She slammed the door to her dressing-room behind her with a bang.

At once Stanley turned around. He searched for the handkerchief in the half-dark. He picked it up.

Cecil gave a vigorous wave: "Just a moment!" he pleaded. Stanley held the handkerchief under his nose. "Ah! Tabac Blond! Very good! Very very good! Not quite new, but most enchanting! Really more for the blonde woman than the black-haired, no? What say you, Stanley my boy? But still, very very good! What was she called? Camilla Blank? Ah, Camilla, Camilla!"

Stanley stuffed the handkerchief into a jacket pocket that smelled of Richmond blended with Navy Cut.

Now, at last, Cecil yawned. "Tiresome business," he murmured. "I shall allow myself just five minutes, provided only that I be left *in peace* in this wretched hotel! And then we shall change for dinner. Will you join us at the Grand Guignol, Stanley?"

"No."

Cecil sighed. He composed himself comfortably on the sofa.

"Bye-bye, Stanley."

.XVIII.

Cornelia passed a very disturbed night. The cause might have been the various pleasant inanities she had watched on stage at the Grand Guignol. There was for example the lunatic asylum where a young girl, now fully recovered, the night before her discharge had her eyes carefully put out by two evil-minded matrons who seemingly left something to be desired in the mental hygiene line; a cripple who had languished bedridden for thirty years suddenly stood up to direct the proceedings like the conductor of an orchestra, but she too was grabbed by the neck and pushed down onto a red-hot iron stove where her face sizzled like a drop of water; and finally the audience made the acquaintance of a young sailor in a lighthouse, whose antics high up in the tower became ever madder until his own father felt it necessary to strike him dead; and more such quaint delights.

But Cornelia was man enough not to let such events rob her of a moment's sleep. She was accustomed to judging things by their merits. Were those proceedings up on the stage poorly done, or well done? She found that they were well done, full stop.

She had several rather more mundane visions. For example, instead of two empty eye sockets she saw a monogram sewn carefully in a circle: *Ch. V.* Then a female face that gave her food for thought. In vain did she compare it in her memory to certain family photographs featuring a Berlin baby which from its earliest years used to write her such impertinent letters. Those photos must have been stored away in the bottommost drawer of a low chest of drawers in her house in Colombo, and there, given the torrid humidity along the seventh parallel, would have slowly curled up. She had always treated those photographs as the most worthless treasures ever to find a place in her lovely Ceylonese villa. Now, however, she would gladly pay a couple of thousand pounds to have them in her hands here in Paris. She seriously entertained the notion of despatching Grace to Colombo to fetch them! Throughout the night she kept replaying that curious exchange with her tea guest: *"It makes me so inexpressibly sad, Lady Cornelia, that you have formed no good opinion of me ..."* – *"What do you mean, of you?"* – *"What do you mean, of me?"* – *"You said 'of me'. But we were not speaking of you at all, but of your late cousin."*

At eight o'clock, once Cornelia had completed twenty minutes of physical exercises fuelled by intense annoyance, she made a decision, the boldness of which caused even a woman such as she to tremble: namely, to summon Cecil! Summon Cecil at eight in the morning! – you might just as well try to summon the Pope in the Vatican to the telephone.

Imagine her astonishment when it turned out that Cecil was already awake, and answering the telephone in the best of moods.

"What's going on?" Cornelia cried. "You're not asleep?"

"Whatever are you thinking, my dear! I, sleep? I've been awake these two hours."

"Has something happened?" Cornelia asked, envisaging a murder in Cecil's room.

"Oh, not at all, my love! What do you think might have happened? I often lie there sleepless, just thinking. Business worries just go round and round in my head."

Cornelia was deeply moved: "You poor man! Thank you so much for fretting about my problems! Might we perhaps meet for breakfast in my salon in half an hour?"

The suggestion was very tentative, for she knew Cecil abhorred conversation and communal meals in the morning. "I have a very important matter to discuss with you," she added. "In fact, I must ask you to take a trip to Berlin on the three o'clock Nordexpress."

Cecil yelped: "Take a trip? To Berlin?"

Silence.

"Very well. I shall meet you in your salon in half an hour."

At ten o'clock Cecil put a call through to Stanley's little hotel on Montmartre. Stanley was astonished to hear Cecil on the telephone. Their relationship had never been especially friendly.

"Stanley, my dear boy! I have an enormous favour to ask of you!"

"Please, my dear Cecil! I trust your health is in a satisfactory condition?"

"My health is not too bad, dear Stanley. But my nerves! I am in the midst of a kind of nervous breakdown!"

"Oh!"

"I had a very bad night, and an even worse breakfast with your mother."

"Oh, I quite understand what breakfast with Mother must have been like."

"Yes, and now the big favour: can you lunch with me at half past twelve, at Larue's?"

"It's not ... very convenient," came the hesitant response.

"Oh, Stanley!" Cecil's voice acquired a quite feminine seductiveness. "Please, do tell me you can make it! Telephone your appointments and cancel them! You would be doing me such a great favour!"

Silence on Montmartre.

"Are you still there?"

"Yes. All right, I shall telephone and cancel my appointments. But not Larue's! I'm broke. A small brasserie on Rue Vivienne, called Dubski's!"

"But Stanley! No nonsense, please! If you're a bit short, I can bring you what you need."

"Oho! This is a side of you, my dear sir, that I've never got to know! Then good. But I insist on Dubski's!"

"You insist on bad food?" Cecil asked, rather peevishly.

"Absolutely! I can't stand those USA faces at Larue's! Half past twelve in Rue Vivienne! And don't forget to bring a couple of kilograms of chequebooks. You know you can get whatever you want from me, with money. I really think there's no one in the whole world more corruptible than me! Au revoir, my good man!"

"Au revoir, Stanley."

And so they met at half past twelve in the Rue Vivienne. Cecil peered warily about, like a man sentenced by a court to ruin his stomach at some mandated location.

"Please don't think me mad, dear Stanley, but my nerves are so shot I absolutely must have champagne."

"Please, have champagne, my good Cecil. Have you brought your library along?"

Cecil smiled. His golden-brown eyes with the trout-flecks were capable of bewitching even a male person when they smiled like that.

"So how much do you need, Stanley my child?"

"Fifty thousand pounds."

"No, be serious!"

"I was just joking about the fifty thousand. I actually need double that."

"I shall write a cheque for a hundred, Stanley. Will that do?"

"Oh, *very* nicely," Stanley replied appreciatively. "They wouldn't send round my Citroen this morning, because I hadn't paid the rent."

He followed Cecil's wonderful handwriting and the gold pen that covered the detached cheque with such meticulous lettering. He felt impelled to accompany Cecil's handwriting exercise with a few profound observations, as he played tenderly with the chequebook.

"I love the great literature of every nation, Cecil! But these twenty-five pages for me rank higher than the writings of every language and culture! If you leaf through these most significant publications of the human spirit, a superficial observer might form the impression that their text is basically rather monotonous. Wrong, quite wrong! Precisely this is the most wonderful and democratic aspect of this new genre of literature: the author is no longer autonomous, he's the Everyman-man who only now, between these lines, voyages with his own spirit. What a symbol, Cecil! What do you think Dante's or Goethe's divine works would be without a reader? Desert moonscapes! Stars leaking away sad and frosty, for of a young girl no sweet lips ever go singing across their meadows. Alas, Cecil, what would this eventual novel of mine signify, without the designation 150,000<sup>th</sup>?"

Cecil handed over the cheque with a sigh. But the sigh seemed unrelated to the definitive loss of the hundred pounds.

"Of a young girl no sweet lips – very prettily put!"

"I'll say! I knew you belonged to that generation of solid fellows who can still appreciate a preposed genitive!"

"What?" Cecil asked, placing considerable strain on his facial folds as he tried to master the preposed genitive.

"Oh, nothing. Spit it out, Cecil! What do you actually want from me? Was there ever in the whole of British history a Prince of Wales more an outsider than I am?"

Cecil tried the hors d'oeuvres. He found them very tasty.

"Now listen, Stanley! I'm relying on your discretion as a fellow clubman! You're friendly with that young lady who visited your mother yesterday. I mean the Vision in Mourning

with the whiff of Tabac Blond perfume. It gave me a most unsettled night. Because, you see, I would like to marry that lady.”

Stanley dropped his knife and fork. He actually raised them half a meter to his ears so they would make a lovely clang.

“Stanley, stop fooling around. I’m not a hunchback. I might have been devil-may-care at times in my life, and rather short of funds, but I have a very respectable income from the tea company. Last year I made ten thousand pounds, and this year I expect that sum to increase. I don’t know, Stanley, how you see me. We have always steered rather clear of one another. Circumstances made that unavoidable. But I think that today, at last, we should really become better acquainted. You see, Stanley – we are all growing older. I’m almost thirty-six. And this Vision with the Tabac Blond appeals to me – appeals so well it’s driving me round the bend! She’s so ladylike and so intelligent and witty – I really cannot understand why she is a German.”

“She appeals to *me* so well she’s driving *me* round the bend, and I’ve never understood why she’s not a Negress.”

“Oh! So you want to marry her as well?”

“I shall buy a poodle in the flea market and marry that. I shall never marry a human female – out of the question.”

“Then please let me know what you really think. Have you spoken to the Vision in Mourning, yesterday evening or today?”

Stanley stared straight at Cecil. His nose became quite wide, he stared so hard: “Can you keep a secret, good sir?”

“But we’re such ripping comrades in arms, my dear Stanley!”

“Good. I did speak to her again yesterday evening. We had dinner on Montparnasse.”

Cecil blushed a little. “Did she somehow ... at some point ... I mean, did you have any impression ... at the tea party yesterday, did this girl ... notice me?”

Stanley pondered the question.

“Oh!” he cried at a sudden burst of illumination, accompanied by another loud and loutish clash of cutlery. “It made me so frustrated! Now I understand! During the whole evening she spoke only of you! She asked the silliest questions about you, I had no way to answer them. It made me mad as a dog with a sugar-stick stuck to its tail! I really couldn’t fathom what this girl wanted from you. Oh! Oh! What an ass I am!”

Cecil, his face delicately blushing, downed his glass of champagne at a gulp. He squirmed with pleasure in his chair. His nerves were evidently improved.

“So it’s all fine! I shall marry! Stanley, good lad – would you lend me a bit of a hand?”

Stanley hesitated. He spoke very low, so moved and embarrassed was he: “I don’t know ... But Cecil! Won’t it be a major act of disloyalty? ... I really don’t know if my dear mother, my dear, dear mother, who holds you in such close affection ... will she agree?”

“Let’s have it out, Stanley!” Cecil cried with passion, already the valiant husband of the Vision in Mourning! A paterfamilias who wants to conclude a business deal as swiftly as

possible, for the benefit of his spouse! “Cards on the table, Stanley! I spent the whole night mulling over this business of the one-and-a-half from every conceivable angle. It’s quite remarkable how a poor sleeper like me can work everything out in a single night! Now: your mother’s position is completely untenable. The money must be paid over to the Tabac Blond!”

“Bravo!” Stanley cried, and now he too, here in the bright light of day, downed his glass of Heidsieck. “That’s exactly what I think. One and a half million dollars right away into the snakeskin handbag of this Tabac Blond with the coal-tar-raven hair.”

“Good! You told me on the telephone that you’re the most corruptible person of the age. You now have the chance to prove whether you’ll stand by your word like a man! You hear? Like a *man*! Now here’s my proposal: I shall try to bring your mother round to my position, and ensure that the matter of the one-and-a-half is settled as quickly as possible. This very week! As for you, you will create the opportunity for me to see the Vision in Mourning again. You will not denigrate me excessively as you usually do, but you will tell her I’m a pretty good fisherman, and a crack golfer ...”

“Oh, golf is excellent! She’s a passionate golfer!”

“...that I dress not too badly, I know how to go through life with my senses alert, and I earn a pretty respectable income.”

“Good, good, I know all about you, my dear chap! And how respectable, may I ask, might my income be from this caper?”

“You’ll receive ten thousand pounds on account from your eventual inheritance.”

“That makes twenty thousand!” Stanley cried, his boyish blue eyes sparkling, and he danced with his knife and fork like Chaplin in *The Gold Rush* with his bread rolls.

Cecil pricked up his ears. “Will you have ten thousand from Tabac Blond as well?”

“Indeed, my dear chap! Tabac Blond is going to fork out ten grand too!”

“Congratulations! As for me, it’ll be as I have said. But now I need your advice. It’s one o’clock now. In two hours’ time I have to take a trip.”

Stanley sat up.

“I’m very annoyed with your mother about this trip,” said Cecil uneasily. “It really doesn’t suit me to be forced to leave Paris on a whim of your mother’s! Who knows if Tabac Blond will still be here when I get back? In short, I’m desperate! I don’t know if I can summon the nerve for this trip! And the whole thing is so ridiculous. Because the task doesn’t need a man like me. If necessary it could be done by a messenger boy.”

“Would you care to explain?” asked Stanley, quite serious and extremely attentive.

“Stanley, for the past eight years I have been a thoroughly devoted friend to your dear mother. But there comes a time when I must think of myself! I’m being devoured by this friendship! I’m growing old! I’m squandering my life! Stanley! Can you keep a secret?”

Cecil stared straight into Stanley’s face, as if to sweep away all veils with the radiance of his eyes.

“But Cecil, we’re such ripping comrades in arms now!”

“Fine! I shall now be a little indiscreet and tell you why I must set off in two hours’ time. Fact is, your dear mother knows me and trusts me so well to keep a secret that this morning she didn’t even expressly hold me to a vow. And consequently I’m not breaching any confidence if I tell you everything.”

“This is extraordinarily illuminating. And very correct.”

“Isn’t it? Well then! You see the man behind you over there in the corner?”

Stanley looked around. The man in the corner gave a discreet and minimal nod.

“Well? Is he a detective?”

“Do you recognise the box under his table?”

“A radio apparatus?”

“No. A photo apparatus. The man is a photographer.”

Stanley stared directly at Cecil. At this moment he looked like a detective: “Is he going with you to Berlin?” he asked abruptly.

“Who said anything about Berlin?”

“The Nordexpress to Berlin leaves in two hours.”

“It’s true. I must set off for Berlin.”

Stanley took a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed his pretty gold-brown neck. Then he blew his nose in it so loudly that the photographer in the corner gave a start. Finally his cravat needed some adjustment, though it never was very tidy.

Stanley gradually sank into a tragic musing. “If you want to photograph something in Berlin, I would recommend Acacia. The best thing you can find there.”

“A cocotte?” asked Cecil, his voice low and tender in the way one usually speaks of the finest things in life.

“A bull-terrier bitch,” Stanley replied. He was now very pale. He downed his third glass.

“I’m really not meant to take this photographer man with me to Berlin, Stanley,” Cecil informed him gently. “I was supposed, with your help, to arrange a lunch with Tabac Blond at Larue’s. Then the artist over there would have taken Tabac Blond’s photo as she left. In order not to vex your mother, I brought him along here. I was then supposed to take the plate with me to Berlin and have it developed there. Then I was to get to know someone in Berlin society who was well acquainted with your late travelling companion. If that didn’t work, I was to go to the biggest photographers in Berlin to see if they could dig up a portrait of the deceased lady. I was to pay whatever they asked and return at once to Paris. Meanwhile here in Paris your dear mother would be endeavouring to make the acquaintance of Madame de Pourtales, or someone else from Parisian society.”

“What is all this nonsense?” asked Stanley in a rage. “Does Mama propose to set up a portrait gallery of beautiful women in the Hotel Meurice?”

“So you haven’t worked it out?” Cecil asked triumphantly. “I’ve thought it all over, and I – I understand! Mama – please don’t take it amiss – your dear mama, in her despair over

the one-and-a-half, has quite lost her mind! One might have suspicions – good. But to be so distrustful, it's laughable! Do you really not understand, my dear Stanley?"

"No!" Stanley cried. "What the devil is going on, sir?"

"She has worked herself up to an absurd suspicion that the Vision in Mourning might actually be the deceased lady herself! She suspects that the heiress and the testator are *one and the same person!*"

Stanley was flabbergasted. He repeated it to himself, trying to understand. He pressed an index finger so vigorously to his forehead that he overbalanced.

"The Vision in Mourning – the dead girl – the same?" Stanley's mouth formed a little child's O. "Oh!"

"Yes, oh!" Cecil laughed. He leaned excitedly across the table and patted Stanley's arm. "What do you say, my boy? Your dear mother is fixated on the imbecilic notion that in introducing this Tabac Blond to her, you were actually presenting the deceased lady! I don't know how she explains away the death certificate– but she suspects that you, my good Stanley, are in league with her enemies! That you have some romantic attachment to this Tabac Blond! And that you have been bribed with a sizable portion of the one-and-a-half million cheque ..." Suddenly Cecil's face acquired a thoroughly moronic look. His eyes drooped down along his nose, and all at once he looked just like one of Justus's marine monsters. "But you *have* been bribed! What *is* going on here? You're getting ten thousand from Tabac Blond!"

Phlegmatic Stanley fired an Anglo-Saxon roar of laughter from thirty-two healthy teeth right into Cecil's face: "You're right! For ten thousand pounds I can bring the dead to life! What can a corruptible fellow not achieve? For twenty thousand I'll have Emperor Diocletian dance the Charleston in Florida with Saint Barbara this very evening!"

Cecil felt embarrassed. He still had a very pretty foolish look.

"I do beg your pardon, Stanley. But it all comes of not sleeping well and never having a moment's peace at the hotel all day long ... So, what do we do now?"

Stanley leapt to his feet. "Give me two hundred francs!" he commanded. Distraught and obedient, Cecil felt in his pockets.

Stanley took the two hundred francs to the photographer in the corner: "Nous n'avons plus besoin de vous, monsieur! Madame que vous attendions ici, ne viendra plus!"\*

The photographer exited on sprightly legs with the two hundred francs.

Now Stanley launched into a paroxysm of activity. He began to do what any person of this era does when feeling energetic: he telephoned. Five separate telephone calls led him to the whereabouts of the Vision in Mourning. Once he had her on the line and had spoken with her at some length, he began as usual to pull all sorts of paper slips from his pockets. At last he found on one of these slips the pencilled note he sought: Holk's telephone number in Berlin. At once there was urgent conversation with Berlin. He returned to the dining area, where Cecil looked up in bewilderment. Stanley fixed him with his gaze: "Can you keep a secret?"

Cecil sat up, shocked: "But Stanley!"

“Good. You needn’t to go to Berlin.”

“No?” asked Cecil, with an obscure sense of relief.

“No! You will see Tabac Blond again today. Tabac Blond will be here in fifteen minutes!”

“Oh!” Cecil folded his hands in prayer. “Whatever shall I say to your mother?”

“My mother will think you’re away on a trip.”

“She’s bringing me to the station.”

Stanley erupted. “Waiter! Railway timetable! ... The Nordexpress stops – stops – damn, the first stop is on the Belgian frontier! Are you man enough to pull the emergency cord?”

“No!” was Cecil’s firm reply.

“Then you’ll have to ride as far as Erquelinnes and return overnight by car or train. Tomorrow you will spend the day with Tabac Blond on the Marne. You will fish for trout. I know of no girl in my circle of acquaintances who can fish like Tabac Blond.”

Cecil buried his head in his hands in despair. “There’s no escaping this wretched technology! Your mother will telephone me in Berlin half a dozen times a day!”

“The secretary of one of my Berlin friends will send a telegram to Mama telling her all the Berlin hotels are chock full. You’ll be staying at a pension in the city where the telephone had been cut off because of unpaid bills. This secretary will send half a dozen telegrams during the day saying you are out tracking down those photos. In the final telegram you will have gained your prize and already be on your way back. I guarantee you that tomorrow afternoon a photograph of dead Charlott will already be in Paris – a day earlier than expected! No one can deceive me about this photograph, because I remember very well what the poor creature looked like. But you must not reveal this photograph at the Meurice until the afternoon of the day after tomorrow.”

“How is it that I’m only now learning of your remarkable talents?”

“Berlin, monsieur!” called the excited waiter. Stanley leapt to the telephone.

“Parlez, monsieur! Voilà Berlin! Ludsooo trentecinq quarante-trois! Allo allo!” Then a curt Prussian voice. “Please speak, sir! The caller is waiting at the app-a-rat!”

Stanley roared: “Holk! Holk!”

“Who is this?” asked a female voice, its terror muffled by the dreadful distance even though the connection was very clear.

“Is Herr Holk at home?” Stanley cried.

“But who is this?” the Prussian woman asked, shaky as a little rabbit.

Stanley roared through clenched teeth in excellent German: “That need not concern you in the slightest, my good woman! I asked you whether Herr Holk is at home!”

“But who is this?” asked Prussian woman, her heart on its knees.

“There’ll be murder by telephone, my lady! Is Herr Holk at home?”

“...gone out.”

“Where to?”

“... lunch in the city.”

“Who with?”

“... von Debschitz.”

“Phone number?”

“This is Lützow 3543.”

A goodly fleck of foam came flying from Stanley’s lips. He looked rather like that poor sailor in the lighthouse.

“Silly cow! The telephone number of Frau von Debschitz!”

“This is Lützow 3543.”

“Allo allo? Parlez-vous encore, monsieur?”

Stanley was blubbing like a child left tied up in the forest at night.

“The phone number of Frau von Debschitz!” he wailed.

“Bismarck 1622.”

Stanley slammed the earpiece onto its rest. At once he picked it back up.

“Long distance! Long distance! Long distance! Berlin! Urgent! Bismarck seize vingt-deux! The famous Chancellor, my girl! Has anyone at your exchange ever mentioned that he actually lived? Bismarck seize vingt-deux!”

Fifteen minutes later Paris was engaged in the following conversation with Berlin. There was a certain similarity with that morning’s call from the Meurice to Montmartre.

“Holk, I have an enormous favour to ask of you!”

“How’s the rheumatism, Stanley?”

“Please hold your tongue and listen!”

They had become firm friends in Berlin. In the evening, once the urn had been deposited at Petersdorf in the big salon on the ground floor – it would not be buried until Justus returned – Holk and Stanley had downed enormous quantities of drink at the Esplanade bar and then at any number of other bars, with tears streaming from nose, mouth and eyes.

“You must do me the greatest favour that could ever be asked of a friend,” said Stanley, his voice oozing with the most feminine charm. “You must head over to Friedrich Strasse this evening at ten o’clock, and take the Nordexpress to Paris!”

Berlin was silent.

“Are you there, my dear Holk?”

“Yes. Oh, yes! Absolutely. But! ... That won’t go well, my dear Stanley!”

“Whyever not, my dear Holk?”

“I haven’t even a single pfennig in my trouser pockets, Stanley old chap.”

Paris turned pale. Then, decisively: "That poses not the slightest difficulty! I shall telegraph a thousand Mark at once, Very Urgent!"

"Most remarkable, and highly improbable," cried Holk across Elbe, Weser, Vosges and Champagne.

"If you'd just stop prattling nonsense!" roared Stanley back across the same rivers, hills and provinces.

"All tight. When I see the money I'll work out if there's enough left to cover the fare."

"Wait! You'll be bringing Camilla with you!"

"Anyone else, Stanley?" enquired Holk, his intonation nauseatingly sweet. "The Wertheim Department Store? The Social Democratic Party? The roller coaster from Luna Park?"

"You must be so awfully helpful, Holk, and bring Camilla with you! Go to her at once and tell her from me: SOS! That's the code word we agreed! We must see to it, my dear chap, that we secure Camilla's inheritance! Surely you'll be glad to help! Won't you? You'll play your part to fulfil our late friend's last will and testament?"

Now, across the Vosges hills, came a serious, sensible and almost sorrowful response: "I shall definitely come, and shall bring Camilla with me! You may depend on it!"

"There's another thing! Camilla must select a few very big and very clear photographs of various pretty young women aged around twenty-two, and bring them along! Doesn't matter who! Just none of Charlott. Maybe one of Daisy Hallgarten or Katinka Debschitz or Grace Ginzbourgh! You could take some down from your walls!"

"What in the devil's name is this all about?"

"You have understood me very well and so I do not need to repeat it, not even for a hundred francs. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon at the Gare du Nord with Camilla and the photographs! Say hi to Camilla!"

"Don't forget the thousand Mark!" came the disembodied plea from east of the Rhine.

"... sure!"

When Stanley returned to the dining area, he found Tabac Blond and Cecil standing by the table, so deep in conversation that they took no notice at all of his presence.

"I must leave right away, my dear Cecil!" (Stanley's eyes were quite round.) "I came just for a few moments to tell you how shocked I am at Lady Fisher's tragi-comical misapprehension! So, my dear friend," (she held out a hand) "you will help me a little? I should be so terribly grateful, Cecil!" (Stanley's eyes were big as saucers.) "I told Stanley yesterday, from the very first moment I had a feeling that I had known you for twenty years as an *especially* close friend. Right away I felt so at home!" (She held out a hand.)

"My dear, dear Miss Blank!" Cecil assured her in a deep baritone. No trace of frayed nerves now.

"So that's settled!" Tabac Blond kept drawing out the farewell so he could keep kissing her hand. "Tomorrow morning I shall be in Meaux at the Hotel des Trois Rois. We shall spend a delightful day on the Marne – my dear!" (She held out a hand.) "The weather is

so lovely just now, and I adore the banks of the Marne, and I find angling such an enchanting sport! It's quite impossible for us to be seen together here, which is why I can stay only for a minute." (She held out a hand.) "Au revoir, my dear Cecil! ... Oh, hello, Stanley, or rather, adieu! No, really, no need to see me out, Cecil dearest!" (She held out a hand.) "My car is over there. If I leave it motherless another moment, a policeman will come along. At eleven, outside the Trois Rois! I am so looking forward to it! A thousand thanks, my dear Cecil! A thousand, thousand thanks!"

She held out a hand.

.XIX.

The first act of a light comedy at the Théâtre des Capucines had just begun. The young Parisiennes scattered here and there among the tourists in the stalls had blissful smiles: the ambiguous dialogue suggested that where love was concerned, a threesome could all remain very good friends. Their smiles, albeit with the same degree of naivete, indicated rather more intelligence than the smiles typically smiled by their sisters across the Rhine regarding their own special treats and staple fare – lieutenants, and cadets.

Half an hour from the start, one of the doors was opened again, and Cornelia entered the auditorium together with her son. They took their seats in the front row – clearly Stanley had been unable to secure a box this time. The bright footlights cast a triumphant glow over Cornelia's pageboy-debonair demeanour, as she proceeded to her seat in full view of the entire audience in an ermine-lined blouse-type evening cape and the dark shadow of a spangled dress with leaf-shaped pleats, a fully opened bloom on her round shoulder, pearls and brilliants tinkling, the daintiest makeup. She looked like Stanley's younger brother. The older brother in his careless evening dress stomped nattering into the theatre as if it were a student's room at an Oxford college. He made such a commotion that the stalls wondered if this gentleman was perhaps going to step up onto the stage and become part of the play.

But this was not Stanley's intention at present. He looked about, noticed on his left an especially pretty young lady, and without a moment's thought pinched her bare upper arm. The young lady was startled, but uttered not a peep, whereat she again found herself on the receiving end. But now she stared at the stage as if her upper arm had nothing at all to do with her. At any event, the notion of complaining to the gentleman on her left, presumably her husband, seemed farthest from her thoughts.

It took Cornelia forty seconds to twig the plot of the comedy in all its ramifications. She wore a contented smile: *Quand on est trois! Very good!*

"This is nice," she whispered to Stanley.

"Quite gripping, dearest!" was his flippant response. "Shall we have a bite to eat after, or go dancing? I'll just pop out for a minute and book a table at Florida!"

Cornelia shrugged.

Stanley applied all his muscle power to extricate himself, five minutes later returned making a devil of a noise, and at once resumed his new sport: he pinched the pretty young

lady, who had gently curling centre-parted golden-brown hair, again and again on the taut skin of her upper arm, always the same spot.

The curtain fell. The auditorium lights came up.

Stanley gazed about blinking like a baby after a nice sleep and lovely dreams. He jumped up in shock.

“Oh! My dear lady! I didn’t recognise you! When did you arrive in Paris? – Good evening, Mr Holk!”

With a rather sour face, like an actress placed in a role that suits her not at all, the maltreated lady provided information while her left hand kept massaging a certain spot on her right arm:

“How nice to see you, Mr Fisher! My husband and I have been in Paris for two weeks already. My husband and I really enjoy being in Paris! Everyone is so kind to my husband and me, especially at the theatre! Here nobody disturbs anybody else! Neighbours keep to themselves! My husband and I can watch in peace” (the maltreated lady massaged even harder) “as events on the great world stage play out.”

“Splendid, splendid!” Stanley’s eyes darted like those of a child left behind. “Only a *German* lady could say such clever things! And your good lady wife is so elegant, Herr Holk! One would never take her for a *German* lady, she’s so elegant! Excuse me.”

He turned round to his mother. He whispered: “Acquaintances from Berlin. Shall I introduce you, my girl?”

Camelia’s eyebrows took the bait: “Acquaintances from *Berlin*?”

“Yes. Top class family. Holks. Very, very wealthy and very, very well brought up. Relations in London. Like to shake a paw?”

Cornelia nodded agreement, almost eagerly.

Stanley began to prance about like a provincial player who has at last received his cue: “Dearest Mama, may I introduce my dear friends from Berlin, Mrs Holk and Mr Holk?”

And now he poured a chamberpot of the crassest rhetoric over the three unfortunates standing there:

– Such lovely French people here in Paris, so full of jolly fun! – And the Grand Prix coming up at Longchamps, with the President of the Republic and the Republican Guard! – Was there a President of the Republic in Berlin too? – What is he called, and is he the same chap who was taken prisoner by Napoleon at Sedan? –

Holk was sweating. He directed helplessly pleading eyes at Stanley. Very pleased with his performance, Stanley flicked a golden-brown lock back from his forehead. Suddenly Holk heard a whisper very close to his ear: “If you call your wife ‘Camilla’ even once this evening, my lad, I shall shoot you down like a cur!”

Camilla took no notice of Stanley. She was engaged in a lively conversation with Cornelia, and Cornelia was so taken with her politeness and the precision of her enunciation that she enquired if they might invite the couple to join her and Stanley this evening on Montmartre, where they had a table booked at Florida. She found that

Camilla's pale pastel dress went very well with her own ensemble. Camilla, like an obedient German wife, asked her husband, who responded with enthusiasm:

"But of course, *Maria*." He called his wife "Maria" as if performing a vow. "We'll have some lovely dancing, Lady Cornelia!" At once, without any ceremony, Holk took a seat beside Cornelia, and spoke to her as if they used to go skating together at Wannsee when they were children.

"Shouldn't we abandon this dreary play and go dancing at once, Lady Cornelia? I do so look forward to dancing with you!"

Cornelia gave a little smile, pleased but a bit mollifying: "But I should like to know how it is, *quand on est trois*."

The lights went down for the second half.

Holk was fidgety. "But really, wouldn't we rather leave right now? Who can stand this nonsense? I haven't the slightest interest in what's happening on the stage. This evening I am interested only" (Cornelia could feel his breath) "in *quand on est deux*!"

She wore the same smile as before, but cast a shrewd lively glance at her neighbour, who for his part was studying, with the naiveté of an officer cadet, her pale hands with the lightly varnished nails and the arm laden to the inoculation scars with wide jingling bands of brilliants.

An hour later they were on Montmartre, at Florida, surrounded by Negroes, cocottes, Anglo-Saxons, South Americans, Rhinelanders and Berliners.

Holk paid not the slightest attention to his wife, he was obsessed with Cornelia, he danced only with Cornelia. He even adored her neck, the neck of a forty-five year old.

Cornelia's finger on his shoulder vibrated a little.

"You are mad, the way you keep dancing with me! What are you up to, I wonder?"

Holk provided the right answer...

Meanwhile, Camilla and Stanley were sitting at their table. "Don't let Holk drink too much, and don't leave him alone with your mother for more than three minutes!"

Stanley kept kissing the spot on her arm where he had pinched her: "Did you train him well for these Parisian days?"

"I drilled him like a recruit! I made him repeat every response he would have to make. There was such a scene! He was outraged at having to learn his role mechanically by rote, without the slightest idea what it all means!"

Stanley was amused: "What did he say?"

"I'm not a moron! Why won't you explain anything?" So I promised he would understand everything by next week."

"If he calls you 'Camilla' even once this evening, he's done for."

"That's why you mustn't let him drink any more! Or else his tongue will be too loose!"

Camilla peered into her little mirror. As she did so she spoke clearly and to the point: "You see what he's like! Charlott's been dead these three months. For fifteen days he wandered in the desert, and instead of crayfish tails on rice he ate only locusts. But as soon as we deposited the urn at Petersdorf, for him the whole thing was over. So now Charlott is *really* dead – and there's not the slightest thing we can do about it! Because everyone knows you can't resurrect the dead! Just look at him! He's totally smitten with your mother this evening!"

"I think I'll give him another going over tonight," said Stanley, his cheeky boyish mouth tickling Camilla's arm. "The lad's starting to get on my nerves. Are you in love with him?"

"Yes!" was Camilla's simple reply. She drew the lipstick over her lips.

"Then he'll have a double dose of thrashing! Did you have a sleeping-car berth?"

"You're mad."

"Did he behave himself?"

"He always behaves himself with me, alas. He considers me his best friend. The worst thing that can happen to a woman."

"Then he'll have just half a thrashing."

Away on the dance floor, Cornelia was whispering while Holk tried some crazy Charleston steps: "You're from Berlin? I had a very, very dear acquaintance in Berlin."

Holk took Cornelia in his arms and swept her away most gallantly: "What? You're so enchanting!"

"She was like a daughter to me. Even though I really didn't know her. Does that make sense?"

Holk kissed her neck: "... make sense," he repeated like a mindless echo.

The music stopped. People applauded, eager for the next dance.

"Did you know her? She died, the poor thing. Charlott Verloh?"

Holk was clapping, but at the sound of that name he turned grey and wrinkled as an ape. Suddenly he looked like the Holk who had sat in the corner of his sleeping car compartment staring out at the relentless spring rain between Moscow and Smolensk.

He stammered: "I knew her well ... She was a good friend of ours ..."

Cornelia stood before him. Both clapped mechanically, but the weary orchestra declined to obey the applause-commandment just yet.

"Oh, you knew her? You must do me a great favour and tell me all about her! I know so little of her life! What did she look like, actually?"

Holk looked sharply at Cornelia. At the very last moment he remembered his mission here in Paris! It had been drummed into him hard enough! Yet he felt a momentary embarrassment at deceiving this lady who had stirred up such a turmoil in his nervous system. Then he remembered –

– She’s one of the richest women in the Indies, and Camilla, poor girl, has to slave away in her criminal-psychology institute for three hundred Mark a month. Why won’t she pay over Camilla’s legal bequest from Charlott?

Now they were dancing a tango, surrounded by mulattos, cocottes, Rhinelanders and Brazilians.

Holk began to sketch an absurd picture of Charlott. As Camilla had instructed, it was Katinka Debschitz he described: short and frail in stature, dark blonde with dark eyes that lent her an especial charm, a rather wide nose, a rather broad forehead, and so on.

Hearing this description, Cornelia sank back into herself. She was no longer a good dancer.

“Oh, my dear, why didn’t I know you one day sooner? Sometimes my suspicions drive me quite mad!” (Holk kissed her shoulder.) “I could have spared a very good friend of mine an unnecessary journey.”

Over at the table, Camilla pushed Stanley away “Stop your stupid kissing, Stanley. I came here because of your SOS! Believe me, I was none too happy about it. And believe me, I have nothing to do with any of it! I really like your mother. I despise all this monkey business. I mean –“ She reconsidered, nodded at Stanley: “Seeing that you can’t manage without me, the whole thing is actually great fun ... What do you think, how’s our plan working?”

“If you let me go on kissing you, it’s working splendidly.”

“Be serious!”

“Serious? Shouldn’t we dance?”

“No.”

“Provided your so-called husband won’t ruin everything tonight, I think that the day after tomorrow, as soon as Cecil is back, the great day will have dawned, and we shall have the cheque.”

“Do you mean it?”

‘I swear, the day after tomorrow will be a really tremendous day for all of us! The day of all days! I’ve worked it all out and woven it all together from every possible side. Mama will even be happy, the day after tomorrow, to have got away without losing six million Reichsmarks.’

“Stanley, please, kiss me!”

Cornelia and Holk came back. Cornelia had grown ancient, a woman of sixty-five, a crone begging her offspring for care and kindness. She drank from her champagne glass.

“One is sometimes such a beast,” she said, without preamble.

A puzzled silence.

“But Lady Cornelia!” cried Camilla, horrified, and she laughed.

“My dear good boy, forgive me, but one is sometimes such a beast.”

Stanley had never seen his mother like this. He was shocked to the core. For the first time he saw his mother as an elderly helpless pitiable female, not an enemy to be combatted with the most refined cunning.

“What is the matter, *my girl*?”

He said “my girl” to please her, but for the first time in his life “mother” would have been more appropriate.

“Nothing, dear boy,” Cornelia smiled an abject defiant smile. “Why aren’t you dancing with Mrs Holk?”

Camilla stood up, ready to flee from her sympathy and her horror. “Let’s dance!”

“You must dance too,” said Holk to Cornelia, caught up like the others in this sudden outbreak of love, and this sudden sympathy for the lady.

“No, no!” she pleaded, her smile bland and indulgent, like a grandmother at her grandchild’s wedding declining the invitation.

But Holk pulled her along.

Now they were all dancing. Holk, no longer impetuous as a new lover, was now as tender as a friend from way back. He whispered sweet nothings in Cornelia’s ear. He repeated them in time to the music:

“You’re enchanting. – I want to kiss you. – You’re enchanting. – I want to kiss you.” Cornelia, eternally changeable, blossomed anew under these words. His whispers were worth more than all the world’s treasures!

“*You’re* enchanting,” she told him. And she too said: “I want to kiss you.” She whispered into his neck: “I am so so grateful! I want to kiss your hands, you’re so enchanting.”

They headed back to the table, where Stanley and Camilla had just sat down again. Some Englishmen and their wives, friends of Cornelia and Stanley, had joined them.

Holk, red-faced, breathing heavily, sweating, excited and out of control, called from a distance: “Shall we have a dance, *Ca-mi-lla-a*? He did not say, as he usually did, “Cammie”. Oh no, he pronounced all three syllables, drawing them out with voluptuous emphasis so that nothing of the precious name should be lost!

Cornelia had just lowered herself onto her seat. Her mouth hung open for a few seconds. She had been greeting her English friends, and her hand was still on Camilla’s arm, which she stroked like a sister. “So why don’t you dance with Mr Holk?”

Now she looked askance, with a bland friendly smile, at the young lady who had been addressed the whole evening as “Maria” and was now called “Camilla – Camilla, like her tea guest, the same name as Charlott’s Heiress! Cornelia fanned herself with her handkerchief. She seemed intent on repelling certain newly emerging thoughts that plagued her like annoying insects. She looked confused, foolish even. Some people of high intelligence can, at such moments, resemble dumb animals – sheep, or cows.

Cornelia had a feeling that, for the past several days, she had been tangled by strangers and by her own son in gossamer snares, first this limb, then that, snared and then released. She had only one friend left in the whole world: Cecil.

She remained quite silent, her face sorrowful, eyebrows nervously twitching.

During the whole incident, Stanley had kept his head down. For the first time ever he eyed Holk with a malevolent, jealous, biting Kalmuck glare.

Cornelia and Camilla were led off to the dance floor by the Englishmen. Soon Stanley and Holk were alone at the table. Stanley slowly, very slowly, got to his feet. He whispered to Holk: "Come along, my boy!"

"What's going on?" Holk asked, red as a crayfish.

"Come along, my boy!" Stanley whispered again. But in his whisper was such a suspiciously amiable undertone that Holk felt it right to follow him unresisting.

They emerged onto twenty square metres of courtyard. "Strip off, my boy!" Stanley commanded, cold and menacing.

"For God's sake!" Holk pleaded. "Did I actually say 'Camilla'?"

From their lopsided totally drunken plane, stars grinned down on Holk– cold, mocking, odious.

"My God!" Holk jabbered as he removed his jacket. "So I really did say 'Camilla'!"

Stanley too removed his clothing, not jabbering but malevolent, ireful, with the determined coolness of a man in the wilderness defending his claim.

"You swine, you!" Stanley hissed grimly and deliberately. "We toiled for weeks and months to help poor Camilla come into the inheritance that poor Charlott bequeathed her. And a fellow like you lands us all in the mire with just a single word! Once you pummelled my back in the express, when I had rheumatism. Now I shall return the compliment, my lad! – Here you go!"

Stanley let out a roar, and the fun began. It was an unequal match, for Holk stood there at attention like a guilty soldier awaiting the punishment he deserves, arms at his sides, while Stanley for his part punched Holk in the face so that the twenty square metres heaved this way and that.

But not a man on this Earth could hold out for long without his manly blood starting to boil. At last the dreadful battering Holk was receiving for his 'Camilla' filled him with rage. He thought it excessive. He punched back, and now a legitimate boxing match began, between two gentleman who minutes before wore evening dress and were now striving to hammer each other to dust, like West Australian kangaroos dressed up for a lark in starched shirts and collars.

Ten minutes later Stanley and Holk, encased carefully up to the neck in their clothing and with the most curious blemishes on their faces, stood at the table where their ladies were waiting.

"Shall we leave?" both asked, very courteously.

"I think, my girl, it is time!" said Stanley.

"And you must be tired, Maria!" said Holk.

The ladies took their leave of the English acquaintances they had been dancing with. Camilla had been sneaking quick anxious looks at Cornelia the whole time.

“Should we take a taxi?” asked Holk, hoarse but polite.

Stanley at once made a bow, replying equally politely: “But certainly, my dear Holk! A pleasure!”

They stood for some minutes among a throng of South Americans threatening to run amok - their nocturnal amusements had rendered them savage. The Montmartre of the post-War years had gradually become the world’s topmost destination for global seekers of entertainment ecstasies. Wherever on the Earth’s surface a farmer grew tobacco or rubber or wheat, Montmartre was the place where his wife, his sons and his daughters converted the earnings into merrymaking.

Cornelia was taciturn. As soon as she said a word, Camilla would at once lean forward, the better to hear and offer a glib response. She showed a slavish eagerness to be as ingratiating as possible towards Cornelia.

The taxi they were sitting in was unable to move. All four regarded the carnivalesque throng surrounding the vehicle.

Suddenly a very specific event twenty yards away, unremarked by the others, piqued Cornelia’s interest. A gentleman in an evening cloak and top hat was guiding a lady very quickly towards a car and helping her into the driver’s seat. She was a tall young woman with shiny black hair, in a dark cape trimmed with such stiff chinchilla fur that her face was hidden up to the nose. During these few seconds the gentleman kept his face lowered. With no warning the big car roared away regardless of the throng, accelerating immediately. Cornelia saw the illuminated numberplate.

She thought she had seen Cecil! Cecil whom she had driven to the station yesterday, from whom she had received a telegram from Berlin just two hours ago to say he would return to Paris on the overnight Nordexpress, with photographs of Charlott! She also believed she recognised the lady in the dark cape, a blouse-shaped cape rather like her own; within the raised fur collar only the top of a long narrow head could be seen.

Cornelia wiped the ring finger of her right hand over her eyebrows. She seemed to be surrounded by devilish images. She began to mistrust her own mistrust.

On they went. No one said a word. Even in her silence, Camilla was polite to the point of abnegation towards Cornelia.

“Which hotel are you staying at?” Cornelia asked after a long silence, tired and aloof.

“My husband and I are staying at the Mirabeau, Lady Cornelia,” Camilla replied, inclining her head.

“Oh!”

“We feel very comfortable there,” Camilla added, even though no one had asked if they felt comfortable there. Again Camilla leaned forward a little in case Cornelia was about to say something. But Cornelia addressed not another word to her.

“Stanley, what letter do German cars show, actually? Is it a ‘D’?”

Stanley hesitated. He delayed. He thought it over. For better or worse he would have to concede that the designation of a German car was certainly 'D'. He nodded in confirmation.

"Adieu," said Cornelia outside the Mirabeau, and extended a hand neither to Camilla nor to Holk.

"Adieu, Lady Cornelia," said Camilla and Holk, their voices low.

"Adieu, Stanley," said Camilla at the taxi door, and she was so preoccupied she forgot to raise a hand in her mock-military salute.

"Adieu," said Cornelia outside their hotel, and she did not give Stanley her hand.

"Adieu, my child!" said Stanley. "Sleep well, sleep very well!"

But as he sat in the taxi on the way back to the Mirabeau, he almost wept at a resurgence of his rage against Holk.

## .XX.

The great Day after Tomorrow, the Day of Days, had dawned.

Despite all the misadventures of the Montmartre night out, Stanley remained cautious. He believed he had played his part yesterday to cancel each newly emerging aggravation that assailed Cornelia's mind.

That very night he had called up Cecil, who supposedly would arrive in Paris six hours late, at the hotel. Cecil seemed somewhat "exhausted", but otherwise furiously in love, in good spirits, and loyally promoting the matter of Charlott's heiress.

And yet, as he breakfasted in bed, Stanley had a conversation that left him shattered to the core for several minutes. For the proprietress of the little hotel, who as a special privilege brought the morning tea right to his bedside, informed him *inter alia* that:

"There was another lady here last night, monsieur."

Stanley was unconcerned. There were always ladies coming to his room, even when he wasn't there.

"There was such a mess, monsieur, that I felt embarrassed for us both! I had no time to tidy the room, because Cook had hung an entire party of elderly French-Canadian women around my neck for the evening."

"Was there anyone among them whom we might find pleasing, madame?"

"No! Not one!" replied Madame, offended. She was always happy to look after her favourite gentlemen. "And anyway, monsieur, you have quite enough! I simply wished to draw your attention to the fact that yesterday evening, in your haste to exchange your sports jacket for evening dress, you once again left all your suitcases open."

"Anyone can steal whatever they want from me!"

"Well, that may be, but you have fine clothes, and for sure those books are worth a great deal here!"

"I draw your attention, madame, to the fact that books which I shall eventually write will be worth a great deal, others not so much!"

"Very well. Also, the lady said she is your mother."

Stanley leapt out of bed.

Madame smiled as she tidied the room: "I have had much to do with sisters, sisters in law and cousins. A mother, that's new." She added in a tone of respect: "One must do justice to the truth, that she is a very distinguished, elegant and even beautiful mother. She is of all mothers by far the best in the matter of style and chic! Truth to tell, Monsieur Stanley, all in all she resembled a little Madame Laetitia Bonaparte in her younger days! She must be very close to you."

Stanley, sitting on the edge of the bed, holding the teacup, profoundly affected, pondered his knees.

"Was the lady alone in my room?"

"I think so. For like a good son you have forbidden me to turn away any of your mothers at the door! And this lady did not seem the sort to steal a waistcoat or a collar stud. Good day, monsieur!"

Now he was on high alert! Cornelia had been in his room! It was not like her to act the spy! She had never, never done so! He could not remember a single such incident from his childhood. However strict she might have been with him, still she respected his schoolboy secrets. As a nine-year-old he already had his own locked desk. She had never so much as peeped into it, even when he invited her to. She wanted to train him to respect her own private affairs in equal measure. Despite everything, she was the finest gentleman of his acquaintance, with her bobbed hair and her young girl's figure!

His heart pounded rather anxiously. Had he caused her to do something that went against her own conscience? Had he made her take desperate measures? Stanley had never intended this! He took enormous pleasure in foiling his clever, hard-hearted mother with her masculine talent for activity, even perhaps annoy her a little, but he had no wish to damage her moral being. He called her "my child", not only to honour her beauty and her youthfulness, but rather because that was what he felt about her, a little. She was his superior, she was strict and hard with him – but children are often that way to their parents. If necessary he would let himself be torn to pieces to save her! His arms would keep her head above water even as Death rose to his eyelashes.

Having pondered this aspect of the matter with regret and a bad conscience, he considered the practical consequences of the event. He was untidy, but not to the extent that he had forgotten in recent days to tear into little pieces every letter and telegram he received. Here in his room were suits, washing things, gloves, tennis rackets, riding boots, a Baedeker, old fashion magazines and literary journals, volumes of poetry, Russian novels, picture postcards of actresses - Elisabeth Bergner, Mistinguette.

Cornelia, he concluded to his satisfaction, could not have found the least little thing that would have interested her.

And so he headed whistling to his bath.

– Still, I’m curious to see how the child will justify her action, he thought as his legs merrily stirred the water of this Day of all Days.

.XXI.

Over at the Meurice, too, the Great Day had dawned. Today too, against all custom, Cornelia and Cecil again breakfasted together in her lounge.

The previous evening, after his “belated return”, Cecil had chosen a time when Cornelia had already gone out with the Broughams and Brändli-Ochses. He left her a note: he is too tired to talk with her tonight, tomorrow at breakfast he will report on his trip.

This he did, as he devoured his bacon and eggs and drank his tea. In Cornelia’s life, every great event played out to the drinking of tea. Cornelia appeared to be attending, with the piously deferent eagerness of a dependent female, to hear what a very well tested business friend might advise in her difficult situation.

Cecil for his part was still grumbling about this “trip” that any messenger boy could have undertaken.

He indicated a bouquet of perhaps two hundred red roses: “May I ask, my dear, who sent you the roses?”

“Oh! Just an acquaintance. Did you enjoy your trip?”

“There was no time for that.”

“Did you like Berlin?”

“I didn’t look around.”

“Well? What did you do there?”

“First of all, I reflected on what the whole business was supposed to be about, since you did not have the courtesy to take me fully into your confidence. I reached the conclusion that your mistrust had once again played a nasty trick on us. When I recall how many business opportunities have gone belly up because of this character trait of yours! You mindlessly sacrifice your own son to this mistrust, and all your friends as well, not to mention my nerves, which at present are anyway not in the best condition.”

“I am so sorry!”

“I too am so sorry, Cornelia, believe me! In the long hours of my thoughtlessly conceived railway journey, I reached the further conclusion that you would do well to invite Tabac Blond and the notary to a meeting ...”

“Invite whom, dear?” Cornelia asked, her voice level, as she poured Cecil another cup.

“I mean you should at once telephone to Monsieur La Haye, the notary, and to Miss Blank, and invite them both here.”

“What is that meant to achieve?” asked Cornelia, opening the samovar’s spigot.

“Tabac Blond ...”

“Why do you keep mentioning this Tabac?” asked Cornelia blandly. “I thought she was called Camilla Blank, not Tabac?”

“Well, I’ve been calling her Tabac Blond because of her perfume. But as you wish ...”

“Been calling ...?”

“As you wish, my dear. Miss Blank should sign a notarised affidavit declaring that all her claims on you are by these presents satisfied ...”

“These presents? What presents?”

“The cheque for one and a half million dollars, or three hundred thousand pounds, that you will give her.”

“Oh, absolutely!” Cornelia swilled out a teacup with hot water. “One and a half million dollars or three hundred thousand pounds or six million Reichsmark should satisfy the claims of any young girl. But what, my darling, has led you to proffer this advice?”

“Well, my darling, I have worked out that you are somehow in the grip of a wild novelletish notion. Tabac Blond is supposed to be a kind of reincarnation of her deceased cousin. Here are the photographs I dug up as per your wishes. I had plenty of time on the Nordexpress to study them. I find no trace of any resemblance to Miss Blank. Unless she is such a skilful quick-change artist that any music hall would snap her up at once.”

Cecil handed over the quarto-size photographs. Using the handle of a teaspoon, he began to explain, like a geography teacher with a map:

“Tabac Blond is about as tall as you. Charlott in this photo is barely medium height. Tabac Blond is coal-tar-raven-black –“

“Who is this?” Cornelia asked.

“Coal-tar-raven-black – the expression comes from your son, not me – and poor Charlott seems to have been more like a dark blonde. Tabac Blond has the most wonderfully bright blue eyes of any coal-tar ...”

“... raven-haired woman,” Cornelia completed.

“... raven-haired woman I have ever known. While all the world’s blackness seems to be gathered in the eyes of poor Charlott in this photograph. Not to mention the whole skull shape, the facial structure, even the nose! This lady here resembles Miss Blank about as much as you, my dear, resemble me!”

Cornelia had been studying the photographs closely. “Honestly,” she declared, “there’s no trace of a likeness!”

“So you see, my dear!” said Cecil triumphantly. “So there! On top of everything, last night I found a letter from our lawyer in London. It says Charlott’s Will is valid in both German and English law. And in Berlin I took on an extra task and approached a lawyer that someone recommended to me. His view too was that without doubt you are obliged to transfer the money right away.”

Cecil jumped up. Never was a businessman so eager to pay out money right away as he was now! “Darling, consider! What real harm will it do? Of course it’s not pleasant to

have to do it all at once, but we've always allowed for it in our accounting. And the tea company can weather it without the slightest shock!"

Cornelia considered with a deferential, thoughtful, almost gloomy air. "Yes," she said.

"Well then! Let's write this wretched cheque before it ruins our entire stay in Paris! Let's summon the notary and Miss Blank!"

Cecil rested both hands on Cornelia's shoulders. He gave her kimono a little shake, as one shakes the shoulders of a stubborn boy while appealing to his best qualities.

"Yes," said Cornelia, glumly.

Then she quietly shrugged off Cecil's hands. She stood up. As she did so the kimono fell open. For a few seconds she stood there, minimally clothed, gorgeous to look at with her long strong thighs, narrow hips, her virgin-slim and yet powerful behind. Then she closed the gap with a hand. She went over to the smoking stand and lit a cigarette.

"Listen, Cecil. I am prepared to invite this Miss Blank and the notary to call on us, if that is what you advise."

"Darling!" Cecil cried tenderly, radiant with delight. "I certainly do advise it! Not least for your peace of mind, and my nerves!"

"Very well. Let me just alert you to one trifling point. If this Miss Blank signs the notarised declaration, and makes ready to take possession of the cheque in the presence of the notary, then, my dear friend, I shall at once have her arrested and locked up. They have some very pretty prisons here in Paris. Everything in Paris is very pretty. *This* lady, for example" – she indicated a portrait of Marie Antoinette above the Louis XVI settee – "was in the Conciergerie. Not long ago I saw the cell where she was held. They've turned it into a chapel. Very, very pretty, very attractive and very, very devout. I don't know if the cell in which I shall have Tabac Blond imprisoned will later be converted into something similar. That must be left entirely to the devotion of the Parisians."

Cecil pressed an open hand to his forehead. The two eyes staring out below the line of the hand – not at Cornelia, but into empty space – glinted like beads of jet. An actor would have found him a splendid character study, standing like that: Flummoxed Man ...

"Pardon me, dearest," he stammered. "Never in my life have I been impolite to you ... But now I fear ... that it is you, Cornelia, who must be locked up!"

Cornelia regarded him in silence, with quiet dignity.

"I do not think that will happen. Although I concede that in these last few days all of us – including myself, my dear – have compromised our honour, and incurred guilt."

Determined as a man who has reached his limit, Cecil stuck his hands in the pockets of his morning jacket. The skin over his cheekbones tautened, his eyes became narrowed and almost angry, and even the slim moustache seemed to grow dangerously pointed, like a needle ready to jab.

"Would you care to explain yourself, Cornelia?"

"Yes I would. All of you have forgotten that I am a woman who for twenty years has managed a business. I think, my dear, that in every civilised nation of laws it is a

punishable offence to attach one's signature to a formally notarised document with intent to deceive by using a false name. Is it not?"

"You think Camilla Blank will do that?" There was menace in Cecil's voice.

"If she signs as 'Camilla Blank' and accepts the cheque as Camilla Blank, then yes."

"So you assume she is not Camilla Blank?"

"I am all the more ready to assume it, in that I have met the real Camilla Blank. Two evenings ago I spent several hours with her, at the theatre and on Montmartre. I cannot believe that the register of foreigners in Paris contains more than one Camilla Blank."

"With Camilla Blank? Two days ago? On Montmartre?" cried Cecil with a burst of incredulous laughter at so much delusion. He clapped his hands together in front of his face so that the thumbs clutched tight to the backs of the hands.

"You laugh," Cornelia noted with irony. "You seem to think it was *you* who were together with Miss Blank that evening on Montmartre, and not I. You are mistaken, my dear man!"

"I?" Cecil flushed like a turkey. "How so, please, I ask you? Two evenings ago I was on the Nordexpress."

"All right." Cornelia glided over this point. "But I assure you once again that two nights ago I spent the whole evening with Camilla Blank. I found her very pleasant. In fact, all these young women are not at all bad, I have to say. One is rather loopy in her forwardness, and a little injured in her pride – no doubt a childhood during the War, and the Inflation – but both have the charm of spirited individuals."

"I'm actually shocked at you, my darling!" cried Cecil. "You're mixing everything up! You're so confused these days, I've never seen anything like it in my life! I really don't know if I shouldn't recommend a few weeks in a sanatorium! Heavens above, I really need to set my memory into some kind of order. Two evenings ago you were together at the Florida with a Madam Holk from Berlin and her husband, and not with any Camilla Blank in the whole world!"

"I know very well that I was with a Herr Holk from Berlin. We danced very nicely together all evening And yesterday he sent me these flowers."

"The flowers came from Herr Holk?" Cecil was surprised. He cast a none too friendly eye over the bouquet.

Cornelia, smugly: "I like him very much. He dances well, and was nice in other ways." She added ironically: "Might I enquire, dear, how it is that you know so much about my little night out at Florida?"

"From Stanley."

"Ah! You've just spoken to Stanley!"

Cecil was indignant: "Yes! I spoke to him on the telephone last night! Is that not permitted?"

"It is permitted, darling," Cornelia replied, submissive and meek. "I only asked because once you two were not so close that you had to talk after just a few hours apart."

Cecil shrugged. He had no intention of answering any more questions. But now it was Cornelia who approached Cecil to lay a hand on his shoulder and give him a shake as if he was the stubborn child.

"I find it so embarrassing, Cecil, that I have to catch you out in a lie, like a schoolboy! It's the worst thing that can happen to a woman – to find that a man she looked up to like a god – and that is how I looked up to you –" (Here she rested her sorrowful face on Cecil's shoulder) "when he acts beneath the level of his character. But I think that we are all these days enveloped in unfairness, as in an evil miasma."

She added, softly and simply: "You were never in Berlin, darling. These photographs of some lady in Berlin were pressed into your hand by these Holks, or by Stanley. You have enjoyed a little fling with Tabac Blond. So besotted are you that you even risked bringing her into my vicinity on Montmartre. You probably arranged for Stanley to tell you by telephone where we had gone. And she, for her part, was bold enough to go with you, even though she must never be spotted by anyone from her Berlin circle! Because she is dead, of course – the poor, poor thing! But she was probably tired of being more than three months dead, with no dancing. You can't blame the dead for being fed up. Did you have a good time with your pretty ghost, my love? Did you have fun?"

Cecil turned about. He took two panther-strides at the back of the lounge, two forward, two back.

"All right! So you know, my love. I was never in Berlin. I was with Miss Blank on a tributary of the Marne. We spent a delightful day there. We caught trout that weighed pounds. In the evening I brought her back to Paris. We parted like brother and sister. I spent the night in a most uncivilised hotel on the Champs Elysees. Next day we met for afternoon tea out at Fontainebleau, then an evening on Montmartre. Your tale about her playing dead these last three months is just nonsense! Brain-fever! I'm sorry, but I found her to be completely alive. And she showed no sign that she feared daylight. It was only for my sake that we took care not to bump into anyone who knows us. I was able to accompany her back to her hotel. We parted, once again, like brother and sister."

"Is that *true*?" asked Cornelia. Her eyes shone: she wanted to believe him! When he said "brother and sister", everything else he had said became irrelevant.

"It is true!" cried Cecil with great emphasis and vigour. "On my word of honour! Miss Blank is an irreproachable young lady!"

Cornelia's hand signalled to him to come closer. Her large hand signalled wonderful forgiveness.

But Cecil took no notice. He kept pacing back and forth like a panther in a cage. Nervously he tweaked the ends of his moustache between thumb and forefinger.

"I have lied to you, and I beg your forgiveness! I have behaved very badly, but there's a good explanation. There are occasions in life when one *has* to behave badly! This has been one such occasion. Because I considered the task you set me to be stupid and useless, and I didn't want to miss out on these days in Paris, not at any price!"

"Because you were in love with Tabac Blond?" Cornelia asked, again tense and edgy.

"Because I shall marry Tabac Blond!"

If Cornelia had been a lady in that French comedy, Grace would have had to come on stage with her handbag and a bottle of eau de cologne. But at this moment Cornelia was entirely Lady Macbeth, or Laetitia Bonaparte!

Her kimono had fallen open, and once again she stood there magnificent in the beautifully smouldering outrage of her almost naked body.

“Oh!” she cried, filled with indignation. But her Oh! seemed aimed less at Cecil than at her great female adversary.

“Oh! She is *much* more dangerous than I had imagined!”

“What? Who?”

Cornelia lifted her arms like a praying youth of antiquity: “Oh! She wants to marry you! She is strong ... really ... that does show strength!”

Cecil flung out his arms. “You must understand! You must forgive me! I’m wasting away! I’m falling apart! My nerves *need* this marriage!”

“Good, good! Marry her! Marry a convict, for your nerves! It will be so good for your nerves and your social standing!”

Cecil bared all his teeth: “I forbid you to insult my future wife!”

“I shall see your future wife laid in chains!”

“You will turn me into your deadliest enemy if you try anything against her!”

Now Cornelia strode angrily to the window, and Cecil to the door.

Suddenly Cornelia came to a halt: “Has she actually agreed to marry you?”

“We’ve spoken of it, hinted at it. That’s enough for me!”

Cornelia laughed: “Hinted, and that’s enough for you? Whoever told you that she really does intend to marry you? Such a rich young lady! Who in five years’ time – if they let her out of prison – will come into one and a half million dollars!”

“Why on Earth should she *not* marry me?” Cecil stood there, indignant. “I’m an excellent angler, I play golf like a professional, I know how to dress, I have a very decent income, I’m not exactly stupid ...”

Cornelia’s shoulders shrugged in contempt. She stood by the window. Crucial decisions were coming together within her. Imperiously she turned around, fully Madame Mère: “Can you contact the lady this very minute?”

Cecil was surprised. “Stanley can.”

“Then she must be informed that I expect her here at the Meurice punctually at twelve noon. And you – you shall call the notary. La Haye shall also be here punctually at twelve.”

“What are you up to?” Cecil looked at her, his gaze flickering anxiously.

“Leave me! I shall do as Fate commands!”

“Ah! Fate!” Cecil replied, his hand on the doorknob. “And I too – I shall do as Fate commands! I shall now lie down for a moment. Such conversations are poison to my nerves. Good! Good! Tabac Blond will come here.” Cecil raised his voice: “But no one in

this building – you hear me? No one – will harm so much as a hair on her head while I still live!”

Cornelia’s voluptuous nose quivered: “It is not as easy as you think, my love, to harm a hair on a ravening tiger in the jungle!”

.XXII.

Punctually as befits a spirit being, the pretty ghost stepped into Cornelia’s lounge just as the clock struck twelve. But an earthy whiff of tabac blond attested to a powerfully mundane corporeality.

Charlott’s Heiress must have run up the stairs. Perhaps the lift would have delivered her too late. Her cheeks were red and round, her eyes a dazzling blue, lips somewhat moist, and she was gasping for breath. All in all, one would have the impression that the person dashing into the room found life good, was accordingly in a radiant mood, with eyes that held a slowly fading afterglow of laughter shared among good friends.

“It’s so gracious of you, Lady Cornelia, to let me call on you once again!” cried Charlott’s Heiress, struggling a little with her breathing as she quickly raised Cornelia’s hand to her lips, like a man.

“Take your hat off, if you would find it more comfortable! I should like to see you for once without a hat!” Cornelia subjected her victim to a searching look, as if considering what she would look like hatless in Marie Antoinette’s cell, quite soon.

“Oh, that is *such* a kind suggestion!” Charlott’s Heiress stood at the mirror. “But you must promise not to look, Lady Cornelia! I’ve arrived with my hair in a terrible state ... There!”

With a faintly cruel smile at the corners of her mouth, the younger woman showed off her uncovered hair. A long narrow elliptical head with a rounding towards the back that suggested intelligence could now be seen, as well as the famous coal-tar-raven-black hair parted and buffed in the latest Parisian style, half covering the ears and with little waves here and there. A very pretty feminine look for the Conciergerie.

“Your hairstyle is really delightful. I must copy it,” said Cornelia Fisher, and in the same comradely way as at the first meeting, as she studied the hairstyle she placed her arm in the arm of Charlotte’s Heiress. She led her guest to the Louis XVI settee beneath the portrait of Marie Antoinette on the wall. They lowered themselves onto it side by side like crowned heads, each quarter-turned courteously towards the other. By means of a courtly swivel, Charlott’s heiress had managed to sit herself on Cornelia’s left.

“I am glad to be able to speak with you again with no men in the room. Men always complicate and confuse things for us women! I have a pressing need to speak frankly with you, my dear Miss Blank, woman to woman.”

The woman thus addressed quickly gave Cornelia’s hand a cautious tender squeeze:

“It is *such* a joy that I can see you alone, Lady Cornelia! And I’m so grateful that you wish to speak frankly to me!”

“Would you like to tell an old woman – ” (the visitor interrupted her with a smile, a graceful curve of the sweet mouth) “something about your life?”

“Oh, I find it so *especially* nice here, Lady Cornelia,” the visitor burst out. “I’m always in *such* a good mood when I wake up in Paris, and see the Parisian sun! But you should know that I love my ancestral city Berlin quite passionately! I yearn for Berlin! And yet every morning I splash about in my bath like a baby, I am so happy! I think I must – touch wood! – have hit upon a little lucky streak, quite uncalled for! Everything I try my hand at turns out so well! And – maybe it sounds stupid, and it’s *infra dig* to say it, Lady Cornelia – but I’m so happy about my money! It won’t help just me, but all the many friends I have in Germany who are going through hard times! It makes me so very, *very* happy!”

“Yes,” Cornelia responded. The hennaed eyelashes quivered as her eyelids lifted. She regarded her guest through these golden-blue lashes.

“Yes,” she repeated.

“And I have such good friends who stand by me! And the loveliest thing is that new friends come along almost every day.”

“Yes,” said Cornelia. She had turned pale at the lips and around the nose. “Yes.”

Now both fell silent. Charlott’s Heiress was still smiling, her childish mouth open, teeth glistening a little, yet already sensing a looming awkwardness. Cornelia was still fixing her guest with a determined gaze. Then she said:

“Do you know that you are a little bit ... unprincipled, my child?”

The young lady sat there in shock. She flushed slightly, even as her mouth with the glistening half-covered teeth still smiled.

“Have I said anything, Lady Cornelia, that – ”

“Do you know how old I am? You can easily work it out, because Stanley is twenty-four. At my age there are no new friends, not one day to the next, nor even one year to the next!”

With a jubilant wiggle, Charlott’s heiress straightened up on the settee: “Oh, fishing, fishing, Lady Cornelia! How deplorable! Don’t you know – ” Tabac Blond screeched with pleasure, so happy was she to be able to say what was coming: “Don’t you know that on one single evening in Paris a very good friend of mine totally lost his mind over you? I haven’t spoken to him myself yet, but it’s the talk of the town that you absolutely slayed him! You slayed him, Lady Cornelia! “

Cornelia blushed like a schoolgirl: “Of whom do you speak?”

“Oh, that’s so sweet, Lady Cornelia!” Tabac Blond gave a low throaty laugh with a touch of Negro, and she stroked Cornelia’s arm. “I speak of my friend Holk! I haven’t seen him yet – I haven’t seen him for three months – but I shall certainly see him today! I shall interrogate him madly!”

“Ah, Holk!” Cornelia cried, with the slight flush of a lady who knows how to tame the surging of her blood.

“I am terribly indiscreet, Lady Cornelia – ” The lively mouth opened in a smile – “But I know that bouquet of two hundred roses in the corner very well! I’ve had several myself! It’s a tradition among us: whenever we want to tell someone we love them or have a special regard for them, we send them two hundred red roses. Holk even had a bouquet from me, once, after he’d done especially well in some matter. And the last time I ever sent two hundred red roses was three months ago in Berlin, to a much-loved actress who always enthralled me more than I could ever say, whenever I see her on stage! Dearest Lady Cornelia, I promise you that by teatime you will have received four hundred red roses – from me!” And with a dovish gurgle in her throat she squeezed Cornelia’s arm, quite hard.

Cornelia could not but stare at her in awe. She even joined in a little with her guest’s laughter, and in a not unfriendly tone, but rather teasing than accusing, she said:

“I believe, I do believe, dear Miss Blank, that as an actress you could put even your Berlin diva in the shade! Should I send you half a thousand red roses?”

Now both laughed like a mother and daughter who get along very well and to some extent see through one another. They even rocked a little together as they laughed. But as she laughed, Cornelia wondered: red roses in the Conciergerie?

“Miss Blank, let us smoke a cigarette, and then I shall ask you a very indelicate question. It’s the only way I can summon the courage, so overwhelmed am I by the magic of your presence! I may be permitted to view you as a friend I have known for a long time.”

“Oh please, Lady Cornelia! I’m all agog, and shall respond to you as the best of all my best friends!”

Carefully and almost ceremoniously they lit their cigarettes, with lots of little Chinese politenesses: “Please! ... A thousand thanks! ... Here’s the flame! ... Do you like Turkish? ... Oh, awfully!”

“And now the question?” Charlott’s Heiress’s ring finger dabbed a speck of tobacco from her lip.

“Here it comes! Do you have any intention in the near future of marrying?”

“Yes!” Charlott’s Heiress replied at once, and she gazed with eager curiosity, her brow lifted, directly into Cornelia’s face.

She seemed ready to answer more questions just as frankly and promptly as this one. But no others came. The one question was posed, the one reply conveyed, and the impact was enormous.

Charlott’s Heiress quickly assessed the impact. Now her fingers were in her jacket pockets, the cigarette quivered at the corner of her mouth, and she sent Cornelia searching sideways glances through the smoke, like a smuggler spying the border guard’s house through fog.

Cornelia looked up. Slowly, precisely, with a dangerously cutting gaze, she asked: “Would you give up your intention to get married, Miss Blank, if the little business matter between us were to be settled this very afternoon?”

Charlott’s heiress pondered this question with her eyes almost closed. Her lips were visibly repeating the question, and rehearsing her answer.

"A settlement of this little matter, Lady Cornelia, is actually a precondition for my marriage. Without that settlement I should have to wait five more years!"

"And do you believe that the man you intend to marry would also wait five years?" asked Cornelia. The mocking tone was unsure of itself.

"Absolutely I believe it! I should say: I know it for certain!"

Now there was no more polite beating about the bush. With the hostility of a vengeful woman, Cornelia fired deadly glares at the guest, who sat so innocently beside her on the settee without missing any of the expressions flickering across Cornelia's face.

Following a silence, Charlott's Heiress suddenly asked, energetically and with a concealed bite: "What actually is it, Lady Cornelia, that has led you to show such hostility to me in the last few minutes? *Please!*" Tabak Blond held up a warning hand as Cornelia tried to interrupt her: "I see that you are my enemy! Anyone else in the room would see it! Are you afraid I'm trying to infiltrate into your family? Do you consider me unworthy to be a member of your family? Do you regard me as a little seamstress who must be paid off? Or is that famous *pacifism* not actually so prevalent among you?"

"I have no idea what you mean," Cornelia waved it away. She sat bolt upright and stiff on the settee, hands in her lap, her gaze aimed over her cheekbones at Charlott's Heiress. The cigarettes smouldered slowly in the ashtray.

"You have no idea? Well, it's my belief you think I want to marry Stanley."

Coolly Cornelia responded: "I would be very glad to see you and Stanley happy together. I would feel honoured to take you into the family. But I have *never* thought you might marry Stanley, and I believe you have never thought it, either."

"I have never thought it, Lady Cornelia, and neither has Stanley."

"Well then!"

"Well then! So who else were you thinking of, actually?"

"You know very well. I was thinking of a man with whom I am connected by eight years of friendship and good commercial comradeship. I speak of Cecil Dell."

"Oh, *Cecil!*" cried Charlott's Heiress, relieved. Suddenly she was laughing with her whole face - to Cornelia it looked like a bride's blissfully unrestrained laugh - "We recently enjoyed a delightful day on a tributary of the Marne."

"Yes, you did!" Cornelia screwed up her face a little: "He's *such* a good angler! And he plays golf like a professional!"

"And he's so well dressed, isn't he!"

"And he has *such* a decent income!"

"And he takes life as it comes - with *such* a healthy attitude, Lady Cornelia!"

"I see, Miss Blank, that just one day was enough for you to learn all his outstanding qualities!"

“Two days, Lady Cornelia! We also spent *such* a charming dance evening at a tiny bar on Montmartre. His dancing is acceptable enough: a bit lazy, it’s true, but talented! Oh, Mr Dell! I’m uncommonly fond of him – uncommonly, and e-norm-ously!”

Cornelia’s glittering fingers played with one another. Her mouth was so strangely downturned towards her chin, the glum downturn of an old woman.

– A few seconds more!

She stood up determinedly like a swordsman, very soldierly – controlled and limber. She was heading to her weapons cabinet, to take up her last and most deadly blade.

How she did this was so curious! She went seemingly at random across the room, randomly picked up various objects, looked at them and carelessly let them drop. She did this with a newspaper, an ashtray, her guest’s black suede gloves, and the little hat with the mastiff brooch. And then, finally, a yellowed crumpled fashion magazine such as Stanley liked to carry about with him at the bottom of his suitcase.

“Oh!” Cornelia seemed to have stumbled upon an enormous surprise. “I almost forgot! I meant to show you this! Such a sweet photograph of you! So lifelike! And there’s your name ... ‘at the wheel of her 100hp Mercedes.’ I think I saw this car not long ago, on Montmartre.”

She strolled back towards her guest, one jolly girlfriend bringing another girlfriend a surprise, and showed her the photograph in the German magazine *Die Dame*.

“Yes,” said Charlott’s Heiress as she took the magazine, and she gazed up at Cornelia with a bright friendly smile. “A charming picture, and so like me! I’ve always adored it!”

She closed the magazine. She held it rolled up in her hand like a field marshal’s baton. As field marshals are wont to do, she struck it carelessly against her knee.

“But – she’s not me, Lady Cornelia! She’s my dead cousin! We were just like twins! And the car belonged to my dead cousin. I inherited it.”

“Oh!” Cornelia was desperate to interject some caveat, but Charlott’s Heiress cut her off almost rudely as she stood up:

“I have to go now, Lady Cornelia. I’m so *very* sorry, but I have an important appointment! Can you guess where? No? You’ll never guess! It’s an international radio communications office!”

“Is it really so urgent?” asked Cornelia, curtly. “Perhaps you’re really going to some completely different meeting.”

“Oh no! Certainly not!” She pouted this like a callow schoolgirl making fun of the teacher. “I really must keep the appointment at the radio office! But I am quite certain the little matter between us will be settled within this week! Here’s what I shall do today: for an enormous fee, I shall broadcast over every radio station in the world, including those along the Equator, a message to the man I intend to marry. Because I haven’t the slightest idea what latitude he might be messing about in at the moment. He’s a frightful globetrotter! Perhaps you could recommend to me someone at the radio station in Colombo? It’s so comical, Lady Cornelia – I’m about to blare out a message to my future

husband like someone at the Zoo who's lost track of their child!" She laughed, showing all her gleaming teeth. "Oh, men, Lady Cornelia! Men! They really do keep us busy!"

Cornelia seized to her bosom the hands of this woman who was playing such a cruel game with her. So stricken to the very core of her being, to the last thread of her existence, did she seem, that Charlott's Heiress was almost sympathetic.

"So it is not Cecil that you plan to marry?"

"He's such a good angler, Lady Cornelia! But the one I'm looking for is in the South Seas, and he catches much better fish – catsharks and gurnards and all kinds of marvellous creatures – much better than Mr Dell! Oh, do say hello to Mr Dell for me, Lady Cornelia! It was so nice angling with him on the banks of the Marne!"

"You give me your word of honour – your honour as a *gentleman* – that you plan to marry this globetrotter and nobody else?"

"I give you my word as a *gentleman*, Lady Cornelia!"

Still with the marshal's baton in her hand, Charlott's Heiress held two fingers up close to Cornelia's face to seal the oath.

Now Cornelia pressed the avowing *gentleman* to her breast for a kiss on the mouth. The marshal's baton squeezed between them crumpled and dropped to the floor.

"Just a moment!" Cornelia cried. She went into the next room. Charlott's heiress could hear her talking rapidly to a Frenchman.

Cornelia came back with a document that she flourished triumphantly, like a schoolboy with a good report: "Read it! Sit on this chair and read it! Here is a pen! Will you sign?"

Charlott's Heiress sat on the chair, and read. "I shall sign it, Lady Cornelia! One step at a time! Will you be so kind as to write the cheque now?"

Cornelia tore a cheque from her chequebook – as blithely and casually as if paying the hotel bill. Stanley would have been delighted if he could have witnessed his own mother create one of the most significant literary productions of the human spirit!

No. 645 319

Paris June 17<sup>th</sup> 1926

Guaranty Trust Company of New York, New York

P a y *Charlott Verloh*

Or order (Duplicate Being Unpaid) the sum of

*One Million Five Hundred Thousand* Dollars

Check against out credit

\$1,500,000

*Cornelia Fisher*

“Here you are!” said Cornelia, and with a boy’s excited face she handed the cheque to Charlott’s Heiress as if it was a cup of tea.

Charlott’s Heiress scrutinised the cheque carefully line by line. For a moment she considered, head cocked to one side. She was undecided.

“You have named my dead cousin as the payee?”

Cornelia gave a friendly nod: “I really thought it would be best! Since you are in every respect the legal successor of your late cousin, you should have no difficulties when you present it.”

“That is true, Lady Cornelia! Thank you so much!”

“And I think,” said Cornelia in the same benevolent tone, “that as the legal successor to your late cousin, you might also sign this notarised declaration that you have no further claims of whatever kind against me in the name of Charlott Verloh, née Landgraf.”

“Oh, I guess ... I think ... I could do that.”

“Then let us invite Monsieur La Haye to join us.”

An elderly gentleman, apparently hauled out dusty, rusty and creaking from the lumber room of French justice, stepped in. He bowed to Charlott’s legal successor.

“Is this lady known to you personally, Lady Fisher?”

“She is known to me extremely well, Monsieur La Haye! As a small child she used to write me the most delightful letters.”

The two ladies exchanged polite smiles. There followed a few formal questions, then Charlott’s legal successor signed using Cornelia’s pen: *Charlott Verloh, née Landgraf*. She wrote fluidly, without hesitation. She must have been very familiar with that signature: Charlott Verloh née Landgraf. She seemed to be totally a proxy for her late cousin.

“I am truly glad that this has been settled,” said Tabac Blond with unshakeable good humour as she folded the cheque neatly in half and at once tucked it away along with her black-hemmed handkerchief with its strong odour of tabac blond and her suede gloves with the white-flecked cuffs into her snakeskin handbag.

Monsieur La Haye took his leave. The ladies each held out a hand.

But by the door the ladies came to a stop. “Adieu, Lady Cornelia! I mustn’t keep you any longer! I think I shall fly to London early tomorrow. I need to make another radio call from there. Many, many thanks for settling our little business!”

“I hope it will bring you joy!”

“I hope that now our little business is settled, you too will have much, much joy, Lady Cornelia!”

Cornelia's smile was indecipherable. Was it really a rather sorrowful smile? Ladies of forty-five in the social class to which Cornelia Fisher belonged are in our times sparing with their sorrowful smiles.

"And if I bump into my friend Holk, shall I say hello from you?"

Cornelia blushed: "Tell him thank you for the roses. And that I would be glad to see him again."

"Adieu, Lady Cornelia! Will you still be in Europe this winter?"

"It is quite possible."

"So please do come and visit us in Berlin! I would be so happy! I shall be back in Berlin in the winter, and I even hope I may by then be married to my equatorial vagabond! Adieu, Lady Cornelia, and many, many thanks!"

"Adieu, *Charlott!*"

They shook hands quite naturally, and Charlott left.

### .XXIII.

Charlott – she who had passed away following an all too nude river swim on the east bank of the Dnieper during the spring thaw, whose remains had been mercilessly incinerated in a Soviet Russian town, whose ashes had languished for weeks in desolate foreign parts until the frivolous unfeeling Englishman in whose arms she had breathed her last conveyed her mortal remains to Germany, where they were deposited in the vacant unswept dust-sheeted curtained house at Petersdorf – Charlott negotiated the steps at the entrance to the Hotel Meurice in the Rue de Rivoli in Paris three at a time in the same way Bosco the mastiff had negotiated the steps at Petersdorf. She galloped down them with the same sort of joyful animal yelps in her throat and at a comparable pace, so that at every half-landing she had to skip and slide in order to achieve the change of direction. A street urchin could not have managed it better, the way her wide striding legs took four steps at once, one hand on the balustrade, in the other the centrifugally arcing snakeskin handbag.

A gentleman climbing slowly and laboriously up the steps encountered her. He was easily bowled aside, and he even received one in the face from the zipper of the one-and-a-half-million handbag, as one receives a sabre-slash in a cavalry attack. It was a miracle he kept all his teeth.

"Sorry!" cried Charlott, already sixteen steps below. And she was even kind enough to turn her head and call back to him: "I really am truly sorry!"

The gentleman held a hand firmly over his mouth as if it might fly off his face, and he seemed to think it a good idea to keep the hand there for a while. But above the line of the thumb could be seen a hopelessly confused, even horrified portion of a face, like a cartoon in the margins of a parchment.

The gentleman on the steps of the Meurice was of course from Berlin. He had known Charlott well, while she was still alive. According to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's

*Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, ghosts should not appear in broad daylight. This particular ghost had not employed its ample leisure time to deepen its appreciation of Lessing. At one o'clock in the afternoon, in the middle of Enlightenment-minded Paris, it went about bashing people in the face.

In the lobby at the bottom, the unfeeling Englishman was seized by the collar and hauled off to his Citroën coupé like a small boy who won't listen. Bosco, who had been waiting at his side in the lobby, wagged her tail like an aeroplane propeller. She kept pummelling her mistress's kneecaps with it.

"I have it! – Mirabeau!"

Stanley roared off down the Rue de Rivoli, Charlott at his side, the mastiff on the jump seat. All three were grinning like the demons of hell – even the little mastiff of brilliants and onyx on Charlott's hat grinned like the devil. Stanley kept swivelling his neck slightly to see better. His nostrils were quite remarkably flared. His face still bore unmistakable mementos of his fight on Montmartre.

"One and a half?"

"Yes sir, that's my baby!"

There was a jam. Charlott waved the cheque at the policemen on Saint Honoré. She leaned a long way out of the window:

"Mister Policeman, please let us through! I have here a cheque for one-and-a-half! Monsieur! Do you know if there's a flower shop nearby? I have to tell you: once it was 'Make yourself scarce!' Now it's the Guaranty Trust Company of New York!"

– Foreigners! Some are drunk already at noon, sighed the policeman. He was a Pan-European. He loved Count Coudenhoven-Kalergi.\* He raised his arm: "Make way!"

Charlott leapt out by a flower shop. "Four hundred red roses from Nice! For your mother! Have you some money?"

"Not a centime!"

"Me too. We'll put it on the tab! There's not a place on Earth where you can't put it on the tab!"

Two minutes later they and the car were outside the Mirabeau.

"I'll run up to Holk!" Stanley shouted on the street. "Tell Camilla to come down! You must be up there in five minutes!"

Stanley rushed into the hotel. Charlott used all her strength to hold back the mastiff by its massive nail-studded lacquered leather collar.: "Stay! Good girl!"

The mastiff stuck its nose in her mouth. Charlott spat – as no lady ever had, in the Rue de la Paix.

"Aren't you ashamed?" Stanley scolded his friend up in the room. "Brushing your hair at one o'clock in the noontime? I told you we'd be here at one on the dot with Camilla and we'll all breakfast together with a delightful lady that I'm bringing along."

“Where’s your delightful lady?” asked Holk coolly, and he kept brushing his Negro-curly blond hair without ever achieving the smooth look he desired.

“In the lobby! And are you really not ashamed of yourself?”

“Every day there are so many things to be really ashamed about.” Holk studied his and Stanley’s bruised faces in the mirror. “I don’t know why it always has to be me exactly that has to feel ashamed. You have plenty of choice!”

“Really? I do? You Hun! First of all, your top priority should be the totally unknown delightful lady I’ve left waiting down in the lobby! Of course you’re on tenterhooks to make her acquaintance.”

“Of course,” said Holk, and he brushed his hair.

“And then, if you please, what kind of trick was that, spoiling the child Cornelia with two hundred red roses? Don’t you have an iota of shame in your body? Three months ago your poor, poor friend passed away on the Dnieper, the one you always used to send two hundred red roses to, and now Cornelia is to choke on all that flowery splendour?”

Holk turned to him, a round brush in each hand. Each cheek showed two accusatory furrows of grief, and there were heavy bags under the grey eyes. Holk said not a word.

And at the sight of this human face of grief, the softhearted vulnerability, the nights of useless self-laceration, and finally: true loyalty – see how simply true the human being can be, who is made of such fleeting dust! – Stanley lost his zest for fooling around.

In silence Holk turned back to the mirror. He stood a little bent forward, shoulders mournfully rounded.

At that moment the double doors to his room were flung open. Holk, as he brushed, saw a woman in the mirror.

“Cammie,” he said.

Then he held the brushes an inch from his head immobile in the air. They were like the fixed wings on Hermes’ helmet. He brought his face closer to the mirror, which had taken into itself the shadows of another world, much as this world of appearances reflects only the shadows of things.

Holk had the expression of a young nobly bewildered bull, that for the first time perceives the inconstant image in the reflection as the miracle of miracles. His eyes grew wide, and in a melancholy way, foolish.

Then he collapsed before this reflection, and with it the image.

His mouth came to rest on a pair of female feet. His chin showed lacerated purple traces of Stanley’s friendly fists. He rubbed his cheek on the narrow shapes beneath his head. He settled in nicely, like a child ready for a long sleep.

He said nothing. He did not stammer the one name lost, and now found again.

A solemn pretty female face bent down to the sleeper on her feet:

“So you didn’t forget all about me, little Holkeman? Darling?”

.XXIV.

The garden of the house high on the lofty hillside was surrounded by untamed jungle. Aerial roots of giant trees down below stirred torpid wave-foam. Then came cliffs. Then once again and at last – the great ocean. You could count off its ten different colour-provinces all the way to the horizon, each corresponding to the condition of the seabed and the disposition of the light. The ocean looked like a map filled with small states.

Justus lay on the terrace, which had a tall balustrade for the children's safety. For in this house of his Dutch hosts, to which Justus had returned after several years' absence, there were numerous children – indeed they were the most important members of the household; everything revolved around them.

Justus peered through gaps in the wooden railings, over the tops of the densely clustered trees, out onto the ocean's colourful realm. Or he peered up, straight up to the sky where now and then big colourful birds with coral-coloured wattles flew over islands in order to reach on some other island the domain where they would sleep. Their wings shone in an evening light whose joyful glory was shared with the peaks of volcanos and the crowns of giant trees.

But the lower parts down here were already ruled by the shadows of fast-falling night.

Justus had spent the day with his hosts, working at the colony's Biological Institute. Man and wife worked alongside each other in wonderful harmony – both were colleagues at the Institute, and each the other's assistant. Seven hours of work in the Tropics – for a fat European equivalent to seventeen hours back in the north. Justus had pitched his tents here to enjoy a little bit of cooling, to dream a little, and to gaze a little out to the north-northeast. Whether it was the right direction mattered not at all. Maybe faces never were all turned so accurately to Mecca, maybe some pointed to Morocco, or to Lappland. But somewhere over there lay Petersdorf, Berlin, Zurich, Paris, London, and the rest!

Justus watched languidly foaming waves break against the reefs. On the horizon a big steamer was trailing its wake towards Borneo. The green starboard light blinked on before the first star in the firmament.

Justus hummed a sad tune he had heard somewhere: *One forgets! One forgets! On l'oublie!* The chorus of a suburban Parisian chanson.

He wasn't sad because everyone had forgotten *him* – oh, that was understandable! Anyone living in a certain sector of the globe between 35 and 60 degrees north no doubt never has the time to stretch out on a veranda in the evening and gaze onto the ocean or some other calming scenery towards the south-southeast, and remember somebody! Not even on their winter or summer breaks can they find the time! No, it was his own fault he had fallen into this state of hopeless lassitude in the Tropics. For sure you can't forget everything up there between 35 and 60 degrees north – but you can grow tired of remembering. Better to accept the gift the Tropics offer to the European of the old school: the veil they spread over thoughts of home ...

Indoors, behind him, children were at play. Maurits, his godchild, and his siblings and friends were whipping up a terrific din. Maurits had been born on the island a few weeks

before Justus was hauled off his boat by the English, all those years ago. In the cradle was already a gift from his godfather, but then Godfather disappeared behind a barbed wire fence in India, never to be seen again. Maurits often heard stories about him. Later on, magnificent Christmas and birthday presents arrived – and others at odd times even when there was no discernible festive excuse! These presents were chosen as particular reminders of Godfather. Man-high rocking horses, entire zoos, later electric train sets and cars of the most extravagant kind, and last year a radio set through which you could hear people in Holland talking and singing!

The mysterious being back there in Germany – disembodied, faceless – bore an unmistakable resemblance to God in Heaven. When he was six years old Maurits initiated from his bedsprings a lively theological debate as to whether Uncle Justus was not *one and the same* person as God in Heaven, but maybe only *similar* to God. His parents, united in their horror, contested both theories, but Maurits came up with all kinds of hair-splitting scholastic arguments until his perplexed parents wondered if their son might not have right on his side after all.

The unknown god had been in the house for some days now, and he proved to be a fat and not at all supernatural gentleman of the human species, whose indecipherable moods, however, had a whiff of divine caprice about them. For example, you never could tell if he was joking or serious. He could roll his eyes and roar at a nine year old boy, but still you had to laugh, and the adults around also had to laugh, and – strangest of all – he himself, the guest, seemed never to intend that any child in the world should tremble at the knees because of his roar! Nevertheless, it was best to be on your guard ...

“Come here, you!” Justus commanded in a gruff voice. Maurits came obediently to the side of the lounge. “What’s all the confounded hullabaloo in there?” Justus wished indignantly to know. The boy’s eyes widened a little fearfully. He clasped his hands behind his back:

“If it disturbs you, Uncle Justus, we shall go into the garden.”

There. A few words, and Justus had what he wanted. Nevertheless he persisted, quite illogically, with his scolding: “It’s enough to drive one mad! A chap can’t even hear himself think!”

“OK, Uncle Justus. We’ll carry on in the garden.” The boy considered. He cocked his head, pondering a quite specific problem. “Of course, there’s a very particular reason why it’s more formal up here.” He gazed at Justus with anxious cunning eyes.

“What particular reason might that be, pray?”

“Because the radio set is in this room.”

“What’s going on?” Justus pricked up his ears.

“A wedding.”

“Oh? Who is getting married, pray?”

Maurits was fired up: “Me!”

“And the bride, pray?”

“Lolotte is my bride ... In just a minute you can watch her become my wife!”

“And who is Lolotte?”

“Lolotte is Lotte van Stam of course. She’s just arrived in a car! Didn’t you hear, Uncle Justus? What a car they have, I’ll say! I’ve never seen one like it in my whole life! A really modern Mercedes 100hp!”

Justus almost fell off the lounge: “Hell’s bells, young man!”

“Lotte’s parents are off to Borneo so Lotte’s staying with us here the whole time they’re away. So it’s better for us to get married at once.”

“Hm,” said Justus. He pondered the matter: “Might I be introduced to your bride?”

“Oh, please!” The boy rushed to the door: “Lotte, you need to come here!”

A very cute little thing with the nimble eyes of a mouse and a simple blue-black ponytail appeared. She was wearing a white dressing gown embroidered with examples of every conceivable tropical foliage and fruit.

Justus hauled himself politely upright. They shook hands.

“Are you German, Lotte?”

“Mummy used to be German. I’m called Lolita by my daddy and Lolotte by my fiancé and Lotte by my mummy. But if the Resident or the Pastor come, then I am called Charlotte.”

“Then I suppose that on your wedding day today, we should all address you as Charlotte?”

“Of course!”

“It’s going to happen right now!” cried the impatient bridegroom.

In Singapore they had already been playing a whole programme of wedding music: arias by Gounod, Puccini, Verdi, Meyerbeer. It was high time for it to happen.

A youth with a sharp chin and a high narrow forehead, clad all in black cloth, officiated at the ceremony. He was a Berserker of a pastor, thundering away! Justus lay on his stomach listening to the pastor. His eyes were big.

“You must not always beat your wife right away just because the soup isn’t on the table in time for lunch! Mark this well! Sometimes the kindling is damp, and the Malay boys have grown slack! So you must not always grab the stick at once and let fly at your wife! Mark this well!”

These notions of the belated soup and the stick for beating the wife seemed to be the leitmotiv of the wedding sermon. The pastor couldn’t leave the topic alone; clearly he regarded these as the most perilous cliffs of married life. But then there proceeded from his mouth utterances whose relevance was not immediately clear. The pastor held a fist up to the bride’s face, his eyes squinted, he was so angry and malevolent – he ground his teeth in rage:

“As for you, you must not quarrel whenever you like with the natives, for the natives are people just like us! Anyone who wallops his boy is a great big pig! Even the half-castes

are Christians just like us! They deserve to be treated decently!" The fist was horribly menacing. "And so you must not just quarrel with them whenever you like!"

Singapore was accompanying all this with the aria from *La Bohème* about the little ice-cold hand.

But then the proceedings went awry. This Charlotte from the Sunda Islands suddenly declared midway through the ceremony: she has had enough. She has had it up to here, and she indicated with a hand where that was exactly, she would not be bossed about by the pastor, and now she does not wish to get married at all. Maurits is a coward who puts up with anything. He should have boxed the pastor's ears right at the start. Whereat there ensued a massive pillow fight, which now and then even put Justus in the danger zone.

Hardly had the battle-cries from this abortive wedding died away when Charlotte from the Sunda Islands declared that she wanted to "play dead".

Justus, who had been listening intently, had not heard the word quite clearly: "What is it you want to play?" he asked, with misgivings.

"Dead, Uncle Justus!" came the response, with the liveliest enthusiasm.

The girl was placed on a bier, a moving spectacle in her little white gown with the same flowers and leaves that had adorned her bridal attire. And now such a lamentation arose from those left behind that the birds with their flesh-coloured wattles froze, and wondered if a volcanic eruption was now to be feared.

– Dead? Thought Justus, filled with misgivings. Children play dead?

Suddenly he stormed in on them like the Weather God: "What kind of beastly game is this?" he roared. "Play 'alive'! Everyone who plays 'alive' right now can expect something *really nice* from me tomorrow!"

The dead girl and those left behind now besieged Justus with boisterous glee. They would have loved to carry mighty Justus about on their hands like a victor. But now the Malay nanny came in, a lady like the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the games of 'dead' and 'alive' were ended by two shrill birdlike screams. The children politely said "Goodnight", held out their hot little paws to Justus, and skipped away like excited lambs. They still had lots to fight about, for many aspects of the unsuccessful wedding gave rise to many differences of opinion.

– Dead? thought Justus, left all alone as opera melodies followed one another on the loudspeaker, for the children had forgotten to turn the radio off. Children playing dead?

– Of course! he concluded bitterly. The Malay servants treat them well, and otherwise never forbid them anything. So she'd rather break off the wedding and lay herself in the cold cold grave!

The stars rose in the heavens, and Justus was reminded of the ghostly choirs on the yacht when he sought for Charlott's voice amid the howling whistles of the earth-orbiting dead. He was superstitious, always had been, always would be. His ancestors were farmers in Lower Germany. All Low German peasants are superstitious.

So you lie back with the soothing veil over the eyes – this boon of the Tropics – on the veranda of a house in the Sunda Islands, gaze to the north-northwest listening to the sweetest arias of European opera, and – fear seizes the heart.

– Why did she ‘play dead’ after that abortive wedding? What hellish coincidences are these? Am I ready enough for Swedenborg? What would Strindberg have made of this ‘wedding’? Has there ever been anything like it?

Justus stood up. He wandered about, his hand gliding over the railing or wiping sweat from his brow, casting tormented glances towards the sea.

– I must go to this girl’s bedside. And if she’s asleep I must waken her. I must ask her why she ‘plays dead’ and lies on the bier in her white gown.

Justus shook clenched fists before his face.

– Maurits and Lolotte and that pastor boy – away with them! Better have dogs and aquariums and boats and pretty girls and cars – but *never* any children!

Justus placed his hands on the veranda railing, and laid his head on those hands. The fat man stood there for a long while in a bent and most uncomfortable pose, as stars wheeled over the back of his head.

The music had fallen silent. But he hummed to himself, out over the world: *Mount up! We’re off to Linlithgow, And you’ll ride by my side!*

Then, as he hummed, a voice spoke to him. Out of the burning thorn bush it came, into the desert of his despair. It spoke quite loudly, as unmistakable and inexorable as those voices from celestial heights down to the thirsting humans in the desert:

“Message for Dr Justus Verloh! On board the German yacht *Charlott!* Message for Dr Justus Verloh! On board the German yacht *Charlott!* Your wife is alive and well! You are requested to return at once to Berlin and telegraph your booking to the Hotel Esplanade!”

Twice more was this message transmitted around the globe.

As the message rang out, Justus remained in the same position: hands on the railing, forehead on the hands. Had his soul dozed off as he hummed to himself?

*Mount up! We’re off to Linlithgow, And you’ll ride by my side.  
There we’ll fish and hunt with joy, As so many years ago!”*

## .XXV.

At Petersdorf, there was once again a wedding celebration. The event even passed without a glitch. This time it was a tremendous affair. A hundred automobiles were parked outside the big mansion. All Berlin was invited, and all Berlin turned up, eager to greet the pretty ghost.

Never in recent decades had such an exuberant wedding been celebrated in this land. It was a super-carnival. In earlier times perhaps, when Dame Fortune was in the mood, this kind of thing was common in Nice or Cologne or Moscow, but never yet in this gloomy northern clime only now intent on gradually becoming brighter .

Teppich placed his hands together above his head. He prayed like a prophet. It was no use: they were all wreaking unspeakable havoc on the creatures in his aquarium.

Bosco lost her mind. She ripped the already skimpy clothing of silk-satin or crepe georgette from the bodies of ladies, scattered long strings of pearls real and artificial, and laid winter-muddy paws onto gentlemen's dress shirts. Anyone singled out by Bosco's passionate intensity received from Charlott a present in consolation and apology: a little Chinese figurine, a water jug from Sumatra, or some bit of rococo nonsense. Acacia, the silent abbess with a heartful of wishes, joined enthusiastically in Bosco's extravagances, as befits a refined personality when she steps out of her role, and she added at least a half more to everything her big sister engaged in.

During his stay in Berlin, Cecil Dell often stared at Cornelia in utter perplexity: "But the women here are actually *pretty*!" He forgot to yawn and doze. "Have to say, I'm most *uncommonly* astonished!"

Cornelia enjoyed greater success than at any time in her life so far. Charlott's terrible foe from the East Indian archipelago, on whose account she had had to descend like Odysseus into the realm of shadows, Lady Cornelia Fisher had already spent two weeks as the greatest sensation in Berlin. Embassies and legations, the Foreign Office, industry, the banks, trade, the arts, the sciences and the Press, Christian and Jewish circles, all these misty cosmic entities so urgently occupied in forming themselves into a kind of republican society suited to a great capital city – they all celebrated Cornelia, arranged receptions, teas, dinners and balls in her honour, and even the newspapers with their heads kept giddy and stupid with a whirl of politics, film stars and sport suddenly discovered a social phenomenon here in Berlin to which they gave a few timid column inches. They wrote: "Lady Cornelia Fisher, widow of the late Sir Herbert H Fisher of Colombo, who has captured the hearts of Berlin society ..."

As for Stanley, he had rather put Holk in the shade as far as Berliners were concerned. He was Holk to the nth degree. If Holk was a little bit foolish, Stanley was utterly crazy. For the first time in his life he had money, for not only had Charlott lent him ten thousand pounds, but Justus had added a few Reichsmark of his own, and – what was most amazing – Cornelia in the full flush of her success settled an annuity on him.

"Tell about the Dnieper, Stanley my lad!"

Charlott, heated from dancing, sank down onto Stanley's armchair in the aquarium and laid an arm over his shoulders, while every floor of the palace vibrated to the antic foolish instruments of the jazz bands.

A Thankmar, squatting like a Muslim on the floor, couldn't wait a moment longer: "Were you both really so godless as to travel by yourselves to Russia?"

With Great British pride, Stanley flicked a lock of hair back from his forehead: "All lies!"

"All?" asked Holk, turning pale.

"All!"

Camilla, squatting on the floor beside the Thankmar like a schoolgirl playing marbles, bent over her knees with laughter.

“All of it?” Holk stammered. “Alexandrov? The Benz 98, Comfortable Style? The naked swim in the Borysthenes? The lung inflammation with the death certificate in the hand? All of it?”

Stanley was as pitiless as a man determined not to be done out of a single one of his swindles: “All of it, my boy! Charlott was never in Russia at all.” Whereat he snuggled his soft cheeky boy’s lips against Charlott’s brilliant-studded arm. “Were you, my angel?”

Cornelia approached.

Charlott stood and linked her arm with Cornelia’s, like a tender daughter. And all the young women and girls and the all the Thankmars around them stood up. Only Stanley remained seated in a very comfortable pose.

“And the death certificate?” Cornelia enquired, with a stern gaze from under eyebrows that were no longer a single unbroken strip of bronze – for during this winter she had had her brows shaved and reduced to two tiny thin lines.

“How I obtained the death certificate is my secret, child! The main thing is: all of it was lies, clever lies! Is one a novelist, or is one not?”

“One is!” Embittered Holk drew the “child” off in his arms to dance. But he cast a menacing glare at Stanley. For two pins he would have left Cornelia standing and whispered the same couple of words to Stanley that were whispered to him that night on Montmartre: “Come along, my boy!”

A paperchain noose was placed around the Master Liar’s neck, in order to hang him right there in the aquarium. Charlott had arranged the construction of the paperchain. Every inhabitant of Justus’ aquarium was depicted: a lobster bit the tail of a gurnard, which bit a stargazer-fish, which bit a horned frog, which bit a catshark ...

Justus paid for this third day of his marriage to Charlott with twenty-five pounds of his body weight.

It was not just the joy of this one day that possessed him, but mainly what had preceded it. For from the very first moment of their reunion at the harbour in Genoa, Charlott had treated him with the most effusive tenderness. And then, at the Hotel Miramar, such magnificent stories and confessions! Hands clapping in horror, questions and counter-questions, interrupted by helpless fits of laughter! And finally, Justus’ confession of his own deception. He had never gone bankrupt, oh, far from it. There never was any aniline man eager to rent Petersdorf. This led to a pillow fight worthy of the children left behind in the Sunda Islands. And then wonderfully comradely vagabonding solitary months along the French coast. All culminating, via prospects, pledges, mellifluous avowals, comely certainties: Charlott undertook to provide at least three children on the lines of Maurits, Lolotte and the pastor-boy.

Merry heart maketh fair manners. Justus danced on his wedding day with every one of the one hundred and thirty-five ladies of all ages. He even danced with one man – the ship’s boy from the *Charlott*. The entire crew, from captain to ship’s boys, had been invited by Charlott. The Foreign Office, young gentlemen from foreign missions, gentlemen fat and thin from private enterprise, the press, artists, and the yacht’s crew

including the Negro stoker, who performed an exemplary Charleston solo down in Justus' aquarium. This was Charlott's wedding.

A sailor clicked his heels: "May I make so bold, ma'am?" Charlott danced with the sailor.

"Did you and the crew learn anything about marine biology from my husband?"

"In respect of biology, ma'am, we sailors are up to scratch! Gill arches, pectoral fins, backbones – all shipshape and Bristol fashion!"

Charlott's mouth opened in a laugh. She whirled with the sailor in ever diminishing circles. She laughed so much she had to bend at the hips. Then the two of them danced a tango and then a stomping sturdy sailor-Charleston, all with healthy shipshape biology.

Immediately after this, Charlott danced her great "Apology Charleston" with Cecil Dell. It lasted fifty-five minutes and took them to every floor of the house where an orchestra or a gramophone could be found. They flirted just as they had on that blessed spring day on the Marne.

"Will you promise to marry me after your next divorce, Charlott?"

"Won't you be too sleepy, Cecil?"

Cecil's brow furrowed testily: "Ever since I got to know you, my nights have been so awfully unpleasant. I feel so affected. I simply cannot close my eyes."

"You look anaemic, Cecil. Take more iron."

"I shall play golf and angle assiduously."

"Yes, assiduous angling is so good for the red blood corpuscles!" She laid her laughing head against his shoulder.

Holk danced with Cornelia, Justus with Camilla. The two couples, each linked by a paperchain noose, bumped into each other. Holk cried: "Lady Cornelia wants us to get married, Cammie! Would you like to?"

They were released from the nooses. On every floor the bulwarks of the building were shaken by dancers and the six jazz bands with their saxophones, tubas, trombones, trumpets, banjos, many kinds of drum, handclaps, castanets and pianos.

"Has he proposed to you yet?" Justus asked as he gave Camilla a kiss.

"Ever since our ski trip to Switzerland he's taken to doing it every day, as soon as we're alone. But now it's becoming serious."

"Will you marry him?"

"Naturally!" Camilla relied firmly. "At once!"

Holk danced with Camilla in a corner by a glass wall behind which a Venus Girdle undulated gracefully in a glass cylinder .

"Ask her one more time!" Cornelia commanded. "I was introduced to Camilla as Mrs Holk. I would like to take my leave of a Mrs Holk when I depart for the Indies in a few days."

“Would you like to?” Holk’s bellow soared over eight intervening heads.

Camilla couldn’t make herself understood. So she just nodded her head while raising a hand with splayed fingers to her temple in an utterly inane military salute. And every time during the whirl of the dance when their faces faced each other, she greeted him with more such gestures of accord.

At this moment the bass saxophones and drums resonated through the whole building, over every floor, every staircase and salon, down into the aquarium.

The process-server from Güstrow entered the aquarium. The process-server went up to Charlott, shook her hand, congratulated her on her marriage, and handed her the penalty notice. Guests clambered onto chairs and tables to read it along with Charlott. It specified a fine of ten Reichsmarks, or one day’s imprisonment in default, for falsely advertising her unaccomplished demise.

The ship’s boy, borne on Bosco’s and Acacia’s wild barking, stormed up the stairs. He raised his arms: “Now!” he cried to all the rooms and stairs and corridors where a jazz band had assembled. “Now!”

And six choirs gave voice to Charlott’s wedding hymn, the melody just now composed for a brand new dance:

*Charlott un peu toquée! Charlott’s a little bit loopy!*

THE END

## NOTES

### Ch. I

AVUS track: 10 km stretch of straight road alongside the Grunewald to the west of Berlin. Originally a racing circuit, now part of a motorway.

...Magdeburg: i.e. she is not a country bumpkin.

...*Everyman*: Max Reinhardt's production of Hofmannsthal's play about the death of a rich man premiered in Berlin in 1911, and from 1920 was staged annually at the Salzburger Festspielen.

Bergner: stage and screen actress Elizabeth Bergner became famous as Rosalind in *As You Like It* at the Lessing Theatre in Berlin in 1923.

Chaney's end: Lon Chaney starred in the 1925 film *Phantom of the Opera*.

### Ch. II

Frondeur: aristocratic insurgent against Louis XIV in the French civil wars of 1648-53.

...*finira*: When this cock crows, my love will end!

...Soda: Badische Anilin- und Soda-Fabrik: BASF.

### Ch. III

Valencia: Jose Padilla's 1926 pasadoble composition.

Luise: wife of the feeble Prussian king Frederick Wilhelm III, she conducted diplomacy with the ever-encroaching Napoleon in 1807.

### Ch. IV

Barnowsky: the leading impresario Victor Barnowsky took over the Theater in der Königgrätzer Strasse in 1925; Shaw's play was one of his first productions there.

Scyphozoan: a kind of jellyfish

### Ch. V

Alexanderplatz: where the Berlin Police HQ was located.

### Ch VI:

Le roi Henri: Henri IV of France ("Good King Henry"), assassinated in 1610.

Sing-Akademie: the world's oldest mixed-choir institution, founded in Berlin in 1791.

Archibald Douglas: 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Douglas (1489-1557), brother-in-law of Henry VIII, banished from Scotland for several years. Theodor Fontane's ballad dates from 1854.

...to wife: 17<sup>th</sup> century folk dance, strong on traditional values.

Ci Gît...: (French) Here lies...

Peacock Island; Nikolskoe: scenic spots on Wannsee.

Potsdam glasses: the Postdamer Stange is a very tall, narrow beer glass – one of many local and trade variants.

### Ch. VII

Chervonets: unit of large-denomination Russian / Soviet currency.

Fritzi Massary (1882-1969) was a popular soprano and actress.

### Ch. IX

Irroy: Champagne Ernest Irroy. Its label was designed by Paul Colin, whose graphic art publicised many film stars and theatre productions, including Josephine Baker.

Ch. X

...Daumiers: Daniel Chodowiecki (1726-1801) was famous for his etchings; Honoré Daumier (1808-79) was a printmaker and caricaturist. C. Grip is a mystery.

Schulpforta: the Eton of Germany.

Ch. XIII

Triptych: international driving permit.

Ch. XIV

...smut: The "Law for the Protection of Youth from Smut and Filth" was passed in 1926 after vigorous controversy between conservative moralists and the cultural avantgarde.

Ch. XV

"Thy song...": Translated by Edward Dowden, 1914.

*Skoro*: Quickly!

Ch XVII

Pückler-Muskau (1785-1871): a colourful figure whose activities encompassed the Army, landscape design, world travel, and authorship, including a best-selling account of two years in England where he failed to find a wife. .

...head and arms: unlike the statues of the goddess on Olympia and at Athens.

Ghiberti: designer of the bronze doors of the Florence Baptistry.

Ch. XVIII

...ne viendra plus: "We have no further need of you, monsieur! The lady you're waiting for will not be coming!"

Ch. XXIII

...Kalergi: founding president of the Pan-European Union from 1923 to 1972.

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