

## I THE RETURN OF THE JUDGE

“Wait! Don’t step down yet! Just wait until the train stops!” “Porter please? Porter?” This is it then. Nostalgia for the home country has gripped my heart for so long. You know you’re back from the way the policeman is lurking down there in the hall.

“Have you got any other bags?”

This train station is just like any other, straight up and down buildings, stern and grey, without a glimmer of purple or flash of gold. Were the passageways really so windy and empty before? Ugh! These clouds of dust! And what an icy blast for the start of September! Amid this blank stone, Viktor, you’re at least safe from one thing - the temptations of love! Oh, no chance of that! But this oaf of a porter with his obsequious prattling offers no respite. “Could you do me a great favour,” requested Viktor. “Turn slowly if you would, but really slowly, around this pillar while counting out your steps exactly. — How many? Six? Good. Many thanks and now, if you’d be so kind, we can get moving again.” The lower jaw of the fellow dropped in perplexity so that he never uttered a further word the length of the road.

As soon as he arrived at the hotel, Viktor asked for the street directory. “What exactly is her name now, the faithless one, what ever is her married name? Frau Wyss, wife of the Direktor Wyss. But director of what? There are directors of railways, banks, gas, cement, rubber, there’s any number of possible and impossible directors. Right, we’ll look it up without delay. Ah, there it is, that’s it certainly, prudently concealed behind her husband: Dr. Treugott Wyss, professor, director of the town museum and art school, president of the cantonal library, member of the orphanage committee, at 6 Münsterergasse.

Why, how judicious! What a roll call of honours! To be quite honest, I’d almost have preferred a bank manager. Certainly this must be one very cultured gentleman. However - I’m not to blame, it’s not my fault - I’m not trying to make myself out as anything more than of minute importance. I’m not much to look at, and a bit gauche not to say absurd.

Until tomorrow morning then, my good lady, at number 6 Münsterergasse. A little birdie hasn’t told you, has it, that on the morrow your judge will be at hand?

Next morning at calling time he took the road to Münsterergasse.

How will she react to seeing me? There’s two possibilities. Either she blanches and staggers out of the room, or else blushes, gathers herself together and stares me in the eye. If that’s the case, I shall flood my own gaze with memories and oblige her to lower her eyes. Then I shall turn to her lawfully wedded: “My much honoured Sir, the enigmatic pantomime we have just enacted - your wife and I -

before your astounded eyes demands an explanation. Naturally I'm ready to offer you one, but I reckon it's more chivalrous to leave it to your wife. If I am already your creditor, I do not wish also to take the role of your accuser. It is she who will let you into how and why I am the legitimate title-holder to your wife - and you, Sir, are my representative and faithful lieutenant with my permission. Though do set at rest any disquiet. Once you have unquestioningly accepted your position of proxy husband, I shall conscientiously follow the rules of propriety and not interfere in any way with marriage, peace and contentment. Your home is sacrosanct and my responsibility is clear - to bow out and disappear. By my example, Herr Direktor, you will learn to appreciate the virtue of invisibility. I will have then crossed your threshold for the first and only time. And if today I've put in an appearance, it is to put into words, for once in my life the sincere expression of my need to be taken into account. There you have it, the word of guilt made flesh. That's enough. But if that won't do for you, know that I live at such and such place and am at your command night and day." It's pretty much in these terms I'll speak to him. - Number 14! So deep in thought I've gone past the house. Oh well, let's retrace our steps - number 12, number 10. We're getting there: 8 is next. Not bad the maisonette, quite clean and comfortable with lace curtains and wide balcony. Looked at from the outside, who would guess the deception it harbours? One may even hear a canary or infant laughter. A child? What would a child want with this house? Was I mistaken about the number? No - it's definitely number 6. But several families could quite easily live in this same house.

When he read on the door the name of Wyss his pulse started to race. "Calm down in there!" he demanded, "it is she who should be breathless, not me, the judge!" He rang the bell and launched himself up the stairs.

The maid murmured in servile tones that she regretted that Herr and Frau Direktor were out.

Annoyance set his teeth on edge. He'd anticipated all sorts of reception, but not none at all. As a rule he disliked anyone being absent he proposed to visit. "Gone out!" She goes out in daylight with him. She's got the right of course, but there's not only rights involved there's shame as well. "Here's my card. I'll call back around three this afternoon."

"It's very unlikely Frau Wyss will be in this afternoon," ventured the maid.

"She will be! he commanded. He about-turned and left. What a bitch that maid is! How spitefully she pronounced the words 'Frau Wyss,' almost mockingly. On the stairs he bumped into the postman. "Postcard for Frau Wyss," as he threw it out towards the top. Him also! These cowards! Worshippers of accomplished facts! If I'd married her, they'd probably be addressing *me* today by my name.

Back in the roadway, he took out his watch: "Eleven-thirty! I might as well go

and see Frau Steinbach before lunch. True it's rather far from Münsterergasse to Rosental, but if I lengthen my stride..." - and the intimate little garden of asters in the autumn sun began to awaken memories. Briskly he started out, smiling with pleasure at the thought of seeing his friend again. The longer the road seemed, the more urgent his desire. Still he stopped short in front of the garden gate.

"Naturally she won't be at home either. When that sort of thing starts, it becomes contagious. But no - a miracle!" A cry of joy echoed from the top window, and radiating friendship she came to meet him on the stairs. They only just refrained from throwing their arms around one other's neck. She clasped him by the hands: "It's really you? And now, sit down and tell me what you've been doing! First though, dear friend, how are you?"

"How should I know?"

She laughed with pleasure: "Ah! That's you all over! Now come on, speak up! Say anything whatsoever! Even if it's only to hear your own voice! So I'll know for sure it's really you in the flesh, and not just a fine old fairytale you. Because with you, dear sir, fantasy and reality so merge that one wouldn't be surprised to see you vanish before one's very eyes."

"My train of ideas has rather taken a wrong turning," - he joked - "they don't hang together so well. Are you going to demand I turn around to convince you it's truly me in person?"

"Not at all! Give me your hand again instead. There now I've got a firm grip on you! No! But what a surprise! In fact when did you arrive?"

"Yesterday evening. But don't you know that the more time passes, the younger and more beautiful you become? And naturally always faultlessly dressed in the most refined taste!"

"Oh come on! Quiet! An old widow of thirty-three! And look at you, even stronger and more manly it seems to me than four years ago - and how should I put it, more self-confident and smart!"

"Brash even and go-ahead, ready to go on the offensive!"

"Let's leave it there! We can soon expect then something great and beautiful from you. You know how I'm counting on that."

"Oh, good heavens, as to that" - he sighed looking ahead, thoughtful and anxious.

"You may well put on that doleful look," - she laughed - "I haven't any sympathy with you, not the least. They're pangs of perfection, intimations of victory."

Midday sounded from the direction of the cathedral, booming its deep notes. "Look," - she said, cajolingly while he got up - "come and take tea this afternoon, just the two of us quite alone."

He was going to graciously accept when he remembered: "Alas! I've already

got an engagement elsewhere,” he regretfully announced.

“I can’t believe it! Only arrived yesterday evening and already taken up for today? But I don’t want to intrude on your secrets.”

He reluctantly confessed while allowing himself a bit of leeway: “It’s not a secret from anyone” - he said - “least of all from you. I am as a matter of fact to be received at Direktor Wyss’s house at three this afternoon.”

She looked at him in amazement: “What in the world have you in common with that temple of democratic virtue? Do you know Herr Direktor?”

“Not him, but her, yes.”

Her expression just then completely altered and took on an icy aspect. “I get it, I get it,” - she said as she turned away. “You met her fleetingly four years ago in a spa. For one or two days I fancy.”

“Fleetingly!” - he exploded indignantly - “fleetingly? That’s as you say. Would you know any more about it than any Tom, Dick and Harry? One day, two? What do `days` mean? Does one measure the value of life with the aid of a calendar? I think there are some hours that are more significant than thirty years of routine, hours that live on for ever, having the same authenticity as a work of art, an authenticity even greater because the artist who created them is the sacred spirit of beauty for the living moment.”

“And which sadly fails to preserve them from fading and being forgotten.”

“I don’t agree forgotten, nor acknowledge faded.”

“Not you with your imagination, but others yes, especially when all their wishes are satisfied in the present. You really think Frau Wyss is awaiting your visit or that she would be lacking much if it didn’t happen.”

“Certainly not. It is not my intention to be pleasant to her when I go to see her.”

Frau Steinbach was quiet a moment, then spoke as if to herself though loud and forcefully: “The beautiful Theuda Neukomm is now like a slice of cut loaf. She is content in a happy marriage. She has a cultured husband, respected and worthy of esteem, who loves her and deserves her love. And a lovely child, a true angel of a small boy, I’m telling you, a chip off the old block with black curls like his mother. Yes, you can look as if it’s all a matter of indifference to you. For you, that may seem incidental, but not to the mother. What’s more, she has a circle of friends and parents among whom she is bathed in good will. And first and foremost, her brother Kurt, the prodigy and great genius, her idol. Here she interrupted herself and gave a little smile as if to herself. “To the point anyway. She’s not even at home this afternoon, she’s away on an outing with the choir.”

“I beg your pardon - she will be in.”

“Oh well, if you’re so sure about it, obviously I yield to you.” Then suddenly serious, she looked at him: “Dear friend, tell me honestly, what do you want with Frau Wyss?”

“Nothing!” he snapped irritably.

“It would be better if you didn’t walk into a bitter disappointment...You know you’re always welcome in my home, no matter what the day or hour.” While she accompanied him to the door, she said earnestly: “The beautiful Theuda is now like a slice of cut bread.”

What persistence to repeat the phrase slice of bread! She’s not going to believe that...? No, no, my dearest, the fiancé of the sublime Imago is immune to a Frau Wyss...So it’s her ultimate foolery to bring kids into the world? I beg you, Madam, don’t agitate yourself. Turn out twins, triplets, quads if you must, carry on as though I weren’t there...But I warn you when I replied that I didn’t want anything of her, that wasn’t right - it needs rectifying. And with no more ado he showed Frau Steinbach his brief line: *Dear friend, a correction; it is not `nothing` I want from her, I want her to lower her eyes before me. Your faithful Viktor.*

In the dining-room the customers were bored, coming and going along the length of the walls. Sometimes they looked fixedly out of the windows and at other times they contemplated the illustrated panels, their minds on other things as they waited for lunch to be finally served.

It is in front of the portrait framed in black, of a statesman whose name was quite illegible that Viktor stopped. An energetic face, resolute and open as though modelled on a woodcut. In the expression of disinterestedness and determination was an attitude of ardent conviction, an absorbed air, lacklustre, a man above the crowd not in the habit of provoking conflicts, but rather of skating over them without being obstructed. Viktor approached to make out the motto at the base of the man: *Elementary school is the gateway to everything!* That’s exactly what he typified, this person we have just described. The world conceived as an educational institution. The goal of life to learn at first and then teach, and no truth without a sense of wisdom and no wisdom without rhetoric. The futile brouhaha he would have stirred up, this individual with his stubborn and stuck-up conviction, as if destiny had consigned to him instead of the harmless ballot-box the task of directing the history of the world!

While he was meditating on these speculations concerning the statesman, a companion had surreptitiously joined him, contemplating the portrait with him over his shoulder. “A striking face, isn’t it?” pronounced the unknown admiringly. Other diners gathered round them like flies on a sugar granule, and from the group a second respectful judgement was thrown in: “What a characterful look!” Certainly he must have been important and appreciated the owner of this imposing countenance because discussions were still going on about him although everyone had been at table for some time now. In passing, his name had

been mentioned. Neukomm. What? Have you heard? Neukomm. It was certainly his name. Perhaps it is one of his distant relations?

“Did he leave any children?” asked someone in a deep voice. “Two” - came the answer. “A boy and a girl. The boy didn’t achieve much, he wrote verse. The daughter on the other hand is married to the famous Direktor Wyss. A splendid woman, I’m telling you. In the street everyone turns to look at her. Tall, proud, bronzed like a woman from the south (her grandmother was Italian) - and extremely passionate! At other times perfectly cool and reserved. No one can reproach her with anything. And a committed patriot like her late father.” - So that’s her father’s impressive mug. Come on, wake up reason and get to work because this is raising a whole army of vital issues. Gently reason started in motion, lifted its head a little and then reposed comfortably, with the indifference of a guard-dog stretched out at the entrance to a dairy. “The whole thing seems too absurd to me,” it explained.

After lunch, Viktor inquired of the hotel owner where one could read the papers: “The best place is Café Scherz, near the station. Anyone can direct you.”

In the packed room Viktor managed to find a table near a window with two free places. People came and went, looked around the room, but nobody came to occupy the empty seat opposite him. “Here it’s just like everywhere! Make no mistake Viktor, you have no winning qualities, you don’t put people at ease...- A felicitous thought crossed his mind: could his faithful lieutenant be seated in the middle of all these people? And why not? He was also probably entitled to read the papers. Take someone like that, way down there, with blond locks and a sheep face with bifocals added on. With the best will in the world no-one could claim he was an Adonis, and he doesn’t seem to possess more than the minimum qualities for a lecturer. Lieutenant, lieutenant, if I can offer a piece of advice, don’t be too uppity about your learning lest one sad morning your beautiful Juno with whom you are infatuated dubs you ‘Professor of Boredom’! The laws of good breeding would bid me approach and tease him. Still we’re not going to speculate any longer. It’s ten past two, still three-quarters of an hour. How time drags!...Now, that’s an imposing man who’s just come in. Shame on you! A dream hero for a young girl! Someone to ‘lean on’, to ‘keep up with’, a ‘support for life’! If I knew how to sing, I’d intone: ‘He, the most marvellous of all!’ And girded up like Jupiter! Who then does he remind me of, this amicable Hercules? Of course, that’s it, the king of hearts in a pack of cards...Look out poor virgins, weep! What a match! Perhaps already the papa, since only he can boast a bearing perfectly at one with the entire universe...How carefully he folds his jacket! And the linen so fine, so impeccable for now! What! I truly believe he’s coming my

way. - Most welcome, the most marvellous one!”

Bowing courteously, the king of hearts sat down. Then he took out his cigarette case: “May I offer you one?” Viktor thanked him: “I don’t smoke.” But did you see that cigar case so artistically decorated? Surely a present from his wife.

Just now the king of hearts selects an illustrated magazine. He threw out a kindly glance, indulgent even, rather absent-mindedly; at the same time his fingers drummed on the table. What manicured nails!

The king of hearts didn’t seem especially keen to read but rather to chat. From all appearances lunch had been to his taste. “You are a stranger to these parts” - he broached hesitantly by way of a preamble while all around them the hubbub became more perceptible, “doubtless you cannot appreciate our rather uncouth dialect.”

“No stranger,” rectified Viktor dryly, “born and brought up here. I’ve lived abroad for quite a few years.”

“Ah so much the better. I have then the pleasure of greeting a compatriot.”

Then he disappeared behind his journal, and smiled a smile of satisfaction to himself. “He sucks on this conjugal harmony as if it were a stick of liquorice,” thought Viktor.

Having finished his liquorice stick, the king of hearts pointed out a picture of Werther in this magazine. “What is your opinion,” he asked after a moment’s hesitation, “do you think a love as passionate and romantic can still happen in our times?”

“Nature always has a way,” replied Viktor.

The king of hearts smiled: “Not bad! Everything depends on how you define nature, in a strict or a broad sense. You think then that in our age of realism...”

“This isn’t a realistic age.”

“Alright, if you want. But you must admit all the same there are differences depending on the epoch. There are some ages when certain moods that have formerly held sway are simply unthinkable. Could you, for example, conceive of a John the Baptist or a Francis of Assisi turning up, or to go back to our example, Werther with a starched and stiff collar? Do excuse me. I don’t mean the slightest offense. No, truly, believe me, it was perfectly innocent.”

Viktor smiled, appeased: “I do not claim for one moment the title of baptist or saint. Yet I doubt whether the Holy Ghost would appear because one had eaten locusts. Nor whether ecstasy depends on the collar of a shirt. Furthermore the creator of Werther usually dressed elegantly by all accounts, if my memory serves me right.”

Whilst a longer hiatus set in, an idea insinuated itself indirectly into Viktor’s mind, and the longer the interval went on the less successful he was in freeing himself of it. “Perhaps you know” - he finally hazarded point-blank in an anxious

tone - “you know perhaps in the town a certain Direktor Wyss?” -  
Hardly had he blurted out the name than he felt himself violently blushing.

The king of hearts, surprised, raised his head: “Surely. why?”

“What sort of man is he? I mean what impression does he give? Great or small? Young or old? Ugly or handsome? Certainly a man of culture isn't he, to judge from all his titles and positions?”

The king of hearts took on an extremely arch attitude and smiled, amused towards him: “Well, he's got a number of faults like everyone. Besides that he has, I like to think, some redeeming qualities. But allow me to introduce myself: Direktor Wyss is my name.”

This was arrived at with such good grace and such amiable irony that Viktor, who put delicacy of feeling above all else, was suddenly struck sympathetic and leapt to his feet and offered his hand which the other man eagerly grasped and shook. There arose between the two something like a friendship pact.

Then when Viktor had likewise identified himself, the Direktor exclaimed merrily: “So you are the person who did us the honour of a visit this morning. We sincerely regret, especially my wife whom you once met, if my memory does not deceive me, at some resort.”

“No, not a resort,” an annoyed Viktor corrected, “but a watering-spa in the mountains.”

“She must unfortunately forego the pleasure this afternoon, since an excursion with the ladies of the choral society had already been arranged. I moreover have just returned from the station. I hope you won't be put off by all that, and if you don't find it unwelcome, I would propose a visit to the Idealia. There's no formalities involved. You simply mention my name, and my wife is the honorary president.”

“Idealia?...”

“Ah, I'm forgetting - obviously you can't know about it...” He then began an account, starting at its distant beginnings, of the history of the Idealia: a foundation of his late father-in-law - for social gatherings which excluded all pretension, favouritism and pomp, and free of formal dress and over-indulgence. All that matters is the quality of intra-personal exchanges in which enhancement and relaxation are twinned, the one not excluding the other. Music is especially effective in promoting this, and so on and so forth including a record of members, dates and regular meetings which are generally on Wednesdays, Fridays and Mondays.

Viktor followed this discourse attentively. But his mind wandered, and his eyes glazed over. That's the man, the lieutenant, king of hearts! The most admirable of all! And he had mistaken Adonis for the lieutenant! Why ever had he imagined the lieutenant would be someone ridiculous, or at least ungainly? There is nothing



ludicrous about the king of hearts! Absolutely nothing! - Assessing him, he became mesmerised, disconcerted, almost scared. - Come on, Viktor, cheer up! It's all the better for your sense of pride if your lieutenant cuts a fine figure. I find it entirely in the order of things that she loves him. Have I ever wished otherwise? Certainly not. On the contrary...I'd have been worried if it were otherwise...But as for her, the opposite! What provocation! To go trailing around the countryside when I've announced my visit! No disputing the queen is shameless.

"And you, you're surely a music lover?" echoed in his thoughts the voice of the lieutenant; "or at least you like music?"

"I think so; that is to say I don't know for sure, it depends." From some other direction, the bell-tower struck the hour. "Three o'clock!" the lieutenant said panic stricken and taking fright - "I've droned on too long. I'll have to make tracks to the museum. So then, I'm counting on it, on having the pleasure of welcoming you to the Idealia?" He offered his hand hastily and rushed off. Viktor went outside and wandered up and down the streets, thrown into confusion. He repeated over and over again: "Viktor, be happy," but to no avail. He was down in the mouth, dejected, thoroughly discouraged.

What misfortune then had occurred? Well, none. He was still in fine fettle. He was not assuaged though until he had exhausted himself walking, pressing on to the outer limits of the town. Once back in his room stretched out on the sofa, he felt a lightness. "To your good health" his body wished him.

"Thank you, Conrad," he replied amiably. It was his custom since they understood each other so well, to address his body like a comrade, Conrad.

When he felt sufficiently rested, his eyes caught a small letter on a table which as things fall out, had probably been there some little while. It was from Frau Steinbach.

*Wretched man that you are! Frau Wyss has no need to lower her eyes before anyone. Come immediately so I can scold you!*

Despite his resentment, he resigned himself to obeying the summons.

"I could not imagine you were such a nasty individual - she started on him - There! sit down in the dock and prepare to be interrogated. What is it you are reproaching Frau Wyss with?"

"Adultery."

"What does that mean translated into ordinary language?"

"It signifies in everyday parlance - translation is futile - that she has committed adultery."

"Just now, my dear fellow, I want to speak frankly and to the point. You are trifling with the honour of an irreproachable woman. I appeal to your good faith in which I have full confidence and I ask you, to the best of your knowledge and

belief, is there any sort of pledge between Theuda Neukomm and yourself?”

Viktor vehemently protested: “What exactly are you thinking of?”

“Or at least some equivalent understanding that justifies your assumption. A confession of love? A word, some token? A kiss? Or I know not what?”

He repeated his protestation more heatedly: “No, no and no again! You’re completely on the wrong track. All that happened was a few quite insignificant words passed between us. I was seated close to her at table, we had taken a turn around the garden together and then she sang to me in the drawing room. Nothing more.”

“Well then some letters.”

“Nonsense! I was far too respectful and considerate towards her. And she for her part, too prudent. Women don’t throw over the traces into writing as you know full well.”

“So what then? I beg you, come to the aid of my dim understanding!”

Then suddenly his expression was transformed, taking on a strange and grave aspect as if he had seen a ghost. “A personal meeting in a distant village” - quivered his voice.

“Excuse me if I contradict you right now. I know the very opposite to be the case from Frau Wyss, and the wife of Direktor Wyss does not lie.”

“Me neither! That’s why, if I say ‘a personal meeting’ I do not mean an encounter in the flesh.”

Instinctively she shifted her chair closer and looked at him fixedly: “Not an encounter in the flesh? I hope you’re not going...or what then am I to understand by that statement?”

“You know perfectly well. It’s a question of a meeting soul on soul - Be assured I am sane of mind, and I have a clear conscience with regard to anyone’s concerns. Why do you put on this disbelieving look? You think perhaps that one can make out things from a furnished house better than from an empty one? If I speak of an apparition...”

“You believe in apparitions?” - she groaned.

“Like everyone does, like yourself for example. A dream, a memory, the enduring vividness of a loved one’s face, the splendour of a vision in an artist’s imagination, aren’t they just as much ghosts?”

“For goodness’ sake, spare me the minor sleights of sophistry! Let us discuss seriously. In the case of memory or artistic revelation, one always remains conscious of the fact that it is all a question of a simple creative vision.”

“That’s as may be. I myself am perfectly aware of such a reality.”

“God be praised, your words are helping to revive me, I can breathe again. Because of the way you have just expressed it, I thought for a moment that you wanted to accord your apparition, as you call it, an influence over your day-to-

day life, your actions.”

“That’s precisely what I do propose.”

“Oh surely not! You’re not doing that” - she protested - “you can’t do that.”

He leaned forward - “Forgive me if I allow myself to do so all the same.”

“But it’s madness!” she cried.

He smiled: “How would it be madness, if you please. That I grant as great a value to internal events as external? Indeed infinitely more. Or that I make up my mind according to them? - Conscience? God? Is it then folly also to allow oneself to be influenced in one’s actions by conscience or God?”

She remained a moment dumbstruck, astounded, silenced. But he continued: “The only difference is other people are satisfied with vague phantoms whereas I need to perceive distinct ones, just as the painter envisions the ascension of the Virgin! ‘The finger of God’! ‘The voice of nature’! ‘The sign of destiny’! - what have I to do with this museum of anatomy? I always aim to look on full face.”

Discouraged, she sighed: “As far as subtlety of thought goes, you are far my superior. I’m not however wishing to contest that sphere. There, I can only regret and get distressed.”

He put his hand on her shoulder: “Honoured friend, you have never understood, have you, why I ignored your well intentioned suggestion to hold onto Theuda through a pledge? Confess that you have been, and still are, of the opinion that I have stupidly made a mess of my life because of gross cowardice when it comes to marriage. You see, you’re nodding in agreement.”

“Let us say, through indecision,” she said by way of conciliation.

“No, let us say cowardice, because indecision is also abject, a failure of will. But I cannot bear to be subjected to your judgement in this false light. I want to explain my reasons. Are you prepared to listen?”

“I’m ready for anything,” she whispered lowering her head, “though I don’t hide the fact that this subject is painful to me and that I can hardly see what purpose is served by revisiting ancient history. However if you want...”

“Not if I want” - he corrected - “but if I must!” And in a changed tone he began, raising his voice: “No, it is not by reason of feeble indecision, nor wilful folly that I did not offer my hand when bliss beckoned with silent footsteps, gazing at me with limpid eyes and whispering ‘Take me.’ I knew exactly what I was doing when I reckoned what I was turning my back on, and I made the decision as a result of careful consideration of the difficult choice. I’m now going to recount the events at the very hour of the dilemma.”

He halted after this as if to gather his breath. As the pause went on, she raised her eyes. He stood there trembling all over, shaken by an inner tempest, lips tight shut. “I can’t give you an account of it” - he forced out with difficulty - “it goes too deep” - and he leaned on the piano.

She sprang up to support him if need be.

But he had already recovered.

“I have taken the right decision! I know I have taken the correct decision! And if I were ever again to be posed with the same choice, I should not choose otherwise!” Then he took his hat, bowed and kissed her hand. “I shall send you an account in writing.” Deeply touched, she accompanied him to the door. “Fine,” she said, forcing her voice to take on a detached tone: “Fine, you will put it down in writing. You know full well that everything impinging on you affects me also. And believe me, if I did not understand you previously and as of today I still don’t, I have never yet for one instant doubted the purity and integrity of your motives.”

“Thanks, faithful and respected friend! You give me confidence,” he exclaimed sincerely as he seized both her hands. “I am lacking in that quality, and it goes entirely missing when someone doubts my character.”

“Who has ever done that?” she vehemently, almost angrily, protested.

“Everyone as it were, no one person specifically,” he replied hesitantly.

Between whiles, she had backed away and carefully retreated a few steps. “And yet you are not being vindictive? You are not going to damage anyone?”

He smiled: “I’m not going to harm anyone, unless it should be myself.” With this he left the house.

“What a dangerous and impossible man you are!” - she sighed to herself and, exhausted, she sank into her armchair to recover from her efforts.

As for him, he hastened towards his room to put on paper the confession that he had not be able to articulate. And lo and behold! while normally he loathed writing like a snake’s bite, now that the memory had been awakened by the cross-examination he felt an urgent desire to commit to ink for all to read, the crucial hour of his life, so that his valued secret should be confided to the outer world, released by his remembrance into an immutable truth.

The he began to write at one single stretch and with feverish haste, grinding his teeth in the process, and fulminating against the constraints of the measured laws of thought:

*To Frau Martha Steinbach*

*A curse and shame on this inadequate and tired prose of few minutes ago, because it fails to do justice to the subject! So then I retell profanely:*

*MY HOUR*

*Your letter together with the portrait of Theuda arrived this morning, the letter*

*in which you give me to understand that you were awaiting an unambiguous promise, and that this would for certain secure a favourable response, while renewed dallying would be interpreted as a rejection. I understood: advice reinforced with a warning and defining this as a make or break day, a day of decision. I contemplated the portrait. A thousand delightful qualities started out at me, the limpidness of a young woman blessed before others, distinguished by her beauty, virtue and education - the memory of hours spent together which despite their uneventfulness, preserved for ever a poetic value (these hours that I christened for myself the Parousia) - the tender glance of her eyes full of soul that addressed me: "it is you who secure my aspirations" - the final promise of infinite joys that only you can assure. Beneath the image was some invisible writing which said: "This is the supreme reward," and the words of your letter whispered; "The reward is yours."*

*So much did the excitement of the day occupy my mind that I kept the portrait concealed only feasting my eyes on it furtively, sometimes yielding to the riddle of the dreamy eyes and at others marvelling at the inexhaustible feminine beauty. So I allowed my heart to enjoy the hidden beloved image.*

*However late in the evening when I was sitting alone in my darkened room, I placed the portrait on the table in front of me, looking at it ardently even though I couldn't see it in the obscurity. Across the silence of the large apartment where all doors were open, harmonious sounds echoed as the gentle cooing of a pair of turtle-doves arose from the dining room immersed in darkness. Now illuminated by chandeliers, at the side of the sitting room came the wistful trills of a canary, such a one as sings under artificial light.*

*I was sitting there weighing up my options. There was sighing all around me like two different murmurs originating from antagonistic countries. But at the core was the intimidating issue: "Do you have it right? Can greatness be the reward of happiness?" It was in a bleak mood that I took note of the question, suspecting though the answer would fall in the negative now the dilemma had been posed explicitly. However my heart, sensing the danger, began to unburden itself: "Your splendour" - it exclaimed - "to which you want me to sacrifice myself, what does it consist in? Show me it, permit me to see your great work! - Future greatness? Well! Who can guarantee that you'll even still be alive? There is illness, there is death. Or do you believe yourself liberated from nature's constraints? But let us suppose you continue to live, where do you summon up this future greatness from? From a sense of your own value? Mere tribulation and masquerade! I'm not falling for that, and let me laugh instead! The young wannabes are counted in their thousands dreaming of glorious deeds - they have such an exaggerated sense of their own worth that they swell out as huge as the globe itself! And what becomes of them later? Look at the futile creatures, nobodies full of bitterness and endlessly at war with themselves. Or*

*do you perhaps believe that your self-esteem is of superior quality? How and why? Only the less egotistic, less foolish than you throw off such infantileness once they've passed the school certificates. I'm telling you, Viktor, your would-be `vocation` like your future imaginary greatness are so much hot air and vanity. On the contrary the precious gift that fate offers you today is a solid contentment and realistic. You will cover yourself with ridicule and be a prey to remorse, a hellish remorse for the rest of your life if, for the lure of vainglory and self-love, you let the light of your life slip through your fingers. You won't even find any sympathy if you end up thus wretched. Instead of the hoped-for posthumous glory, your tomb will carry this epitaph in the form of a warning: `Here a bubble burst!`”*

*So I learnt for the first time in my life, doubt. I replied tentatively: “You well know, my heart, that it's not from myself that I sketch out my vocation, my belief and consciousness of my value, but...” “But from whom?” - mocked the heart - come on, have you lost your tongue? Are you ashamed that your mind cannot formulate your presumption in clear terms? Because even if you can't admit it, in your heart of hearts you know you are practising a puerile idolatry. In place of a conventional God, nameable as creator, you worship a shifting phantom which you've invented, a reflection drawn from your own soul that by means of trivial feats of fantasy you project in the futile expectation of pulling yourself up like Münchhausen by the bootstraps. You daren't even mention the name of your idol without blushing. Who is it then the mysterious `Love of your life` and `Iron Mistress` whom you serve with a fanatical devotion like the prophet Jehovah? I'm going to tell you who your `Iron Mistress` is! Every sophomore knows her, every charlatan, every rhymester of the wedding feast, every doggerel-merchant - she is the muse of the faded memory, that old insipid aunt Allegory, life-destroying godmother, the patron of impotence. And it is to this feeble doctrine, marooned as I am on a reef, that I am being led by the dolt that you are. It's in the name of this classroom bric-à-brac that you dare to sell off my peace of mind? Why do you get so indignant when I call your `Severe Lady` vulgarly a muse? If at least she were actually a muse! She's not even that! For a muse knows how to embrace a couple of lines of verse from an adolescent with more or less good grace. Is she capable of that? And what else then are you capable of, thirty-year old gamin that you are? Of nothing, not even of writing a phrase correctly on a scrap of paper! She was and ever will be a nullity - somewhat akin to the rest but at a level of lesser nothingness. Others sometimes submit and are rewarded with an hour of happiness. Submit and you also will get your reward.”*

*In distress, I took refuge beside the Lady of my life, the Severe Woman: “See my heart puts itself to the test, feeble human that I am. It threatens me with remorse, disputes your sacred origin, defames you by christening you a*

*common-all-garden muse. So listen: I'm offering you without reserve all the young hounds of my heart so you can swallow them. Today before you consent to the last and hardest sacrifice, I demand from you a sign proving you are not a false image, a proof that you possess the strength and power to lead me dutifully through to the end. Give me the proof, accord me the signal and I will obey. If not, do not require a weak human to swap his sweet, his delightful happiness for a promise without a signature."*

*Came the severe reply: "I grant neither proof nor sign. If you wish to be in my service, then serve me with blind faith through to the end." - "Grant me at least a clear command. Give the order: `Renounce,` and I will renounce. Command firmly and deliver me from doubt."*

*Came the severe response: "I reject the demand. It is up to you to hesitate, up to you to choose! For at the crossroads of destiny, making the correct choice is the seal of greatness. But weigh well your choice, for if you are wrong, my curse is your lot!"*

*To the left, conscience-stricken, to the right, accursed! My uncertainty defined the strip of tenuous equilibrium. That grew in the depths of my alarmed soul, and at the edge of my present distress crossed the memory of the sublime hour when for the first time I had perceived the whispering sigh of the Severe Woman and had contemplated the essential images of her transcendental mythology. I had heard the demand imposed on the sick creature arising in the shape of a lion on the rocky gully as it leapt above this earthly vale, to sow fear among the heavenly host and chase the creature from her magnificent palace - and everything else that occurred with the lion and the monarch of the skies. I have reviewed that hour and nostalgia came to renew my faith. "Well, so be it! Accept then this last and supreme offering. I shall remain a beggar upon earth. Nothing belongs to me other than yourself and the promise whispered through your breath." I had shouted out aloud; then I charged my will to have the melancholy courage to decide on this renunciation.*

*My heart made one last desperate appeal: "And she, she who counts on you and awaits you. Do you want to sacrifice her also? Do you humanly have the right? Does your conscience permit it?" Discouraged I let my willpower slacken. But the heart pursued urgently: "What is she going to feel? What must she think of you? What judgement can she make of you if you spurn her? She will take you for a weak and indecisive person, a nobody, a dolt incapable of recognising her value. That's what she must think of you and will thereby be contemptuous of you."*

*Unbearable concept! I can achieve the sacrifice, but cannot bear people making a disreputable and false interpretation of it, nor accept the burden of her scorn. For now I no longer know which side to come down on for, exhausted, my weary spirit was rejecting these conclusions.*

*Now the apparition approached, it was the soul of Theuda that manifested itself. She had appeared like this formerly in the flesh at the time of the Parousia, but looking more mature, with a more profound and serious look in her eyes than this new image. She emerged from the obscurity of the dining room with its cooing of the turtle-doves, paused on the threshold and looked at me with a sad and reproachful gaze: "Why do you so underestimate me?" she asked.*

*"Me! Misjudge you" - I exclaimed - "Oh, if you only knew!..."*

*"If you underrate me" - she said - "when you think me capable of this paltriness plotting to set up an obstacle between you and your vocation. Do you really believe you're the only one able to harbour great feelings? The sole noble enough to offer up your heart in sacrifice? Don't you credit me with a resentment just as strong as yours against the spirit of the Iron Mistress? Do you think I am incapable of appreciating the great distinction of being elevated to a symbol by the leader she has chosen? Or that I don't understand nor feel the sense that it is infinitely more honourable and rewarding to be your faithful companion on the heady mountain path to glory, than a housewife or your child's nurse? Come on, let us place together the desires of our hearts at Her feet, tying beneath her eyes a knot more heroic than the vulgar alliance of the sexes before the human altar: the fusion of beauty and greatness! I want to be your faith, your love and inspiration, and you must be my strength and glory who from this wretched, ephemeral creature transfigures me into a symbol, and enables me to escape towards immortality." -Thus she spoke, and I saluted her grandeur, full of jubilant gratitude.*

*After this we proceeded as though we had made our decision. We laid out our dearest wishes, and I then took from her head her marriage crown. Then she took off the ring from my finger and we threw it down too. And as we held each other, unencumbered and naked, like two trees that waited to come into leaf, without other ornament than magnificence of soul, I addressed: "Woman of my life, thou, Iron Mistress, so it is done! See the sacrifice that thou has demanded is accomplished."*

*Before the shuddering shade of the Lady my beloved fell to her knees and, fearful, buried her face in my hands. "You are blessed," began the Iron Mistress, "for having taken the right road, and as a reward accept my benediction. Here is my blessing: you are full of woe and marked by greatness at present, superior to all those, who lacking the black seal of my calling squander their days. I deliver you a sense of your value that will not fail you in error or foolishness, neither in shame nor disrepute, and I hereby forbid you ever to be unhappy. Because it is no longer you whom you henceforth sense in yourself, but me - so that if you lack belief it is me you offend...But who is this who clings to your side?"*



*I replied: "It is my noble friend, your faithful servant who like me comes to offer up her vows. Accept her, as you have accepted me."*

*"Get up" - ordered the Iron Mistress - "and let me see your face! Your face is beautiful and truthful. Now then, I welcome you, not as my servant but as my daughter. Lower your head, my daughter, while I baptise you!"*

*Then my partner inclined her head and my Lady baptised her with the name of Imago.*

*"And now", concluded the Strenge Frau, "give me your hands so I can bless your union: In the name of the Spirit of Nature and the Eternal more sacred than the ephemeral law of humans, I declare you now promised to each other, united for life by these vows, inseparable for good or evil, your souls joined immutably in marriage. You shall be its glory and splendour, she will be its joy and tenderness." - Having said this, the Iron Mistress disappeared and we were alone again.*

*"Your sacrifice, what has it cost?" smiled Imago.*

*I exulted: "O crown of my life! O prodigal grace!"*

*Imago then took her leave: "You are tired out just now and I have a long road to travel. However I will come again tomorrow for now in eternal nuptials we shall dwell daily as one."*

*With these words, we went our separate ways in majesty and joy. But for a long time my mind remained divided in my dark room, taking in the serious consequences of this event; for a booming of the ocean spray broke in spirit and I was enveloped in a solemn chant as of a holy service.*

*And the following morning began as had been predicted with our eternal union. This was a nuptial flight, a duet of gladness with our triumphant lips as one. But her voice seemed higher than mine, so that I stopped several times to hear her song. I flew above the earthly hills to visit the royal domain of my Severe Woman, purer than a monarch of reality but more real than the queen of dreams, so that reality was in the same relation to this monarch as the animals to humans whilst its relation with the dream is that between perfume and flower, royalty which stretches to the meadows of memories and predictions. Then Imago exulted: "O my love! On the route to what new and vast worlds are you leading me? My astounded eyes call it foreign, yet my heart rejoices in greeting it as 'home country.'" Kind people, more friendly than humans, wish us a farewell at the gates of the valleys.*

*When in the course of my travail weighed down by anxieties, while she discreetly concealed her presence, I broke off now and then and lifted up my head sighing, the recollected vision of Imago meeting me: "How loyalty fills me with happiness" - intimated her look - to know I am loved by such a man." When after a well-deserved rest I descended with her into external life, joking as with a human wife, making up silly pet names for her, and prepared the food*

*and set the table for a meal as if she was physically there at my side, Imago began to laugh at her ease: "What children we are! But how have you managed, you so serious, the miracle of making me laugh so gaily, as I never have before?"*

*This made me exuberant and well disposed to people, and they were astonished, saying to me: "What a pleasure! How wonderfully you have been transformed!" I was like the tree in an open sunny field which can spread its crest as all the fruits ripen.*

*And this lasted, this infinite good fortune across time and space until the day when the chasm of betrayal irrupted into our luminous delight, like the wild boar in a tapestry. A printed notice of an engagement to a stranger. No intimation of a friendly sign or remembrance. Nothing but the brutal fact. The whole thing a dumb insult!*

*I threw the paper into the corner contemptuously. So far as the treason was concerned, I had not the slightest regret, nothing but indignation mixed with unhappiness at this unsuspected pettiness. Rather like when with a cold heart, one plays a marvellous piano piece, and suddenly instead of notes there sits a toad in front of you. So it's feasible a female of the species whom fate has accorded the advantage of breath, in her capacity of lover and friend, prefers the first beard to present itself and flounder with him in the mire of his family? Astounded I followed this astonishing example of pettiness as if it were yesterday when as a child I would examine a crayfish. "How could something be a crayfish," I asked at the time. Today I would exclaim: "How can something not be large?"*

*With this ignominious collapse, must my great elation decompose into wretchedness? You have simply read into her your own poetic inventions: the hour of destiny, engagements, majesty, greatness, her nobleness of soul, love, friendship. Imago did not value you as a unique individual. The human, carnal Theuda has become alien, a stranger, with the name X; in fact, an insignificant small bird of which there are hundreds in every town. I screwed up the offensive paper and sniffed it. The commonplace character of the union stank. Exactly like all the others, she decided to get married at any price (probably after an unhappy affair - the road to the altar goes most often, for women, via the tomb of the heart -), pressed in by a swarm of hateful suitors, she saw in me a raw stranger, a saviour, found me acceptable - it's credible - failed to catch me, so much the worse, and then quite simply took someone else, in the name of God. That's how it usually goes, that's how it happened for her, an everyday transaction. How she disappeared! Little Miss X, your name is: "not present!" As proof, look at what I made of you. I rip up the paper and throw the scraps into the waste-paper basket. And now we shall do the same with your pretty little mask of lies. I took down the portrait to tear it into shreds too. By way of a*

*farewell however, I wanted to look at it one more time. So they were deceits, these liquid, melancholy eyes; the whole nobility of this spring beauty is merely a stale sheet of juvenile lard! Then the image began to well up bitter tears: "No, I am not deceitful" - she wept - "for at the time this image was my true reflection, my soul truly was suffused with nobility. These eyes that watch you, formerly did search for you; my desire thought of you, my aspirations centred on you. It is another and later one whose actions involved me not at all who betrayed you. Not out of the baseness of my feelings but, frivolously, out of weakness and pettiness. And who knows, perhaps later the time will come when she will change her mind, recollect herself, will be ashamed of her fall from grace and return to you, purifying my countenance so that it no longer looks ignominiously with a beauty marked by a fallen angel's brand."*

*Then I pitied the image, and raised it respectfully as if it were the image of a dead person. But the other, the new one, the faithless, I did not recognise its right to the name of Theuda and I called her from then on Pseuda, that is: the False One.*

*That evening as I went out on my regular ride on horseback (a real horse of flesh and bone, of course), I heard someone coming up behind me. I knew who it was since I was waiting for her. "Imago," I called, "why are you riding behind me? Why don't you come up beside me?"*

*"Because I am undeserving of you in my infidelity."*

*I continued: "Imago, my beloved, you don't show any signs of it in your face. So then come up to my side, to me your face is blessed."*

*She drew her horse level with mine, but hid her face in her hands. But I gently removed her hands from her face: "See how beautiful and expressive and full of soul it is! Look me in the face, and stop thinking it's unworthy of you now, for I have no doubts."*

*Now she looked at me openly, thanking me with her eyes, and we started to sing again as we used to. Her voice sounded more melodious than formerly, except that there was a more melancholy intonation to it, as when an innocent is suffering. One could have wept for pity. Suddenly in the middle of her song, it was interrupted with a guttural shriek. She pursed her lips like an expiring angel and swayed in her saddle. "Misery me," she wailed, "someone has struck me a violent blow that has made me ill, and shattered my voice. So renounce me, Viktor, and look for a new Imago, one who is healthy and strong, and possesses her countenance intact. She will be able to celebrate and sing for you, giving you the reward she deserves for your sweetness."*

*I rejoined: "Imago, my bride, my inspiration, one doesn't abandon a friend because they are ill. For I have contracted an alliance with you before the very breath of the Iron Mistress so that your visage represents for me the very symbol of all that is worthwhile and elevated. Also listen - that you may be ill*

*and sad makes my love for you even stronger than before, than when you were exulting at my side with joy and delight.”*

*She said: “Bad luck will come your way, Viktor, if you do not renounce me! For henceforth I can only bring you heartbreak.”*

*I replied: “Then bring me heartbreak, Imago my love. But I will not reject you.”*

*I renewed my union then with the wasting Imago, and everything was as before, save that her voice had faded and her eyes looked doleful. -*

*Matters have rested there up to the present day, and I have not renounced her, and she is an inspiration greater than all the world’s riches, even if she is mute and ill. - Come, courage, perseverance and freedom! She is mine Severe Woman, my own Imago, there for my work, vocation and achievement, there for my tender love. All else is worthless. I despise women of the world. One may have a good time in passing, enjoy oneself and say thank you and forget. I know several such, both respectable and dubious. Pleasure with the first, debauchery with the second. But I can’t even remember their names. It is Pseuda, re-christened X, the petty unfaithful one who has afflicted Theuda and rendered Imago sickly. I disdain vengeance! I only ask one thing as restitution. To see her again for one last time, to know how an infidel regards the freshness of the day, and to experience that moment when she lowers her eyes before me. That is my absolute right and her justified punishment. That will suffice, that she may recognise and revel in her mire and that God should bless her marriage.*

*I’ve finished, and having finished will stop.*

*Your faithful Viktor*

The same night he slipped the confession into the postbox with his own hands. And by the next morning the eleven o’clock post brought this response from his friend:

*Very dear friend,*

*I have read your remarkable confession with the attention it deserves. I truly appreciate your communicating it to me as a token of our mutual trust. However before coming to the substance, permit me immediately to get something out of my system, something that sticks in my throat and which I want to raise straight away. You don’t honestly believe, do you, that a woman is bound by a process of thought of which she neither does nor can know anything, an unfolding of imaginative dreams of metaphysical union? You should not expect that, you cannot reasonably expect such a thing. It would be as illogical as unjust. Dear friend, Frau Wyss in no way deserves this detestable name Pseuda. For if there is one woman on this earth who is frank and truthful, it is her. You would demand of her greatness? I don’t know anyway whether women are, in fact,*

*capable of greatness...we have other qualities, but even supposing they are, who can insist on such a thing? How lamentable for humanity if greatness were a duty! Frau Wyss, like any other woman, has been educated to be the faithful companion of a worthy man, and this vocation she fulfills to perfection, to her own satisfaction, the happiness of her near relations and as an example to others. In the whole town I don't know of a wife more virtuous, faithful and devoted, nor a better mother. I must once again protest at anyone seeking to force her to lower her eyes. She has no need to do so, and what's more she won't do it - you can rely on that. To suppose another woman perhaps could share in this 'Parousia,' she would have to be an exceptional woman with rare qualities who loved you with every fibre of her being. But in this case, she has not experienced the 'Parousia,' and it's not her duty to feel it. After this preamble, I'll start again from the beginning.*

*Yes, it's with full attention that I read your apologia. I've been by turns touched and disconcerted, fearful and exalted by it. I do not possess the appropriate gift of cool reasoning and lack the necessary comprehension to get angry at this monstrous mixture of fantasy and reality! But all the same! What is all this: 'Theuda', 'Pseuda', 'Imago' (I prefer to overlook 'Fraulein X'), three persons with a single and unique aspect! The one does not exist, the other is dead, the third 'is not there', and she who exists not is ill. So long as the heart does not get into a complete muddle... I don't know whether it is out of fear or abject respect that my breath has been taken away. You are - do forgive me, I know how you hate this name but all the same I can't call you a rabbi - you are, even if you bridle at it, a poet. Again, if you prefer to be called a visionary or prophet - I read your hymn to Imago with the delighted surprise one experiences in listening to a great work of poetry - I am thoroughly convinced that the demon with which you are possessed (call it what you will) - 'Imago', 'Streng Frau' or whatnot (it could well be a close relative of genius) - is sacred in origin. For I'm certain of this: something to which an adult as exceptionally intelligent and sensitive as yourself sacrifices his love life, is not a will o' the wisp. So I believe in your 'Iron Mistress' and also in you, my dear friend, and in your work and future greatness that until now I have only suspected and hoped for. I believe in it to the degree that your account filled my soul with pure joy, like encountering an immortal work of art, if I were not at the same time your friend, so through my empathy constrained to consider your success or loss as a human being. But I'm gripped by the fear of what you are going to suffer when your marvellously imaginative world (pardon this novelistic turn of phrase) bumps up against hard reality (I'm afraid I can't call it anything else). One thing especially astounds me - how you have managed to avoid such a terrible shock for so long. The exceptional individuals among whom you have had the opportunity to live abroad, valued your exquisite*

*delicacy of soul, allowing you to plunge so liberally and with impunity into the dream of an ideal world - and what's more in the midst of the city crowds! I must not deceive myself too much in assuming it is a woman, a woman with sublime qualities at that, who sustained your progression. I would never have thought such a thing possible amidst the hurly-burly, had not your narrative convinced me of it.*

*I admire your sheer will power, the assurance with which under the guidance of the 'Iron Mistress' you always find your way back to your thread of destiny through the densest of thickets. Only there - you will have to forgive me for saying - an error sneaks in...You are here in this town, and you shouldn't be. Permit me not to be deflected by the hodgepodge of your soul. Quite simply put, you wish to see Frau Wyss again. And why? Because you can't forget her. That is regrettable and I would have wished otherwise. For to let your mind dwell on something you definitively abandoned - you'll observe I underline the word 'definitively' - only brings back what you have already surpassed. But it's probably not the role of a woman to reproach you for it. Nobody knows better than we do that you can't give orders to the heart. I would simply want to warn you to take care not to be seduced by vain hopes and cruel deceptions. Will you accept from a trusted friend a well-intentioned warning? - It will probably be no use, but I must say it even so, for I couldn't forgive myself if I didn't. Don't see her again - go away as quickly as you can from this dangerous ground and continue to sing your brilliant duet with Imago. But from a safe distance. In time, Imago will recover and get her voice back. I have no doubt of that. Here you will only find discord. Take note of what I am saying to you. I who know Frau Wyss - she was my pupil in a certain sense, albeit passingly, and has honoured me several times with confidences - take note of what I am saying. All the small cavities of your heart are occupied. It is certainly not love you are looking for from her, is it? You have too much honesty to claim that. But you will not win her friendship, for to be simply a friend of the house and its musical gatherings, you have arrived too late. And for a loftily spiritual companionship such as you conceive, too early. For that she is too young, too untouched by life, too contented. And above all, do not reckon on her spiritual qualities! She is not made of that material. She has not felt the draught of the 'Second Coming', nor will she recognise the 'Iron Mistress' or the track of the lion that lays siege to the heavens. If I can imagine her suitable as your wife, I have to say I do not consider her a candidate for being your friend. These two roles need different qualities. So once again - leave this dangerous territory, for you do truly seem to me to be on the verge of committing supreme errors of judgement that will unsettle others, and be the occasion of bitter disappointment for yourself.*

*That's it, and I feel I have now redeemed my soul. Now do as you want, or rather as you must, since fate knows clearly what it proposes for you. Weak*

*daughter of men that I am, I can no longer support you wholeheartedly on your chosen path. May the wounds that you will certainly suffer for the elevated goal on which you have set your life not be too cruel. I consequently hope not to see you again. Greetings from me to your marvellous Imago.*

*To you in friendship and respect,*

*Yours, Martha Steinbach.*

*P.S. And be careful not to let yourself be `teased` by terrestrial women!*

Is this of any earthly use? repeated Viktor after reading the letter. What use to me is that? What distinguishes man from a mule is to accept with good grace judicious advice. Dear friend, you are clearly quite right. What am I doing here? What do I want with this little woman who is married and has lost her bloom? It's over! Closed down! Leave it at that. I want to avoid her and am going to leave. That is to say, as soon as I have said hello again to my old friends and class-mates, as is my duty. I must avoid the Lady at all costs, though not actually flee from her. To flee in mortification like a young Christian faced with temptation, that no, I've really no need to do such a thing. If pure chance should occasion a meeting, then so much the worse for her.

And a tiny convoluted desire that a stroke of luck should bring about such a thing, began to gnaw at the deeps of his soul.

## II A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT

How comfortably his old school-mates had found their niches in public service posts! One had become a schoolmaster, another a general at staff headquarters, a third a manufacturer of gas-pipes, yet another had been appointed the cantonal forestry warden, and so on and so forth. Furthermore most of them were happily married, easy-going and content with their lot. Without exception, they all fulfilled useful functions, and were respected. He, on the contrary, with his thirty-four years! Without a skill or situation, reputation or home, without credit or oeuvre, nothing. And how cruel were the blows when they reminded him of the wasted wealth of his natural gifts. "Are you still aiming as high as before?" "And what has become of the music?" -

Oh! His poor talent! Dwindled away, consumed in the service of the Severe Woman! And why for heaven's sake? For a transformation to come, always and yet in the future, never in the present! It would be a long time, it seemed to him, before it actually arrived - the future, and thirty-four years old!

"Do you remember, Viktor" - asked Vital the police officer - "our amiable

German master, Herr Fritzli? The papers make quite a fuss of him now because of his books. God has had pity on him which has stood him in good stead, poor devil, old and frail as he is.” Viktor retained a residual memory of Fritzli for his having once saved him in the course of a staff-meeting from being expelled from school for “bad conduct” and rebellious behaviour. He felt he should go and see him.- He found him curled up in bed, a shattered and tremulous creature.

Painfully the invalid turned his head towards the visitor, with an indifference full of suffering. But gradually he began to consider Viktor, scrutinising his shape for a long time, not manifesting any signs of recognition but embarrassed and surprised, rather as a naturalist examines the caterpillar of a rare species. All the while Viktor was passing on his compliments - mumbling since he was a poor speaker - Fritzli was not listening at all but continued to try to make out his form. He finally said in a weary tone: “So you also! I don’t know whether I should wish you good luck or offer my commiserations. What was your name?” He then offered an enigmatic sentence in a solemn and insistent voice: “Not the old, they don’t believe in it; not one’s contemporaries, they can’t bear it; not women, they just chase success; but only and exclusively the elite of a generation to come. Go now, your place is not around the corpse of a repulsive old man. You’ve enough on your plate. May everything go favourably for you. And thanks for visiting, it’s been a great comfort to me. I’ve given you the best advice - only the cream of a younger generation. But go now, please go.” When Viktor tried to repeat the visit, he was no longer admitted.

Until then, he had nowhere bumped into Pseuda and there was only one further call to be made - to go and see Frau Keller, wife of the Government Adviser. After that he could depart - “say Monday or at the latest Tuesday.” He had twice been presented at her home without finding her in. He now tried a third time without success. Apparently this wasn’t going to come off! “Oh well, I’ll leave on Monday.” It is then he received an invitation from her to come for tea on Wednesday afternoon: *Wednesday afternoon, I welcome the Idealia. You will meet some interesting people there, and we shall probably have some music.* “Even music” - he repeated - music as the height of entertainment! Interesting people, the Idealia!” The programme contained nothing to detain him, and he had intended to depart on the Tuesday. On the other hand, he did not want to turn the invitation down since he was grateful to this female pillar of society. “So be it. Ultimately, what better do I have to occupy me?” And so he accepted it, though only provisionally.

The counsellor’s wife received him with her customary cordiality, though a little reservedly and absent-mindedly. “We’re expecting Kurt,” she announced, radiating goodwill, in a soft voice as if revealing the hiding place of an Easter egg.



Kurt? Now where had he heard the name?

Surely - she pressed - you know Kurt! An excusable omission, nevertheless, on the part of someone newly arrived from abroad. She then began to sing Kurt's praises. He had all the virtues and gifts, and at the centre of his pearls, a string that held the necklace together: "In a word, a genius through and through." "And along with that, a modesty truly affecting." "And so delicate and loveable." And everything admirable. Viktor smiled. Always the same, Frau Keller, when she is pleased with someone she turns to the dithyrambic mode. From what he could gather, he was simply going to make up the audience for the prodigy Kurt, which somewhat annoyed him and made him regret having come.

In an altered tone of voice, like a diva dropping into singspiel, she added a throwaway: "His sister is also here. I think you have already met Frau Wyss, wife of Direktor Wyss."

Ah! so here we have it! Drawing in a deep breath, he steadied himself for vengeance! "Concentrate on the lucid things: not Imago, nor even Theuda, but solely Pseuda the treacherous! And don't send me a racing pulse, you inside there!" Thus armed, he entered.

The very one! My word! And there she is the traitor! Leaning over a musical score in the full radiance of her stunning beauty, Theuda stood surrounded by the cries of the poetry of betrayed memories. But what a resemblance to Imago! How does she do it? At the sight, his blood coursed through his veins like a squirrel hurtling round a cage. A din was unleashed in his ears like an alarm clock going off in the middle of the night and falling to the floor-boards. "All rational spirits, come to my rescue!" he prayed, overwhelmed by anxiety. But alas, where are they? Nothing turned up to talk sense. - Like a blind man, he went through the introductions and felicitations. Will he be warmly greeted by her? See how her glance mortifies him even now! An indifferent look as if for a stranger. She raised her eyes a moment for form's sake, and then coolly refocused on the score.

"Is that it?" - he asked himself, blood running thin.

No, that was not everything. In front of her was a bowl of whipped cream which she was eyeing up enviously. She glanced around timidly to make sure nobody was watching her, and then allowed herself a wary half-spoonful. And finally taking courage in her hands, she took two or three full scoops.

What a welcome! For him! From her! Outrage and indignation! Consumed with a barely restrained rage, he shot her direct looks of disapproval. Until such time as reason came to tug him by the sleeve: "Hey Viktor, if you imagine she's noticing your superior airs, you're deceiving yourself." He stopped just there and fixed her with a blank look, drained, as if he were on the operating table waiting for what was in store, scissors or lancet.

While he remained seated there in a bemused state, snatches of conversation got through to his ears in spite of himself. "The roads in Protestant areas are maintained better than in the Catholic." - "In the third act the hero is found guilty in his total innocence." - "Was Kurt there too?" - "Genius always manages to force a way through." - "Was Kurt on one of his good days?"

And her, with what subject was she going to broach conversation? In the expressive accents of her beloved and revered voice of yesteryear! For a long time he waited in vain. But hush, silence! Just now she is listening to what is being said. She knits her brows, her eyes flash lightning and she parts her lips: "Come on!" - she exclaimed - "polite society is particularly hypocritical!"

This was so unexpected that he had to burst out laughing.

She slowly turned her head in his direction and took a sidelong look at him: "So far as you are concerned - said the glance - I am finished with you." And as she turned her head away again she provoked several tiny supplementary ideas in his mind, minute characters that he could interpret all too clearly: "Sir, whatever do you want with me? Why do you regard me with this significant look, meaningfully charged with recollections? If something from the past gnaws at you, so much the worse for you! Come to terms with it on your own.. But leave me in peace thank you, and if not, back off! Today it is the present that matters, tomorrow the future. My husband and child are everything to me. And you - nothing!"

This was neither scalpel nor scissors. It was instead a terrifying chainsaw. Pain and anger conjoined in the assault on the bold front he had striven so hard to preserve. "She dares to. Under cover of the commonplace accessories of her good-for-nothing marriage - husband, child and other domestic utensils - she would reproduce the immortal art of the Parousia?"

Once again the hubbub of conversations resounded in his ear. From the left: "You honestly think Kurt will still come?" - "Already four hours! It's over, he won't come again this time!" - "I repeat - he's coming." - From the right: "Obsequious courtiers..." - "The joyless family life of the denizens of large cities." - "Inspid amusements of the so-called world at large." "The ridiculously starchy ceremonial of the palaces of the great." It seemed to him that in ten years he had never heard such banalities as in this quarter of an hour, However to his confusion was little by little being heaped, resentment. Why does nobody take any notice of me? How long do I have to remain seated solitary as Robinson on his reef?

Then at a single stroke, a gleeful animation coursed through the gathering, accompanied by whispering and faint jubilation as if a festival procession were approaching. While he listlessly turned to see the cause of this outbreak of euphoria - for what did it matter to him what was going on around him? - a

masculine figure strode across the room without greeting or introduction, in his hurry brushing against Viktor's sleeve and offering no apology. Without further ado he seated himself at the piano and prepared a score - he's not going despite everything...? - but Heaven forbid! He began to sing right in the centre of the assembled guests without so much as a please or thank you, like a drunk in a tavern. Awaiting no invitation himself, Viktor was beside him in a moment, closing up the score in a single move, hurling him to his knees, upon which the intruder without uttering a peep, left the room posthaste. It had all happened extremely quickly, as if a bat out of hell had come flitting through the window and back out again immediately.

"Whoever was that person?" asked an amused Viktor of the Government Adviser's wife, expecting to be thanked for helping the intruder on his way.

Instead all around him - embarrassment, indignation and consternation.

"Person, certainly not!" flared Pseuda, red with anger, raking him with eyes flaming with hostility. But Frau Keller, tears in her eyes, hissed reproachfully in his ear: "That was her brother, it was Kurt!"

In a tone of ironic respect, Viktor bowed in front of Pseuda: "Frau! My sincere and profound apologies!"

"No need for apologies, I'm proud of my brother as only I can be!" - She went out noisily and everyone got ready to go.

"Oh! My lovely musical soirée!" - wailed the official's wife, inconsolable.

When Viktor came casually to offer his excuses to her, protesting that not for one moment did he doubt that it was some lout who, without greeting or announcement, had burst into the gathering, jostling the elbows of guests... -

"Master of ceremonies!" - she interrupted bitterly. "Of course he is an original, a genius" - and with that she vanished in tribulation.

However Lehmann, the consultant engineer for Rivers and Forests and an old classmate of Viktor's, slapped him on the shoulder laughing: "Viktor, Viktor, that was a monumental howler!"

"Pardon me, dear friend, it was not a blunder. It was a correction."

"Call it what you will, in any case with regard to Frau Wyss you've blown it big time."

"Well, we shall see!" - said an intrepid Viktor, defiantly.

Once in the road outside, it was as if he had just emerged from some gigantic farce. So that was the much vaunted Kurt! "Sensitive, lovable, modest!" Did the words have some special meaning here that they didn't have anywhere else on this earth? He, a genius?! Certainly every family has one of these abortive geniuses in the background, preserved in a sister's adulation and decorated with a crown by languid cousins. - What pit had he dropped into! What chitter-chatter!

Mouldy commonplaces that elsewhere they wouldn't touch with a barge-pole. Runtish judgements just good enough to be pickled in spirits of wine! "Polite society is particularly hypocritical" - in what democratic hot-house has she managed to fish up this pathetic truism? Yet how prettily it was said. Self-confident and sure of success as if on exam day. "The battle of Salamis?" "I know, wags a triumphant index finger. You want me to tell you what she is, Viktor? An immature child married to a johnny-come-lately; the doll in his arms and out comes, before she knows what's happening, a small boy on her knees. He will be for her a sort of manikin to be moulded by further education. Did you see how amorously she licked up her whipped cream? But how beautiful she is! One could almost be tempted to attribute a higher purpose to Creation merely because of her; perhaps even more beautiful than at first for being a product of the Parousia and so born again. Nothing lost, but many more additions - in a word, 'in full flower' as the novelists put it. And how spiritedly she defended her buffoon of a brother! Pseuda, you delight me. Alright, she kicks against the traces like a wild foal. So much the better, proof of hot-bloodedness. It doesn't displease me at all to see her kicking her heels and bolting. Pseuda, we shall yet become good friends. - And humming merrily, he went off down the road.

Only all this was merely an infantile game of clowning up there on the bridge, while down below in the hut a man had been stabbed and was groaning. And this man was the captain. Hardly had he got back to the hotel than Viktor threw off his artificial gaiety and sank immersed into thought. "Viktor, a truth has been pronounced, and the sentence cannot be denied. The facts are thus; the policy of Caesar - to come and to conquer- has not worked out. Your entry, your seeing, your righteous indignation have miscarried to a pitiful degree. What has been the cause of the setback, and what is the state of play at present between you and Pseuda? Reflect and draw the conclusions."

Viktor considered and then answered: "The reason for the setback is as follows - this little lady is happy and contented, she has no need of anything and does not long for anything, still less for me. I am simply superfluous. She has buried the past without epitaph. That's why my appearance has been abortive. As to future relations between us, this is how matters stand: my intellectual superiority is of no earthly use here, for she is entirely incapable of appreciating it. She has hurt me in all honesty, for I find myself at odds with her own convictions which are all the more intransigent for having suppressed her former beliefs. In brief: "she is not made of that material," as Frau Steinbach would have it. Whoever venerates an official person of rank, or who can admire a Kurt, will never value a Viktor. It's naturally impossible - the one excludes the other. However that person is her father and her brother Kurt. I must therefore mount an assault on her own blood-line, and her fine virtue of piety. Consequently..." But at this point

his train of thought recoiled, loath to follow this to its logical conclusion.

In its place a soft voice emerging from the darkest depths of his soul concluded: "It's hopeless." And as if this were a signal, from every corner came voices suddenly raised, repeating endlessly the words "without hope," in a trenchant tone, becoming ever more urgent and forceful accumulating like an avalanche, akin to an audience's reaction when the curtain refuses to go up.

Viktor let his head fall back convicted and listless.

Reason clapped him on the shoulder: "Viktor, you hear the people's judgement which accords with mine, and if you are honest with yourself, with yours as well. In short, the atmosphere here is not conducive to you." - "Then what is to be done.?" - "Pack your case and go."

"If you really believe it would be in keeping with my sense of dignity to cut and run shame-faced after having arrived like Ulysses in a tantrum, then you're much mistaken."

"Would it not be more advantageous to your self-esteem to retreat for a time, humiliated, woefully defeated, wounds suppurating and heart bitter?"

"But fate now owes me some measure of satisfaction, some sort of triumph over the traitress."

"Destiny rarely pays up. Be reasonable, let's get gone. Stop banging your head against a brick wall."

Viktor sighed and kept his counsel for a moment. Then he replied: "Perhaps you're right, I haven't said I won't accept your arguments. But I should still like to allow this absurdity a bit more rope. Tomorrow morning I'll let you know my decision. For now leave me to sleep on it."

As he was lying there on his downy bed anticipating departure next day, half-asleep and thinking mildly and sadly on his failed expedition to carry through summary justice, his heart took advantage of his relenting mood: "What a pity, I would have wished you a happier exit. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not trying to influence your decision. Follow reason which is far and away more wise than the pair of us - but you might have a pang of regret that you left amid such discord, burdened for the rest of your life with the memory of a hostile Pseuda. For I think it's patently clear to you that you will never see her again, and you can never modify the image you are stuck with today. Like an enraged stranger she will stand before your eyes eternally. By way of farewell, I would have wished something conciliatory, a pleasant glance, a warm word, what should I suggest? - something fine you could take away that would brighten your mood when you're far off. That would be beneficial for you - I'm not referring to myself; my only experience of the world is privation - and would at the same time provide sick Imago with a remedy." - And so on and so on in a shimmering seductive whisper

until he fell full asleep.

But during the night, towards morning, a fable came to him in a dream. On the island of a loch he recognised Pseuda in the guise of an enchanted princess, enthroned amid frogs and efts with Kurt as king of the frogs, hopping hither and thither grotesquely. "Is there no worthy soul to deliver me from frogs?" her voice moaned. On the river bank in the osier-bed, the lieutenant was cowering, rhythmically waving his arms in the direction of his wife as if he was scything. "Help her," his expression seemed to implore whilst he averted his eyes. As to Viktor, naturally he couldn't move since he was in a dream.

When he awoke refreshed and composed, mind alert, body fortified by courage and renewed self-belief, he bounded out of bed full of purpose: "Have confidence, Pseuda, I shall deliver you from the frogs," he promised with serious intent. He dressed, opened the window, sent his soul out above the mountain-tops, his eyes hurling lightning shafts, his feet pounding the ground: "How did it go? `Without hope`?" Who's saying `hopeless`?" She's not yet a void inside, she has a soul like everyone and in the soul slumbers a nucleus and in this core, even though she herself may know nothing of it, there are dreams of nostalgia and this nostalgia thirsts for something more elevated, heroic, finer than the daily futile entourage can offer. She is simply trapped like a fossil. However if I stay near at hand, then inexorably sooner or later the magic of my personality - all the more and better defined by the positive regard great figures abroad hold me in - is going to spread my flame to her soul so that her eyes will be opened, the dust blown from those eyes until she recognises my true worth and sees clearly my lofty and disinterested character. The soul set in opposition to the commonplace, the spirit against indolence, the individual against the masses - such will be the stakes I gamble. Magic is the name of my weapon while the Iron Mistress is my potent general. We shall see then who is strongest!"

And that very morning, concluding that the magic spell would perhaps take a little time to effect, he set about looking for an apartment.

"A fat lot of good that will do!" exclaimed reason to him when he was dining late in the evening. And two misgivings grazed the carapace of his spirit.

The closest said: "There's someone who is waiting until he gets a broken leg before seeing sense."

But the other misgiving thought prudently and waited to be out of harm's way before ironically and insistently remarking: "Because he is pure and simply amorous," and then fled to avoid being knocked flying by a Viktor who was beside himself with rage.

But his imagination then took Viktor aside and spoke to him in familiar tones: "Let them keep chivvying you. Come, I want to show you something." She gently drew back a corner of the curtain just far enough to see through a chink.

And look: in a tableau there was Pseuda and Viktor himself. They were hand in hand and were looking at each other tenderly. Then Pseuda said to him: "Thou, so high, good and dispassionate, everything that without sin I'm able to offer is yours, whether you put it down to friendship or love." - And so obligingly smiled imagination while she closed the curtain again: "That has only been a brief rehearsal to give you an idea of it, and later I'll show you something yet more beautiful."

### III IN THE HELL OF AN INTIMATE INFORMALITY

To give the recalcitrant Lady a display of his personality, he needed to meet her as often and regularly as possible, for individual qualities do not become weapons when held beyond reach. Where? What a question. What could be more simple? At her house, by the fireside of course! If not, what is the use of having a lieutenant? Anyway, he has already suggested it.

The lieutenant received him as cordially as anyone could imagine, exchanging opinions on scientific issues with Viktor for hours on end. His wife, on the contrary, the real object of his visit, remained out of sight and when it came to the time of departure and he passed her, she bestowed a 'good day' on him so glacial he understood she did not approve of his visits.

So that route to her did not work. He would have to try to intercept her in yet some other place. He made enquiries as to whom and where she was in the habit of frequenting. The intelligence gathered suggested that her social appearances were confined almost exclusively to the Idealia! He sighed, but bucked himself up with the thought: "These are basically friendly and decent folk, and even of a rare urbanity of heart despite the vanity of their dogmatic grandiloquence and pedantry. The plain fact of the matter is that none of them has shown ill will yet in regard to the incident with Kurt. So with a bit of good will..." And turning down other invitations and neglecting Frau Steinbach, Viktor joined the assemblies of the Idealia, patiently resigned to the most woeful moments of cordial intimacy.

They received him with kindness, but soon the strength of the opposition engendered an unnaturalness to the harmony.

There was, beside everything, his inner need to set himself apart from all human groups by whatever names they called themselves, and which left him with a shudder of horror - all the more reason when it was a question of an 'association!' And bearing the title of Idealia into the bargain! They, in return, assumed in each person two principal qualities that he lacked: a perpetual thirst

for culture and an insatiable hunger for music. Lacking music, these people were as bereft as bedouins whose camels had taken flight. “You don’t want to play something?” they would ask of each other. This ‘something’ would have him springing up from his seat. Was someone suggesting ‘would you like to ‘say’ something to us?’

In the presence of culture, the opposition expressed itself eminently clearly: they were interested in everything, he in nothing. (In nothing because his soul, full to overflowing with images and poems, refused admission to anything else.)

The main fact, however, was that the preconditions for their type of unpretentious sociability were wanting in him. The discipline of a profession with its duties and pitfalls, family life with its worries - in a word, the scope for recreation and leisure. It was the age-old conflict between the bohemian intellectual life and that of the cloistered life of the domestic congregation. The very position he found himself in, of having to wait for something to happen (as in the case of the conversion of Pseuda), and this was enough to mess up his life, for the human spirit is not predisposed to loafing.

As a result in place of the hoped-for adaptation, he gave rise to a mutual malaise. He disturbed their complacencies, and they upset him. For sure, he genuinely tried to hide his discomfort so as not to appear the ‘leper’ in a game of cards, but this was merely an unnatural effort not show his own unease. “How are you enjoying yourself in our company? You’ve grown used to things a little?” “Oh yes, very much so!” he assured everyone eagerly, while thrashing around inside like a harpooned whale.

Then they began to console him. In the well-known way, as the saying goes: *It’s all your fault*. Beneath each comforting phrase seeped a reproof, like those sauce boats in two tiers where the fat dribbles from the top lip and the sauce from the lower. The barb was sharpened time and again and given a personal twist, at least in regard to the auxiliary verbs: ‘you should’, ‘you ought’, or even inversely ‘you shouldn’t’, ‘you ought not’. Well, let’s see what would be reasonable to their way of thinking. “And what, not. He should not ‘let himself go’, ‘retreat into himself’, ‘enclose himself in a cocoon’. He should ‘grin and bear it’, ‘come out of his shell’, ‘shake off his lethargy’ (Viktor, take note of your symptom, you are lethargic), ‘in time, perhaps, get married, why not? And if possible to a reliable woman full of energy who could heave you out of your lethargy’ (decidedly, the word had seduced them).

For now it would be best to make use of the multiple possibilities on offer in the town; or would he have a taste for something a bit more demanding? Thursday, for example, there will be an interesting conference on love among the ancient Germans, and a seven-year old violinist will appear on Sunday who will certainly



not be one of those infant prodigies who are to be pitied, for the locals would be the last to appreciate an artificial hot-house product, but a true divinely inspired artist. And himself, didn't he sing or at least play all sorts of instruments? And the thought was soon followed by the scheme: on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December, for the commemorative day of the foundation of the Idealia, Kurt will be giving a gala performance. "Couldn't you play some role - for example an old sea salt or a mountain spirit?" And why should he not enrol as an actual member of the Idealia? And wouldn't it be all the more natural and pleasing to address other members in the familiar terms they use among themselves?

Otherwise they would try to mock him. If one were to organise a modest ball or social games (hunt the ring, spin the plates, or other entertainments of that sort), they would grip him by the arm: "Come! Don't put on that desperate look, join in. There's no need always to look so solemn!" As nothing made any difference, as more and more he revealed himself as an `egoist` who played the F minor while the others intoned the D sharp major, and proved himself a confirmed `realist` who was interested in nothing, but absolutely nothing at all and who further was ignorant to a degree that made your hair stand on end, and was quite revolting (for example, he had not read Tasso) then their advice, exhortations and censure took on a rather more tight-lipped aspect. Or was not the criticism itself certain proof of friendship? They fussed around him, correcting, rectifying, with the best intentions in the world, with the sole purpose of adapting him to the Idealia, rather as when a family committee folds a dress to get it into a suitcase - one reckons the sleeves need to be folded just so, another like this, the third straightens the neck towards the top, a fourth turns down the skirt. Two of them take the precaution of flattening the work with their fists and knees, and little Virginia comes to sit on top of it.

Now unfortunately Viktor justifiably felt a strong aversion to allowing himself to be put to rights, for the very good reason that he had taken the whole affair in hand himself. What he found most difficult to bear were the chicaneries concerning his physical appearance. He was harassed and incessantly bombarded over his looks! Nothing about him was good enough, from the top of his skull to the tip of his toes, nor his language, his accent, his haircut, his beard, his clothes, nor his shoes. To complete the rout, his shirt collars left them inconsolable. Timid efforts to deflect the criticism hardly met with a sympathetic ear.

And then there were the thousand and one provincial susceptibilities! Who could answer its unbelievable hypersensitivity, the oversensitiveness of the imaginative (the reverse of sensibility) which in probing wounds unremittingly, transforms a pin-prick into a suppurating wound, and magnifies a minor sleight into a mortal offense! So, to this side and that, each makes it their business to create this perverse state of affairs that is decked out with the name

`misunderstanding`. But for them these `misunderstandings` are barely of importance. God in heaven! In this quiet Idealia where taking one year with another there was always a jumble of years, feast days, everyone with everyone, what could `misunderstanding` possibly signify! They refused to relent on anything, but did not bear any malice for all that. He on the other hand, with his hypersensitive tendency to exaggerate everything, with the monstrous range of his memory that let nothing drop, but truly nothing allowed to fade away into the great forgotten, with his metaphysical sense of life which invested the smallest occurrence with an emotional significance, with his talent for hasty imaginative conclusions, blaming everyone for what a single person had done (that`s much more simple) he kept finding himself bit by bit in the situation of a bear assailed by bees. He willingly admitted that, for sure, all this only occurred out of a genuine friendliness. Nevertheless it seemed to him that friendship in this sense had a damnable resemblance to a raging toothache. And at a stroke the bees, wildly fed by his imagination, had become monsters that were seeking him out in the most remote corners with their treacherous eyes. All this just now was turning him suspicious as a dog on a chain at twilight. Everywhere he sniffed ill intentions, demanded explanations left, right and centre, and begged apologies for sleights on his good name to the point of childishness. The wife of pastor Wehrenfels had offered him his left hand: “Did he do that deliberately to humiliate me?” The outcome was that after a sleepless night, he demanded an explanation in the tone of an officer who had been insulted. “It`s impossible to understand you,” exclaimed the irritated wife of Dr. Richard after another puerile scene of the same type. The reproach in turn so afflicted his perfectionist soul with doubts that he called up an immediate inspection of the judgment. “And what if she`s right? And why not? It`s quite possible. Only how can I remedy it? I can correct myself, but not change!” And cowering inside and humbled, he wrote to a friend abroad: “Tell me frankly without the slightest embarrassment, is it that I am an impossible person?” The response was: “I`m laughing at your question, it`s child`s play dealing with you, you`re a guinea-pig. All that`s needed is to have a fair bit of affection for you, and to let you know it from time to time.”

The most ridiculous thing was that she whom he was searching out at the Idealia and for whom he was submitting to all these amicable sleights, he hardly ever saw. “The wife of Direktor Wyss is a real home-bird,” someone told him, “she lives only for her husband and child.” It became clear, however, that this was not the only reason, but that she principally absented herself so she did not meet him. But that was of passing importance for worse was on the horizon. When he turned up and didn`t find her, he would contemplate the seat she would probably have occupied if she had come, his mind so far away that he failed to

utter a single word and heard nothing of what was said to him. In addition to the death of expectation, he suffered the shame of deluded hope. Each day after a disappointment, he would wander haggardly through the town, like a ghost that had got lost on its way back to the cemetery.

On the rare occasions when Pseuda was present, she paid him back with interest for the outrage inflicted on her brother, and proud, gallant and resolute as a Turk, let fly hurtful remarks at him, little caring what she said since anything would do for the occasion. Hardly would he open his mouth than she would drop some comment onto him like a ton of bricks. His touchy amour-propre sustained several serious wounds in this way. "I do not like flatterers," she fired at him one day authoritatively, when he had let escape the exclamation: "How beautiful you are!" Another time he disputed the assertion that the nobility of Europe were degenerate half-wits and she called him a `snob`. He could simply have put this down to female whimsy, but in his juvenile idiocy he interpreted it literally. It took him three painful nights to swallow the supposed insult. He erected around himself, rod, fire and scorpion, and examined his innermost self down to the tiniest corner lest the ignominious remark should take hold. No, one who doffs his hat before the beggar to whom he is offering alms, who like a protestant pastor does not refuse his hand to a self-confessed robber, and who in full daylight greets a prostitute, is not a snob. And he who for the whole of his life disdained the stratagem of winning favour with a woman by denigrating his enemy, was no flatterer. "Then why does she say I am!" he indignantly cried. And from that time onwards he would stay seated opposite Pseuda with the air of someone whose eyes had been put out, but who had pardoned the perpetrator.

The Government Adviser's wife no longer attended, for her amiable nature could not bear deep divisions in her entourage. And as she was cordially disposed to both Viktor and Frau Wyss, she concluded that it was a simple `misunderstanding` between the two of them. So she tried to mediate, describing the virtues of Frau Wyss to Viktor, and the merits of Viktor to her. With good grace and in conformity with her open and honest nature whose qualities were painted in lively hues as in a fresco, the wife of the Direktor declared herself disposed to forget the incident with Kurt so long as Viktor made an effort in the future to display a more accommodating attitude. But as far as the extolling of Viktor went, she listened incredulously. And whilst Frau Keller did her utmost in singing the praises of her protégé, Frau Wyss silently gathered impressions herself for a character portrait of Viktor in order to expel all remnants of him from her mind.

The fact that this man evoked a more and more intense animosity (leaving aside the injury he had done to her brother), left her in no doubt on this subject. Nothing less than dastardly conduct, which he doesn't even attempt to disguise!

“But don’t be unjust, try and find a saving aspect.” But in vain did she consider and reconsider the matter, no good side of him came to light, and the inventory of his qualities became a virtual catalogue of indiscretions.

His rather unmasculine appearance, too tender, almost mawkish, lacking firmness, force and determination, his soft voice, exaggerated politeness, clownish dress, esoteric and bizarre language - his ambiguous and equivocal nature containing multiple facets, uncommunicative and surly resulting in individuals never knowing where they stood with him, having a different face on him each day (“I love simple, direct and honest people”) - his sarcastic and frivolous cast of mind which, through ready paradoxes turns everything to mockery, even what is most sacred, the country and soil of our ancestors, morality, religion, poetry and art - an intellect without seriousness or depth lacking principles and ideas - no verve, warmth nor feeling (for example, how can anyone not like music unless they lack a heart!). “Certainly he has no heart at all. Who has he befriended these three weeks? No one.” - And then his loud and pretentious remarks, his lack of tact and extravagances verging on insults! For example, had one not had the greatest difficulty in getting him to drop the habit of calling her ‘Fräulein’?

No, her aversion to him was not unfair, whatever Frau Keller and her husband may say in his favour. Her father also would have reproved him and condemned him in a single word: “He is not sound.” She could hear the tone of the venerable voice in which he would have pronounced that. And as Frau Keller precisely enumerated Viktor’s talents: “Where are they then, these talents?” she demanded, “show me one of these abilities of his please, a single one! What skill does he have? Or what does he know. Of his talents, I’m only aware of absence.” “You must at least concede he has spirit,” protested Frau Keller.

But at that, the wife of the Direktor lost patience: “Spirit?” she flared up indignantly - “I also love and appreciate spirit. But the point is to know what quality of spirit. Spirit to my way of thinking ought to promote something good and just, truth or beauty, deeds and works. Spirit honours what is decent, acknowledges merit, celebrates everything noble and elevated and, above all, the spirit speaks seriously when it is a question of serious things. In contrast these petty, empty and would-be spiritual word games, I must say that if all that is spirit then I set little value on it, not the least. I hate that sort of spirit. Instead of ‘nature’ to refer to ‘Frau Horsepower’ - I ask you! ‘The psychologists - the worst of all are the psychologists,’ what can you say? If that is spirit, then I claim the distinction of passing for stupid. Kurt also has spirit, doesn’t he, but that has an altogether different character.” And as Frau Keller hastened to join the chorus on this point, the praise heaped on Viktor was converted into a hymn to the glory of Kurt.

After both of them had exhausted their paean to Kurt, Frau Wyss finished by declaring herself disposed - the spirit of conciliation could do no harm, and she would not retreat on any other basis - to treat this annoyance with more moderation.

He who refused to accept the offer of reconciliation was Viktor. Quite clearly he could not accept that 'Pseuda,' that is the real Frau Wyss in flesh and blood could exist *de facto* and *de jure*. As long as she was not 'transformed,' as long as she had not reintegrated her soul with the virgin Theuda, all parley with her was hopeless.

Having encountered this refusal the wife of the State official sought peace on another basis - by reconciling Kurt and Viktor. "It's an impossible situation, if only both got to know each other, and so on and so forth." This gave way in turn to one of those initiatives that only make things worse. It is still Viktor who is recalcitrant. Having willy-nilly consented to a meeting with Kurt, he had refrained for the occasion - this was still in his capability - from any antagonistic words. But instead he so stood on his dignity that he added insult to injury. This time there was no longer any excuse - the offensive intention was blatant! "Why then," he asked himself, "why do I have to humiliate this man, although he's done me no harm, and although I know full well it is ill advised and I could, with an amicable disposition, win favour with Pseuda?"

He could find no answer. It was the same thing as with a dog when it spots a cat - if it refrained from attacking, at least he could devour it with its eyes.

"Natural history!" he thought, at a loss to explain the insurmountable contradiction." He was deceiving himself; it was a professional matter, the ire of the true prophet against the false, the indignation of the legitimate successor as opposed to the usurper. In a word it was the fiery breath of the Iron Mistress had roused him against this sham wunderkind.

This time it was Frau Keller who abandoned mediation. But for Pseuda, naturally it was absolutely the last straw. "And to top it all, this is an evil man who, out of vain jealousy for the genius of my brother, intends to set himself up against him." Such henceforth was the judgment she sustained of him, and in such a way that he could harbour no doubts. If otherwise, how explain the whispered conversations and broad hints?

This new 'injustice' provoked his indignation once more, mixed with astonishment. And what had it got to do with her brother? He was not part of the history. His presence was simply a mistake in the drama. And that finally his relation to Pseuda marked a blow to progress, that defied sense! Several times already he had asked, annoyed: "So why does she hesitate? When will she finally wake up? Does she perhaps believe that I want or have the time to await her conversion for decades?" And what's more, will everything now have to go into

reverse?

Such an idea was unbearable. How could he circumvent this now? He knew no other means than his `magic,` the same magic that hitherto had failed so lamentably. How could it have proved so abortive? How could the blaze of his dazzling powers not have managed to fire her soul? A hypothesis: the spark perhaps could only make the leap in a state of ecstasy, and if the effect is delayed it's only because so far he had always appeared to her in listless and grumpy humour. It is why one evening, having geared up his imagination full tilt, his soul crammed to perfection with famous people so that he thought their aura would be perceptible to all around him, he would pluck up courage and go and find her in her home with the secret intent of radiating a short-circuiting magic. So a type of psychological experiment - but of no frivolous character for it was a matter, was it not, of his very salvation?

As chance would have it, that very evening she had an old classmate round to relive the past, dropping for a spell her quite recent maternal dignity and feeling again the refreshing innocence of her youthful light-headedness. It does one so much good, does it not, to go back in time once in a while, to come out of character and play the fool with all one's heart? One of them had crammed a baby's bonnet on her head, the other a top hat, and high spirits demanded they skip around the room in the attire. Viktor reckoned they wouldn't interrupt the farce for love or money, not even for his entrance. So he sat there, on his bench, allowed to witness the comedy. After a quarter of an hour, he knew for all his days the importance of the soul's magic! He departed as he had come, without being noticed, and dejected he made his way home. Now for the first time his confidence deserted him. A pang of horror struck him as if the back wheels of his triumphal carriage had just dropped off and the axle was trailing along the ground jolting violently. And while he assigned his spirit the task of discovering some consolation, he found a blank screen in front of him, still rolled up it is true, but agitated by disturbed motion as if it could come crashing down at any moment, without any warning whatsoever. His magic having proved inadequate, what remained? Anguish oppressed him, and in his anguish he prematurely seized the trump card that he had actually reserved for later when he might have released himself from her heart; her conversion by means of the photograph taken in the hour of her noble virginity. He reckoned the sight of her former virginal appearance would awaken her memory, and so Theuda would punish Pseuda, rather as the criminal presented with his likeness from a time of innocence suddenly breaks down sobbing, regretting crimes and swearing to redeem their former self from infamy. With a tremulous hand, he dug out the picture of Theuda (her sacred image) which three years previously Frau Steinbach had sent him. He fearfully avoided looking at it, since he could not summon the strength to

ward off the assault of memories. Armed with this picture like a loaded revolver, next day he retraced his pilgrimage to her home. So terrifying was the weapon, the situation was dangerous to the point of Viktor's experiencing almost a pang of sympathy before its use. He positioned the portrait on the piano and with pounding heart awaited the effect.

"Who gave you that?" she enquired in the curt tone of an examining magistrate. "Where did Frau Steinbach get the right to send you my photo?" Then with a shrug of the shoulders: "Anyway, it's a poor photo. I never liked it." That was the net effect of the sacred image.

Now his situation had become dire. For he had no trump left in his hand. However he clung even more determinedly to his hope since he had no alternative, but now with a convulsive grip. Hope lacked all rational basis since he had to admit that unless something unexpected came to his aid, he had played his last card. So at the bottom of his soul sadness piled up, and added to the sentiment of hopelessness to produce full-blown misery.

This was to manifest itself in public during a discussion of Goethe's *Tasso*. The conversation had turned to the disputed attractiveness of genius for women. Pseuda argued that the female heart felt drawn by an unerring instinct to a man of true of significance and originality. Having delivered herself of that, she sighed meditatively to herself.

"Are you so sure of the truth of your assertion?" he dared to object.

"Absolutely sure", she said defiantly, "and we sense as strongly the opposite in being able to find out a man of no importance or distinction." And to ensure the implication was not lost on him, she supplemented it with a nod of the head and an expression of mockery.

Then he was riven by a profound depression. Indignation now raised his blood. "Say what you have to say," ordered the Iron Mistress.

He obeyed reluctantly for his sense of decency and modesty militated against it. However he submitted. He then spoke: "Who is to say I am not an extraordinary and significant man?" This sentence pronounced to the four walls in the full light of day took on a resonance so unbearably objectionable that even he felt cowed, and everyone present lowered their eyes in embarrassment, as if something indecent was taking place.

Pastor Wehrenfels found the words to unlock the situation: "You could do worse, he opined turning towards Viktor in a mild rebuke, to read *Tasso* before joining the discussion."

"Well said!" rejoiced all the looks.

To the chagrin of the hope that had gone missing there arose, by some route independent of the Idealia, a strange and ill humour in the gathering which he could neither define as physical or psychological, perhaps both at once; a

sentiment of distress of which he had sensed the premonitory signs ever since his arrival and which had never afterwards left him.

Within the symptoms of despondency that already weighed on him came bursting out the latent disease - for it really was something of that nature. But what exactly could it be? A ghastly feeling of emptiness, an ominous sensation of repugnance as if he had swallowed a desert of clay. Homesickness? Yes, something like that. But a homesickness lacking all poetry, without verve or colour, a lonely despair, a vanishing. One evening when he re-entered the Idealia going by dark lanes without lights or life other than the dealers, whose clamours, uproar and alcohol so struck him in the face that he suddenly diagnosed his suffering; it was the distress of the citizen rejected by a small town. On the church steps an abandoned dog howled. He understood this dog, it was howling along with him.

In spite of everything, his relations with the Idealia had remained amicable enough up to this point. Certainly they found many things to criticise about him, or more exactly, everything. But they always treated him as one of their number. Then again, he kept himself to himself so that he exuded the air of a pious martyr and managed to effect a remarkable gentleness. That was when an innocent discussion which had begun on a completely anodyne even pleasant note triggered a deep hostility, not with the others for these peaceable folk were barely capable of ill-will, but with himself, the enthusiast of ideas, the truth obsessive. This led to a grotesque scene that he later christened his `battle with the Amazons.` It occurred at the house of Frau Richard, wife of the doctor, where he found himself the sole male opposite a few dozen pretty ladies, amongst whom was Pseuda. Cheered up by the surrounding charm, he began to tease the company as was his right and duty. This consisted of all sorts of minor mischievousness regarding women which he delivered in the spirit of genuine love of the opposite sex. However what he could not have bargained for, or had forgotten during his sojourn abroad, was that women here adhered to the dogma of the mystery of the Germanic female, quite different from the rest of Europe, so that they tolerated coarseness but condemned as sacrilege the slightest aspersion cast on the sacred grandeur of their sex.

He soon found himself in the midst of a clamour of indignation raised by several voices (the war-cry of the Amazons) which left him powerless to fight back. In the heat of combat, as he had the audacity to justify women smoking, they gave vent to a noisy celebration of the terrible fate that befell a Russian student who, the previous week, had perished miserably in flames for having smoked cigarettes. "I'm overjoyed at it." "That's her just deserts." "May all women who smoke suffer the same fate." Then his sense of justice suddenly erupted into a



seething and savage anger, a veritable prophet's wrath such that he could have hurled fire and brimstone on the bloodthirsty priestesses of good breeding. He saw clearly before his eyes the wretched student writhing about with her clothes ablaze, screaming and contorted, sometimes leaping in pain, sometimes plunging to earth, while all around her the pharisees were cheering with diabolical laughter. "Assassins" cried out his fixed look full of hatred. Now once and for all he suddenly understood the mortal enmity that exists between the prophet and women.

But while his gracious enemies, rising from the tumultuous meeting, hastened to distance themselves from the stormy session - a cup of tea, a little ham sandwich until no-one felt anything - in his memory the ghastly image of the dance of death of this young woman surrounded by triumphal hypocrites remained fixed. The twelve guilty ladies, who were actually incapable of hurting a fly (mites excepted), were scarred with the mark of Cain on their foreheads in his imagination. The whole Idealia, since collectively responsible for each of its members, appeared henceforth able to mutate into a band of Furies, in a sinister flash of atridesque illumination. "Even if the police and justices cannot arrest you, even if you daunder about in mincing steps and hypocritically go into raptures over Schumann lieder, in my eyes you are and remain criminals: assassins." And he experienced the suppressed hatred of an avenger. For the student at the mercy of the flames continued in her oxidized form to arraign the Idealia, exhorting Viktor into action like the ghost in *Hamlet*.

His antagonism continued to gush up under the lid. It bubbled without breaking out. He badly wanted to attack, but not immediately. Then several days after `the war with the Amazons,` there arrived, after a delay, letters from afar. "What a different atmosphere! "Celebrated and honoured in the circle of your dear familiars, we hope that our old distant friends are not..." Celebrated and honoured, what an irony! My dear familiars, oh desolation! "Your eminent qualities, your knowledge, your good heart will not want for..." What expressions! How many forgotten things! He of eminent qualities! Knowledge! The good times that were when nobody found anything to criticise in him, not even to praise. These letters had the impact of a wake-up call. Indeed his self-esteem had daily been checkmated by so much that he had been dulled to the point of stupefaction, and imperceptibly another horizon, more narrow, had come to encircle him, that of this place; to the degree that, little by little, he had ended up interpreting as his own fault everything that annoyed him, the assumption being that he was the raw horse that everyone could seek out to break in. All of a sudden he awoke, the straitened perspective disintegrated, his pride recalled itself and his memory made comparisons. What a difference! And what derisiveness in the difference! Over there, abroad, with open arms, a warm

welcome, a generous tolerance of his idiosyncrasies, indulgence for his faults. Here in his own country - petty nit-picking, a conviction that *they* are always right, the negation of the fullness of his personality.

As a result of these comparisons all the bitterness he had choked back awoke and, blunted as he was, a fierce warlike fury flared up in him. No longer will I suffer in silence! Go on the attack! I'm going to come down amongst you, tear your pharisee masks away and pulverise your smug hypocritical verbiage. Hold tight and pay attention to what I want to say to you, because I'm going to hold a mirror up to you. Are you ready? Right then, I'll begin. Here is what I'm going to say to you: your `virtue`? A weapon to defame your neighbour. Your `frankness`? The customary privilege of vilifying your fellow human without having to take the slightest criticism yourselves. Your `uprightness`? The licence to ascribe the vilest failings behind someone`s back rather than raise them to their face. Your `truthfulness`? Sticklers for truth in regard to anything peripheral, you reward with lies in those cases that matter. If I could conclude this business with an epitome of truth: the devil must cross himself before four witnesses. And there`s all the egoism of imbecilic proportions protected by an impenetrable carapace; when the wind of misfortune blows, nobody comes to the assistance of another member. Your familial benevolence, your love of your neighbour? Let go a slice of inheritance and see what comes of it, of this love! Your music! Oh, like ice-floes packed with jubilation! Your culture, your commitment to the arts and literature? If on the right the door to Paradise is opened and on the left a conference announced on the subject of Paradise, you would all by-pass Paradise in order to rush to the conference. "Interesting, very interesting!"

It is in this manner I will speak to you; remain calm and prepare yourselves. Unfortunately he remembered that in the salons of the Idealians there was no pulpit from which to castigate the flock as if they were a congregation of penitents during Lent. "So much the worse, I shall have to proffer my blessing to each of you separately. The first one to present themselves to me affecting a virtuous countenance will get the whole packet in one go. Who wants it?" And like a bull he lowered his horns and awaited the antagonist. Only as he cast a glance around full of combative passion, all opposition had evaporated. All against him, but in the field not a one! Yes as if through deliberate malice, at the very moment when he was ready to take them on, everyone seemed to have been given the word to offer him their friendship - which soon completely disarmed him. How do you gore someone who approaches confidently with an amicable greeting on their lips! "Now then, how are you getting along? I do hope you haven`t caught cold in this impossible weather?" Hungrily but vainly he yearned for an enemy. Kurt? A defenceless man who took flight as soon as he spotted Viktor`s hat in the antechamber. What`s more, Kurt had, one could not deny it,

exceptional good looks to the well-disposed. What is to be done? His burning rage could find nobody to roast.

Primed up but lacking an enemy or quarrel, his impotent fury manifested itself in an extremely foul temper. He glowered at everyone, his mood became scornful, the tone of his voice provoked, and his pronouncements fell like despotic decrees which banished the slightest objection. Anyway, as a fundamentalist where truth was concerned, he could not bear to be contradicted by second-hand ideas (“I do not appreciate it when someone quibbles with the truth armed with pitch-forks of borrowed arguments.”) Now his voice implied the clear warning: “Go ahead and contradict me if you dare!” He only lacked a bodyguard of mercenaries to seize the adversary by the neck.

But he did not succeed in getting the hoped-for affront through these tactics. Everyone quite simply avoided him from now on, as you do with a badly trained animal. When the pastor spoke of Viktor, he now called him an enraged Nepomuk. The doctor likened him to a nun carrying stigmata, the forest warden to an elephant, basically good and sweet as an angel, but who for some unknown reason has suddenly become savage. Of course he could remain seated for a whole evening, thoughtful and silent, looking fixedly ahead, gloomy and morose. Yet you never did know what tempest lay over the horizon. People always left him to it with his silent rage, not wanting to expose themselves to disagreeable surprises.

One example: Dr. Richard had spoken highly of a scientific work that had just appeared; “You absolutely must read this book,” he concluded turning toward Viktor who was sitting there utterly indifferent. Viktor leapt up fuming with rage: “How dare you give me orders?” And all evening there was nothing but: “Doctor, you absolutely must put this pencil in your mouth.” “Doctor, you absolutely must bring me my handkerchief from my overcoat.” “Doctor, you really must go home at once.” “No, to have to deal with such a person, well no thank you!” they would say to one another.

When the Direktor and his wife organised a small supper to which, following the firm orders of the lieutenant, it was necessary to invite Viktor, the guests called off one after the other at the very last minute so that the cruelly disappointed hostess had nobody save a single invitee, this monster of a Viktor, whom she considered now no better than a brass button in a church collecting box. As to himself, “Bah, he consoled himself, I couldn’t be more choked off than I am now anyway.” From then on Frau Wyss called Viktor quite simply ‘The Abominable.’

“This Viktor, one cannot put up with him any longer” was the general opinion. “Viktor is ill” came the unanimous excuse in response.

The explanation rang true. Standing on four feet, the bull held itself at the ready,

blood oozing from its nostrils. “My God, what a head you have on your shoulders,” exclaimed a shocked Frau Steinbach when she encountered him one day on a street corner. The same day, he received an especially pressing invitation to go and visit her. It was in vain, for he feared his friend as if she were Reason incarnate.

#### IV VIKTOR CHALLENGES PSEUDA TO A DUEL

“I can’t be more wet through than I am already,” he had thought. Wrong! The downpour was only just beginning. Indeed one day in his presence Frau Wyss took it upon herself to accuse him of gallantry (gallantry was one of the cardinal sins to the Idealia). “So, ho!” laughed Viktor, “you would hardly be less annoyed, Frau Wyss, if a man actually refused to act courteously towards you.” And as she proudly contested this idea, arguing firmly that she neither demanded nor wished gallantry but wanted to be spared it, Viktor motivated only by the spirit of truth, decided to teach her a lesson. To this end, when goodbyes were being said in the vestibule, he planted himself in front of her, arms folded behind his back leaving her to retrieve and slip on her fur coat on her own. The sleeves of the coat were too tight, so that labourious contortions were required to get it on. Amused, he looked at her mockingly: “You see now, little lady, how useful gallantry is?” But here now, something incredible. She didn’t even notice anything, a sleight by oblique means, a preplanned insult, Frau Wyss scarcely comprehended this style of pedagogy. Clearly nothing like this had happened to her before. On the contrary, she had perfectly understood the intentional character of his refusal to come to her aid, since he had behaved ostentatiously and at other times he had been reproached for being a ‘master of ceremonies’ hyper-formalist. Also she had interpreted his omission as an ill-intentioned offence. The look she gave him! They were no longer eyes, but circles of white jelly with an ink blot in the middle. - What to do? Explain? Futile, she’d never believe him. Apologise? The female of the species would never accept excuses. “And who knows, perhaps the whole thing is less grave than it appears!”

However it was every bit as serious as it appeared. Henceforth wherever and whenever she spotted him, she let out a hateful sound, a little like the snarl of a young panther - “Grraa, Chraa” - and with a lithe movement she quickly turned her back on him.

The first couple of times he reacted with detachment. He even found enough objectivity to feast his eyes on the supple movement of her back. But on the third occasion, mustard rose to his nostrils: “Oh you! Some sort of silly goose or long-

tailed monkey in disguise!” he exclaimed to himself. “If only I could! If I could not care for you! Let us lay long odds that I could, with the sleight of a hand, transform your puerile ‘Grraa, Chraa’ into languorous cooing.” ‘At present you must despise me’ (sigh), ‘My husband, my child...how will I from now on their...’ (Tears), ‘But you will always for me...’ (Hug), ‘And from now on all the hullabaloo.’ But stop there! Down boy! As if you have not deserved it, with your stupid antics. Adultery with honour; at least that would be a straightforward adultery, love for love, pleasure for pleasure. On the other hand, to catch a woman through artifice and calculation, destroy an innocent family through the crude vanity of a wounded male - because she will go straightaway and throw herself in the river if she loses her honour, there’s no doubt - enough! There’s no way I’m going to do that. Firstly because I won’t; secondly because to carry off my life’s mission I need my soul intact. And then there’s her husband who is my friend! So, no, no, and yet again no! Save yourself and say thank you, little one! But if you want to hate me, that’s quite alright too; let’s wager that I will tutor you to loathe me until you climb the wall in rage. Between times I will be sampling radishes coated in butter at my leisure. The more radically you hate me, the more profoundly I will enjoy myself. You don’t believe any of this? Rest assured! I will test you in the field of battle!”

And he began - for sure only within the limits of the permissible, but right to the very edge - to provoke and irritate with all his might, imposing himself on her without compunction, pitilessly dogging her footsteps. According to his mood, he served up mockeries and sarcasms, openly or obliquely.

His humour lay under the sign of the sardonic, and he unleashed terrible comments that went against all his most sacred beliefs. Had she yet noted that woman often gave vent to an astounding brutality of feeling? Had she not likewise observed that one would nowhere encounter so frightening a lack of sensibility and heart as among the music lovers? Then again he admired the sure instinct of the feminine heart, that with an unparalleled infallibility, could locate in the midst of a hundred men the worst of the ignorant louts to fall in love with. Then again, he advocated adultery as a means of educating the husband to behave more reasonably toward his wife. Yet further, he deplored the pitiful fate that “condemned him to the fine morals” in this god-forsaken hole. Moreover, why did they call him and his confrères lovers of debauchery when they should rather call them admirers of beauty of the female form? And anyhow, what rhyme or reason was there to all these deceptive and hypocritical complaints about lust. “If a woman does not arouse interest, she feels offended, doesn’t she? As a result, if I fancy her, my lust expresses homage, clearly.” There’s something you’d really like, isn’t there, as if you were obliged to swallow a slow-worm? Good appetite! Then let us proceed! “What I’ve never been able to understand is

that a pirate may affect reluctance with a virgin he has captured. She can, at best, show her hatred of him through her eyes, certainly not her heels. And in such a case the eye are secondary.” A little more like that, please? No? Then let us continue. “Every man, all the time, desires the entirely beautiful woman; whoever denies it either is not a man or lies.”

She does not do him the honour of discussing with him; only her glances let him know: “If ever it comes to it, dear sir, that you have the misfortune to fall under the wagon of a train, I shall sincerely regret it, but I shall not pity you in any way.”

To which his impertinent expression replies ironically: “My dear madam, if it were to happen that you were willing to explode, if you would please let me know in advance so that I could reserve a choice morsel.”

Wasn't he in a slightly more mellow humour? He contented himself with offending her convictions and precepts on encountering her alpine rose patriotism, her bucolic passion for a happy people of shepherds and pastoral folk, and other things of that sort.

When she took her walks, she loved to sing at the top of her voice the popular song: *Tomorrow in the cool of the eve, we milk the cows*. “Ah! but do you know how to milk, Frau?” he inquired in an admiring tone. - And when in a siren's voice she cooed that other song: *To all, I say quite simply `you`* he applauded enthusiastically: for a long time I harboured the secret desire to say to us `you`. - Beside her brother, she made a lot of a cousin long in the legs named Ludwig, who through weather fair and foul indefatigably made his way to the summits. These impetuous obstructors of a Ludwig were called `Yodelouis`. Why ever were his dear compatriots so besotted with the Alps beyond all measure? - “All the same these are not the ones who made the mountains! If they had made them, they would have probably have turned out a good deal flatter.” In any case, even leaving the Alps aside, in our age people hugely overestimate inanimate nature. The least small toe of a pretty woman would be more precious in the eyes of God than the highest glacial flow, and He would honestly discover more soul and spirit in a top hat perfectly adjusted than in a sunrise; “for a sunrise, even a mammoth could appreciate that, whilst a top hat could only be admired by someone of developed culture.” - Or again, he dispensed unsolicited opinions. When she deplored the vandalism that attacked local antiquities, he advocated: “Bring out the cannons and blast to pieces these wooden antiquities!” When she expressed regret for the slow disappearance of regional dress and dialects, he recommended punishing criminals by imposing local dress, and reserving the dialects for local disgraced families.

When he was in this frame of mind, his greatest pleasure consisted in adapting the names of everything and everybody. Their common natal village he called

`Mooburg,` local politics: ` a periodic agitation about knowing who to choose between Peter and Paul. `In place of the word `grossness,` he would use `patriotism,` in place of `a swear word,` a `Germanic;` as for lapses of tact, he called them `errors of the dialect of the soul!`

Occasionally he used lengthy circumlocutions to enrage her, all the while affecting a deceptively innocent air. For example, by means of anecdotes and memorable instances that he invented on the spur of the moment for the cause. "My dear Frau," he began harmlessly enough, "do you know the story of the Countess Stepansky, Beethoven and the conductor Pfuscini?"

"I have no wish to know it," she muttered scenting mischief.

"But you are wrong, completely wrong, for it is both instructive and amusing. When they asked Countess Stepansky who welcomed both Beethoven and Pfuscini to her table on the same day, which of them she considered the most important she affected a superior air: `You can't compare them: each sings his part; they complement each other.`"

"What's more, music and women in general! Let's set up an experiment, dear Frau! Let the most brilliant young girl musicians undertake her studies at the conservatoire, then protect her from all masculine stimulus and see what has become of her ten years later. She will have her grand piano and acquired a cat. The piano since she hasn't the time, the cat, because she doesn't know what to do with her days."

And when once again she reasserted in a discussion, the superiority of women compared to men: "I would entirely concur with pleasure," he said, "if only women themselves away from indiscreet ears did not preach the superiority of men."

"?"

"But definitely. When a mother, after six miscarried girls finally succeeds with a boy, she goes about victoriously trumpeting the fact as if she's given birth to the Messiah. And the womenfolk for miles around spontaneously rush to humbly serve the miracle. The `boy,` the `urchin,` the `lad,`! As if a boy were the wonder of the world. And the Messiah will end up as the cantonal councillor, if only he will come.

As a result of all that, he managed without difficulty what he had counted on - getting over his deepest disgust, the most extreme coming from the bottom of his heart. It was no longer the panther cries "Grraa, Chraa!" when she saw him, but `ugh` as if he had gained some sort of victory over her. "You see now," he sneered to himself, "how your opinion is countermanded by mine!" And amused, he drew a parallel: "You would like to come up with frogs, but it is you yourself who is a frog."

“Viktor, I am now beginning to think you really are insane.” “All the more reason to behave as if I am,” he laughed.

One afternoon, just as he was turning the corner of a road, he heard a loud voice calling out behind him: “Lama!” And when he turned around, furious, in the direction of the cry, the voice continued: “You don’t need to turn round, it’s me, your reason who calls you Lama.”

“By what right do you call me Lama?”

“Because you toil with devilish determination in a direction contrary to the goal you want to reach.”

“But I don’t have any goal in mind.”

“Yes you do, and I’m going to tell you what. In your heart of hearts, without admitting it to yourself, your plan is to annoy this little naive woman until she gets confused and loses her bearings, until one day out of simple hornet’s frenzy, she throws herself around your neck without more ado, like a midge driven wild by the tempest.”

“And if that was the case, would the aim have been all that false? Very often still, woman’s hatred suddenly turns to love.”

“Nonsense,” replied reason, “do what you want, I’m not your keeper!”

Viktor however remained dumbstruck, beset by doubt. Uncertain and troubled he returned home. And when he examined his situation in a sensible spirit, he took fright and was seized with dizziness. He was on a false track; he had been led astray. There was no disputing it. Reason was in the right, his hatred of Pseuda could never be transformed into love. A sorry discovery! To move matters forward, he could hardly do anything more, for stripped of the secret hope of a sudden turnaround in the situation, to reinforce Pseuda’s hatred no longer made any sense, since that would simply serve to widen the angle of separation between her and him. Good, but then what? Return to go and begin all over again? Modify straightaway his anger by showing himself meek and adaptable, forcing himself to conquer his disgust, then curing his antipathy and so patiently step by step, degree by degree, to solicit her gracious favours? “And what beyond! I can’t even consider it! I would have to renounce my very self-esteem. I don’t even have time for it. Moreover, thank God, we have not even reached that point yet!” - Good, but if not that, then what? He made a frank assessment of his situation, but saw no resolution. Suddenly, he stamped his foot: “But what obliges me to occupy myself with her? Whether she is converted or not, whether she wallows in the filth or the stagnant pond - if that is what she wants, so what? I’m not her confessor or director of conscience. Or does she think I give special classes in psychology? I’ve given her too much respect already to want to enrage her. Before I bother myself with her again, she will have to ask me herself pronto. For now, go your own way, I don’t know you.



What is Frau Wyss? Is it that she inhabits the sea, or nests in the trees? Does she gather seeds or snap up insects? Dear Frau, have you ever seen a flea leap from a fingernail? It's exactly how you are jumping from my memory. One - two - three! That's it! Nothing more. Pseuda, "you do not exist."

As soon as said, he turned on his heels and snapped his fingers. Ah! How light-hearted he felt since he had dismissed that pernicious creature! A bad tooth he had got rid of! What should he do with this new-found liberty? A thousand delightful possibilities presented themselves. "How would it be if, for a example, as a change we fell in love with someone?" Good idea! For from time immemorial he had not tasted this delicious syrup. It's thoroughly abnormal! And if possible with someone from the lower classes, uncultured, for whom if she only knew it (and in this nest of busybodies she soon would) she would be provoked and humiliated. Let us say, for example, a serving wench. To this end, overcoming his aversion to alcohol and its priestesses, he made his way to the nearest tavern. Her name was Pamela who served him. He persuaded her to sit beside him and bombarded her with honeyed remarks, candying them one after the other according to the tried and tested method. Pamela listened to him for a moment, smiling on the sly, comfortably tucked in beside him like a snail beneath the lukewarm May rain. Until without warning, she started to spit and sneeze, slipping away behind the bar like a cat whose tail you have crushed. "You old uncouth imbecile!" she apostrophised while yelping. Ah! good, he had praised her pearly teeth when she no longer had a single one. For he had not even made the effort to look at her.

Three days later in the street Frau Wyss, beaming friendlily, hurried over to meet him. Look at that, what a sudden transformation! What could it mean? "One can, it seems, congratulate you, she offered, the hypocrite! When is the marriage to Pamela?"

"Ah wily wretch that you are." This is not what he wanted at all.

No, love just didn't work. As he had very rightly had an intimation since he arrived on this chalky soil - love simply cannot take root. Let us try friendship! A certain Andreas Wixel, an archivist, appeared to be particularly propitious for the very good reason that Frau Wyss could not bear him. She had the habit of calling him "Andreas-with-blinkers." For this Andreas he now experienced, without even knowing him, a hot-blooded rapport, pressed him to visit, made friends with him, quite touched by his look veiled with blinkers. Wixel for his part was moved by the unexpected amity of Viktor and to consecrate the pact, they arranged for the following Sunday afternoon an outing to Guggisweid. From the heights they contemplated the town during that interminable and dull Sunday afternoon, between the nine-pin bowlers at a sport's club and the maudlin music of a brass band. Viktor was silent as a carp, his eyes fixed on the Münstergasse. Wyxel

meanwhile was sounding off with nebulous speculations on the difference between Goethe and Schiller in a relentless Auvergnat patois enough to make you throw up in commiseration. It's no use, Pseuda could say what she may, it was a veritable "Andreas-with-blinkers," this Wixel.

Male bonding, that was no longer the thing. Something else then! Theatre? Bah! In fact what theatre in this town! And then again, he didn't even like the theatre. Perhaps a concert? Let's try a concert. But alas! No sooner was he seated in the second row than at the opening chord the instruments sounded out of tune. He also lost the desire for friendly visits due to the fact that everywhere they spoke of a certain woman named Frau Wyss. "Do you have no news of the wife of Direktor Wyss?" "When did you last see her?" And so on. Eyes raised to the heavens, Viktor searched his memory with difficulty: "The wife of Direktor Wyss? Where have I heard that name before?" Even in the street people came up to him to enquire for news of the state of health of Frau Wyss - who didn't even exist. No, he knew full well there may be tiresome women, but he would not have thought it possible that there could be one like this Frau Wyss, shamelessly clinging, a veritable moth in amber. Ah! this small village where you are constantly trapped by the same folk, and if not by the persons themselves, then by their names. Whence can one flee to escape this wretched and unavoidable Direktor's wife? It must be possible to save oneself in the far distant, deep in the countryside where not the least goat had heard mention of her.

And why not? What is the railway for? He recalled having one day heard this very exclamation coming from his own lips: "How strange it is that in the whole of my days I have never been to Lengendorf." This Lengendorf was thus devoid of all memory, that is to say "Pseuda-free." He then took the train and went to Lengendorf. Having alighted, so as to enjoy to the full his awareness of her non-existence, he allowed himself a small, amusing and devious game. Hardly had he got off the train than he sought out the station-master to ask him, in his most polite practised manner, to furnish him with some information. He had actually come to Lengendorf to pay a visit on a certain lady, wife of the Direktor Wyss. Could he be so kind as to show him the way to her house? The station-master was taken aback, shook his head and called the ticket clerk over for help. He called for assistance from the porter, the porter in turn that of the waiter from the Deer Inn and the coachman from The Stork. The name of Frau Wyss was unknown to all of them. The policeman, then several gawps away, came to tackle the question. "In Lengendorf," came the disappointed but unanimous answer, "lives no Frau Wyss." And they contemplated Viktor with a pitying look. However he was jubilant inside: "You see now, phoney and tiresome creature that you are, even the existence of your insignificant person is unknown to humans at large. So why do you imagine you are so immeasurably important?"

These unspoilt Lengendorffians, who never even knew Frau Wyss's name, enchanted him and with an affability fit to win over hearts, like a monarch travelling incognito, he charmed every living soul he met with his friendliness. All day he played Emperor Joseph. And not only on the surface, not at all, he truly loved them with all his heart, these honest, good and worthy folk of Lengendorf who had not even heard of Frau Wyss. And this ravishing region where she had never set foot. These loveable wooded summits on which she had never cast her eyes. One really breathed in good air here. Don't you feel so, yourself as well? And he launched a eulogy to the Lengendorf climate so that the landlord of The Stork inn where he'd gone down to, stirred by hopes of a tourist industry offered him a reduction if he wanted to take the remedial air next summer. Viktor even had to insist on the landlord's letting him settle the bill for lunch. When he took his leave that evening, the whole village had become his friends, from the doctor to the pastor to the hotel waiter and the farm dog as well. He got back touched and happy, since he had rarely enjoyed such serene hours. Decidedly up until now he had seriously underestimated the country people.

Still deep in reverie about this idyllic journey, on his return to town he ploughed his way through the crowds at the station. Ouch! What a pest! She was there in person, discussing with Father Pfininger, and that did for the boon of her non-existence.

"And now, if you please, what is it about the laws of nature? What is their logic? If she does not exist, I cannot see her; and if I see her, then she must nevertheless exist. However she does not exist; how can I then see her? Would that a sophist figure something out! - I can only project a single plan: I will shut myself in my room and she'll find it mighty difficult to get through the key-hole!" He closed the door, bolted it and stretched out on the couch and twiddled his thumbs. After relaxing like this for a moment, a sort of luminous mist appeared in the room, and the fog turned more dense and a splendid human face loomed out of it, always becoming more clear and beautiful - and there indeed was her face. "At present, Pseuda," he said gently but seriously, "for now I appeal to your sense of fairness and justice. I will not object to your antipathy or your hatred; I yield the road, the town, the whole of the external world, but respect the sanctuary of my home. You must not visit my room!"

"Come, come, Viktor!" Reason remonstrated, "she's not here in person, it's simply sister Anastasia Phantasmagoria who is playing an illusionist trick on you."

"She could come up with something more intelligent then!" reckoned Viktor, annoyed.

"I will create whatever illusions I choose," scolded the fantasy. "This

countenance of Pseuda delights me; if you think not, you only have to ignore it, nobody obliges you otherwise.” And she continued with her mischief, so that Viktor now had Pseuda’s head before him floating there incessantly, especially in the evening when twilight filled the room. What could one do about it? He seemed well and truly condemned to have this pretentious and irritating nothingness permanently in front of his eyes. But to sum up: a disturbance is not a catastrophe by any reckoning. Others have mosquitos in their room, he had Pseuda; the whole trick lay in not getting rattled. And he could reconcile himself to her omnipresence if he used a bit of sense.

Suddenly like a grenade detonating in the house, the news came through that she was ill. It was evening, around seven o’clock; it would be the servant who would announce the arrival. Once recovered from the first consternation, he proceeded in an agitated state and in great confusion as if he had an ant’s nest right inside him. What attitude should he adopt faced with this turn of events? Naturally it could not be a question of offering sincere sympathy - oh, no! Not on your life! His wicked enemy! She who has betrayed the Rebirth! Who poisoned Imago! On the other hand, he could not avoid grieving with all his heart for, despite everything, at this very moment she was a creature who was suffering. Where does the line of separation pass exactly? And where is the exact and just middle point? A difficult poser for the sensibility, and what’s more, dangerous, for if he grieves for Pseuda slightly too much, it could give the impression that he was not indifferent to her; but if he did not empathise sufficiently he would appear heartless and detestable. This undertaking was so difficult that he was in a state of hyper-excitement until midnight, and at midnight he was no nearer to leaving. On the contrary. And O what a calamity! Bad luck! What if it was a grave illness! If finally even she...But no! It would be veritably a diabolical mischance on the part of destiny to want to oblige him, through such ignoble artifices, to manifest sympathy for the traitress. And he passed the other half of the night in anguished prayers to the Fates that she should recover and he may not be called upon to show goodwill towards her. In the morning, he found himself so perturbed by this violent affective effort that he got out of bed half ill himself.

Rejecting breakfast, he rushed to the Münstergasse. “Lieutenant, how is your wife? Nothing serious I hope?” he blurted out anxiously in the vestibule.

The lieutenant was astounded: “Why? She’s not sick, just a touch of toothache. - But why do you address me as lieutenant?”

“Oh no reason, no reason at all,” he exulted and, relieved, departed in haste. Fate had then granted his prayer. A simple toothache, even if it was not dangerous still hurt. “One moment! Here’s something good, something very good! You know - without prejudice to the state of war I find myself in with

Pseuda - I would like to offer some affectionate gesture to thank her for not making me ill. (One can also conduct a war in a chivalrous manner.) So then, attention - while she is suffering, I, to experience the pain and here in the same spot, to wit the teeth. How about that, isn't it a good idea? Is it not pleasant? Is it not a courteous style of making war?" So he went, straight away, to call on dentist Effringer whose address, unfortunately, he already knew. Pull this tooth and then that other one, he demanded.

"But this tooth is perfectly fine! You are thinking no doubt of that decayed molar, there at the side? For that stump, it wouldn't be a pity."

Viktor struggled with his conscience: is it fitting to substitute a benefit for a sufferance? Finally he decided in favour of the ruined molar rather than the good tooth.

Then when Effringer approached with his laughing gas, conscience kicked in a second time: "Viktor, have you no shame? You came here to put up with pain alongside her, and you would cowardly deny your sacrifice."

Viktor was ashamed certainly. Only in view of the ominous pincer movement, he found it more advantageous to accept this consolatory outcome that he surely hadn't asked for, but which had duly presented itself. While still under the anaesthetic, to appease a modicum of conscience he allowed another worm-eaten molar to be extracted as well.

Afterwards on the road back home, he could arrive at no clear decision as to whether he had in fact accomplished something positive or not. On the one side, it was not an everyday occurrence to have two teeth pulled only because someone else had toothache, while on the other side, two bad teeth didn't really add up to a proper sacrifice. And as to undergoing pain when sedated, truly there was not a pope who would have canonised him as much of a martyr.

However all of a sudden he felt a trifle tired and enfeebled, and he very much wanted to sit down somewhere. But being a man who never set foot in taverns, this simple solution didn't even raise his spirits. At this moment in time he saw no other answer than to beg - despite the unholy hour (it was a little after nine o'clock) - the hospitality of some of his acquaintances. Frau Richard's house was on his route. She would surely excuse him, but he did not feel at all well. Eagerly she fussed over him and got him to lie down on the sofa and drink a glass of Malaga wine, which revived him and as he was taking a thankful leave, she persuaded him to remain. "You're still a little pale. I assure you, you won't put me out in the slightest." - He had settled there about half an hour when, sparkling and lively, in hat and cloak, a young lady made her entrance: "This pretty girl," said Frau Richard, "must seem especially sympathetic to your condition - beside the fact that she is affable towards the whole world - no? I would say particularly solicitous because a long time ago Frau Wyss saved her life one day." Then she

presented her: “Fräulein Marie Leona Planita, the finest pianist in our town and at the same time as you can see for yourself, the most ravishing creature who ever turned a man`s head.”

“Yes! Without Frau Wyss I wouldn`t be here now,” confirmed Fräulein Planita whose face lit up in gratitude, “and I would not commit so many follies nor as many errors in my scales.” “Yes,” she laughed, “she saved from a strange baptism.”

In a couple of words Frau Richard enlightened him further. It was during their school years in the swimming pool. She had sunk to the bottom and the beautiful Theuda (whom everyone already so called her) had pulled her from the water.

“Without more ado, she had dived into the water fully dressed as if it were the most natural thing in the world,” added Fräulein Planita. “I can still see her now rescuing me while I was floundering with both hands, unable to cry out because my mouth was full of water. I didn`t even have time to die before I was once again alive. But how ill I felt afterwards! So sick! I can tell you! Yes there are certainly many beautiful things in music, and I`m the very first to admit with a grateful acknowledgement, but all the music in the world cannot equal in beauty the matchless look that called over to me: `Confidence Marie Leona, I`m coming to help you.` Half a dozen girls were swimming near me. They could only reach out a hand, but not a single one of them realized what was happening. They would have left me to splash my way to death. And neither of us knew how to swim, neither Theuda nor me. How we didn`t both drown, the pair of us, I will never know.”

During this whole account, Viktor`s heart was as glum as a peasant who sees a meteorite fall in front of his cart. How could this frightful Frau Wyss be capable of such a noble sacrifice? Or else did she reserve perhaps all her vindictiveness for him alone? But why only him? A host of thoughts hammered at his brain demanding entry. Only for the moment, he could listen to none of them. He had to look all the time at this fräulein so fresh and vivacious who, without Frau Wyss, would be rotting in a grave. And when Fräulein Planita got up, he suggested he accompany her to be able to contemplate further the miracle. “Can I accompany you, Fräulein Lazarus?” he asked.

She smiled. “Yes, `Fräulein Lazarus,` that`s a very suitable name for me.”

“Oh! For now I no longer need to worry about Viktor,” joked Frau Richard, “for if he can escort a pretty girl, he is cured for the moment.”

After taking leave of Fräulein Lazarus, Viktor resumed his ruminations; if I had been the one drowning, she would never have offered her hand. Of course she wouldn`t! She`d have hurled stones at my head. But look! Who`s this coming? I almost thought that...but it`s true - Pseuda in flesh and bone! Apparently in

perfect health and full of the joys of life, not a sign of dental problems around the cheeks. That's surprising and gives me food for thought; the sacrifice of his two teeth, could it have softened her tortures? Frankly, it's a delusion, but it's not impossible. Aware of his own admirable sacrifice, he approached her with a little more confidence than usual. He almost expected a brief word of gratitude. But she looked straight through him with a cold stare as if she failed to recognize him. Then she turned aside and set herself to study closely - leaning over slightly - a hat in a fashionable shop window until he had gone.

"Fine! Pass along the way! So she won't greet me! There's nothing lost there!" And flapping his arm with regal contempt: "So much for you and the rest of the human race! Whilst you scourge yourself at night on her behalf, depriving yourself of sleep, she refuses to acknowledge you!" And her demeanour appeared so vile to him he dismissed her from his mind with a sublime indifference. But even so it was revolting. And now after the first shock of indignation was working its way up, stronger with each step, accompanied by bitter thoughts, finally he really felt sick as if someone was drawing a knife across his bowels of rage. Things were crystal clear; everything bad for him, good for others. Nevertheless when you come to think of it, it must be a wicked deed to throw stones at someone drowning! And he would do wrong to put up with it. But what was positively diabolical was that today she appeared all the more attractive in the light of the history of Fräulein Lazarus.

Suddenly a seed of doubt seeped into the image preserved in his memory; "Was there not a hint of a smile behind her eyes when she stared him through with that cold objectivity? Her look seems suspicious to me."

During the whole morning he could not get a handle on the event. But when in the evening Pseuda's head appeared to him again still more resplendent than ever, there and then with no more ado he saw things with perfect clarity: there was indeed a secret smile beneath her look.

At that his anger spilled over: "What does it mean, this smile?" he cried threateningly, "A smile is ambiguous language; I demand a forthright reply. Pseuda, I order you to tell me why you smile at me craftily."

Instead of a response there appeared at the centre of the sly smile a touch of mockery which grew and grew.

Now a cry of rage escaped him: "Evil woman! Don't make mock! It's enough that you pursue me with your venomous hatred, that you're dogging me day after day, all the time, without let or respite, pitching stones to drown me. But don't make fun of me, do you understand, I forbid it." But the hint of mockery remained as if he had said nothing and now propelled by an invisible hand, arose a triumphant victory banner above the resplendent jeering visage.

"What have you to celebrate?" he called out. "What sort of victory have you

won over me? I see none of it. So if you don't mind, in the interests of propriety, do me the favour of folding away that stupid triumphal rag."

But it was just as if he had not uttered a word. The victory pennon prevailed and look now - a new insult: the smile of contempt in her eyes is spreading to the corners of her mouth now distorted into an insolent, ironical grimace. At the last, the human countenance becomes a devil's face with beak and horns, a sort of fiendish mocking-bird but which still possesses the beautiful traits of Pseuda.

That was quite enough for the clear view of Viktor. "Back phantom!" he cried, and threw a blow in its direction. Then the spectre split in two, fleeing on all sides. But slowly, very slowly, the different sections reconstituted themselves. The victory banner from one corner, the jeerer with beak and horns from another and now from a third the beautiful human face of Pseuda, and all the different parts thenceforth remained separated by a space. Instead of a single apparition, there were now three. A cadaverous anguish invaded him. "And that, Viktor, what is it? Are you insane?" He summoned all his wits to prove his good health. "What is the nature of madness? The failure to recognise the ghosts as imaginary creations and confusing them with reality. Are you fantasizing them?" "No question: I know very well that I have before me a simple imaginary apparition, but I cannot suppress the spectre by willpower because I am afflicted with too powerful an imagination."

"Good. Then allow your imagination to conjure up these phantoms at will, and don't get obsessed with them." Suitably appeased, he lay down to sleep.

Next morning when he opened his eyes in the stygian gloom of his room and while his consciousness was refocusing bit by bit on his memory and beginning to pierce the fog of thoughts, he perceived again the whole panoply of apparitions: the triumphal banner, the diabolical bird sneering ironically, the beautiful and human Pseuda.

"So then, that's going to go on as before?" That did indeed continue. The whole substance of his life, second by second, entered into a battle with his imagination to put the ghost in its place, amid the anxious demand not to confuse appearance and reality. An exhausting task, terrible, which left no space for any other thinking. And thoroughly desperate as well; this work was at once useful and vain, useful to avoid madness, futile in that the trials of an hour enabling him to win through were at the cost of limitless suffering that nullified them within the hour. As if nothing had been extinguished from morn to dusk the infernal trio hovered over him, pitiless, not allowing a moment's respite for him to breathe. And rather than disappearing, the shapes took on gargantuan dimensions, monstrous. In the obscurity they jeered from all corners of the chamber, by day from windows, roofs, hills, everywhere.

He did not go insane, but wild with fury. He got to the stage of racing through



forests roaring with rage, baring his teeth fiercely at anyone who spoke gently because he had just at that very moment perceived between them and himself the infernal spectre. Internally a dark wave sprang up, surrounding his mind with red stains as if blooded ink was gushing from an open wound.

One evening he succumbed to fatigue: "I can go on no more, I no longer know who I am."

He then had the impression of making out a handsome man in front of him, who put his hand on his shoulder. "Viktor," said the fine-looking man, and nothing more.

Viktor looked at him morosely, then lowered his forehead, holding it in both hands. "I will be good," he murmured at last, "it's the only thing I can still understand."

"Yes, be good," said the handsome man comfortingly, all the rest of it, madness or not madness, is ultimately secondary." After these words, the black wave of blood-stained ink as if from a wound dried up. On the other hand the spectres persisted as before.

That occurred one Thursday. On the Saturday morning he saw them as flesh and blood in the street walking a short distance in front of him, separated from him by other passers-by. Ah! At last I get it! he sighed, and leapt behind him at a run with a wolf's agility. And as he caught sight of the eyes of the handsome man focussed on him: "Nothing to fear! Neither scathing word nor insulting remark. All I need do is look into the eyes of the perfidious enemy who is provoking me through the invisible."

When he had caught him up, he halted nonplussed, silent with stupefaction: "That's all there is to it?" Diminished to pitiful scope, ridiculously tiny, the whole was no higher than one metre eighty as she strolled there. Nothing existed besides the skin. No phantom around her, no grimace or monstrosity. And this hat she was carrying. What lack of taste. What a pitiful eye-opener!

So he had discovered the talisman who would protect him against all fiendish trickery. It was sufficient to have him before his eyes in flesh and bone, and the magic tricks were done with. Manifestly - since ruse and cowardice usually came in pairs - she was afraid of him. He turned up then at her house as often as possible and exorcised her by means of menacing looks, peering into her face like a cat in front of a mouse-hole.

"So you don't dare, eh?" and he revelled in her impotence. In fact he was even so surprised, he had taken a look willingly to see whether she could manage to reactivate the apparitions - a woman's head transformed into the head of a bird is not an everyday sight. To this end and also to catch the transformation of visage unawares, he watched her when she least expected it, lightning fast. But all in

vain, she was too quick for him.

However the spectres now that they had been unmasked and aware they'd met their match, abandoned their role, though they still appeared on rare occasions without conviction, simply to save face. They ended up disappearing altogether.

Things could have continued like that for any length of time.

It happened then one evening in the company of another guest but in the absence of the lieutenant, that she wanted, after performing various anodyne and worthless songs, to sing for the other person the air that she'd once sung for him, Viktor, during the Parousia. She did so without malice, since for her this melody was simply a musical piece like any other. But he, confronted with the imminent profanation of his most sacred blessing, sensed a mindless grief erupting inside. "To tarnish the eternal gold of the Parousia by repeating it in this vulgar daubing! To show a stranger Theuda's tomb, her sister, my bride! Without sentiment, as a mere divertissement, and what's more in my presence! Is that devilish evil or stupidity?" Already ill-prepared with words or for conversation, in these circumstances of extreme aggravation, Viktor held his tongue. Mute with terror he watched her extract from the jumble of scores this same sheet as previously, now a little yellowed at the edges with time. She opened it casually on the piano. However when she drew back to start singing, he sprang forward and forced words from his throat. "This song, you will not sing it!" he forbade. He wanted it to come out as though he was imploring her, but in moving from heart to voice, grief and indignation altered the plea to a harsh injunction.

A violent resentment turned her brow red. "I should like to know," she said defiantly to him, "who it is has the right to forbid me to sing whatever I like?"

"Me," he groaned.

It is then, and only then, that she resolved to sing the song, out of defiance to his presumptuous order. She opened her mouth and sang the actual air of the Parousia. Truly she interpreted it pitilessly, for an infinity from first to last note. And he remained there, seated and subdued. He found the strength to restrain himself and not budge. But scarcely had she finished than he summoned an offensive balefulness to his expression, got up, placed himself in front of her and glared at her contemptuously.

"Take care! warned menacing eyes, "if ever a disrespectful word escapes you..."

No, things could not go on like this. Something had to give. With curiosity, though in vain, he examined his foreboding to discover what.

To mark the surprise early snowfall - it was still October - the Idealia had organised an outing on sledges, and on the way back they had stopped at a forest tavern. After sampling the tea, Viktor went to rejoin the party and the coachman who had led the sledges along with Pseuda and two other men, pointed with his whip towards the front: "Your wife is now on the other sledge." He had taken Viktor and Pseuda - God knows why? perhaps because they were arguing all the time - to be man and wife.

"Wait a moment," shouted Viktor as he leapt violently towards him. Getting his purse out in haste, he put a gold coin in the coachman's hand!

He reflected on the gold coin in the light of the lantern. "But it's a gold piece," he said amazed - almost in the tone of a reproach.

"I'm well aware of that. Look after it then."

"But why?"

"Because out of several thousand, you're the only sensible fellow in the town."

Having said as much, Viktor got on the sledge and never said another word on the return journey. However hardly had he got home than he called up Reason:

"In all honesty, I've neglected you a bit too much recently. Don't take it badly, I beg you, and give me some help."

"Anyway I never take anything ill," replied Reason. "How can I be of use?"

"Certain things have escaped me in my nervous irritation. I'm apprehensive about that. Tell me frankly what it signifies?" And he retold the incident of the gold coin.

"Alright then, do you want the truth?"

"In every case I want the truth. Do not lie to yourself either. Above all, that."

"Fine, then sit down and listen. But do check whether by chance I make some error. So I'll begin. By giving a gift of a gold piece to this man because he took Pseuda for your wife, you wanted to reward him for his misapprehension, didn't you?"

"Obviously."

"If you wanted to reward him, that goes to prove that his error played well to your wishes."

"Perhaps."

"Not 'perhaps,' I demand an exact reply. Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll continue. If the simple mistake by a third party - what's more from a man who is a perfect stranger, a coachman - who thinks Pseuda is your wife, is worth, poor brute, a gold piece, that reveals you would feel an unutterable pleasure if Pseuda actually was your wife." And when Viktor leapt up, calling down curses and fulminating furiously at the suggestion, Reason remarked quietly: "Well, if you only want to hear what pleases you, go and hire a lackey. Goodbye,

I'll be on my way."

"No, please stay. I didn't mean anything. Then you think that was possible? No way! One cannot love what once scarcely values."

"Oh, come on! Nothing is more common! Needing to love what one hardly rates, it's the daily bread of manly love. Anyway it's not even true that you don't have a high opinion of her, you want her badly but you've not won her over. Because secretly you admire her, and you should admire her for you are not so blind or prejudiced that you've failed to notice her remarkable qualities. But why discuss it? Show me any loophole in my reasoning."

Viktor found himself like someone who, while in perfect health discovers a strange small pustule on his lower lip as a result of which a devilish thought whispers in his ear: "Hopefully this isn't cancerous!" "Bah! and why shouldn't it be?" And he thought to go straightway to the doctor expecting to be ridiculed, but the doctor pronounces with an enigmatic smile: "It's good you came long so promptly. It will be a straightforward operation, a trifling one without danger."

In a sombre mood, he tried desperately to dispute the diagnosis. "These things occur suddenly; there are certainly other early symptoms."

"There are indeed," replied reason. "For example only this evening at the doctor's where you went back into the dining room like a robber to finish off an orange *she* had taken a bite out of."

"Mere childishness!"

"Agreed. It's simply this - that you commit infantilisms in pursuit of her is, for me, a signal. Or again at their house, at the Direktor's. You lingered at the open door to the bedroom - you remember - and the maid asked 'You don't feel well, sighing like this? Shall I get you a glass of water?'"

"Yes, but did I really sigh? I don't think so?"

"I would like to believe you. Sighs generally occur at our own instigation, but the maid would have had to intend mischief to make it up. - And then what about the time you addressed the chimney-sweep as 'Pseuda' and he answered: 'You must have got confused; I'm not Pseuda but Auguste Hürlimann.'"

"This only shows I'm absent-minded."

"And shows you are obsessed with Pseuda. - And that handkerchief you stole, and then deceptively helped her to search for, why then do you always keep it in your pocket? I bet even now you've got it on you. Aren't you blushing? -And then this dubious tale of the toothache! - And further why are you always in such a miserable frame of mind? Where has your vitality gone? Why do you always look like a fish on a hook out of water? Why do you come over to everybody grumbling against the whole universe like some rheumatic major? All that's the result of lacking something. But what you miss - permit me to name it in one word: Pseuda. There, now you have it, this truth you would know."

After this exchange, Viktor stayed sitting for hours afterwards, his mind a blank, dumbfounded by his bewildering revelation. Then suddenly he made up his mind. "Let the proud cavalier arise," he sent out the order to his soul inside!

He appeared in his clanking armour, followed by a lion. "I'm here. What orders?"

"On alert! We have a traitor in our midst, a wretch who is betraying the sacred service of Imago and ogles someone unworthy, an ordinary human woman. Mount a vigilant guard and the first person you apprehend casting amorous glances at a certain Pseuda, alias Frau Wyss, bring them to me."

"I hear and will obey," answered the proud cavalier, and set off at a gallop with his weapons rattling, followed by a lion. Soon after the lion reappeared with a rabbit in its mouth. "Here's the sinner," he roared and threw down the rabbit and disappeared.

"It's just as I thought," muttered Viktor, annoyed, "it's naturally still him, the heart, this stupid rabbit that's the cause of all the misfortune." And holding up the rabbit by the ears he read him this sermon: "You do realise, you scatterbrained stupid creature, that you are stoking up the fire of your own hell. Listen and commit to memory the five articles of the madness of love - they're so simple that an earth-worm could understand them.

First article: no woman in the world can tolerate being the initiator of love; it is she who must love initially and ardently desire your love in return as if it were an unparalleled favour. 'I cannot conceive it, I cannot believe it...!' as the poem goes. If not, she will torture you. As they themselves want to be tortured, if you don't do the torturing it's she who becomes the torturer. She doesn't need to be evil to do this, she can't do otherwise, it's a law of nature. Do you know what a natural law is? Something that can't be altered either as a result of gores from a horn or scratches from claws. Have you understood? Answer."

"Squeak," squealed the rabbit.

"Yes, that's it, squeak! You'd better take evasive action. - Article number two: the heart of a married woman will be beleaguered from head to toe by adultery. That I don't want to commit, nor you either. So what conclusion? Answer."

"Squeak," was the reply.

"Article three: if you have had the chance to marry a female of the species and you've omitted to do so whatever the cause, even if she's in seventh heaven she will despise you for life. - fourthly: in the heart of a housewife and happy mother, it will be as impossible to arouse love as engendering hunger in a replete stomach. Say squeak."

"Squeak."

"Fifth: if a woman can't stand you..."

"Squeak."

“Hold your idiot squeaks until I’ve finished the sentence.”

The rabbit had got free of his hands and, somersaulting, sped away with squeals of anguish. “Ah you!” he called after it. “Take care yourself, for if you allow even the teeniest amorous dalliance...”

“I read the lesson well, he smiled contentedly, and henceforth this rabbit will carry on peacefully.”

However, to reassure himself completely, Viktor carried out further manoeuvres undertaking a tour of the Noah’s Ark in his soul, from the highest tier to the vaulted caves of his unconscious, passing on exhortations and wisdom to all and sundry. He appealed to the pride of the noble animals, offering them a recital of glory and triumphs to come, entirely contrary to the pitiful roles they were called on to play in their miserable wooing of a Frau Wyss. As for the domesticated animals, he crammed them with sweets, reminding them of past amorous delights and holding out more delicious prospects if only, for one more brief moment, they were willing to behave correctly. Finally to draw it to a conclusion he got the lion to roar from the top of the stairs to the bottom. “Are you all convinced now?”

“We are persuaded.”

“Good. Then behave yourselves properly and look after each other.”

This examination brought him peace. But it was a tranquillity based on a violent tension in which anguish kept watch on an equilibrium painfully won. Like a giant who supports an arch by contracting his back with great efforts, the pressure is so massive that he asks if he could not rather let the vault come crashing down on him at once, so the suffering could end.

At this point, at the end of the first twenty-four hours, as day follows night, weariness and rest, Viktor grew a little accustomed to things again; the misery of the tension evaporated, the pain became more bearable, the awareness of danger surrounding him diminished. Only a profound malaise announced the threatening catastrophe, rather as when you ask: “Am I going down with typhoid or am I simply imagining it?”

The next three days brought no disturbance. On the contrary he had been able to have with the lieutenant - whom he had met in the street and taken to a café - an entirely calm and rational discussion as if nothing amiss had happened, on the difference between ancient and modern sentimental love, together with the causes of the change. No, anyone who could carry that off was not lovesick! Smiling he recalled the phrase that had escaped the lieutenant in the heat of the discussion: “The fact is, I concede, that with possession, for example in marriage, authentic love properly understood in the poetic sense of the term, is over.” Oh well! Oh well! Lieutenant! Already on the slippery slope of becoming

a pasha surfeited on his sofa and with his sweet maid? Naturally as he ran this again, he tried anxiously to retract this thoughtless phrase. "That is to say," he corrected himself, "only inauthentic love properly defined. On the contrary authentic true love in the poetic sense, continues into marriage, indeed only truly begins with marriage." Anyway all this left him strangely indifferent at present; how, who or what the lieutenant could love or not love! Certainly without cause or basis, reason had scared him. It's just a pity that on this occasion he'd had to promise to dine at the lieutenant's on Friday evening. How one is drawn when embarrassed to accept invitations, three-quarters out of obligation and for the rest from pressure.

But nightly from Tuesday to Thursday, without anything specific bringing it on - he had worked all day then gone out after dinner - a dream stalked him.

He dreamed that Pseuda was gambolling around his room, a stocking on one leg, the other naked. "What's happened to my stocking?" she cried in a rage. "But help me lazy-bones! Ah, bah! Let him go to the devil! Let John run after James." Sitting on the floor, she lifted up the stockings and tossed them into the air. The two stockings fluttered whirling around under the ceiling like a windmill. Then there was a moment of confusion. Suddenly she was standing by his bed dressed in a child's short shirt. "Make way! Imbecile!" she commanded, and stretched out beside him. Surprised he asked eyes open wide:

"But aren't you married to the lieutenant?" "Me, to the lieutenant? What gave you that absurd idea? That would be a nice mess! Now I must come to bed with you. Ah!" Then he sighed from the depths of his heart, like a condemned man who has just been pardoned on the path to the scaffold: "Could it be possible? Could you really, but really, be my wife and not the lieutenant's? O God, I no longer know what to believe. What if at the end of the day it's only a dream?" "But what's the matter with you today? she grumbled indignantly. If this was only a dream, that's not our child sleeping in his cradle, but the lieutenant's. It's all so obvious!" "O! Pseuda, Pseuda, if you only knew how unutterably, ineffably wretched I was dreaming you were married to the lieutenant!" "But how can you dream so stupidly, she reprimanded, and so inconveniently. Shame on you!" She kissed him on the foot and taped over his mouth.

When he awoke and ran his fingers over the wallpaper, he realised that all was quite the reverse; he alone in his bed and Pseuda away there at the lieutenant's. He took stock of his situation. For in this dream, he felt it was a sadness he was experiencing, not occurring by chance; it had arisen from a nostalgia in his soul. There could be no mistake; he was lovesick from head to toe, within his very fibres. And who did he have to love! A humiliating outrage! A woman who he had been accustomed to treat patronizingly, a stranger who was indifferent to him, named X, a woman who hated him. He, the bridegroom of the sublime

Imago. He could henceforth find no self-contentment; he would have preferred not to go on living at all. Feeling downcast, he turned his head to the wall and tried to forget the whole situation. Each time some emotion summoned him, shame broke through as though a cloud of stones was weighing down on him. But ultimately he had to go on with life and as his body's drive was for him a sign of health, there was nothing for it but to get up and on his feet. Well, so be it! To be ashamed whether standing or prostrate, it's all one.

He remained there, sitting, all day long, without courage or willpower, his spirit deadened, watching his own fall from grace. Suddenly towards evening an unpleasant thought reared up in his memory: it's Friday today and he had promised the lieutenant to go for dinner this very evening! Now, over there in this state! At her home! Horrible thought! Only the promise poked at his snout as the butcher's dog nuzzles calves. There was nothing for it, and he forced himself to get along to the Direktor's.

What a desolate evening, devoid of all propitious signs. As soon as he entered, he realised he was not expected; he had put himself out for no good reason.

In his funereal mood, he would have preferred to be absolutely anywhere than here. The others, for their part perceived it clearly, which hardly livened up the atmosphere. And he must have deprived them of the desire to make music into the bargain. In fact, all in all, that evening was nothing less than provocative, but to put up with just now in this morose humour any intrusion whatsoever, something to be appreciated, no, he didn't have the strength for it.

Then naturally when he saw Pseuda depressed, lacklustre, regretting her musical diversion was spoilt, so upset that she even forgot to argue with him, it was a heartbreaking spectacle for him. "You know, my poor Pseuda," he promised silently, "I'll make it up to you later, but today you must know, you'll have to forgive me for I really am too sad!"

The gathering broke up early, disappointed and discontented.

Viktor had forgotten his umbrella and retraced his steps to look for it. "Hang on," cautioned the maid on retrieving his umbrella, the gas has already been shut off. I'll come back straightaway with a lamp. "No need," he protested as he had already entered the vestibule. Just then Pseuda's voice was heard on the first floor to warn him: "Take care! In front of the entrance door there are still three steps."

The warning reached him like a window that had suddenly opened upon the sky and shot a ray of sunlight into his heart, filling it with a thousand smiling angels who with one bound leapt from one part to the other of the sunbeam. She who hated him and with every cause in the world, annoyed him and pursued him relentlessly, he, the wretch who had just ruined her miserable gathering - she was forewarning him so that nothing amiss happened to him! O noble generosity and



immeasurable goodness of heart! And you, you poor blind imbecile, you have underestimated this superior woman! If there is anyone contemptible here, is it you or her? It's you, villain, for you are bad as she is good. "Take care!" Did you hear? That's what she said to you, to you, and in her own voice! These words resounded in his heart like a psalm rendered by a choir of harps and hand-bells. Intoxicated with delight he went off running, staggering feverishly.

Arriving home, he then returned once more in the direction of the house he had just left, and spread his arms out: "Imago," he said calling out her name. "And even more than Imago, since the pathos of her corporeal self ennobled her magnificence. Theuda and Imago reunited in one single unique person!" Then rushing to his room, he assembled all the inhabitants of his soul. "Children! Wonderful news. You can love, love without condition or reserve, without measure or limit. The more strongly and deeply you may love, the better it will be. Since she is noble and she is good."

An explosion of frenetic happiness demanded he admit permission to love: the whole of Noah's Ark danced around him. And ever increasing crowds whose existence he had been ignoring expressed their jubilation in the background; they brandished torches in their hands and there were crowns on their heads. Smiling he took part in the celebration, delighting himself in the permission he had just granted - like some king who, after years of bloody repression, ends by conceding a Constitution and finds himself overwhelmed by the unexpected gratitude of the people. Dividing the crowd, a delegation advanced at a dignified pace, conducted by the proud knight in the white regalia of peace, leading the lion on a leash: "Allow me, Your Majesty, to thank you on behalf of all knights-errant for your gracious dispensation. We had always considered such a resolution would be just and necessary."

"But why did you not let me know sooner?"

"How could I have contradicted the orders of Your Majesty?"

The valiant knighthood had then no more objections to his love? His position was at present totally secure and assured, and his courage resurrected liberty and joy. Hail to Redemption; to have permission to love someone whom one could not help but love!

## VI VIKTOR CONVERTED

From the instant Pseuda was transformed for him into Imago, she was to appear to him in a divine light. Imago was, in effect, a metaphysical being of symbolic origin; the illustrious daughter of the Severe Woman, the sacred singer of the

most solemn hour of his life. Viktor's love had become a religion. And - O miracle! - her divinity was present there, close by, visible and accessible.

Naturally a malign derision arrived to decry his faith. "Delirium! Idiocy! Infamy! The very ordinary Frau Wyss, the honorary president of the Idealia, suddenly bathed in divine illumination! Get thee to the doctor's, Viktor! Book yourself a bed in the lunatic asylum while where's still time." And a thousand prior experiences summoned a deafening clamour against him. "Stop there! Pay attention! Just wait! We bring you irrefutable proofs!" But is a believer ever put off his course by the demands of proof? "Take care! In front of the entrance door there are still three steps," he cheered in his heart, and the high tide of an ardent and amorous devotion swept out all the chaff from his consciousness: experiences, doubts, scruples and proofs - all that was only a foul heap. Each objection was scattered to ruin and junk, like a dog chased from church.

Her closeness! Mountains and forests, the whole surrounding environment was transfigured in his eyes. All the roads and avenues in the town sanctified his comings and goings, and even the suburbs by the possibility of his presence. The sense he had of his own existence was of floating in the clouds; with each breath, he sucked in a blast of revelation. Everything was germinating and flowering around him; his sight distinguished gaudy arabesques, his ears the swelling of organ music. The least external stimulus, the hammer of a blacksmith, a child's cry, a crow on the fence, had the effect of a cosmic poem. He was so intensely inspired by her proximity and by the actuality of her visible presence that he never even felt the need to see her. On the contrary, he preferred to adore her secretly, near but in a hidden corner.

However an unpleasant thought disturbed his euphoria: her verdict would still condemn him as in the past since she could hardly know anything of his conversion. He could no longer bear this thought. But to make known his conversion, by word of mouth or in writing to the material incarnation of Frau Wyss: never! Otherwise he would have to confess how he was first struck by love, but he had too much pride for that and too much intelligence also for since she did not care for him - oh! that was the very least of it! - to admit his love would have reduced him to the lamentable role of a supplicant burning with desire. Yet he wanted to be the devoted servant of her Divinity, not her pitiful supplicant. Happily he had no need of recourse to the expedient of ordinary communication; he knew a better way of making contact with her, more direct and dignified: the way of soul-to-soul vision.

So he ordered his soul: "Go and rejoin the soul of Theuda, she who is Imago and announce: 'The undeserving person, shamefully struck with blindness who attacked and persecuted you is dead; a new being stands before you, a convert who, humbly acknowledging your sovereignty and goodness, greets you, Imago,

and worships loyally your beautiful countenance as a symbol of divinity. ` Go and tell her that, and bring me her decision.”

The judgement arrived back: “I discovered her soul at the window offering up a prayer to the light of the sky sprinkled with stars. She turned her gaze towards me and acquainted me with her severe reply: `I am a woman, chastity is my glory, purity my honour. Stand back, scoundrel, who ceaselessly insults woman with his insolent sarcasm. Before I may believe in your conversion, repent and recognise the worth of chaste womanhood.`”

Upon this, he sent again his soul to her: “The penitence that you demand of me has been accomplished for I have read it in your eyes punishing me. Hear my confession; before me a temple is open, a royal priestess is advancing and behind her the earth-women, alive and dead, real women and those engendered by desire. And me, I have seen, acknowledged and accepted them: `I believe in a woman chaste and pure; her mind is melody, her works speak of abnegation and self-sacrifice; her face reflects divinity; in her footsteps arise sovereignty and nobility; she raises her hand and the vulgar flee for cover; she moves and the sun exults. O woman, how beautiful you are! She stoops over a sick man who was lying in the road and comforts him and I cry: Wisdom, veil thy face! You, all-virtuous, knelt down, for mercy is the queen. ` Go and transmit this testimony.”

Word came back: “I found her soul leaning over the cradle of a child. She raised her eyes and delivered her harsh response: `I am a dutiful daughter, devoted to love and respect for my family. Get back wretch, who despises my father and insults my brother. Before I can credit your conversion, learn to respect my father and effect a reconciliation with my brother.`”

With this riposte Viktor began to sigh and groan: “I don` t want to honour her father nor reconcile myself to her brother, for they are enemies of the spirit and opponents of truth. I occupy the throne of right, well beyond them.” He grumbled and fumed in his rancour. Then Reason addressed him: “Can I also say something?”

“Speak.”

“To be superior to another human, you have to appreciate their just value, and mediocre as Kurt may be, while there is still something you have to apologise for, you set him above yourself. Go! Here is pen, ink and paper; write to Kurt some words of regret and he will disappear through a trap-door, and you will be relieved of an unpleasant burden.”

And the heart said insidiously: “He will remain, despite everything, her brother.” And the proud knight exhorted him: “To admit freely a fault and put it right does no harm at all in the eyes of the captain royal of the Severe Woman.”

“I cannot and won` t do it,” said his wrath through grated teeth. Then there appeared in the room a patch of blue sky, the patch grew, harps twanged and

through the song of the harps, a voice arose, her voice: "Take care! In front of the entrance door, there are still three steps."

"Imago," cried his love, "you, so great, so good, so noble! I believe." And in a febrile rush he wrote a note of apology to Kurt; brief and proud, but also sincere and loyal as was befitting, never failing to find the appropriate phrase.

The next morning he received a postcard written in pencil and unsigned:

*Rollicking hullabaloo crowing with enthusiasm!*

*Philosophers, university clowns!!*

*The dove has flown into the high spheres! Fantastic!!!*

Frau Keller to whom he showed this scribble, solved the mystery; these bizarre phrases were quotations from Viktor's own statements that had clearly wildly amused Kurt and the whole added up to a sort of act of reconciliation.

"Original, isn't it? Genial?" she enthused.

"You see now, Viktor?" added Reason. "Don't you feel liberated and relieved now? I want an answer from you." Viktor replied: "Not only do I feel freer and relieved, but also better and nobler."

"Then continue on the path. The first half is done, get on with the second. Learn to respect her father."

Then Viktor addressed himself: "It was her father. The language that emanated from his countenance is like that coming from Theuda. Good! I want to learn how to show respect before that face." He went to the bookshop and bought the portrait of Minister of State Neukomm to put up on his wall as a model. But when he examined this fine head full of confidence and imprinted with conviction, with its flamboyant and empty features, he was again overwhelmed by the old derision, to the point that he promptly covered the portrait beneath a ream of paper with a heavy paper-weight on top, so the fine head could in no way escape surreptitiously by chance.

"No matter what, he remains despite everything her father," pleaded the heart. "He cannot be deprived of his merits since there is a statue raised in his honour standing in front of the town-hall, said reason persuasively." So he took off the paper-weight and put back up on the wall the statesman in his eminence; but reversed with the portrait turned against the wallpaper, the empty back towards the front, since every time he tried to turn it the right way round, jeering irony chased away respect.

"Even so," Viktor lectured himself, unhappy with things, "I would like to obey Theuda's commands; for Theuda is Imago. Here we have her father in his grave; a tomb is a serious matter; well, let us go to his tomb so I can divest myself of my irony." And he went to visit the grave of Minister of State Neukomm at the cemetery. Arrived in front of it, he was greeted by a voice emanating from the soil: "What are you looking for?"

“The Spirit of statesman Neukomm.”

“There is no Minister of State here, replied the voice, and no spirits with names. I was while on earth, a man unprovided for, like all men, a powerless creature who was born there, breathed, suffered and trespassed like all the other creatures. May those who did ill to me or good, and those who loved me - be blessed. Two faithful people in my own image, my two children, followed my coffin in tears and sanctified my memory by their grief. Blessed should be whoever wishes them well. If you are someone who moves upon earth in full powers of life, give me news of my children.”

Then Viktor spoke: “Your children are doing well; they are loved and respected by people; he who stands before your tomb wishes to be a good friend to the two of them.” At these words, the image of Kurt he carried with him suddenly altered, becoming enhanced and more agreeable.

Then the voice sighed: “Because you have given me news of my children, I conclude with you a pact of indebtedness, and since you wish to be a good friend to my children, I conclude with you this pact of benediction.”

Once back in the house, Viktor could turn the portrait the right way round. -

And once again Viktor sent his soul to rejoin Theuda's. “Your order has been obeyed, and I am reconciled with your brother and have sealed a pact with your father. Do you now believe in my conversion?”

The response arrived: “I found her soul had risen to the pinnacle of the roof, counting the towers and small fortifications in the town. She lowered her gaze and delivered her stern reply: ‘I am a worthy citizen, passionately devoted to my people and my country. Stand back, villain, who scoffs at the morals and customs of the nation. Before I can accept your repentance, make a sacrifice by learning to live on good terms with your people.’”

This come-back saw his anger spill over into foaming rage:

“Woman,” he yelled, “you are a saint no doubt, but poor in spirit. You may well make a goddess, but not a God. Don't try me too far! My heart is yours, accept my devotion, purify my soul, but don't deprive me of my convictions, woman! Away there, soul, and retail that to her.”

The answer came back: “As truly as I am Theuda, who is here called Imago: until you have made peace and friendship with your people, I will not take your conversion for fact.”

Then Viktor began to fulminate; he blasphemed against his goddess, cursed her, called her by all sorts of bird names and of horned beasts, like the criminal caught after the failed attack by a postal truck on the Madonna.

“When you have finished with foul-mouthing,” remarked Reason, “then I would also like to add something. Between the two of us, her demands are entirely just; you are a monster when it comes to diplomacy.”

“You think so?”

“Not only do I think so, I know full well. Ever since you took your first steps, you have been a backwoodsman, and your spell in a foreign country has turned you into a perfect savage. You saunter down the roads of your native town like a Redskin in the October beer festival during an afternoon off. Is that normal? Is it tolerable? Come here now, sit yourself down on this school bench; a little patriotism, my God, won't do you any harm. Fear not, only what's required, nobody's going to ask you to deliver the shooting competition speech. Then Viktor was obliged to sit on the bench while reason lectured him on the 'people,' on their modes of feeling, grieving, worrying, and described to him the wheels of the constitution guaranteeing freedom, showed him the interrelation with the development of an individual and strong character and finally taught him to understand politics as a microcosm of idealism, “idealism dry like the foot of a vine but idealism nonetheless.”

Viktor listened intently, at first trembling, then on his best behaviour. Suddenly he leapt to his feet, his eyes gleaming: “I want to study civil law.”

“There you go again! Now you're naturally rushing to the other extreme. Even without civil law you can be a good citizen.” But Viktor defended every inch of his ground: “True though it is I can be a good citizen, I still want to study civil law.” He staked out his cause and went off to get hold of a civil rights manual, here and there borrowed documents on the Constitution and books on the history of what was quoted. The more arid an article, the happier he was. He asked for the Official Gazette and followed the debates of the municipal councillors in the journal. (“a little verbose, Sirs! So much the better for my mortification.”). He wore out his soles among the collections of antiquities, stood before the walls and decayed skeletons while the spirit of the ancestors washed over him, and he contemplated with emotion, like a brother and fellow-citizen, the tiniest lads in the countryside leading their small calves to market, in the interest of research for an ongoing client.

But when he was satisfied with his progress and sent her a report on the democratic Adam he'd become, she dismissed it with irony: “Prove it in action,” she commanded peremptorily. “Prove it in action!” he repeated indignantly. “So that's her tough and niggardly response, like being struck with an elbow. After all, she forgets that my conversion is exclusively the result of my decision freely entered into. A slight shrug of the shoulders, and there I am on the ground. It's as if she wants to set me up for blows from the riding-crop!”

But when the hyena had jumped through three hoops, it gets through the fourth even if it has to grit its teeth. At the forthcoming elections, he obtained a ballot paper.

“Forest warden, give me some advice. I want to exercise my duty as a citizen -

that`s a good thing, eh? - but unfortunately I don`t know a political soul in the world. Who would you advise me to vote for?”

“Good. First of all you must let me know whether you`re conservative or liberal?”

“What`s the difference?”

“That can`t be explained in one minute.”

“Well then which of the two is in favour of the teaching of the Church?”

“The conservatives.”

“Right, I`m a liberal.” And he consequently voted for them. But Theuda`s soul was dissatisfied. “That didn`t come from the depths of your heart,” she objected.

“Not from the depths of my heart?” he inveighed. “I`ll show you what comes from the bottom of my heart!” And he fomented a dreadful revolt against the goddess, of a type the pit of his heart became a cage of wild animals at feeding time. - “You want to play Numa Hawa\*\*. Right then be patient while I tune up my abuse to full throat.”

Up to the day where it happened, he had foreseen nothing of it. It came like a jet of liquid from a boiling volcano; in an outburst of rage, he silenced two unknown dandies who were poking fun at an army procession . While he was doing this, still completely flabbergasted, not knowing whether he should feel shame or what after this primitive outbreak, Theuda`s soul came to greet him addressing him with a gracious smile: “That Viktor, that for a change delights me.” And a lake of pure blue sky came wrapping him round, with innumerable small Theuda heads inside, giving him positive signals.

So his weary penitence at last met with approval and satisfaction.

Purified and pardoned in a way, renewed and in fine fettle from this sense of vital cleansing, Viktor opened the grand door to his heart: “Let us rejoice, my heart! Me who thought myself wise and took you for a stupid little rabbit! Mistake! The world upside down! I was suffering from an alienated mind and you are the more intelligent of the two of us. For not only have you alone understood from the start that she is Imago, but I also owe my repentance and

\*\*an Amazonian dominatrice

conversion to you. So from now onwards you will no longer be my despised young puppy, rejected and maltreated, but you will be our guide and chief. Let us celebrate, O heart, my king, your wish is my command.”

His heart exulted, transported with happiness: “O liberty! Look I have been hooded like a stolen goldfinch; also to make up for it I am now going to love and love until I breathe my last.”

Viktor approved: “Freedom, but believe Theuda is Imago, that is sublime and admirable. If your love is soiled by desire, don’t touch that which is pure with an impure passion.”

The heart responded: “Here I am before you: take a candle, run the light along the most secret passageways and examine me.”

So Viktor did so, and he took the light along the innermost recesses of his heart. When he had completed his examination, he declared: “Your love is modest and lacking desire. So love her then, until the expiry of your final breath.”

Then his heart breathed and sighed: “I would like to go to her in secret, stay with her while invisible and live with her for always, following everything she lives, each hour, each second, from the good morning when she opens the shutters to the moment when she wishes goodnight late in the evening.”

“Yes go and do it,” authorised Viktor. And the heart did as he said and lived invisibly with her from morn to night, from the morning greeting when she opened the shutters to the moment she wished ‘good night’ when evening tiredness came on. And when she set the table for the midday meal, it nodded approval: “Eat and enjoy,” and when she prepared to go out he whispered: “Don’t put on your everyday dress, but the new one, the bright and magnificent one, for you are beautiful and loveable which means: wherever you are, every day is a feast-day.”

And the heart continued to breathe and sigh: “I would I could plunge into her heart, really deeply, to the source of her feelings, to love everything in her heart, everyone she loves herself, beginning with her husband and child, to the flowery branch that grows in front of her window.”

“Alright,” endorsed Viktor, “do it.”

And the heart did as bidden and dived into the heart of Theuda right to the root of her emotions, and loved in her all she loved and spoke thus to her husband: “Brother, you are a friend without knowing it, a support without suspecting it. Be reassured, whatever the future has in store, I shall be there to assist you.” And it said to the child: “Your tiny legs bump into uncertainties, your little eyes smile into the fog and the distance, but I am here to offer good advice. I will save you from false moves and ill winds.” It said to the flowering branch in front of the window: “Light up in your joyful colours and renew your courage in the breeze, for realise how your branches soar into a room of a very special nature.”

And again the heart breathed and sighed: “I wish to transform myself into a benediction and swirl around her steps like a divine genie to console her when she loses heart and keep from her all misfortune that may arrive to plague the threshold of her house.”

“That’s reasonable and fitting,” agreed Viktor, “go and do it.” And the heart followed his order and transformed itself into a blessing. And in the feeble light



of first morning he went to embrace Theuda's eyes: "The cockerel is up and about; get up and have no fear for this is a joyful day." And when she was sad, it said to her: "Wrong! You should not be melancholy, for you are pleasure itself and the delight of humanity." And when misfortune stalked the threshold, he forbade its entry: "Halt! Who goes there? You are deceived! This dwelling is invulnerable for here lives Theuda-Imago."

"And so, my heart," exclaimed Viktor, "whatever you sighed for I granted. Are you satisfied? Or is there something more you wish?"

And the heart responded: "I am never content, for my love breeds love; the more I love the Unique, the more I yearn to love it. I've enveloped her life form with the web of my devotion, and now I shall do the same for her former self. By welcoming her earlier appearance, what she was before the present, I shall go back passing by her adolescent years, as far as her infancy and from her childhood back to her origins aloft where her soul germinated before starting out on its journey to the earth. But I can't do it on my own; command your imagination to lift me up to the heights."

"Yes, approved Viktor, that's where you're going to reach." And he ordered his imagination: "You, small vulnerable frivolous bird that creates me from bother and worry, deluding me with your deceptive looks until I commit innumerable stupidities! Go, prove yourself useful for once. Did you hear what my heart demands of you? Well then prepare the boldest of your wings and transport my intuition beyond the world into the seed-bed of souls."

Imagination replied in a burst of roaring laughter: "That's just what I've always been after. When high up I'm at home." Thus it spoke, and in an audacious flight carried his intuition out of this world into the incubator of souls dormant in dreams. And there, feeling out with the aid of antennae of love the path his soul had taken formerly towards the world, Viktor tried to relive the steps of his former life, evoking through imagination his first years; communing with the form of a young maiden above the forests of his country, hailing the rocks that had such an amazing impact when he first set eyes on them. The toil opened a countryside of a new creation for him, with dazzling light and corridors of clouds so unusual his soul shivered. Reality vanished. Time sank before his feet.

Exhausted by the superabundance of distant miracles, his feeble human brain began to fail and his spirit, tired from the journey, found itself worn out. "Enough! For heaven's sake! That's just too much!" But the imagination, incensed, helped his wings. "I have not flown to the heights for nothing; the air is here I need for life, it's here I wish to whirl around. You wanted to go in quest of the seed of your soul, so allow the coronation of your soul." And taking no notice of supplications and refusals, imagination, circling ever higher, unveiled to the eyes of the trembling Viktor, a vision of the future, undesired and inopportune,

but nevertheless impossible to ignore.

He was looking at a young man beside a young woman whose dual soul aspired to the totality of worldly souls, so that there was nothing alive beside the couple moving in infinite space. This young man and woman wandered together through a celestial prairie, whispering to one another, looking tenderly into each other's eyes with a gentle intimacy redolent of that of terrestrial love, separate, broken into small pieces, representing only a futile simian antic.

“What do I have to do with these young people?” Viktor's heart interrupted laughingly. And look, the young woman of all united souls has Imago's face.

In this way Viktor found contentment in his new-born love. His heart frolicked around the bodily version of Theuda. His imagination carried the illuminated form of Theuda to him from aloft beyond the clouds. To love was his cause, to bless became his relaxation. But as he felt his love so pure and fine, keeping lust at bay in the meditation of his holy service, while imagination tirelessly supplied him with new revelations by the abundant armful, his good fortune became so overwhelming that breathing was inadequate to him, and he had to give voice to a song, sometimes babbling cries of joy and sometimes humming to himself in languid and lifeless accents. Also he started to doodle a mixture of slanting and curved lines on scraps of paper to interweave his shouts of jubilation into a garland of design. Of words, his love song had no need.

“Am I losing my grip?” reverberated the fatherly voice of the lieutenant. After several banal phrases of introduction, he put together a coherent discourse, but it was constantly interrupted by reservations as if he had some concept at the back of his mind. He ended up tentatively coming out with: “The 4<sup>th</sup> December, as you have been aware for some time, the Idealia will be celebrating the anniversary of its foundation. On this occasion, I have also..myself too - how should I put it? one could call it a prologue - some modest and unpretentious verses (iambs with five feet and every one an anapaest) in the form of a dialogue between the ancients and moderns - could you not? perhaps...I have thought of you because to meet the vacancy I need a man of great culture (one naturally comes across citations from Latin and Greek); in this case, that is to say if you will agree, I will do, myself, the ancients and you the moderns - but as I have just said, that will be as you wish, supposing you have the time and are willing...”

And as Viktor declared himself very willingly disposed to all areas of culture, the lieutenant sighed, relieved. “Yes, and I must not forget this: my wife is very pleased at your reconciliation with my brother-in-law and asks why we never see you now.”

It was quite true, he had only just realised in the zeal of his divine service, he had totally forgotten the divinity herself. The need to see her had not made itself

felt; now of course surrounded by her he needs must proceed there, and since he must, he also wished to do so.

Then several days later he made a pilgrimage to the Münsterergasse, proceeding in the state of mind of a baptised pagan attending his first communion, here with a wary step, there with a confident pace. Certainly he couldn't hide from her, no infestation of mites yet lodged in her Justice's ermine. However his conversion was authentic, his repentance deep, his love pure, and after all the gods do show clemency. Added to that, he now had Kurt on his side.

She received him graciously (was it the influence of Kurt or could he make out devotion on her face?) And there was not the least echo of old hostility - amazingly a single stroke of the brush had erased the memory of previous ill-feeling. She confided the death of a distant relative, who had died unexpectedly the previous night, simply like that, a small incidental piece of information slipped in amidst the preparations for the anniversary celebrations. In relating the news, some tears rolled down her cheeks. He reached out his hand to gather them as if they were holy water. Then they spoke of this and that; then when he was taking his leave, she offered a friendly hand for the first time since the Parousia.

Anxieties about the prologue (ancient and modern culture) obliged him to turn up quite often at the lieutenant's, and once the duties had been performed, he liked to linger sometimes and while in the house, where he usually remained seated in silence, with the kindly look of an uncle who has, secretly, added the family to this will. Viktor offered his love in this way the privilege of following the movements and gestures of Theuda which, in the eyes of the convert, passed for novelties. And as he could observe them now in his natural role and having previously only seen her on the defensive, he discovered to the joy of his soul, besides the perfections formerly appreciated, a host of new qualities. The heart is pleased because each of her virtues represented a justification for his idealisation and a dampener on any objections. He had no need to scatter the doubts; on the contrary he encouraged them to wallow in their confusion.

"Come then, you grumps, observe with all the sharpness you can muster, put your glasses on if that suits you: you can see how well she treats the servants? Haven't you always insisted that you can best estimate the core of a human for good or evil by looking at how someone treats subordinates? Also, note well the fact she's good."

"Good without doubt she is."

"And then there's the matter of the beggar, how she gave him alms, not condescendingly but equal to equal. Admit it, she's charitable."

"It's conceded - she's charitable."

"Patience, you'll have to admit a deal more. Have you noticed how she never shows any trace of jealousy when another woman's beauty is praised? And also

no vestige of pleasure finds a place in her soul when the flattery of strangers, including mine, is forthcoming, and if she notices it then she is embarrassed? Have you not been struck by the fact that amid all the people whom she honours by rubbing shoulders with them, there's not one lacking integrity? And her modesty, her sense of duty, her loyalty to home, her quiet devotion to her child? I ask you, deny all that if you can."

"Nobody is disputing in the least this mass of extraordinary qualities; only the fact that you, as if it were divinity, you..."

"Enough. Not another word! Whoever still has doubts only evinces bad faith."

Despite everything - he had been able to convince himself of her perfection without disputation - her physical presence continued to trouble him rather than contenting him. Not her human failings - he knew full well she was human and he loved the fact - but a certain indolence in her behaviour which did not always accord with his conceptions. You could actually reproach her occasionally for an indifference, a withdrawn attitude hardly in conformity with the ideal, a lacklustre look. In brief she was not unreservedly always herself, Imago, consistently from dawn to dusk, so that every now and then he almost suspected she was not conscious of her calling as a symbol of the imagination.

To that was added something abominable to the sight. On her house-coat black velvet ribbons were sewn, with two further rows below near the hem, and another close to the neck round the collar. No, Imago in the costume of a chorister from Freischütz, as if she was going to sing the round of the virgins, his eyes were horrified by it, his devotion hit the buffers at that. This then provoked an uneasy fluctuation in his feelings during which he preferred a solitary chat with her in his imagination.

On occasion he went to visit friends and acquaintances of Theuda from the Idealia, so as to read her reflection on their familiar faces. And each time her beloved name was mentioned, a ray of light would cross the assembly as if a magic wand were throwing off sparks, with a colourful star in its midst. But from his own mouth he hardly dare pronounce her name, for he blushed even at saying the simple nothing, the word 'Münstergasse.'

Then one day he met Kurt who rushed forward smiling a full joyful smile: "Whores in all arts who prostitute your soul for some shred of a master work which soon passes. Horrible, abominable, but what a nerve!" And a short half-an-hour later, when Viktor confronted by the sermonizing of the priest and lieutenant combined, declared: "A religion which addresses only morals is not worth an honest man wasting a single thought on." Kurt came up to him and asked in a cordial and modest tone: "When could we talk some time, just the two of us?" From that day forward, each time they met in society they sat next to each other.

The change in character Viktor had undergone did not go unnoticed in the Idealia; the transformation was spectacular. He who formerly behaved with such arrogance and went out of his way to be objectionable to all and sundry, who took flight as soon as spotted even from a distance and sulked if the grand piano was even half-open, crushed all conversation with his ironic and superior smile - not only did he now listen wide-eyed to the most interminable family histories, but punctuated them with exclamations: "Not possible!" "You don't say!" "Really?" He enquired about the children at school, asked if Gertrude had had the measles yet and Mimi jaundice, yes, even begged of his own accord that please could somebody sing 'something' for him. In short he had overnight, as if by a miracle, become agreeable. But there were, above all, reasonable opinions that he now professed on the subject of the glorious female sex which inspired delighted approval. Was this really the same Viktor who now came out with judgements such as: "It's not in the least fast women who are poetic, but the wise ones, for women's poetry is called devotion where women of dubious character produce egoism." Or again: "The bigot with the narrow mind is only surpassed in lack of charity by masculine women." Ah! How pleasing to hear! This all rang differently now! Unfortunately a regrettable afterword ruined the edifying atmosphere created by his pieties. After singing the praises of the virtuous woman spiritedly so that you could have transcribed the lot into music for a five voice choir and orchestra, he went and added: "But tell me, I beg, what the devil could I do with a virtuous woman?" It was not merely that: something still did not ring true every now and then after his conversion. Nevertheless his determination to reform was obvious - you cannot reasonably expect, can you, absolute perfection at the first attempt? - to the degree that already the hope was being mooted that with time he would possibly agree to be the tenor in the choral society.

However what could he have to say, Viktor, in this crucial period as a single man? The anniversary celebration of the Idealia was approaching and the coming of Advent was occupying people's minds. So it was becoming a present reality, this great week, an incredible but indisputable week.

On the eve of the feast happened - more or less spontaneously because nobody could concentrate on anything else and with the incidence of an unusually warm temperature (11° in the shade!) - a sort of preliminary celebration in which a party of members, among whom Viktor was invited (the rest were almost exclusively women) had convened in the afternoon on the edge of the town at the Waldegg, unfortunately without the Direktor's wife who was busy with preparations for the great event. After some small cakes, the merry band amused themselves with some open-air games, notably 'four corners' - one, two, three and quickly race from tree to tree. A tamed Viktor leapt gallantly into the middle

of the Idealia members, like a wolf among lambs in paradise. Among the crowd the sunny day had attracted to the Waldegg was also Frau Steinbach who was contemplating the pleasant spectacle as if it was a Shrove Tuesday miracle. Viktor was more than a little embarrassed that she might see him and tried to put between himself and her observant eye some tree trunks as broad as possible, to act as a protective screen. But all things considered, embarrassment counted for little where the object was enjoying himself so much. So he dared to come forward more and more boldly, finally skipping around the entire first circle of trees without bothering about the penetrating gaze of his friend.

Then in the evening of the festivities themselves, towards eight o'clock, in the museum hall, the programme carefully selected and organized was going exceptionally well. To begin with the prologue between the lieutenant and Viktor (ancient and modern culture) where, as the parish priest had mischievously remarked, ancient civilization was palpably superior to modern. In fact Viktor had never in his life been capable of learning ten verses by heart without ruining them. Then after the performance of several songs came the turn of the famous piece by Kurt. But alas! Consternation! A bear transpired among the nymphs and marine deities, and it is now that the chemist Röthelin had, at the last moment sent the splendid bearskin with effusive regrets, but a sudden illness of his father...In short he absolutely had to take the first train. General agitation; only Kurt himself kept an admirable calm even though the first affected: "That will be fine without the bear," his companions consoled him. Slightly subdued however since this hitch had annoyed him even so. Then Viktor sought him out with a cheery grin: "This should not be so difficult an art, Herr Neukomm," he said grunting a little. "If I can repair things a bit..." He appeared in the bearskin to applause - in fact he growled quite well given the feeble voice he had.

To end there was a mystery; when the curtain opened one could see the scene as a forest of greenery where, amid all the leaves, was a brilliant chrysalis of human size made of silver paper. Frau Wyss, in her capacity as honorary president of the Idealia, sang three verses on the theme of metamorphosis. Then with her magic wand she lightly touched the chrysalis. The casing fell away and a creature equipped with two small waving antennae in its hair, delightfully decorated with flowers and garlands, emerged instead of a butterfly. The so-called Perfect child was a small pretty and talented orphan whom Frau Wyss and Frau Keller had taken under their wing and provided an education for at their expense. Through a pleasing reference to the Idealia she was baptised the 'Ideal Child,' enhancing the name 'ideal' through her excellent school reports. The Ideal Child now lisped several verses of thanks while wiggling her antennae. She executed several graceful curtsies, then was carried off covered in kisses from

the ladies vying with each other in showering her with gifts given secretly in corners. So the serious part of the feast was completed and this heralded the start of a free dance which went on interminably with the Ideal Child the object of everyone's adulation, an ideal creature whose tender and vernal years did not prevent her from making eyes at Kurt. But Viktor also enjoyed compliments from those who appreciated his co-operation and willing help. There were hardly a couple of dancers who passed near him (he wasn't in the mood to dance) without directing a few pleasantries or mischievous allusions regarding the bear or his culture, with more or less spirit but always in a most friendly tone. Yes, the most intelligent even succeed in connecting a bear and culture in the thread of a single concept, extended boldly into the shape of a lasso: "I would have thought the bear would have gone better with ancient civilization than modern." or: "With your modern culture, have you, all things considered, wanted us to take a bear for a lantern?"

A wave of genuine goodwill broke over him so that he ended up seriously embarrassed by compliments so little deserved. And out of this shamefacedness soon spurted a tenderness and gratitude which flowed now from his heart towards these so kind folk, followed finally by a third surge filling him with an entirely novel feeling of wellbeing never before felt, the bliss of shared emotion. He, the confirmed individualist learned today, through the grace of everyone, how to appreciate comradeship. Mock on, Frau Steinbach with your piercing eyes! They are not geniuses, they are not the stuff of those who make history certainly, but they are dignified people worthy of love, and that's the main thing.

Peace internally, peace externally, at ease with himself and with the whole world, he was not really sure how it had happened, nor how he was going to sustain this harmony of a thousand voices. And when the following morning he received a small note - is it possible? from her - the first in his life, his overflowing fortune made him positively ill. Certainly the letter contained nothing to speak of, at least from the heart; she was simply asking if he would be so kind to enquire at the museum whether anyone had found her fan. But they were lines written in her hand! At the beginning she had written 'Dear Sir,' and at the end 'Your Theuda Wyss.' He would be hard pressed to say they were heart-felt phrases, even so he was buoyed and intoxicated by the fact she had not judged it vain to give him a 'Dear Sir.' But with the signature he performed a sly little manoeuvre: equipped with his nail scissors he very skilfully cut out the first two words of the three 'your Theuda Wyss,' suppressing the third. You can see now she signs it 'your Theuda.' Which means, my Theuda; she recognises herself as belonging to me. And he carefully stowed this false confession away in the box containing his watch-chain. "Now I have her, so to speak, in my possession," his heart exulted.

The joy flooded his nerve-ends so fully that out of sheer exuberance he would have committed some truly madcap thing, only he didn't know what. While unoccupied he stood in front of the mirror, grimacing or imitating animal noises and different human accents - which for him represented the height of gaiety. Truly, seriously, he no longer knew if that was good or bad for him, he was so intolerably happy.

## VII            HEARTACHE

One day, however, he found out whether all this was giving him pleasure or pain. He had met her one morning when going to visit Frau Richard; she was in a good mood and happy to exchange some innocent badinage just like himself; in short, today they `understood each other.` They remained there chatting familiarly longer than expected, rooted to the spot by the pleasant spirit of the moment.

Spurred by the effect of this harmony, once in the road she offered her hand as they parted looking at him with a friendly eye, and a childish question escaped his lips: "But now, you're coming along with me."

"Of course not," she replied in amusement. "It's to be hoped not."

"Where now then?"

"What a question! To the house, to my husband and small son who must be hungry and waiting for lunch."

"And me? I'm excluded then?"

"Not at all! Come along with me; my husband will be very pleased."

She was not his. Like a cat which has been shot, he rushed off to his own house. She wasn't for him! And he, who had thought that his love was free of desire! As if it were possible to love someone without desiring them - this was a permanent human trait. She was not his! So much the worse; she belonged to some other, a stranger! He had known it for a long time of course; but today for the first time he felt it as she left him to go home to another. And that's what she calls `going back to the house`!

The cat when it received the shotgun blast drags itself into a corner. But he carried the lead-shot with him, and the wound at first caused fear rather than harm, stunned him into silent retreat and started him working. What unlooked-for privilege! What revolting inequality! Day after day, year upon year, until the end of everything, that will be the law of life without her, never herself allowed for him. Not a summer, not a month, not even one privileged day. Everything for the other one, nothing for himself. And not only living with her, but - Back, thoughts! When he already has too much over there, she offers him beside her



presence, love and friendship. Is he sad? She consoles him. Is he ill? She grieves for him. If he dies, her regrets follow him beyond the tomb; if resurrection were to exist, her eyes would be raised to search him out. What unique, intrinsic quality does he have then, this pretender, to deserve such a heady reward? Aren't I also a human being? Or does the other alone possess more privileges and merits than the rest of humanity put together?

And no hope! Nothing will alter it! Neither guile nor persistence will achieve anything; no possibility in any direction. On the contrary: each hour that passes, from day to night, rain or shine, come what may, there is one thing that is inexorably brought to bear - she deepens the abyss between him and her and seals more tightly her bond with the other. Routine, mutual understanding, shared memories, debts of recognition, all that far from diminishing is increasing and accumulating. In time, the child will make claims on them for its needs and future, and those through that will be tied more intimately still with its parents. Also it's not cast in stone that he will remain the only child, it's very possible there will appear a young brother and little sister, why not? Who would want to deny them that?

Ah! How he had underestimated the power of marriage, when he had considered it was a sort of delegation conferred on a lieutenant who would lightly give it up: to the other, to the lieutenant of the soul, to him the soul itself! Perceptive as he may be, one thing even so had escaped him through lack of experience, the essential fact: the mystery of the flesh, the animal strength of natural instinct which prompts a mother to move heaven and earth to get hold of a bowl of broth for her child, which constrains a woman to belong with every fibre of her being to the man who has affected her body, who has transformed her from a young girl into a woman and mother, and who condemns her to love him even if she despises him. Baby, infant and papa, these three words exhaust the parameters of a woman's life. Oh, foolish as you are, you who want to know whether she loves you, she whom you want to marry! Courage! Laugh at her rejection, drag her to the altar, for marriage is stronger than hate, more durable than love.

A young girl hauls herself staggering to church with someone she hates, as if to the abattoir, pallid, death in her heart which belongs to another. Ask for news of her twenty years later: "Children celebrate, papa is coming back tomorrow." "So long as nothing bad happens to papa!" In other instances, the other one, he who formerly had been ardently loved, if he dies, receives on the announcement of his death a token melancholy thought or, at best, a tiny tear painfully extracted. Then they get over "papa." That's it, the power of marriage.

No, there was no hope. To fight a natural instinct? Folly. Struggle against the laws of the world? Lunacy. Truth told him: "Damned for all eternity," and his

affliction admitted: "That`s how it is."

He recognised that anyone who makes a god of a human being sows his own curse. Envidable are those who have a transcendental god, whether an angry one like Jehovah or a monster such as Moloch; for no god of any religion is implacable, none condemn to hell whoever may approach with love, none say to the desperate: "I do not know you." And even if one of these celestial beings were as unfeeling as a stone, there is one thing in every case it is not: it is not petty. One does not bump up against a Direktor Wyss between yourself and her, one does not depend on the good offices of a Kurt, the Madonna of the Christians does not breed a bunch of brats who cause her to forget heaven and earth. To adore a human: it`s no more intelligent than adoring a glass. He saw it perfectly lucidly: but understanding never cured an inflammation. Recognise that the poison which infects your blood with pus may be an ever so tiny grain of contamination, the gangrene continues to devour you.

But it was exactly because his love was a religion, because the symbolic visage of Theuda-Imago resonated for him with the life of the world just as the mother-country is reflected in its countryside, that he felt again the most hideous suffering in all the most noble parts of his soul. All that was evoked and signified, all the light, depths and poetry which encroached on the bridge which relays reality to the internal spiritual world came scarred and pierced with bloody wounds, and every sense of existence resolved itself into a homesickness of consuming nostalgia. Homesickness for her, homesickness for the common country of all creatures, homesickness for himself. For it was her, but her - O devilish mirage of the impossible! - she was not him.

And as he was an intellectual, obliged when injured, to understand what snake had bitten him, he wanted a dialogue with reason about the phenomenon of failure in love; in vain, for he well knew that science could not help him, simply because being a thinker, he could do no other than ponder for himself. But the heartache did not stop the contemplation; on the contrary it caused the thoughts to fret: "Are you awake? Can you spare a moment? Can you solve the riddle: how can a human whom you offer a boon to, the sole consolation in life, that is love, not return one`s love?"

Reason replied: "Sum things up and face matters: if you love the good Lord, does he love you in return?" "Without doubt." "If you love the pope, does he return the love?" "Moderately." "If you love the Duchess of Castille and Aragon, does she love you in return?" "The idea would not even occur to her." "If you love a snail, does it love in return?" "It couldn`t manage it if it wanted to." "Well count yourself clarified. The lower your soul sinks, the less love there is. Love demands plenitude of soul, the absence of love betrays stupidity. That`s the point."

“To understand that clearly, to recognise fully that there is the simple egg of your own fantasies which have obsessed you since the shock of meeting this little woman, and nevertheless to be condemned to want this little woman whom you so overestimate, projecting her as the Holy Grail, yearning for her like a demented man after salvation! How do you explain that?”

“Madness, madness, my dear! jeered reason. But continue quietly your follies; I foresee hope that one day you will emerge from it a rational being.”

It is in this manner that he discussed with Reason his predicament. It is not so much he felt himself the least person of the whole wide world. On the contrary, it was for him like when you have toothache; the more you think on it, the more painful it becomes, and when you try not to think about it, misery demands you contemplate the pain. But where could he docket away these thoughts so he was not confronting grief all the time? Even if he fled to the higher starry sky of religion or the blazing ether of poetic creation, he was condemned to bang his head against a brick wall. He always came up against the same deadly and beloved human face which pursued him everywhere, and from everywhere attempted to destroy his cool.

Oh you scatterbrain who laughs at the misery of an unreturned love! Suppose a mother were to see her dead infant, her only child, come out of the tomb, adorable and handsome, transfigured by celestial change; with a cry of distress and anxiety she rushes toward him, but the child turns with a faraway look and says with a scornful pout: “What does she want?” That would make you smile? He was in exactly that state of mind: the most precious part of himself had been snatched from him, trudging down a separate path and him repudiated. That was so cruelly, intolerably negative he thought sometimes it surely was not happening, he could not bear it.

However Viktor was not a weak person, but firm and tenacious. So he called reason to his aid, “Well, that`s the situation. Live I must; endure it I cannot. So what now?”

Reason answered him: “Come, I want to show you something.” It led him to an abattoir. “There now, I think you can put up with it.” Then once back in the house, it continued: “Look, the whole art of the thing consists in not doing anything rash; simply do nothing at all. Grit your teeth or, if that doesn` t help, you can always cry; but don` t let your hands get into action. The trick is to take control of the hour. He who commands the hour, masters the day. Whoever masters the day, subdues the year; above all do nothing irreversible now. But the hour can subdue a man - and you are surely a man - so he thinks he is doing well - and you are in good health - through work. Also leave grieving to the passing hour, it`s their affair, leave it to them alone. You get to work - you know what on.”

He did indeed know. And as work developed in the service of the Stern Woman, a powerful goddess, the tormenting forces fled before his presence as far as behind the curtain, from which place it's true they came out treacherously on periodic sorties to administer a sharp bite, but soon to retire again.

Naturally even the hardest toil includes breaks or else fatigue sets in. It is in these hours that the assaults increase in number and become more dangerous. On the bookshelf were lined up, in the order of appearance by the year, a complete collection of monthly journals; while he leafed casually through these reviews he suddenly recoiled as if he had been stung by a snake. One of the volumes bore the date of the Parousia year, so that from then on he gave a wide berth to any shelf of periodicals.

He passed in front of a shop selling ready-made clothes. In the window a white skirt with green buttons shone resplendently. Oh, what a burning ray of sun struck his memory! During Parousia she wore a white skirt and a white sash embroidered with green and gold threads.

And other incidents of this type. Beneath the most inoffensive objects, however unattractive, scorpions lay in wait. This comb seems innocent enough, does it not? And this paper-knife too? Illusion, malice and duplicity! For he had bought this comb two weeks before the Parousia! And the paper-knife in the course of the following year during the `ephemeral nuptials`! And each time when all this reached the heart, it cried out: "That cannot be, that must not be, it's quite impossible." "Nonsense! exhorted reason, these are just phantasmagoria! Faulty logic - that is, ergo this is possible." And it sank with one blow the reviving hope.

Nevertheless, struggling valiantly hour upon hour, he reached the close of days in goodish shape - usually victorious, sometimes a draw, never defeated.

But the nights! In dreams, the disease of his soul's territory, repressed but not suppressed by day and not content with the work done by willpower and reason, rose up freely like a column of steam from a boiling pan when you take the lid off! Not a night without dreams and not a dream without her in it. Unfailingly the dream married him to her with the promise: "I am the truth, the contrary is merely lies and deceit." And the dreams did not yield isolated fantasies, each was a part of a whole, played out on alternate nights. No, the dream of each night returned to those of the preceding night, like a romantic narrative with flashbacks; they formed a chain of events. So that he led a double life according to these rules: night-time effectively at one with her, lit up by her smile, with her amorous look radiating on things while they chatted and coaxed each other; a life filled with a gentle gilded felicity. By day a desperate and anxious existence afflicted by an unceasing curse. Oh why awaken, so the disappointment could never arrive! If the delirious happiness of the reverie could also comfort the

daytime!

“If that’s the only problem,” the Imagination offered, “there’s a very speedy remedy.” In double quick time and three moves without waiting for his go-ahead, it installed magic lantern and began the show - impossibilities supported on the feet of delusions, but conceivable to the degree that they were abstracted from the heart of the mendacity.

A modest old lady appeared on his threshold; her beauty had faded, friends and admirers dispersed, the far-away eyes yearning for an autumn of love. “You also for sure grieve in your look, now I am old and ugly, you ignore me.”

But he shouted out: “Theuda, my dear, it is vain to try to disguise the eternal youth of your beauty beneath the mask of old age, for it betrays the glory of the Parousia which shines all around you. Why do you remain there, on the threshold, with your modest look? Look, I kneel in respect of your splendour.”

Theuda replied: “O miracle of grace! Today when I am old and ugly, I receive more love from a single and unique heart than I received from all men put together during my lifetime.”

“That pleases you, doesn’t it?” sneered imagination, and went on with the performance.

It projected her ill in bed, disfigured by tumours, an object of repulsion. But he approached her with devotion, as if to the altar.

“This, on the other hand, is not a beautiful sight,” carped the imagination. “Moreover it does not need be because what is really fine internally allows one to surmount even physical repulsion. But wait I’ve something more for you.” And it continued its presentation.

It showed a wanton, condemned by the entire world, rejected, vomiting; addicted to alcohol she was rolling on the ground in a drunken state.

“Ugh!” groaned Viktor indignantly, “Beat it! What a shocking sight, you madman! She, the virtuous, pure and esteemed!”

“But so what?” whispered the imagination, “so what? Tell me honestly what you would do in such an event? Would you pick her up and put her on her feet again? Would you? Only you know. Very well I know enough for now. However I’ve other things to suggest to you in a different style. Would a game of see-through cards please you? No? What a pity, there you’re mistaken. Then something more serious surely? At once.”

And it showed her as a widow in her weeds.

Then anger overcame Viktor and he threw the magic lantern at imagination’s head. He must have loved her to distraction for imagination to risk offering him such monstrous images!

Memory that he had formerly clung to in exchanging hell on earth for heaven, that for six long months during the happiness had made six paces towards her

door awaiting her acceptance, the thought that he could have with a single word won not only pleasing favours that would have seemed at that point the summit of unattainable grace, but also, in a wealth to take your breath away, her person, her body, her love and life all at once, scarred his torment with a tragic wound. Memory glanced at regret but without touching him for one moment. So much the better for him! For if he had experienced regret, nothing could have rescued him from despair. No he had no regrets, even if the ardour of his desire pierced his heart with nails. It's why he did not even feel unfortunate when his heart sent out the most searing complaints. Something like a brilliant nimbus shone around his misery; like the halo of the martyr whose mouth quivered under torture, whose limbs were stretched out before the executioner but who at the same time proclaimed his triumphant faith in God. His sentiment rose to a passion, his soul advanced at ceremonial pace, his spirit provided the equilibrium to a rhythmic action. The look in eyes to which grief refused a single tear became so ecstatic that one day an optician stopped him in the middle of the road and asked permission to examine this remarkable curiosity.

But where ecstasy breeds, issues also arise. For him also arrived the day of reckoning.

The Wyss family was celebrating the anniversary of their son's birth, little Kurt. Viktor, whom it was impossible to ignore in any household ("a strange man, hardly could one credit all was going well with him than he played the hermit again") concluded he should not miss the occasion. A sort of allegorical play by the other Kurt, imagined for the hero of the day and played out by his uncle and godfather (for this genial fellow came at short notice where others would have needed weeks or months), while the mother and wife of Direktor Wyss took on the role of a fairy. So she recited her doggerel verse dressed in white and equipped with two massive wings, her black ringlets untied and a small crown with gold spangles on her head. During the performance, at the sight of this sublime apparition in celestial garb, his heart already allowed itself a treasonable proposition: "Look then at this fathead, this coward who jibs at marriage, and see what you've missed." Then when afterwards Theuda wanted to keep her fairy clothing on, the role and reality of goddess and human intermingled, as the child was passed from hand to hand in a solemn ritual lighting up the face of the delighted mother, blessing the place and the hour and all present with her gracefulness and goodness. Then his heart began to pound in a mad, frenetic tumult as never before in his life:

"And even if all the gods in the sky and all earthly religions and the whole tradition of morality, sublimity and wisdom revisited me, I would proclaim quite the opposite: there is nothing as valuable in the universe as the possession of the loved one, and no reward in heaven or on earth that can compensate for the loss

of such a treasure. He who could win such a prize and who spurns it, be it on the orders of the All-Powerful himself, is not a martyr nor a hero, he is an idiot pure and simple. It is entirely just that the curse of damnation should crush you.”

Viktor hastened home, went to his room and called up his Iron Mistress in his hour of need just as a believer calls up his God.

“Help me!” he moaned. “I can do no more on my own. The partner you offered me, your daughter you gave me in marriage through a solemn vow that united us for ever, Imago, my legitimate wife, does not know me, her glance slides off me. Do not scorn the cry of my tortured heart. No guilt soils the trembling wish of my wounded soul. Turn the clock back and put the decision in my hands a second time and I would give her up that second time; yes, I would willingly do it. Also I would willingly undergo suffering and privation, along with misery, but through the goodness of my heart and full belief. Why should this be so awful, so inhuman? Is it then so outrageous a crime to be great that I must be punished beyond human capacity? If that is so, soften the sentence passed on me. Open the eyes of your daughter so she does not reject me entirely; talk to her so she may call me her honourable friend, so she may allow me a single momentary reprise, one and only one. Recommend this to her heart, command it. If that cannot be, then lend me your aid to help me not succumb to despair.”

Then it was as if the shadow of the Iron Mistress was floating across the room. He got up, fortified, and bore what he had to endure.

## VIII

### CONVULSIONS AND ILLUSIONS

Meantime the winter festivals had arrived, Christmas quickly passing by, then New Year's Eve dragging out its time. Of course he kept out of things, for he did not like family gatherings at the best of times and especially the civilities of this period (“all year they stick together mooring without showing the slightest feeling and then at the New Year they proclaim love and fraternity”); he had no reason to be thankful at this time in his wretchedness.

On the other hand he could not avoid the customary polite visits of New Year's Day. So he did as he must, finally making the most difficult visits - to Frau Steinbach and the Wyss`.

He was not feeling relaxed as he climbed the steps to the small, intimate house of Frau Steinbach. “It will be difficult to get away without some insinuations, or at least a ticking off.” But there was no such thing. She received him with an amicable simplicity, though with a little more reserve than previously, as if he had been there the very evening before, and not been absent for three long

months. "During New Year's Eve," she remarked smiling, "I looked into your future; you know how, with a plumb-line in water. Of course it's superstition; however when the oracle is favourable, one is happy to agree. And what it told me about you, I truly believe. To learn that one day you will have a sweet and faithful woman, unpretentious and unselfish, young and graceful, who will be devoted to you with all her heart and will fill your life with joy and more, some clearer and well-behaved children, rascals and darlings. In short, you will be happy.

"Me, happy?" he repeated miserably.

"Yes, happy. And what's more as happy as a man can be on earth even if at this moment you cannot believe it. I sense it, I know it, you will be fortunate for you have a natural gift for happiness. And do you know what I know? I already love your wife-to-be, without even knowing her if I will live long enough to see her - I cannot be sure, I just hope - for it will be the loveliest moment of my life. If that cannot be, then greet your dear wife on my behalf and tell her that I bless her from the bottom of my heart for all the good and tenderness she will offer you."

"Your woman, your wife!" But what words are these! What summons! And all permeated with sadness; he went off completely dumbfounded to the Wyss'.

He found her in the reception room, the child on her knees, excited by the feast days, presents and visitors. With an almost nonchalant carefreeness, she offered him her hand, adding her usual good wishes: "I wish you much good luck in the new year, good health and all sorts of excellent things."

It's *her* who said that! *She* wishing him good luck! Overwhelmed by a wave of self-pity, he left the room without responding to her wishes. He didn't take his leave formally ("what a strange man he is, this Viktor"), and sped down the narrow streets and then suburbs - O this town which never ends, these crowds, these strange looks! - toward the salvation of the forest. But he did not reach the forest, for hardly had he spotted in the distance the so welcoming skirt of the firs than he collapsed into the snow, overcome by unrestrained sobbing. There was no longer any sang-froid nor pride; like someone with arsenic in his system who sinks down amid a hostile crowd writhing in convulsions, even if he knows it isn't normal, he must give free rein to his sobs. "Because I am her also," protested his body. "He must have lost someone," he heard a compassionate passing peasant say.

From this moment it was as if a river had found a breach in the dyke and rushed through the gap. All his pangs of nostalgia rushed into his eyes, and Viktor no longer had existence other than in tears and fear of more tears. For the lachrymose crises took hold of him without a moment's warning; the slightest stimulus was enough; the sound of a bell, a musical note, the sight of a road she



had walked down, the passing of a cloud that reminded him of childhood and the country - even the simple buzzing of a fly was enough to unleash convulsions as if caused by tetanus. Where could he find a place he could hide and weep, away from prying and from sympathy? Why didn't the state provide enclosures at places made sacrosanct especially for the afflicted, far from intrusive eyes? There are so many useless rights, why not a right to grieve?

In the intervals that separated the crises, he felt utterly apathetic like a convalescent, wanting to see kind faces but of strangers who had done him no harm, a greeting, a fleeting word, the simple act of someone passing close by him without doing him injury, filled him with gratitude. For this reason he avoided his acquaintances in order to seek out crowds of people in public spaces like taverns; the sight of a group of people indifferent to his plight, the sound of words not addressed to him, did him the world of good.

Naturally he ended inevitably snared by this game, so that even when he went among the inhabitants of distant villages he would bump into an acquaintance. So one day in the Dreher saloon, the lieutenant appeared and insisted he came over to join him at his table where he presented a man not known to him, "Doktor Eduard Weber, moralist." Hardly had the lieutenant pronounced the word "moralist" than Viktor underwent a new shock to the nerves: an outbreak of mad laughter. It was so powerful, so irresistible, that he cried and hooted with laughter in front of a whole crowd of people. Instead of calming down, the attack became increasingly violent. "And he's named Eduard into the bargain! And have you seen a vision of harmony and universal peace?"

There was nothing for it but to rush into the road, roaring with laughter as he went, everyone joining in the contagious laughter. "He's very happy, him." And as next day he went to offer his sincere apologies to the man, the moment he prepared to ring the bell, because the plaque fixed to the door had the untoward word "moralist" he began snorting with laughter and another attack beset him. Three times he fled and three times he made himself return, straight-faced and determined; but to no avail, this fateful magic word stopped him in his tracks.

Once they'd started there was no stopping the hilarity any more than the tears; having found their route they stuck to it. And for them too the slightest pretext was enough to set him off. He saw a hen drinking water and as she did she raised her eyelids and turned her head. Result: an explosion of laughter. He would be reading a book at a table in the inn where three millers were sitting; a burst of spasmodic hooting would break out. Just think of it - three millers completely bleached, one beside the other!

"Ah, Conrad, how cavalierly you make use of your Viktor!"

"Yes but think also how much you have demanded of me for the past four months!"

One fine morning, it was around 11 o'clock, a bright idea struck him between the eyes like a rocket: "Since gladness means so much to your heart, why not present yourself quite openly to her, the source of your felicity? The doctor who made you ill can also cure you. - Don't be so reticent! What do you fear? Who are you afraid of? Of her? From someone good, nothing evil can come. Good heavens, you have by now become so insignificant, so undemanding! Try; it's not really such a big deal to pay a visit to a lady with whom you have spoken under friendly auspices; you've already been to her house often and she hasn't bitten your head off. And why should she today rather than tomorrow? Or do you have some reason to prefer tomorrow?"

"No, none. Today or tomorrow, it's all the same."

"However if you want to go today, you'd better hurry up. It's the best time for visiting."

"You are a far-sighted thought! But allow me to check carefully first to see if all goes well on the internal stability front, lest Conrad gives me some new shock with one of his nervous fits."

He examined himself. Everything was calm, blood and nerves. There was nothing suspect anywhere. Then he set off for her house without further ado.

She was alone in the room seated at her work table. Hardly had he seen her than all the objects in the place began to dazzle as if viewed through a crystal, then began to vibrate ever more rapidly; then he was conscious of nothing as he fell to his knees in a torrent of tears, covering her hands with impulsive kisses. Scared by what he was doing he got up quickly deeply ashamed, ready to hurry away.

But she took him in her arms with merciful gentleness: "Where are you rushing off to like that? What is it you want?"

He stammered: "How do I know? Conceal me somewhere in a grotto deep in the woods and let me die of shame!"

"There's no need to leave like this; come, I'll wipe your eyes." And she led him into the bedroom. "I don't know about that," said his deepening voice, "I didn't expect things to go this far at all. Am I perhaps guilty of something?"

He shook his head, incapable of speaking, and allowed his eyes to be wiped without will as if submitting to an operation. "What shame," he stuttered every now and again, "what ignominy!"

"But it's no disgrace to love someone," she consoled, "one can't help it. Or else am I then so wicked it would be dishonour to love me?"

He bit his lips until they bled.

Meanwhile the child had woken up in its cradle; it had got up and was looking on with curiosity. The mother went to put it into its bed. "Do you see," she said, "here is a poor man who has been terribly hurt. But nobody has caused the pain,

nobody wishes him harm. He has become ill because his imagination has run riot. - You'll promise me, won't you, not to do anything rash?" she urged as they made their farewells. "If you really love me you must promise me not to, I demand it. Go home and we are going to cure you; when you know me better you will soon see that I am not as precious or irreplaceable as you imagine."

"To reveal my love to her!" he lamented on his way home: "to show myself to her with no holds barred! I've behaved like an apothecary's boy in a novel. Tears, hand-kissing, down on one knee, no sort of absurdity was lacking! Is that really me? Oh Conrad, Conrad! And this pity! This merciful consolation! Whatever am I going to do now?"

"Nothing," replied his reason, "keep in good health, the rest will sort itself out in good time."

"But the humiliation, how demeaning!"

"As if there were any lower debasement than succumbing to love!"

Reason had to be right. And then again, it was fine, it had happened. He let things unfold as Conrad wished. Had she herself not said: "We want to cure you, come again to see us?"

Whether or not to accept her invitation, the question did not even arise. The illness to which, after unbearable suffering, someone was finally administering the remedy which salved the pain, how could he question whether he should take it up or not? There are degrees of wretchedness where no pride or shame are left, and where a single thought prevails: "Help!" It little matters how or by whom the pain is alleviated. He had followed his beloved's words, the welcome message of her sympathy. And what a voice! What speech! Her own hands had touched his face, brushed his cheek with her arms. Is there anything to think about? There is to be found the consolation, the greeting and the life; all the rest is of no account.

So the very next morning he went there again, and again the next day, and so each and every morning. And each time he found her alone at her work table, and he was always allowed to tell her he loved her. What a relief! Instead of weeping in his pain far away, in the cold conifer forest, to confess it to her, a warm person, to let it be lit up by her beautiful eyes, to exchange it for affectionate words and loving looks! And how it quietens the tears of an infant when you blow on it and speak silly nothings, utterly meaningless words which carry comfort and relief, simply the voice it wants to hear - so after his second visit he was released from the need to cry as if the source of the wound had been removed. With each visit the inflammation diminished. "We're going to cure you," she had said and that seemed to be the case.

He soon even went so far - he actually had a gift for happiness - as to derive tranquillity and serenity from the privilege of being alone with her each morning

and offering her his love; when nothing made him intolerably wretched, he was always positively happy. Why then wasn't he satisfied? Every day an audience of one hour in friendship and fine amity, a sort of Parousia at a higher level, and what's more bound to her by a secret in common, the secret of his love - who then out of the whole human race, with the sole exception of the lieutenant whose rights he had never envisaged attacking - possessed more?

Knowing whether she loved him or not hardly concerned him; yes, it didn't even interest him, for through his precocity he held from the start the conviction that joy or mercy arose not from the outside but the inside, and that an imitation gave as satisfactory a result as the real thing and often even better. It was not the state of his love that bothered him, but her presence, since his transformed heart drank in the sight of her, her voice, gestures and movements. As always, he would have willingly accepted it if she were to undergo torture and horror by being taken away to his own place for him to hold her as a prisoner and chain her to a wall. "You can argue, cry, curse. What the hell: I only want you to remain with me!"

Of this so desired presence he now had one small, delicious and definite portion, with her willing assistance, without having to take her away and chain her up, a space that she reserved for him and carefully guarded by resolutely keeping away, when he was there, everything that could disturb them, curtly sending away any visitors. Even her brother was not admitted. So that he even felt, to a certain degree, married to her - a secret marriage certainly, but one that was none the less sweet for all that. These especially intimate brief hours developed little by little a comradely relationship between them. Her love, at present considered as coming from him, no longer needed reaffirming each time; it had been relegated to the bass line to become a harmonious backdrop but informing the whole affair. It nevertheless left time for discussions and conversations about other matters which resounded in the upper register like fugitive notes following their humour and fancy. They could chatter like brother and sister, thumb through the arts reviews, play piano with four hands ("I thought you had no feeling for music!") Or she spoke to him of her years as a young girl, discussed the future of her son with him and showed him the different rooms and fittings of her home. He felt relaxed enough to tease her.

"So here's this bad woman who's caused such cruel suffering," he joked.

"Ho, ho!" she menaced, with a ferocious air unsheathing her claws.

"Let's see, show me," he ribbed her again, "look at me please once again as wickedly as in the past."

"I cannot," she declined, simply, truthfully, gently.

One day he picked up like lightning a needle she had dropped that she called "Herr von Wolzogen." "Frau von Stein", he replied bowing

When at the piano he touched her little finger by apparent chance, she rapped his

knuckles; when he came out with a disagreeable statement in the course of discussion, she slapped him on the wrist. One morning she leapt out of an ambush and fell on him with the spring of panther, and began to strangle him with real intent. "It's your birthday today," she explained to a astonished Viktor.

A single consideration brought about a sense of unease from time to time; what had become of his friend the lieutenant all the while? Why did he never put in an appearance? How does this intimate tête-à-tête occur day after day while at times from the study above comes a scuffing of boots and tobacco smoke filters through the interstices of the ceiling as if heralding the pronouncement of an oracle? This concealment, sweet to his heart, did not reach his conscience although nothing untoward was going on anyway. On the other hand he could neither go up and knock on the study door and declare: "Herr Direktor, have you heard the latest? I have the honour of actually loving your wife devotedly. All the same you can sleep peacefully; we are as innocent as two Easter angels, one black and one white." No, discretion of this type did scandalise his sense of good taste. Certain things, though not at all bad but instead grand and noble, were best kept secret for the very good reason that awareness of them by a third party would profane them. "And in the last resort, it's his affair not mine, it's her husband not mine. So if she can square her conscience with it..."

When all this had gone on for several weeks, her behaviour changed, it became indecisive, mercurial, contradictory; he never found her with the same attitude he had left her with the evening before. At first he was surprised by the reappearance of the old distrust; it was clearly the effect of insinuations, probably from friends, perhaps also from envious and jealous people.

"If this cannot proceed in a major key, let us try minor," she shot at him without any forewarning, her tone charged with an undercurrent, her look penetrating. She was inclined, at least for a moment, to consider the mad ache of his heart which had thrust him at her feet, to be some scene from a play, a deliberate action.

Another day when she discussed their first meeting, then called the Parousia, this dialogue ensued:

"Tell me quite honestly," he asked, "have you truly loved me, or not?"

She shook her head and said: "I take you for a hypocrite."

"How have you come to that outlandish conclusion?"

"Because you used to spout so many compliments that were over the top."

"I have never offered a single word of flattery; I have only stated that you are ineffably beautiful and that I worship you as a symbol of divinity."

"But really: this type of insipid mawkish twaddle is only fit for tiny frivolous dolls, not with me."

"And now?" he smiled, "will you still judge me a hypocrite because, just like

before, I always find you wonderfully beautiful, today more than ever and that I honour you as a symbol of divinity?"

"Hm?" she said dubiously, her look scornful, sometimes encouraging, sometimes negative.

He understood and excused her: Germania does not want to admit that a `bohemian` can be capable of authentic love. Yes, it never believes in the truth or purity of such a love; many aspects of his behaviour betrayed this. So it would happen right in the middle of a conversation that her would go and seek out the young boy in his cradle and sit him on his knee, then hold him out in front of her like a protective shield. Or else, when he arrived she was there at the door barring entry with outstretched arms and a threatening look. "Wolf, do not enter my sheep-cote. Then she let him come in even so.

Other times it was a new Eve she was acting out. If he failed to come on a day, she demanded why and expected justifications. If he was taken by surprise in the street in conversation with another woman, she looked at him in an apparently friendly way, but with a voice full of suspicion. "You will marry well one day, yourself, like the rest of them," she reproached him in a bitter almost contemptuous tone, as if he had committed some offensive and unworthy act.

Occasionally Eve teased him as well. And why not? "Make good use of your fine youthfulness; still some more brief fleeting years, good Lord, and then you won't be able to mock anyone."

With dutiful intention, she spoke to him as often as feasible about her husband, naturally in the most neutral tone; she showed him the most recent photograph: "It's for my husband, for his birthday." Or else she forecast the future of `our boy` when `we both` will be old.

"What two?" he asked.

"Why, my husband and me of course. Who else would it be?"

However a third being had gradually joined their particular federation: her son, the young Kurt. Was it because Viktor approached him every now and again for love of his mother? Or was it on the contrary because at the start he had not attracted any attention from this superfluous person? Whatever, the little creature had attached his young heart to Viktor, tottering towards him as if to a father, but a father lacking the false-heartedness of the educated, one who never forbade anything, who never got angry, who always looked at you pleasantly. Then when they played together, the mother took herself off willingly, bent over embroidery, remaining silent for quarter of an hour at a time, as if absorbing herself in forgetfulness by design, raising her eyes every now and then with a deep sigh, and each time she lifted her head, her eyes shone with an inner light. Her meditation hovered over the present scene like a benediction on the three beings.

Suddenly and for no good reason she received him one day with hostility,

brutality even. "When are you going away again?" she greeted him with, in a sharp tone.

"Why, do you want me to leave?"

"Yes."

"You make me sick."

"You make me sick as well."

"Me? - You?"

"Yes, by saying things to me that I don't have the right to hear and that you should not say."

"That I did not want to say what's more, but was driven to say."

"One is never forced to do what one ought not."

"Nature does not recognise the word `must`; it originates in the social grammar of man. So if you really want me to leave, I will; a word will suffice. Then I beg of you, formulate your orders. Do you want me to go? Tomorrow? Or today even?"

She looked at him seriously; then she faltered, went to stand in front of the window and turned her back on him. He, as if attracted by a lover, went up to stand beside her and gently stroked one finger of her hand that she let hang loosely, and did not withdraw contact. The two bodies were united and a sort of current passed between them causing her to tremble and quiver. If spiritual magic does not exist, then bodily magic most certainly does.

One thought beat in at him, accompanied by fanfares and bells: "Now," incited the mind. "Now! If not you make a fool of yourself, forever a laughing stock."

"Very good, go on and be ridiculous," he replied firmly and took away his hand.

Inside himself an ironic laugh reverberated triumphantly: "Virtuous hero! Virtuous hero!"

In the twinkling of a contemptuous eye above the shoulder, he replied: "Pedants of adultery!"

Dangerous ground! A path that leads you astray! Where does this youthful joy lead to on so uncertain a path? Can it last? Vain questions. His purpose was not in any case to pull a fast one on happiness.

## IX

### A SUDDEN ENDING

Candlemass morning, when folk usually welcome the first buds - which have not yet appeared - he turned up at her house as usual. "My husband is in his study while I finish tidying up. Would you like to keep him company?"

He was dumbfounded. What new language was that? She sends me to her

husband! Can she have confessed? Is this for an explanation? Oh well, whatever! We'll soon find out. I'm always ready to deal with anything as it comes.

Entering the room full of smoke sent his pulse racing; no judge smoked so much. "Ah, welcome, boomed the confident voice. Look here's the bookshop that keeps sending me one of these bloated female philosophers. You're doubtless not of their persuasion either? Or what then is your real opinion of women?"

A difficult question! And an embarrassing subject! Whatever the answer, it was better to seize the opportunity to discuss theory rather than personal matters since it was not such a sensitive issue. The judicial debate on women went on calmly and in dignified mode, ideas were proposed in an organised fashion, judgements measured and mutual concessions made with good grace. However Viktor in his zeal to glorify women hazarded: "Without woman, I couldn't even live." The lieutenant remarked dryly: "But each one to their own, eh?"

What was that? A warning?

After discussing for some time, when the limits of the feminine outlook had been exhausted and Viktor had just remarked on the mortifying judgement hidden in the fact that everyone, even among the feminist world, considered that the role of a young woman in a play could only be as a lover, Frau Wyss opened the door warily. "Excuse me, gentlemen, for disturbing your learned discussion," she said timidly in a whisper; "don't worry, I'll be away in a moment." With these words, she strolled over to the book-case, crouched down in a graceful manner, rummaged about among the folio volumes, pushing back her ringlets every now and then, before agilely getting back up suddenly book in hand. "There, now I'll clear out," she reassured the men going to the door on tip-toe like a frightened doe.

"Their only role, anyway," said the lieutenant with a self-satisfied smile, "and she plays it well in life and on the stage."

Soon afterwards a tune sounded out, delightfully played on the piano and her voice lit up the house. That caused Viktor's heart to burst out: "O my God, he stammered, how beautiful! How pure! How noble!" Tears spurted unbidden, and he suddenly got up to fuss around the book-case.

"That, I cannot honestly agree with," replied the lieutenant, "because the way she interprets it is neither beautiful nor lucid. Moreover one should never attempt too difficult a piece which is beyond one's capabilities." Upon this, he wanted to take the discussion back to the previous subject. But Viktor was so captivated by the invisible song that he could not concentrate on anything else. "If only she would stop! Her singing bursts my heart."

She halted finally and Viktor succeeded in taking his leave in a composed state of mind.



“Come tomorrow to take tea,” she begged, pressing him as she lay her hand on his. “Just between the two of us, just you and my husband, without including my humble self who you have to accept into the bargain.” And she added in a significant whisper: “For there’ll be whipped cream.” This was said in a tone suggesting whipped cream would present the principal attraction. “So until tomorrow evening!” she repeated wagging an admonitory finger, “I count on you.”

And now what? Has the lieutenant noticed anything or not? He couldn’t get a clear line on this chubby pasha. Anyway all the better if he had got wind of something (but not too much all the same), that would relieve him of keeping matters concealed and of making an unpleasant confession. For now everything was above board; it was exactly as he imagined; a marriage of three in a joint agreement where he handed over the body of Imago to the lieutenant, while he, by way of thanks, allowed him Imago’s heart and soul. So neither forfeited anything. For him the mornings, for the lieutenant the rest of the time and he had nothing to complain about in regard to being disadvantaged by the division. So it is tomorrow evening that the pact of three would be concluded. “Over an everyday dish of whipped cream,” jeered one thought. “Well, why not over whipped cream instead of wine? For a contract to be honourable do we need poison?” With a secret elation he anticipated her whipped cream beside which he had first seen her at Frau Keller’s, the wife of the Councillor. A fine end to the road travelled, Viktor, don’t you think? From the scornful indifference of the beginning to the cordiality of today! And we are only at the outset. Oh the intoxicating hopes for the future!

With this he set contentedly off at a saunter through the streets of the town, humming to himself as he conducted a heavenly orchestra with his two hands.

It was then he met Frau Steinbach. “Come and see me this afternoon,” she demanded curtly in a sharp tone as she passed close to him, “I want to talk to you.”

His mood more sober, as if taken by surprise by an icy shower, he continued on his way now with no musical accompaniment. “I want to talk to you.” Although he was unable to guess what the devil it was about, he was pretty sure it was something disagreeable. For it’s rare that something good involves ‘want to talk to you.’ So what! I’ll throw it off like water off a duck’s back. Only Theuda-Imago determines my fortune, good or bad, but with her everything goes well for the present.

“Dear sir, you make a fool of yourself,” was Frau Steinbach’s reception for him in a severe and cold voice without even looking at him.

Vexation clouded his face: “In what way exactly?”

“Please do not dissemble. You know perfectly well what I’m talking about.”

“Excuse me contradicting you. I am not dissembling and I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Good, then I’ll tell you. About your behaviour at the Wyss’ which is as insensitive as it’s irresponsible.”

“Can I ask on what authority you call my behaviour insensitive and irresponsible?”

“Well is it not insensitive to importune a married woman through amorous outpourings, one whose affection you are quite indifferent to, while at the same time begging for crumbs of pity? Isn’t that insensitive? I must tax you with irresponsibility, or if the expression is too strong, with incorrect behaviour, the fact of trying to inveigle yourself in between decent married people, faithful to their duty. Though happily in vain.”

The blood rose in his face and he blushed violently. As much ashamed as indignant. How stinging it was when a third party knew what passed between two people in private! Furious he replied: “In what concerns matters that I can, or not, respond to, it’s to Direktor Wyss I must make account if he wants, but to none other. Here on the contrary where I’m looked on as foolish and absurd, I will allow myself to point out that I find in my memory reasons to justify my conviction that Frau Wyss offers me a little more than a few crumbs of comfort, and that neither am I as totally indifferent to her as you would like to suppose in your sycophantic manner.”

Then she turned towards him and took a pace in his direction: “Ah! poor fellow, so young and naive. Yes naive, despite your superior spirit and the knowledge you have of the world and men. Then you really believe, unfortunate one, that if a woman tolerates you and listens without displeasure to your declarations of love, that it can give you the slightest indication of the leanings of her heart? Clearly she listens to them with pleasure, they come from you. It is a minor triumph for her. And she will not pass up the opportunity to flirt, just a tiny bit, within the permitted limit. Perhaps she has gone a little too far there, I cannot tell. Anyway what does it mean in this case to go too far? What sort of moral interdict ought to prevent her doing what she wants with a man who courts her in such unseemly way? One is not her parent, she does not have the least obligation to bother about oneself. Whoever puts a woman in a false position must expect that things may go awry; that’s his fault not hers. But even suppose you have made some impression on her heart, which seems to be the case after what you have told me - this wouldn’t be so surprising anyway, you aren’t the first comer - what do you have to gain from that? A minor and superficial fleeting sensation which vanishes at the first blow of fate. If tomorrow her son or even her husband falls ill, what are you then? What will you be in relation to her? Nothing. No less than nothing,

an object of aversion she can't stand the sight of. Frau Wyss, as I've said to you before, is a plain, honest and decent woman who has no thought other than for her child and husband; with her all you can achieve is to compromise her and make her unhappy and also perhaps, if the reprehensible goes on longer, to provide gossip on her account for she also has friends. Now behave as you want and as you can in accord with your conscience. I do not pretend to lay down your duty. But how can a man of eminent mind, conscious of his worth as you are, put up with profiting from the benign indulgence of her husband? That I cannot comprehend. Are you happy in that role?"

"So he knows then," he mumbled.

"If he knows? What a question! Naturally he knows; that comes by way of her. It comes from her because she has faithfully reported every word, each tear, each falling on your knees. That wasn't only her right, it was her duty. If she had failed to do so, she would have had her conscience to answer to."

He bit his lip and lowered his head. All at once he became aware of a thought that had been dormant for a long time and that he hadn't noticed. And you yourself, dear lady, if I might ask the question, how come you also know the exact details?"

"Why through her of course. She knows I'm your closest friend; also she knew the account of your humiliation would make me uneasy. Even so she did not go so far as to deny herself this pleasure; this is common between women. And she was well advised. To have to listen to how you forgot your dignity, your pride, how a serious and significant man in whom one would like to believe, commits errors of tact and abases himself in genuflections like an adolescent consumed by love, leaves one with a bitter taste. More than once I was on the point of warning you; but I didn't want to interfere in another's household like the Salvation Army. Someone who tries to avoid me and does not have the decency to visit me, I wasn't going to impose myself on him; and then I still retained a slender hope that you would finally recollect your dignity. Until today when I met you by chance."

"In a word, Frau Wyss, wife of the Direktor, relayed the full programme of what passed between us and everything said face to face between her and me."

"In a word: yes."

"And everything in one fell swoop? Or several times? Each time the latest news? You are silent? Then I don't need a reply."

He had the impression of drowning in shame, like a mouse in a chamber pot. The narrative of his disinterested love, his devotion, hawked around by the loved one like a serial in the local paper; day after day an instalment, 'the follow-up in the next edition!' The tears caused by the most intolerable pain of his heart, a pain of his sacred heart which had its roots far from the crowds, in the land of all

souls, exposed to the icy judgement of a person not involved, to be evaluated according to rationalism.

However Frau Steinbach, seeing him so abject and dejected, decided to put his crushing to good use by extracting from him a voluntary withdrawal. "So what do you want? What can you hope? What are you expecting?"

"I'm waiting to know," he replied frostily, "if you reckon you've sufficiently humbled me, or if you would like to abuse me even longer?"

She looked at him astonished. He was completely transformed; he stared at her like a demon, dark and distant.

"Oh don't look at me like that," she cried miserably. "Don't be so unfair! I only wish good for you. It was done out of pure friendship, you know full well."

But he rolled his eyes and twisted his mouth. Suddenly he leapt to his feet, lifted his arm and declaimed in a strong and tremulous voice as if he were addressing his words to a distant point: "If I have reached this appalling hour, if I stand here shameful as a punished schoolboy, covered with ridicule like a lover jeered at the end of a farce, putty in the hands of people without heart, I endure it because I have placed one foot on the road to greatness. Things could have turned out differently for me; celebrity and honours, respect and fortune, happiness and love were at my command; I saw them gleaming, I only had to gather them in. If I had done that, if I had acted as a scoundrel who prefers the shallows, I would savour today happiness and felicity, I would be surrounded by love. Nobody would mock me, no-one dare criticise me, or dictate my conduct. You would approach me with wary respect, men would reckon my friendship as a distinction and the monstrous regiment would court my favours. Men without hearts! Obtuse and insensitive as beasts! See my poor soul overflows with a translucent and holy love like a tumultuous ocean. I do not seek in recompense for the sacrifice of my youth, of my love of life, anything other than a minuscule, a parsimonious droplet of love for my trembling heart. What am I saying 'love?' O not even love! Nothing more than permission to love and to suffer without being punished. And what do I get in return? Mockery and derision. So alright go ahead and humiliate me, take pots and pans and tip them by the bucket-load of shameful mire over my head. That also, I can put up with. But I will say this to you. The time will come when men of another sort will pass judgement on my personality, men who have a heart and a soul. They will wash my soiled features with glory and when they see my wounds will say: 'He was not a madman but a martyr.' And my poor maltreated love which today is imputed to me as a crime, for which I submit to the irony of a heartless woman, I'm telling you, one day when I am dead, more than one will ardently wish in their heart to be loved as I love, and will look enviously on one who can so venerate love."

Hardly had he delivered his discourse than he gathered himself, and resumed as

before. "Pardon me," he excused himself, "it was not I who said all that, it's the excess of unhappiness that screamed it." With this he approached the piano and stretched out his hand for his hat.

"But nobody's making fun of you," she said plaintively. "No-one pronounces your name other than with goodwill and respect. With regard to Frau Wyss specifically, she has a warm sympathy and sincere attachment to you. She is profoundly saddened at being the innocent cause of all the gratuitous and irrational pain you have suffered because of her. And as for me, to reproach me for lack of heart. How could you, dear friend, accuse me of that? Don't say 'heartless,' don't say that to me, not to me!" Her words sounded softly and rang out as a cry.

But Viktor's mind was made up and closed to every plea, his look absent-minded. Skirting round her, he took several steps toward the door. Then suddenly recalling himself, he half-turned and bowed. "Dear lady," he began, "there only remains for me to express my gratitude. I cannot find the words. I can only say to you: worthy and faithful friend, thank you from the bottom of my heart, thanks for everything. And you retain from a man abundantly chastised - who has been deceived on many occasions but who has never wished to hurt anyone - an indulgent memory."

"You are leaving," she asked in a vacant voice.

He nodded. "Tomorrow morning as early as possible, as soon as there's a train."

"My God!" she exclaimed, "and where are you going?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Do I know?...It doesn't matter."

"Ah! my dear, dear friend," she said in a tentative voice. And at the same moment he took her hand to kiss it, she kissed his.

Then she opened her window with a sudden motion and inspected the night. When she made out his shadow near the garden gate she shouted loudly: "I believe in you, in your greatness, in your success."

Next morning in the gloom of a misty and humid dawn, he set off for the station as he had decided, packed for the journey, not fully awake, still in a dream whose gentle colours spread their floweriness as far as the desert of reality.

O shame! It is still of her he had dreamed, despite everything. It is only at the station that his drowsy mind looked wearily around him. This very day whose dawn was only just breaking all around, she would be waiting by the evening. "This evening," as if it is history already! It's over before it's even arrived. What's more, he felt absolutely blank in thinking about her, nothing that called for farewells, no emotion or rancour, just the insipid taste of nausea stuck to his palate; indifferent as a stranger he quitted the dreary country.

One booking office was lit up, the face of an employee framing its window. We can then depart immediately. After reading the destination board above the barrier, he mentioned the name of some distant town abroad.

“Second class?” sounded the query.

“Third,” he replied, urged on by some obscure inner need.

This was to ensure he didn't meet any acquaintances (the improbability of an encounter at this hour of the morning did not suffice, he wanted to be absolutely sure), or else simply as a symbol of his fall from grace; that best corresponded with his shamefaced flight; third class.

As soon as he got into the carriage he noticed on the first seat just beside the guard, a small gentleman with a friendly face and modest demeanour. “A discreet man, a decent man, this can be my companion.” However as he got ready to put his suitcase up, the gentleman intervened urgently to prevent him:

“No, no, sir! Up there are my legs.” Little disposed that day to interpret futile pranks, a conciliatory Viktor put his things elsewhere and sat down without interest, sitting sideways so as not to touch the knees of the passenger opposite. But the fellow blinked his eyes mischievously: “Sir you've no need to go to any trouble for my knees, they don't feel anything when they're touched.” With this he lifted a quilt and he saw then he had no legs at all! “They amputated them at the hospital,” he explained with a beaming, almost proud smile. Then happy to converse with someone, he began to recount the history of his suffering. “What I've had to put up with is incredible!” was the refrain. Viktor said to himself: “Here's someone who's had to endure far more bad luck than myself!” My name is Bürgisser he said by way of conclusion, Leonard Bürgisser of Otlingen, or else Lienert as we say back home. Otherwise a joiner.” After this information he was satisfied and silent.

The train was gearing up in a regular rhythm so that Viktor who hadn't slept much the night before, dozed off without realising it. His neighbour tapped him on the knees waking him with a start. “Look there,” whispered the man without legs, “look at that enormous bouquet of flowers in deepest winter which that beautiful distinguished-looking woman is carrying down there, in front, near second class! She must love him to have bought such splendid flowers. Look! She's having to wipe her eyes with her handkerchief. - But if he doesn't come soon, it will be too late; the train must be ready to leave. - Hush! Don't move. Now she's made a half-turn and is coming towards us: look. - There's also some lily-of-the-valley, I can smell them from here. - Oh dear, my poor woman! Look there it's as she reached third class that she realises no-one has recognised her and she's begun sobbing.”

Viktor having at first ignored this chatter, found himself looking out of the window mechanically despite himself. A tall and slim woman, and from what he

could make out on the gloomy platform, exceptionally stylish, was advancing down below along the side of the carriage, a bouquet in her hands, her face buried in a handkerchief, her shoulders shaking with grief. A wretched parallel cleaved his soul: "For me - my God! No danger! - Nobody would bring me a bouquet of flowers. Oh no! Rather an armful of thistles if she'd known I was leaving." With that he turned away from the window full of bitter thoughts.

"All aboard!" suddenly urged the appeals of the guard. "At last!" rattled the windows with his ironical comment. They slammed the train doors, then there was a moment of silence. "Ready to go!" There was a blast on whistle. - Behind him someone wrenched open the door so that in the intrusion of cold air the smell of flowers penetrated inside - but for a moment only as the porter slammed the doors again. "Oh no, Fraulein," smiled the joiner behind the young lady when she had disappeared, "the one you're searching for isn't in this class. But if you don't get down quickly from the carriage the train will be off. Can you hear the complaints of the guards? In fact they're perfectly within their rights for once they've shouted "ready to go" nobody can stop the train leaving whatever their problem."

Again an imperious whistle from the conductor; then the wheels slowly started turning. Viktor heaved a sigh of relief. "May I never see it again!" he promised himself while his look gauged eagerly his liberating progress from the pillars of the station. - "But stop! Look! Isn't that Frau Steinbach down there crossing the road hurrying towards the station, bouquet in hand? Anyway it's her walk. If only she would show her face! -"

"Tickets ready everybody! - Your tickets please," demanded the ticket-collector reaching out to Viktor. This nuisance dealt with, the station had disappeared and from all sides, left and right, roads raced towards the train.

"Well Viktor, are you going to honour us with a little sign by way of an address?" called out the houses as they receded.

"No, he replied haughtily. "If you would, do me this favour: no hypocritical tender scenes in the last act. You believe I cannot see the mocking apes leaping from roof to roof and the jeering thrushes sneering in the trees." Little by little, the darkness lifted. Cottages, gardens, groves of trees fled, some behind, others to the side. Finally the full day shone on the uncovered fields so as to leap into the train.

Now his mind was completely awake. And with that, memory. With memory, the hard feelings: "Rejoice, you've won; I'm fleeing, deflated, abashed. But defeated by what? By mediocrity, cliques, the insensitivity of hardened hearts." His rancour gathered into black clouds; the clouds clustered into fury and the anger boiled up the anathema.

Then came a voice that caused him to start: that of the Severe Woman.

“What are you carrying there deep down in your pocket?” asked the voice.

“A script that nobody knows about apart from you and me.”

“And whom does the writing concern?”

“It concerns you, my Severe Woman.”

“And when did you write down this evidence about me?”

“I wrote the first lines on arriving in that ill-met town, and finished the last line during the night.”

“And what did I say to you when you completed the last line?”

“You said to me: ‘I accept your witness, and as you have given evidence about me faithfully, despite your misery, your passion and your folly, without giving up or turning away or taunting me, I also bear witness to you: see, I’m going to raise you to the heights of life and grab the horns of men to get them to place recalcitrant glory at your feet.’ That’s what I said.”

“Yes, that’s so. And you are now, ungrateful man, dishonouring this period of sacred work during which you created this script with curses? Listen carefully to what I command: tune your instrument to your soul, sing and rejoice, and bless this town and all its harbours; each hour, each incident, each pain inflicted on you by men who made you wretched down to the dog that barked as you went by.”

Reluctantly he obeyed; with effort and going against the grain, he harmonised the harp with his soul and sang and praised from the depth of his wounds. His sighing soul blessed everything he left behind him, from the men who had treated him unfairly to the dog that barked as he walked past.

“Good,” said the voice.” As a reward for your obedience, lift up your eyes and look around you.”

And there outside, beneath the window, near the train, going at the same speed riding a white horse, galloped Imago; not the false one, the human Imago called Theuda, the lieutenant’s wife, but the true the faithful one, his own. She had emerged from her illness as if it were a new birth and she carried a celebratory victory garland in her hair. “I’m waiting for you,” she shouted smiling toward the window.

Amazed he called out: “Imago, my bride, what miracle enabled you to cure your serious affliction? And what is the victory you are celebrating with this small crown on your head.”

She responded happily: “I have seen you emerge without a stain from the whirlwind of passions; that why in joy I’ve placed a garland in my hair.”

“And will you also pardon me, Imago my sublime partner, for having confused in my folly and blindness a mortal apparition with your grandeur?”

She smiled: “Your tears have washed away your excesses.” Upon these words, she spurred herself forward, giving a great cry of gladness, and overtook the



train.

“And now, let me know,” required the invisible voice, “will you still call me the Severe Woman?”

Surprised his soul offered thanksgiving:

“Saintly lady of my life, your name is `consolation and mercy.` What misfortune if I did not have you; what fortune that I do have you.”