

The Imperative of Desire

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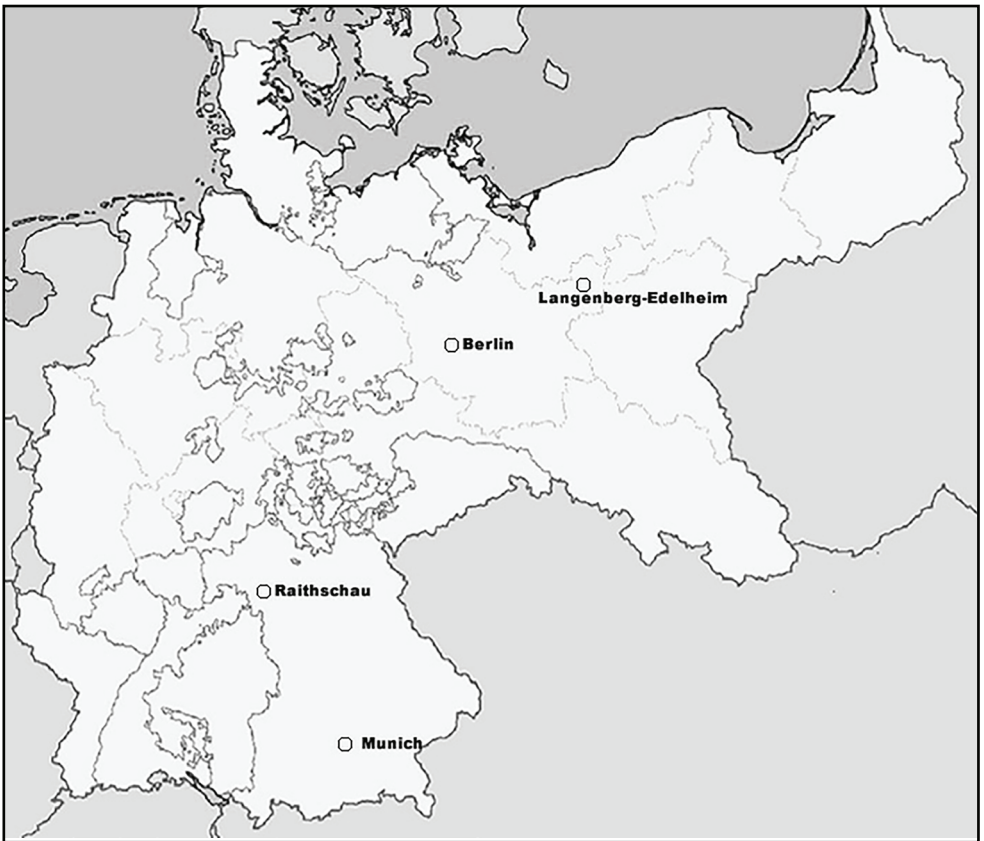
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THE GERMAN EMPIRE - 1910



*To my parents, who taught me there is
always a story in history.*

1

Yellow finches were dancing over the meadow when the old driver's attention faltered. The carriage lurched as it pitched into a rut. In an instant, Grandmother flung her arm across the seat, slamming me against the leather backboard so hard that my ribs ached.

"Are you all right, my darling?" Grandmother asked anxiously. "I feared you would fall." I nodded to assure her, while secretly rubbing the spot where her arm had squeezed my chest. She laid a soft hand that smelled of rosewater on my cheek. "That's my good girl." Her hand fluttered up to her hat, as big around as a wagon wheel, but a silk scarf along with a multitude of hat pins had kept it secure.

"My, that gave me a start." She called to the driver, "Zimmel! Mind the road, will you!"

"Yes, *Gnädige*. My apologies," the old man called over his shoulder.

My eyes sought the yellow finches, but they'd had their fill of thistle seeds and had moved on, replaced by sparrows picking out the centers of the dried daisies and coreopsis. Grandmother let the wildflowers grow along the road because they were pretty. At home, the mowers cut them down, leaving only pointed stubble that I could feel through the thin soles of my shoes. At that time of year, they would be cutting the second hay, but I wouldn't be there to watch.

The baby had died within a week of his birth. Afterwards, the halls of Schloss Edelheim were silent except for the sound of muffled weeping from my mother's rooms. Father asked me not to sing so loudly and to play elsewhere. Fortunately, Grandmother had rescued me from the gloom.

The nuns opened the convent gate as our carriage approached. The towering stone walls of Obberoth blocked the sun, creating a chill as their shadow crept over our carriage.

"Do you remember this place?" asked Grandmother as we entered the courtyard.

I shook my head dramatically, swinging my blond braids. In fact, I

vaguely remembered the cobblestone courtyard and a tall, austere woman clad all in black. My father had brought me to this place when I was very young.

“The headmistress here is my sister. She is your godmother,” Grandmother explained.

“Tante Veronika is my godmother,” I corrected. I was fond of my beautiful, red-haired cousin, who let me sit on her lap.

“Yes, Veronika is also your godmother...at your father’s insistence.” Grandmother’s tone indicated she did not entirely approve, but then she smiled. “What a lucky girl you are to have two godmothers! The bishop had to give permission because your grandaunt is a nun.”

“What’s a nun?” I asked.

Grandmother looked momentarily perplexed. “A nun is a woman who devotes her life to God,” Grandmother finally said. “Nuns never marry and live with other women in order to pray and be of service.”

I struggled to make sense of this. I knew that mother and father were married. They often had loud arguments that sent me scurrying into my hiding places. The cavernous space under the dining table in the great hall was my favorite. Perhaps foregoing marriage was a good thing.

A young nun greeted us as we alighted from the carriage. She bowed to Grandmother, and we followed her heels through the corridors of the convent school until we arrived at a door. After only one knock, the iron hinges squealed, and the door opened. The woman standing in the doorway was even taller than Grandmother, who was taller than any woman I knew, even Mother. Clad all in black, she made a severe impression. Yet her eyes, the blue of Alpine ice, were merry and kind.

“Welcome back, Katje,” the woman said, kissing Grandmother on each cheek. “And here is little Margarethe!” She knelt so that she could speak directly to my face. As a small person, I appreciated this gesture toward equality, but also found it curious. “Welcome to Obberoth, my dear girl,” she said and reached to embrace me. Her enthusiasm frightened me. I hid in Grandmother’s skirts. Her crinoline petticoat made a crinkling sound as I pressed closer to her thigh. “Go on, Grethe. Stand up straight.”

Grandmother reached down to stroke my hair, while I suspiciously regarded the woman in black. “This is your grandaunt, Sister Scholastica, my sister. Say ‘good day,’ to your *Tante* like a big girl.”

The woman rose from her knees in one smooth motion like a giant raven taking flight. “She’s shy, of course,” she said, giving me a little smile of affection. “She has no idea who I am. We must become better acquainted.”

The indulgent smile and the warmth in her voice encouraged me to leave the protection of my grandmother’s skirts and have a look at my grandaunt. She was so tall my neck ached from looking up.

“She’s a clever child. Go on, Grethe,” said Grandmother, nudging me forward, “show my sister what you’ve learned.”

I understood the time to perform had arrived, yet try as I might, I was unable to recite the text I’d been encouraged to prepare. My mind went completely blank.

“Give her something to read, Klärchen,” urged Grandmother, realizing I was flummoxed.

My grandaunt turned to a bookshelf and took down a leather-clad volume. It was not, as I had hoped, something simple, like the Bible or the *Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. No, she had chosen Schlegel’s translation of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*.

Tante turned her pale eyes on me, which caused me to squirm. “Read, child,” she ordered in a firm voice.

Once the trembling ceased and my voice was steady, I opened the book and read where my eyes fell: “I met the duke yesterday and had much question with him. He asked me of what parentage I was; I told him as good as he, so he laughed and let me go.”

A smile of satisfaction spread across my grandaunt’s face. Evidently, my performance had pleased her. “How old did you say?” she asked Grandmother, but her eyes never left mine.

“Five years, this September. She’s very tall for her age.” Grandmother took a piece of licorice out of her purse. Besides the taste, I liked that licorice turned my tongue black. When I stuck it out to demonstrate, the maids’ cries of false horror delighted me.

“She adores mathematics,” my grandmother continued, finally removing her hat. She placed the hat pins in the brim and laid it aside. “When she became bored with arithmetic, Karl began teaching her geometry.”

“Indeed,” said my grandaunt, peering at me. She removed a piece of foolscap from a box on her desk, dipped her pen into the inkwell, and drew a figure on the paper. “What is this, my little Margarethe?”

“A circle.”

“Very good, my pet. Now can you tell me how big the circle is?”

“May I have a ruler and a pencil?” Nodding, she took these items from her desk and handed them to me. I drew a chord in the circle. “I also need a compass,” I murmured, wishing I had thought of this sooner. *Tante* studied me for a moment, but she opened her desk again and found a compass. I drew overlapping circles from the chord’s points of intersection. “This is the diameter,” I explained.

“And why is that useful, Margarethe?” asked *Tante*, leaning closer.

“The outside of the circle is this measure multiplied by Pi.” I recited the number to twenty positions after the decimal. I could have gone on. Grandfather had explained that this unusual number went on forever, which I understood but did not find useful. *Tante* nodded, evidently pleased. After measuring the diameter and calculating the circumference, I announced, “The circle is 4.3472 centimeters.”

“Very good,” said *Tante*, handing me a sugar biscuit. I wolfed it down like an animal. She gave me another and poured me a glass of milk from a large earthenware pitcher.

Meanwhile, I could see my grandmother was trying to conceal a smile of triumph. “She also reads Latin,” she revealed, “and a little Greek.”

“Does she now?” *Tante* turned in my direction and caught me licking the sugar crystals off the biscuit.

I could tell she was curious about the Latin. She took a book down from the shelf. “Eat your biscuit, Margarethe. I would like to hear you read something.” I crammed the biscuit into my mouth, and she handed the book to me. Fortunately, she had chosen something basic—Julius Caesar’s

account of the Gallic Wars, the primer of every budding Latinist. With a long, elegant finger, she indicated where I should commence reading. Of course, anyone who knows the sound of the characters can moronically reproduce them.

“What does it mean?” asked *Tante*, her hands vanishing under the front flap of her uniform.

I translated the passage into German as best I could: “When informed of these matters, Caesar, fearing the fickle disposition of the Gauls, who easily take positions, yet are much inclined to change, decided that nothing was to be entrusted to them.”

My grandmother and my grandaunt regarded one another in wordless communication. I was given another sugar biscuit. While I ate it, I reflected that my father trained his dogs in this manner, with bits of dried meat so they would sit and heel at their master’s will. Indeed, my grandmother stroked my head as if I were a puppy.

“She is much more than clever,” said my grandaunt in an excited voice. “You must allow me to teach her.”

I liked that idea. I looked expectantly at my grandmother, but she shook her head. “Not yet, Klara. Her father wants to keep her at home and has decided she will have a tutor.” Grandmother continued to pet me as if I were her *Affenpincher*. “Fritz has already selected a school in England... when the time comes.”

“Why not here with us?” my grandaunt asked indignantly.

My grandmother sighed. “Let him do as he wishes. You know how stubborn he is.”

“But she will be bored in an ordinary school.”

“Perhaps, but she will also learn to be like other girls...unlike you.”

My grandaunt compressed her lips into a straight line, which is how I realized how much this remark had wounded her.

“You will have her soon enough.” Grandmother patted her arm. “Be patient, dear.”

Before we left, my grandaunt knelt so that her eyes were level with mine to say her farewells. As I studied her pale eyes, I realized that I had finally met someone who understood me.



“She stinks,” said my mother, wrinkling her nose as I came near. My father chuckled and pulled me closer. I realized it was his boots that stank, fresh from the muck in the stall. Despite a ride and a tramp through the field, they still shone like black mirrors. Before we had gone out for our ride, he had demonstrated the proper way to polish boots with a bit of spittle in the shoe wax. I took great pleasure in spitting into the tin. My father commended me on my enthusiasm for this part of the task.

“Send for her nurse to bathe her,” added my mother, never looking up from her needlework.

My father winked at me. “Come, Grethe. Let’s go outside. Your mother doesn’t appreciate the scents of the stable.” I found it difficult to imagine anything better. My father had put me in a saddle as soon as I could sit erect. My pony was my prize possession.

Although my mother was an expert rider, she seldom accompanied us on our jaunts, whereas Father would look for occasions to be with me, whether for a ride or to play with the new puppies from his prize Weimaraners. He often stole me from the nursery and would sit me on his lap while he cut up an orange or an apple with his little gold-handled folding knife. He gave me his beer to sip and make moustaches with the foam. Sometimes he let me sit on his shoulders and comb his hair with a tortoise-shell comb while he read to me. He never protested when I used a little saliva to make the combing easier, although it made his hair as stiff as my starched pinafore.

A footman brought Father his shoes. He took off his smelly boots, and we went out to the terrace that overlooked the south garden. Father sat me on the wicker couch. When he took a seat beside me, the wicker creaked a bit in protest. He was very tall, but graceful for someone of his height. His hair was still nearly as blond as mine. Like the Kaiser, he waxed his moustache so that it turned up at the ends. Once, I filched the pot of wax from his dressing room and used it to stick paper butterflies on the windows of the nursery. Father was stern when he discovered my thievery, but on that occasion, he only patted my behind.

He searched inside his tweed hunting coat, found a butterscotch, and handed it to me. While I happily sucked on the sweet, he filled his pipe from his tobacco pouch. I liked that scent even better than horses. It was aromatic of leather, bay rum, and whiskey. I only knew how whiskey smelled because I had once taken the crystal stopper out of the decanter and had a sniff.

Father took his time lighting his pipe. The ritual intrigued me. It began with filling the pipe with tobacco, carefully tamping it down with little silver tools, and then lighting it with a match struck on the sole of his shoe. The tobacco glowed bright orange for a moment. When my father left off drawing air, it began to smoke.

“How marvelous to be at home,” he said with a sigh. “I wish I could remain longer.”

“Why must you go?” I asked.

He put his arm around my shoulder and gave me a little squeeze. “Because it is my duty.”

“What is duty?” I asked, sitting up straight because I sensed this was important.

“It is something that one must do because it is the right thing. Mostly, it is something you would not want to do, given the choice.”

My father was a soldier. He had once explained that soldiers obeyed orders, whether they wished to or not. I reasoned that duty was like an order, but if so, whence did it come? My father laughed when I spoke my deduction aloud. “Duty is something one learns so well that there is never a question. It is inside you,” he said, poking my tummy until I giggled.

I badgered my father on this subject. He said that when I was old enough, he would give me Kant to read.

“Read it to me, Papa. Then you can explain.”

“I would rather break my leg than read Kant again,” he said, making a face. Fortunately, he laughed, or I would have thought he was serious.

“Why must you be in the army?”

“Because we all must be of service. It wouldn’t do to sit about all day. A career is important.”

“For girls too?”

He frowned. “Well, yes. I suppose it’s important for girls too.”

“I shall be a soldier like you when I grow up,” I proclaimed.

My father was kind enough not to laugh. “No, my dear. Girls cannot be soldiers.”

I considered this with a frown. It was the first time I had perceived the limits of my sex.



With great ceremony, my mother bequeathed her dolls with fancy dresses to me. Sitting on the tuffet in the nursery, they remained untouched. I found their vacant stares and painted, rosebud mouths unnerving and scowled at them as I passed. Out of pure curiosity, I pulled off their pretty heads and found they were completely hollow inside.

My nurse was horrified when she found the decapitated dolls lying on the nursery floor and ran to fetch my mother.

“Margarethe! What have you done!” Mother shrieked at the sight of the headless doll bodies. “These were the greatest treasure of my girlhood.” She sat down on the tuffet and began to cry. I pitied her, especially because she would weep over such useless things.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” I mumbled, tugging at her skirts. I was only sorry to have caused her pain but not to discover the dolls’ terrible secret.

Eventually, Mother mopped her face with her lace handkerchief and focused her eyes on me. I glanced down at my dress and soiled pinafore. No doubt, my hair was a tangle. Nurse often had to yank the brush through it to get out the knots, sometimes burrs from running through the fields with the servants’ boys. Mother gazed at me, clearly telegraphing her disapproval. I’d long known that I was a disappointment to her, despite resembling her in every way. I had her dark blue eyes. Everyone else in my family had eyes as pale as ice. I waited for Mother to say something, but she merely sighed and left the room.

She sent the miserable dolls to be repaired. When they returned, looking no worse for their decapitation, I pointedly ignored them. I preferred to play with Father’s jack-in-a-box and his multicolored wooden blocks, which I

used to build forts and castles. Grandfather gave me a miniature stable complete with miniature animals. My mother was appalled to find the bull posed to rut a cow, a scene I had frequently observed in the barnyard. After that, she unsuccessfully tried to confine me to the house, but I always managed to get away and return with burrs in my hair.

Fortunately, there was one area in which my interests and Mother's intersected. She was an accomplished pianist and widely known for her amateur recitals. For my fourth birthday, she gave me a miniature piano, brought at great expense from Vienna. I was not a prodigy at music, composing symphonies in the cradle like the divine Mozart, but I had a good ear and could reproduce melodies after a single hearing. Mother said that my long fingers were perfect for a pianist.

Reading music was even more interesting than reading words. In my imagination, the little black notes on the score danced as I played.

"*Mutti*, why can we only hear music while it is being played?" I asked one day.

"Oh, Margarethe, what nonsense you say sometimes. Why do you ask such questions?"

"Because I want to know. I can always see a flower or a dog. But music disappears when the notes fade away."

Mother shook her head in disapproval. "You are a most peculiar child."

My godmother, Lady Veronika, who often came to walk with my father in the garden and then afterwards disappeared with him into the little boathouse on the lake, often needed to soothe my injured feelings. When she found me weeping in a corner after my mother had offered her opinion about my oddness, she allowed me to climb into her lap. She stroked my hair and kissed me. "You are not peculiar, my darling. You are *exceptional*."

Exceptional.

I liked the sound of that.



Mother's remedy for my peculiarity was Mlle. Celine de Courcelles, who had descended from an old French noble family and had been educated in the best convent schools. My new governess' duties were to

teach me French and how to behave like a lady, a goal I did not share, but Mademoiselle had several advantages in pursuing her agenda. She was quite handsome, and I adored the sound of her voice when she spoke her own tongue. The first French words I learned were her pet name for me: “*Petite Sauvage*.” I melted into a puddle of cooperation whenever she said it.

I expressed my devotion by composing doggerel in which I extolled her “tiny teeth” and “limpid, pale hair.” Mlle. Celine took no offense at these unwitting insults and seemed quite charmed.

“You are a poet, my darling,” she would say and kiss me.

Thus encouraged, I composed more bad verse. She always listened intently and with a completely serious face.

She wore a delicious scent that compelled me to follow her everywhere. I sniffed the air like a dog when she passed. At night, I would slip out of the nursery and into her bed. Although she clucked her tongue, she never sent me away. I snuggled against her soft breasts and inhaled her intoxicating cologne. She had little need to discipline her “little savage,” having conquered me with love.

About this time, Grandfather had begun to bend Papa’s ear concerning my education. While it amused him to teach me mathematics, Latin, and Greek, he knew there should be a more disciplined approach.

Father assigned his adjutant, Lieutenant von Scheppel, to the special duty of instructing me in German, history, and geography. Every day, for two hours, he sat very straight in his chair and held forth on such mind-numbing topics as the mountain ranges in China. While he did, I entertained myself by inventing heroic stories in my head. That is not to say that I didn’t learn anything from Scheppel. He taught me how to stand at attention, march and crisply salute. Despite my father’s discouraging words, I was still determined to become a soldier.

While I was learning to march, Mlle. Celine noticed Lieutenant von Scheppel’s handsome looks. Eventually, there was a change in her figure. Shortly after that, both Scheppel and Mlle. Celine vanished.



After Mlle. Celine left, Father decided I knew enough French, and it was time for me to learn English. He expected me to go up to Oxford as he had. Oxford provided me with my next tutor, a young woman, who had read natural science at Somerville College.

Father introduced me to Miss Westerfield on the terrace. I instantly liked her strong face and intelligent gray eyes, but I felt nervous when she surveyed my soiled pinafore, stained purple from the blackberries I'd been picking with the gardener's sons. Nurse had tried to get me to tidy myself before meeting my new tutor, but I'd run away and hid from her in the hall of portraits. Naturally, I expected a reprimand, but Miss Westerfield simply led me away to the nursery without a word. After she unpinned her bonnet and set it down, she took a seat in the rocking chair and regarded me with a calm, steady gaze.

"I see you have been picking berries," she said in English.

"Ja, Fräulein. Ich habe Beeren gepflückt."

She nodded "Let's try to speak English. Say, 'Yes, Miss Westerfield, I have been picking berries.'" I tried to repeat this, but, of course the W came out wrong. "Very good. You learn quickly, and even though you don't speak my language, you understood me." She smiled. She had a broad mouth, so her smile seemed to take up her entire face. "Let's put on a fresh pinafore, shall we? And then, if you like, I shall read you a story."

At that moment, I knew that we would get on splendidly. She was even able to convince me to take a bath.

English came easily to me. My father had spoken it to me even before Miss Westerfield's arrival so that I might accustom my ear to the sounds. So much of the language was like German, but it was simpler because there were no case endings. What I found difficult was that syntax was so important.

Miss Westerfield had me practice English by reading Oscar Wilde's fairy tales aloud. She was intrigued that I remembered everything I read and could later recite it by heart. Before bedtime, we would lie on my bed in the dark, and I would tell her the story of the "The Selfish Giant" or "The Nightingale and the Rose." I loved these sessions, but I missed Mlle. Celine's

scent. Miss Westerfield wore none, but she always smelled of Castile soap. When she held me close, I could feel her soft breasts. Unlike my governess, she always returned me to my own bed when I tried to creep into hers. If I'd been frightened by a bad dream or hearing a noise in the dark, she would sit with me, holding my hand until I fell asleep.

Miss Westerfield was pleased to learn that she was not solely responsible for my education. Grandfather continued to teach me Latin and Greek as well as mathematics. He was amazed that I could grasp the rudiments of calculus, although he found it difficult to convey the concept of infinity to a child. After a long and laborious effort to explain it, he threw up his hands in exasperation.

"I understand," I said.

"You do?" marveled Grandfather.

"Yes, of course, infinity is the space between the stars."

His pale eyes glowed with pleasure. "Well, yes, but of course, it is."

I liked the symbols of mathematics. They were so square and certain, even the Greek letters, which I knew from reading Homer. Grandfather explained that the Arabs had invented algebra, and then read to me from the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*. Father had brought home a multi-colored carpet from Persia when he was posted there with the foreign service and explained that the colorful stitches had been hand-knotted by children no older than I. On clear nights, I would imagine riding on my magic carpet into the space between the stars.

Miss Westerfield began my scientific education with a butterfly collection. I preferred beetles, but my tutor liked butterflies, and I liked her, so I went along with the scheme. After we chloroformed the poor creatures, we pinned them to a velvet-covered board in a shadow box. We progressed from butterflies to botany. We collected every plant found on Edelheim's lands, and there were many. We ranged the forests, tramped through the meadows, and got soaking wet feet in the marshes. The specimens were meticulously dried in a press, using newspaper to absorb the moisture.

We arranged everything carefully in a leather-bound volume and annotated all the entries with the common and Latin names as well as my

impressions of the habitat. Miss Westerfield held my hand as I formed the letters. Grandmother had tried in vain to help me learn to write, but I simply couldn't. Meanwhile, I had developed my own shorthand. Unfortunately, no one else could read it. Although I could write all the mathematical symbols quite well and even print the Greek letters, it took some time before my penmanship was legible.

After the scrapbook was complete, Miss Westerfield and I reviewed it together. "You can see how much your handwriting has improved," my tutor said in an encouraging voice as we turned the pages. "Shall we write to your grandmother and invite her to come and see it?"

I nodded eagerly. Miss Westerfield gave me a piece of stationery and a pen. It required several tries to produce a letter without inkblots and cross-outs, but Grandmother was so charmed by the invitation, she kept it in a wooden box along with other relics from my childhood.

As a reward for my achievement, Grandmother induced my grandaunt to lend me a copy of the famous herbal that my ancestor, Margarethe von Raithschau, had written in 1242. It was a fairly recent copy, but hand-lettered, nonetheless. The illustrations were exquisitely drawn, but it was the Latin text that intrigued me. It detailed the medicinal qualities of each plant and how it might be used either to heal or to poison. Miss Westerfield explained that, in those days, poisons were employed quite often.

On her return to Raithschau, Grandmother took me with her. Miss Westerfield had gone home to England to visit her family, and Grandfather thought it best to get me out from under foot. My parents had lost another child. This son had also died within a week of birth. I had been spared the first funeral, being too young, but this time, I was outfitted with a little black dress and miniature veil and walked behind the casket on the way to the village church.

My father firmly held my hand. Mother was unable to attend. She had not yet gotten over the loss of her first son. Sometimes, she would take me to the church crypt to lay little nosegays of pink, miniature roses. There were piles of little dried nosegays on the tiny coffin. No one ever dared to remove them. Now, another tiny coffin was placed beside it and more nosegays were laid.

After the funeral, Mother took to her bed. The drapes were drawn. It was always dark in her room and airless. The place smelled of old lavender. When she allowed me to visit, I sang to her. Sometimes, she would manage a weak smile in response. She drank too much from little, brown bottles. I heard the word, “laudanum” whispered among the maids. The doctor was unaware of Mother’s habit until the night she vomited so violently she nearly died from a stomach hemorrhage. I watched them take the bloody towels out of her room. My father confiscated the brown bottles, and after that, Mother gradually got better.



By the time I returned to Edelheim in October, my mother had emerged from her rooms, and Miss Westerfield was back from England. Things were looking up.

Unfortunately, Father hadn’t given up the idea that I should become a history scholar. He had studied history at Balliol after a stint at Sandhurst arranged by one of Grandfather’s friends in the foreign office. Lieutenant Albrecht had studied at university and actually knew something. Unlike Scheffel, he didn’t force me to memorize the names of mountain ranges.

It was Lieutenant Albrecht who taught me that there is always a story in history, and he told them vividly. After the lesson about Attila the Hun, I was afraid of every shadow for a week. For months afterwards, I was too terrified to walk alone through the armory hall, where empty suits of armor stood at attention.

Albrecht was useful as well as fanciful. He taught me how to build kites from newspaper and thin strips of wood and complex bridges made of matchsticks. At his suggestion, my father donated the tin soldiers of his youth so that I might learn military strategy. Albrecht and I recreated famous battles of the past on the library floor until our toy war annoyed the maids trying to dust. At that point, Father demanded we relocate our campaigns to the nursery.

My tutor also taught me to fence with a miniature sabre minus a point or sharpened edge. My father came to watch and said that I had the makings of a fencer.

“Would you like to see my dueling scar?” Father asked in a tantalizing voice.

“Yes, please!”

He pulled up his sleeve to show me the fine white line running down his forearm.

“Were you defending the honor of a woman?” I asked. Miss Westerfield had me reading Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, and my head was filled with romantic tales of noble knights and damsels in distress.

Father chuckled. “No, little mouse. There were no women involved.” I was disappointed to learn that he’d belonged to a student fencing club, and the wound came from sparring with live blades rather than a real duel. He explained that a fencing wound, or *Schmiss*, was a badge of honor, and I instantly decided I must have one.

That year, Lieutenant Albrecht stuffed my head with magical things. I rode my pony and built tiny sailboats of leaves and twigs. In the winter, I rode in a sleigh behind two, quick-stepping, white Trakehners, the Prussian warmbloods my father raised at stud.

Then, something terrible happened. At the end of the school term, Miss Westerfield announced that she was going to Dublin to finish her education. She explained that, although women were allowed to attend Oxford lectures and sit for examinations, they could not be matriculated, not even in the women’s colleges. Ambitious women went to the more liberal University of Dublin to receive their credentials.

“But who will teach me now?” I asked in a sad voice.

“I’m sure your father will find another tutor soon. Maybe someone who can teach you more than I can. I’m sure you would like that.”

I pouted. I still missed Mlle. Celine and often dreamt of her. Despite Miss Westerfield’s attempts to explain why she must leave and her optimism for the future, I felt betrayed, furious, and frightened. I retreated to my new favorite hiding spot in the hay loft of the cow barn. The *Schloss* had one hundred eighty-six rooms, so there was no lack of places to hide, but the cow barn with its scents of hay, rich manure, and spilt milk always made me feel especially safe. Below, I heard people moving about—the stable

hands, the gardener's son, and my nurse calling my name. I watched the activity through a knot hole in the floorboards.

Eventually, Miss Westerfield came into the barn. In a fit of confidence, I had revealed my secret place in the loft. She gazed upwards, knowing exactly where to look. For a long moment, we eyed one another through the hole in the floor. Then she lifted her skirts to avoid the dust of the hay and approached the ladder. As she was about to step on the second rung, she cried out in pain.

I waited in my hiding place to see what would happen next. Miss Westerfield got down and gripped her foot. When I saw the blood flowing through her fingers, I realized she was injured and scrambled down the ladder to help her. I offered my handkerchief, which was still clean, as a bandage. Her face was contorted in pain and ghostly white. "Please get help," she managed to say.

I ran for the cow master, who enlisted two of the cowhands to help Miss Westerfield into the house. Meanwhile, I ran ahead to tell Wolff, the majordomo, what had happened. Wolff knelt beside me. He asked me to slow down as I spewed out my version of the events. I was telling him about the rusty nail and the blood gushing out of the wound when the cow master arrived with Miss Westerfield. Wolff patted my shoulder. "You did well today, Lady Margarethe. You showed you have a clear head in an emergency. Your father would be proud."

Hearing his praise, I felt important and grown-up, but evidently I was not grown-up enough to watch while the doctor examined Miss Westerfield's foot. Wolff told me to wait outside in the hall. Instead, I watched from above. I had found a place in the attic where a small hole in the ceiling above my tutor's room allowed me to see and hear all that went on below. I sometimes used it to spy on Miss Westerfield while she was dressing. I had never seen an adult woman naked before. Miss Westerfield's breasts were white and soft, her nipples, the palest rose. Her beauty was so heart stopping that sometimes, I couldn't bear the sight of it.

Through the hole in the ceiling, I listened to the doctor's concerns. The nail had gone straight through from the sole of the foot to the instep.

The doctor doubted the wound could be cleaned effectively, so he dug in it with a crude probe. Then he poured antiseptic directly into it. I watched wide-eyed and incredulous, knowing it was barbaric. Miss Westerfield's face twisted in pain, but she clenched her teeth and never cried out.

The doctor who attended Miss Westerfield was not the regular physician. The town doctor had gone on an extended holiday to visit his family in Cologne. Instead, the majordomo had summoned an elderly doctor retired from the regiment. He was dirty. His fingernails were encrusted with filth, and he stank of stale beer. Day after day, I watched him examine his patient, not even washing his hands before he unwound the bandage to inspect the injury.

They would not allow me to see Miss Westerfield, who had become feverish and was talking gibberish. I, meanwhile, lay on my belly in the attic overhead to keep an eye on things.

By the fifth day, the injured foot had begun to darken. I understood from the conversation below, this was not a good sign. I began to daydream about inventing a powerful potion that would miraculously turn the foot back to its normal pink color and restore my tutor to health. In my imagination, I would carefully tend the wound, rubbing in a healing ointment, and soothing Miss Westerfield's feverish brow with cool cloths.

Despite my rich fantasies, the foot only continued to darken. Finally, it turned completely black.

By then, I could no longer bear the separation. When no one was looking, I let myself into Miss Westerfield's room and crept into bed beside her. She was in no position to protest. Her face was pale as death. Her forehead was covered with beads of sweat, and the blackened foot was fetid. The scent remained in my nostrils for days.

Miss Westerfield's feverish delusions passed momentarily, and she recognized me.

"Oh, little Margarethe, how kind of you to come."

I clung to her.

"Please forgive me," I begged. "I am so sorry."

"It was an accident." She kissed me and stroked my hair.

“But if I hadn’t hidden in the barn...”

“Sh, my darling child,” she said, laying a finger on my lips. “It’s no one’s fault, just bad luck.”

Then she lost consciousness again.

The next day the doctor came. I heard him speaking to my mother. She was in charge now. Father had been sent abroad again with one of our foreign delegations.

“The foot must be amputated, or she will die,” the doctor announced bluntly.

Mother looked perfectly aghast. “But she’s so young, barely twenty.”

The regimental doctor shrugged. “I’m sorry, *Gnädige*, but it cannot be helped. She will die otherwise.”

My mother nodded gravely and left the doctor to his awful work. This time, at least, he washed his hands, and put on an apron. He set an iron poker in the fire to heat, stoking the coals until they glowed red. He asked one of the footmen and a maid to assist.

The limb was now black to mid-calf. He drew a line just above the darkened flesh with his fountain pen to indicate where he would cut. Then he traced around the circumference with a scalpel cutting through the flesh. As he did, I felt a strange and intense pain deep within my bowels as if I were being probed with something sharp. I suddenly remembered how animals released their bowels when they were threatened, especially when they were slaughtered or shot during the hunt. There must be a connection, I reasoned. Perhaps in watching what the doctor was doing to Miss Westerfield, I’d been creating a physical mirror of her pain in my body. I could turn away or try to stop the sympathetic response. I willed my mind to block all physical sensations. I willed it with all my strength. Miraculously, my pain stopped.

To my horror, the doctor took a great saw from his kit. The rhythmic sound of cutting through the bone was like that of a woodsman felling a tree. The blackened foot separated from the limb in minutes. The doctor threw it into a basin. The maid turned aside to retch into a chamber pot while the doctor took the glowing iron from the fire and seared the edge

of the stump. I could smell the distinctive scent of burning meat, even in the attic.

“That was quick work, *Herr Doktor*,” said the footman, looking a bit queasy, although he avoided vomiting like the maid.

The doctor laughed. “In the old days, before ether, and the wounded came in from battle, we had no time to be fancy. Someone held them down, and we cut off the shattered limbs just like that!” He snapped his fingers. “I could do a dozen in an hour!”

We were not at war. There was no great hurry. He could have taken some time to do right by Miss Westerfield.

The maid wrapped the amputated foot in a towel and took it away while the old doctor bandaged the wound.

“Now there’s nothing to do but wait and see,” said the doctor, scratching the unshaven whiskers at his throat.

I wish I could report that Miss Westerfield recovered and, despite her infirmity, went to Dublin to matriculate for her degree, but her fever continued. The blackness that had claimed her foot and lower extremity moved into her knee, then her thigh, and eventually, it ran through her entire leg. Fortunately, she never awoke from her misery. She died a week later.

Father returned, not because of these minor readjustments in the household, but because he had leave. He sent a wire to Miss Westerfield’s family in England and inquired as to what should be done with her remains. They gratefully accepted Father’s offer to inter her in the churchyard in the village.

Again, I was required to walk behind a casket. I had grown a bit since I had last performed this duty, so my black dress was shorter but still fit. We stood in for Miss Westerfield’s kin during the funeral. We followed the Roman rite, but father had asked the Lutheran pastor of the village to do the honors because Ms. Westerfield was Anglican.

I began to cry when they lowered the coffin into the grave, but Father gave my arm a sharp yank and then pressed it hard with his fingers. The pain stopped the tears at once. Afterwards, he explained, “One must always

put on a good face, Margarethe, even when you are in great pain. One must hold oneself with dignity, especially for the sake of those who depend on us.”

I nodded, swallowing the great lump in my throat, for I had loved Miss Westerfield and would miss her.

“How am I to learn now, Father?” I asked, feeling lost and bewildered without her.

“You are going to England,” he explained. “As soon as summer ends.”