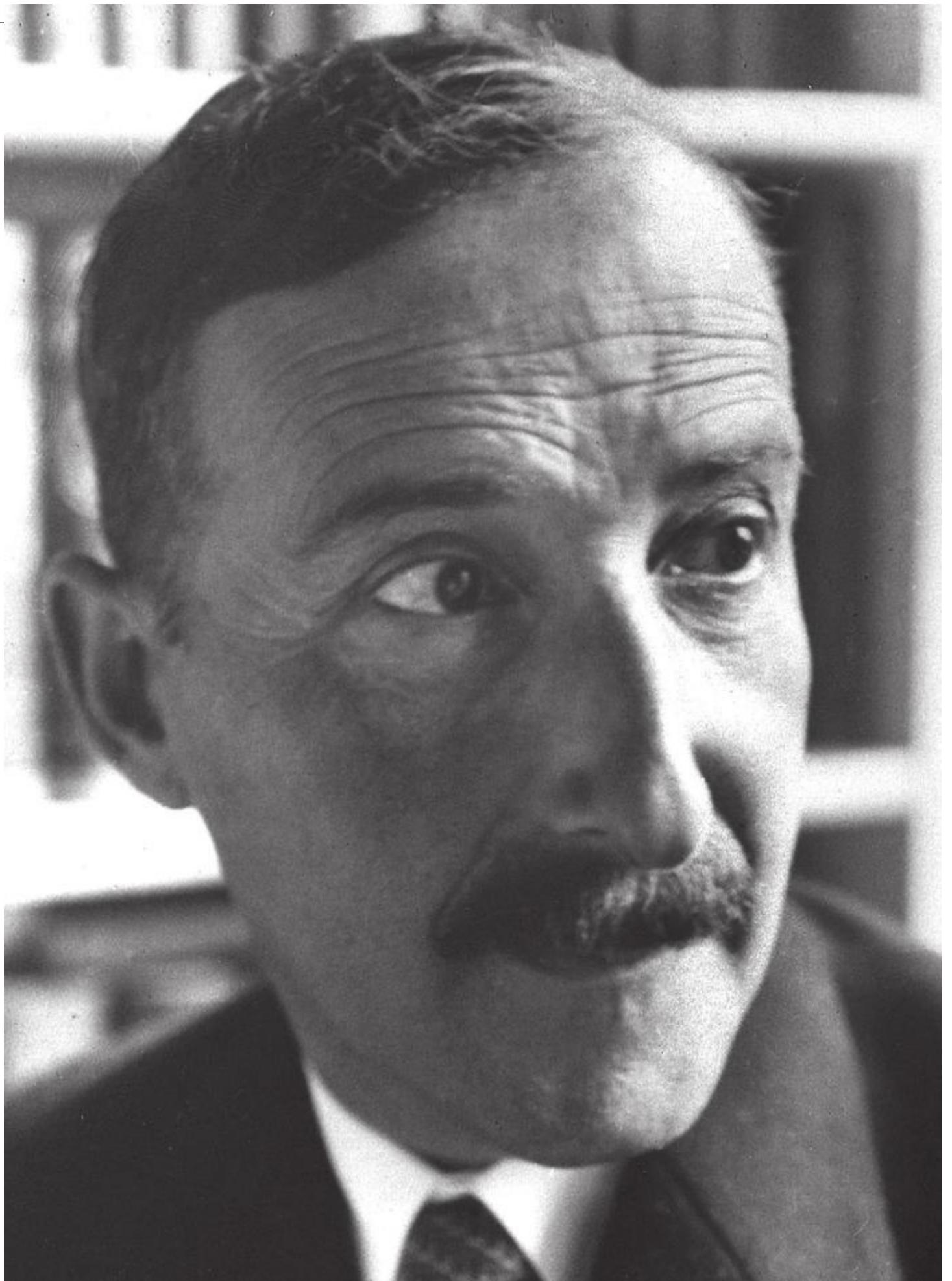


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STEFAN ZWEIG

Burning Secret



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BURNING SECRET

TRANSLATED BY ANTHEA BELL

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BURNING SECRET

THE PARTNER

THE SHRILL WHISTLE of the locomotive sounded; the train had reached Semmering. For a moment the black carriages stood still in the silvery light of the heights up here, allowing a motley assortment of passengers to get out and others to board the train. Voices were raised in altercation, then the engine uttered its hoarse cry again and carried the black chain of carriages away, rattling, into the cavernous tunnel. Once again the pure, clear view of the landscape lay spread out, a backdrop sweet and clean by rain carried on a wet wind.

One of the new arrivals, a young man who drew admiring glances with his good clothes and the natural ease of his gait, was quick to get ahead of the others by taking a cab to his hotel. The horses clip-clopped uphill along the road at their leisure. Spring was in the air. Those white clouds that are seen only in May and June sailed past in the sky, a company clad all in white, still young and flighty themselves, playfully chasing over the blue firmament, hiding suddenly behind high mountain peaks embracing and separating again, sometimes crumpling up like handkerchiefs, sometimes fraying into shreds, and finally playing a practical joke on the mountains as they settled on their heads like white caps. Up here the wind too was restless as it shook the scanty trees, still wet with rain, so violently that they creaked slightly at the joints, while a thousand drops sprayed off them like sparks. And sometimes the cool scent of the snow seemed to drift down from the mountains, both sweet and sharp as you breathed it in. Everything in the air and on the earth was in movement, seething with impatience. Quietly snorting, the horses trotted on along the road, going downhill now, and the sound of their bells went far ahead of them.

The first thing the young man did on reaching the hotel was to look through the list of guests staying there. He was quickly disappointed. Why did I come? he began to ask himself restlessly. Staying up here in the mountains alone, without congenial companions, why, it's worse than being in the office. I'm obviously either too early or too late in the season. I'm always out of luck with my holidays; I never find anyone I know among the other guests. It would be nice if there were at least a few ladies; then a little light-hearted flirtation might help me to while away a week here agreeably enough.

The young man, a baron from a not particularly illustrious noble family in the Austrian civil service, where he was employed himself, had taken this little holiday without feeling any real need for one, mainly because all his colleagues were away for the spring break, and he didn't feel like making the office a present of his week off. Although he was not without inner resources, he was very gregarious by nature, which made him popular. He was welcome everywhere he went, and was well aware of his inability to tolerate solitude. He felt no inclination to be alone and avoided it as far as possible; he didn't really want to become any better acquainted with himself. He knew that, if he wanted to show his talents to best advantage, he needed to strike sparks off other people to fan the flames of warmth and exuberance in his heart. On his own he was frosty, no use to himself at all, like a match left lying in its box.

In downcast mood, he paced up and down the empty hotel lobby, now leafing casually through the newspapers, now picking out a waltz on the piano in the music-room, but he couldn't get the rhythm

of it right. Finally he sat down, feeling dejected, looking at the darkness as it slowly fell and the grey vapours of the mist drifting out of the spruce trees. He wasted an idle, nervous hour in this way, and then took refuge in the dining-room.

Only a few tables were occupied, and he cast a fleeting glance over them. Still no luck! No one he really knew, only—he casually returned a greeting—a racehorse trainer here, a face he'd seen in the Ringstrasse there, that was all. No ladies, nothing to suggest the chance of even a fleeting adventure. He felt increasingly bad-tempered and impatient. He was the kind of young man whose handsome face has brought him plenty of success in the past and is now ever-ready for a new encounter, a fresh experience, always eager to set off into the unknown territory of a little adventure, never taken by surprise because he has worked out everything in advance and is waiting to see what happens, a man who will never overlook any erotic opportunity, whose first glance probes every woman's sensuality and explores it, without discriminating between his friend's wife and the parlour-maid who opens the door to him. Such men are described with a certain facile contempt as lady-killers, but the term has a nugget of truthful observation in it, for in fact all the passionate instincts of the chase are present in their ceaseless vigilance: the stalking of the prey, the excitement and mental cruelty of the kill. They are constantly on the alert, always ready and willing to follow the trail of an adventure to the very edge of the abyss. They are full of passion all the time, but it is the passion of a gambler rather than a lover, cold, calculating and dangerous. Some are so persistent that their whole lives, long after the youth is spent, are made an eternal adventure by this expectation. Each of their days is resolved into hundreds of small sensual experiences—a look exchanged in passing, a fleeting smile, knees brushing together as a couple sit opposite each other—and the year, in its own turn, dissolves into hundreds of such days in which sensuous experience is the constantly flowing, nourishing, inspiring source of life.

Well, there were no partners for a game here; the hunter could see that at once. And there is no worse frustration for a player of games than to sit at the green baize table with his cards in his hand, conscious of his superior skill, waiting in vain for a partner. The Baron called for a newspaper. Gloomily, he ran his eye over the newsprint, but his thoughts were sluggish, stumbling clumsily after the words like a drunk.

Then he heard the rustle of a dress behind him, and a voice, slightly irritated and with an affected accent, saying, "*Mais tais-toi donc, Edgar!*" A silk gown whispered in passing his table, a tall voluptuous figure moved by like a shadow, and behind that figure came a pale little boy in a black velvet suit, who looked at him curiously. The couple sat down at their reserved table opposite him, the child visibly trying hard to behave correctly, an effort apparently belied by the dark restlessness in his eyes. The lady, on whom alone the young Baron's attention was bent, was very *soignée*, dressed with obvious good taste, and what was more, she was a type he liked very much, one of those rather voluptuous Jewish women just before the age of over-maturity, and obviously passionate, but with enough experience to conceal her temperament behind a façade of elegant melancholy. At first he avoided looking into her eyes, and merely admired the beautifully traced line of their brows, a perfect curve above a delicate nose that did in fact betray her race, but was so finely shaped that it made her profile keen and interesting. Her hair, like all the other feminine features of her generous body, was strikingly luxuriant, her beauty seemed to have become ostentatiously complacent in the self-assured certainty that she was widely admired. She gave her order in a very low voice, reproved the boy for playing with his fork—all of this with apparent indifference to the cautiously insinuating glances cast at her by the Baron, whom she did not seem to notice at all, although it was only his alert watchfulness that obliged her to exercise such careful control.

The Baron's gloomy face had suddenly brightened. Deep down, his nerves were at work

invigorating it, smoothing out lines, tensing muscles, while he sat up very straight and a sparkle came into his eyes. He himself was not unlike those women who need the presence of a man if they are to exert their whole power. Only sensuous attraction could stimulate his energy to its full force. The huntsman in him scented prey. Challengingly, his eyes now sought to meet hers, which sometimes briefly returned his gaze with sparkling indecision as she looked past him, but never gave a clear outright answer. He thought he also detected the trace of a smile beginning to play around her mouth now and then, but none of that was certain, and its very uncertainty aroused him. The one thing that did strike him as promising was her constant refusal to look him in the eye, betraying both resistance and self-consciousness, and then there was the curiously painstaking way she talked to her child, which was clearly meant for an onlooker. Her persistent façade of calm, he felt, meant in itself that she was beginning to feel troubled. He too was excited; the game had begun. He lingered over his dinner, kept his eyes on the woman almost constantly for half-an-hour, until he had traced every contour of her face, invisibly touching every part of her opulent body. Outside, oppressive darkness was falling, the forests sighed as if in childish alarm as huge rain clouds now reached grey hands out for them, darker and darker shadows made their way into the room, and its occupants seemed even more closely drawn together by the silence. The mother's conversation with her child, he noticed, was becoming increasingly forced and artificial under the menace of that silence, and soon, he felt, would dry up entirely. He decided to try testing the waters a little. He was the first to rise and, looking past her and at the landscape outside, went slowly to the door. Once there he quickly turned his head as if he had forgotten something—and caught her interested glance bent on him.

It attracted him. He waited in the lobby. She soon came out too, holding the boy's hand, leafing through the journals as she was passing and pointed out some pictures to the child. But when the Baron, as if by chance, came up to the table, apparently to choose a journal for himself but really to look more deeply into the moist brightness of her eyes, perhaps even strike up a conversation, she turned away, tapping her son lightly on the shoulder. "*Viens, Edgar! Au lit!*" She passed him coolly, her skirts rustling. A little disappointed, the Baron watched her go. He had really expected to get to know her better this evening, and her brusque manner was a setback. But after all, her resistance was so intriguing, and his very uncertainty inflamed his desire. In any case, he had found his partner, and the game could begin.

A SWIFT FRIENDSHIP

WHEN THE BARON CAME into the lobby the next morning he saw the son of his fair unknown engaged in earnest conversation with the two lift-boys, showing them the illustrations in a Wild West book by Karl May. His mama was not there; she must still be busy dressing. Only now did the Baron really look at the child. He was a shy, awkward, nervous boy of about twelve with fidgety movements and dark, darting eyes. Like many children of that age, he gave the impression of being alarmed, as if he had just been abruptly woken from sleep and suddenly put down in strange surroundings. His face was not unattractive, but still unformed; the struggle between man and boy seemed only just about to begin, and his features were not yet kneaded into shape, no distinct lines had emerged, it was merely a face of mingled pallor and uncertainty. In addition, he was at just that awkward age when children never fit into their clothes properly, sleeves and trousers hang loose around their thin arms and legs, and vanity has not yet shown them the wisdom of making the best of their appearance.

Wandering around down here in a state of indecision, the boy made a pitiful impression. He was getting in everyone's way. At one moment the receptionist, whom he seemed to be bothering with all kinds of questions, pushed him aside; at the next he was making a nuisance of himself at the hotel entrance. Obviously he wasn't on friendly terms with anyone here. In his childish need for chatter he was trying to ingratiate himself with the hotel staff, who talked to him if they happened to have time, but broke off the conversation at once when an adult appeared or there was real work to be done. Smiling and interested, the Baron watched the unfortunate boy looking curiously at everyone, although they all avoided him. Once he himself received one of those curious glances, but the boy's black eyes immediately veiled their alarmed gaze as soon as he caught them in the act of looking, and retreated behind lowered lids. This amused the Baron. The boy began to intrigue him, and he wondered if this child, who was obviously shy out of mere timidity, might not be a good go-between, offering the quickest way of access to his mother. It was worth trying, anyway. Unobtrusively, he followed the boy, who was loitering just outside the door again, caressing a white horse's pink nostrils in his childish need for affection, until yet again—he really did have back luck—the driver of the carriage told him rather brusquely to get out of the way. Now he was standing around once more, bored, his feelings hurt, with his vacant and rather sad gaze. The Baron spoke to him.

“Well, young man, and how do you like it here?” he began suddenly, taking care to keep his tone of voice as jovial as possible.

The boy went red as beetroot and looked up in alarm. He took the proffered hand almost fearfully, squirming with embarrassment. It was the first time a strange gentleman had ever struck up a conversation with him.

“It's very nice, thank you,” he managed to stammer. The last two words were choked out rather than spoken.

“I'm surprised to hear that,” said the Baron, laughing. “This is really a dull sort of place, particularly for a young man like you. What do you do with yourself all day?”

The boy was still too confused to answer quickly. Was it really possible that this elegant stranger wanted to talk, when no one else bothered about him? The idea made him both shy and proud. Making

an effort, he pulled himself together.

“Oh, I read books, and we go for a lot of walks. And sometimes Mama and I go for a drive in the carriage. I’m supposed to be convalescing here, you see, I’ve been ill. So I have to sit in the sun a lot too, that’s what the doctor said.”

He uttered the last words with a fair degree of confidence. Children are always proud of an illness, knowing that danger makes them doubly important to the rest of their family.

“Yes, the sunlight’s good for young men like you, it’ll soon have you tanned and brown. All the same, you don’t want to be sitting around all day. A young fellow like you should be going around in high spirits, kicking up a few larks. It looks to me as if you’re too well-behaved—something of a bookworm, eh, with that big fat book under your arm? When I think what a young rascal I was at your age, coming home every evening with my trousers torn! You don’t want to be *too* good, you know!”

Involuntarily, the child had to smile, and that did away with his fears. He would have liked to say something, but anything that occurred to him seemed too bold and confident in front of this amiably smiling stranger who addressed him in such friendly tones. He had never been a forward boy, he was always rather diffident, and so his pleasure and shame now had him terribly bewildered. He longed to continue the conversation, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. Fortunately the hotel’s big, tawny St Bernard dog came along just then, sniffed them both, and was happy to be patted.

“Do you like dogs?” asked the Baron,

“Oh, yes, my grandmama has one at her villa in Baden, and when we’re staying there he always spends all day with me. But that’s just in summer, when we’re visiting.”

“We must have a couple of dozen dogs at home on our estate. I’ll tell you what, if you’re good while you’re here I’ll give you one of them. He’s a brown dog with white ears, a young one. Would you like that?”

The child flushed red with delight. “Oh yes!” It burst out of him, warm and enthusiastic. Next moment, however, second thoughts set in. Now he sounded anxious and almost alarmed.

“But Mama would never let me. She says she won’t have a dog at home because they make too much trouble.”

The Baron smiled. At last the conversation had come around to Mama.

“Is your Mama so strict?”

The boy thought about it, looked up at him for a second as if wondering whether this strange gentleman was really to be trusted. He answered cautiously.

“No, Mama isn’t strict. Just now she lets me do anything I like because I’ve been ill. Maybe she’ll even let me have a dog.”

“Shall I ask her?”

“Oh yes, please do,” cried the boy happily. “Then I’m sure Mama will let me have him. What does he look like? You said white ears, didn’t you? Can he fetch?”

“Yes, he can do all sorts of things.” The Baron had to smile at the light he had kindled so quickly in the child’s eyes. All of a sudden the boy’s initial self-consciousness was gone, and he was bubbling over with the passionate enthusiasm that his timidity had held in check. It was an instantaneous transformation: the shy, anxious child of a moment ago was now a cheerful boy. If only the mother were the same, the Baron couldn’t help thinking, so passionate behind her show of diffidence! But the boy was already firing off questions at him.

“What’s the dog’s name?”

“Diamond.”

“Diamond,” the child said, crowing with delight. He was impelled to laugh and crow at every word.

that was spoken, intoxicated by the unexpected experience of having someone make friends with him. The Baron himself was surprised by his swift success, and decided to strike while the iron was hot. He invited the boy to go for a walk with him, and the poor child, starved of any convivial company for weeks, was enchanted by the idea. He chattered away, innocently providing all the information his new friend wanted and enticed out of him by means of small, apparently casual questions. Soon the Baron knew all about the family, more particularly that Edgar was the only son of a Viennese lawyer, obviously a member of the prosperous Jewish middle class. And through further skilful questioning he quickly discovered that the child's mother had expressed herself far from happy with their stay in Semmering, and had complained of the lack of congenial company. He even thought he could detect from Edgar's evasive answer to the question of whether Mama was very fond of Papa, that all was not entirely well in that quarter. He was almost ashamed of the ease with which he elicited all these little family secrets from the unsuspecting boy, for Edgar, very proud to think that what he said could interest a grown-up, positively pressed his confidences on his new friend. His childish heart throbbed with pride to be seen publicly on such close terms of friendship with a grown man—for as they walked along the Baron had laid an arm around his shoulders—and gradually forgot his own childhood, talking as freely as he would to a boy of his own age. Edgar was very intelligent, as his conversation showed: rather precocious, like most sickly children who have spent a great deal of time with adults, and was clearly highly strung, inclined to be either fervently affectionate or hostile. He did not seem to adopt a moderate stance to anything, and spoke of everyone or everything either with enthusiasm or a dislike so violent that it distorted his face, making him look almost vicious and ugly. Something wild and erratic, perhaps as a result of the illness from which he had only just recovered, gave a fanatical fire to what he said, and it seemed that his awkwardness was merely fear, suppressed with difficulty, of his own passionate nature.

The Baron easily won his confidence. Just half-an-hour, and he had that hot and restless heart in his hands. It is so extraordinarily easy to deceive children, unsuspecting creatures whose affections are seldom sought. He had only to lose himself in the past, and childish talk came to him so naturally and easily that the boy himself soon thought of him as one of his own kind. After only a few minutes, any sense of distance between them was gone. Edgar was blissfully happy to have found a friend so suddenly in this isolated place, and what a friend! All his companions in Vienna were forgotten, the little boys with their reedy voices and artless chatter, those images had been swept away by this one hour in his life! His entire passionate enthusiasm was now devoted to his new, his great friend, and his heart swelled with pride when, as the Baron said goodbye, he suggested meeting again tomorrow morning. And then his new friend waved as he walked away, just like a brother. That moment was perhaps, the best of Edgar's life. It is so very easy to deceive children.

The Baron smiled as the boy stormed away. He had found his go-between. Now, he knew, the child would pester his mother to the point of exhaustion with his stories, repeating every single word—and he remembered, complacently, how cleverly he had woven a few compliments intended for her into the conversation, always speaking of Edgar's "beautiful Mama". He was certain that the talkative boy wouldn't rest until he had brought his friend and his mother together. He didn't have to lift a finger to decrease the distance between himself and the fair unknown, he could dream happily now as he looked at the landscape, for he knew that a pair of hot, childish hands was building him a bridge to her heart.

TRIO

THE PLAN, AS IT TURNED OUT an hour later, was excellent and had succeeded down to the very last detail. When the young Baron entered the dining-room, deliberately arriving a little late, Edgar jumped up from his chair, greeted him eagerly with a happy smile, and waved. At the same time he tugged his mother's sleeve, speaking to her fast and excitedly, and unmistakably pointing to the Baron. Blushing and looking embarrassed, she reproved him for his over-exuberant conduct, but she could not avoid satisfying her son's demands by glancing at the Baron once, which he instantly took as his chance to give her a respectful bow. He had made her acquaintance. She had to respond to the bow, but from now on kept her head bent further over her plate and was careful not to look his way again throughout dinner. Edgar, on the contrary, kept looking at him all the time, and once even tried to carry something over to the Baron's table, a piece of bad manners for which his mother scolded him soundly. When they had finished their meal Edgar was told it was time for him to go to bed, and there was much whispering between him and his Mama, the final outcome being that his ardent wish to go over to the other table and pay his respects to his friend was granted. The Baron said a few kind things that made the child's eyes sparkle again, and talked to him for a few minutes. But suddenly, with a skilful move of his own, he rose and went over to the other table, congratulated his slightly embarrassed fellow-guest on her clever and intelligent son, spoke warmly of the morning he had passed so pleasantly with him—Edgar was scarlet with pride and delight—and finally inquired after the boy's state of health in such detail and with so many questions that the mother was bound to answer him. And so, inevitably, they drifted into a conversation of some length, to which the boy listened happily and with a kind of awe. The Baron introduced himself, and thought that his resounding name had made a certain impression on the woman's vanity. At least, she was remarkably civil to him, although observing all decorum; she even left the table soon for the sake of the boy, and she apologetically added.

Edgar protested vigorously that he wasn't tired, he was ready to stay up all night. But his mother had already given the Baron her hand, which he kissed respectfully.

Edgar slept badly that night, full of a mixture of happiness and childish desperation. Something new had come into his existence today. For the first time he had become a part of adult life. Half asleep, he forgot his own childhood state and felt that he too was suddenly grown up. Until now brought up as a lonely and often sickly child, he had had few friends. There had been no one to satisfy his need for affection but his parents, who took little notice of him, and the servants. And the strength of a love is always misjudged if we evaluate it only by its immediate cause and not the stress that we have before it, the dark and hollow space full of disappointment and loneliness that precedes all the great events in the heart's history. A great, unused capacity for emotion had been lying in wait, and now it raced with outstretched arms towards the first person who seemed to deserve it. Edgar lay in the dark, happy and bewildered, he wanted to laugh and couldn't help crying. For he loved this man as he had never loved a friend, or his father and mother, or even God. The whole immature passion of his early years now clung to the image of a man even whose name he had not known two hours ago.

But he was clever enough not to let the unexpected, unique nature of his new friendship distress

him. What bewildered him so much was his sense of his own unworthiness, his insignificance. Am good enough for him, he wondered, tormenting himself, a boy of twelve who still has to go to school and is sent to bed before anyone else in the evening? What can I mean to him, what can I give him? was this painfully felt inability to find a means of showing his emotions that made him unhappy. Usually, when he decided that he liked another boy, the first thing he did was to share the few treasures in his desk with him, stamps and stones, the possessions of childhood, but all these things which only yesterday had seemed full of importance and uncommonly attractive, now suddenly appeared to him devalued, foolish, contemptible. How could he offer such things to this new friend whom he dared not even call by his first name, how could he find a way, an opportunity to show his feelings? More and more, he felt how painful it was to be little, only half-grown, immature, a child of twelve, and he had never before hated childhood so violently, or longed so much to wake up a different person, the person he dreamed of being: tall and strong, a man, a grown-up like the others.

His first vivid dreams of that new world of adulthood wove their way into these troubled thoughts. Edgar fell asleep at last with a smile, but all the same, the memory of tomorrow's promise to meet his friend undermined his sleep. He woke with a start at seven, afraid of being late. He quickly dressed and went to his mother's room to say good morning—she was startled, since she usually had some difficulty in getting him out of bed—and ran downstairs before she could ask any questions. Then he hung about impatiently until nine and forgot to have any breakfast; the only thing in his head was that he mustn't keep his friend waiting for their walk.

At nine-thirty the Baron came strolling nonchalantly up at last. Of course he had long since forgotten about the walk, but now that the boy eagerly went up to him he had to smile at such enthusiasm, and showed that he was ready to keep his promise. He took the boy's arm again and walked about in the lobby with the beaming child, although he gently but firmly declined to set out on their expedition together just yet. He seemed to be waiting for something, or at least so his eyes suggested as they kept going to the doors. Suddenly he stood up very straight. Edgar's Mama had come in, and went up to the two of them with a friendly expression, returning the Baron's greeting. She smiled and nodded when she heard about the planned walk, which Edgar had kept from her as something too precious to be told, but soon agreed to the Baron's invitation to her to join them. Edgar immediately looked sullen and bit his lip. What a nuisance that she had to come in just now! The walk had been for him alone, and if he had introduced his friend to his Mama it was only out of kindness, it didn't mean that he wanted to share him. Something like jealousy was already at work in him when he saw the Baron speaking to his mother in such a friendly way.

So then the three of them went out walking, and the child's dangerous sense of his own importance and his sudden significance, was reinforced by the obvious interest both the adults showed in him. Edgar was almost exclusively the subject of their conversation, in which his mother expressed a rather feigned concern for his pallor and highly-strung nerves, while the Baron, smiling, made light of the ideas and praised the pleasant manners of his new "friend", as he called him. This was Edgar's finest hour. He had rights that no one had ever allowed him in the course of his childhood before. He was permitted to join in the conversation without being immediately told to keep quiet, he was even allowed to express all kinds of bold wishes which had always met with a poor reception before. And it was not surprising that his deceptive feeling of being grown up himself grew and flourished. In his happy dreams, childhood was left behind, like a garment he had outgrown and thrown away.

At lunch the Baron accepted the invitation of Edgar's increasingly friendly mother and joined them at their table. They were now all together, not sitting opposite each other, acquaintances had become friends. The trio was in full swing, and the three voices of man, woman, and child chimed happily.

together.

INTO THE ATTACK

THE IMPATIENT HUNTSMAN now felt that it was time to approach his prey. He did not like the informal, harmonious tone that they had adopted. It was all very well for the three of them to talk comfortably together, but talk, after all, was not his intention. And he knew that the element of companionship, a masquerade hiding his desire, kept delaying the erotic encounter between man and woman, depriving his words of their ardour and his attack of its fire. He did not want the conversation to make her forget his real aim, which, he felt sure, she had already understood.

It was very likely that he would not pursue his quarry in vain. She was at that crucial age when a woman begins to regret having stayed faithful to a husband she never really loved, when the glowing sunset colours of her beauty offer her one last, urgent choice between maternal and feminine love. At such a moment a life that seemed to have chosen its course long ago is questioned once again, for the last time the magic compass needle of the will hovers between final resignation and the hope of erotic experience. Then a woman is confronted with a dangerous decision: does she live her own life or live for her children? And the Baron, who had a keen eye for these things, thought he saw in her just the dangerous hesitation between the fire of life and self-sacrifice. She kept forgetting to bring her husband into the conversation. He obviously appeared to satisfy only her outer needs, not the snobbish ambitions aroused in her by an elegant way of life, and deep inside her she really knew very little about her child. A trace of boredom, appearing as veiled melancholy in her dark eyes, lay over her life and muted her sensuality. The Baron decided to move fast, but at the same time without any appearance of haste. On the contrary, he himself intended to be outwardly indifferent to this new friendship; he wanted her to court him, although in fact he was the suitor. He planned to display a certain arrogance, casting a strong light on the difference in social station between them, and he was intrigued by the idea of gaining possession of that beautiful, opulent, voluptuous body merely by the means of exploiting that arrogance, outward appearances, a fine-sounding aristocratic name and correct manners.

The passionate game was already beginning to arouse him, so he forced himself to be cautious. He spent the afternoon in his room, pleasantly aware of being missed and wanted. However, his absence was not felt so much by her, his real target, as by the poor boy, to whom it was a torment. Edgar felt dreadfully lost and helpless, and kept waiting for his friend all afternoon with his own characteristic loyalty. Going out or doing something on his own would have seemed like an offence against the friendship. He wandered aimlessly around the hotel corridors, and the later it grew the fuller his head brimmed with unhappiness. In his restless imagination he was already dreaming of an accident, some injury that he had unwittingly inflicted, and he was close to tears of impatience and anxiety.

So when the Baron appeared at dinner that evening, he met with a joyous reception. Ignoring the admonishment of his mother and the surprise of the other guests, Edgar jumped up, ran to him and stormily flung his thin arms around the Baron's chest. "Where were you? Where have you been?" he cried, the words tumbling out. "We've been looking for you everywhere." His mother blushed at being involved in this unwelcome way, and said rather sternly, "*Sois sage, Edgar. Assieds-toi!*" (She always spoke French to him, although it was not a language that came naturally to her, and she could easily

find herself on shaky ground in a conversation of any length.) Edgar obeyed, but would not stop asking the Baron questions. “Don’t forget,” his mother added, “that the Baron can do as he likes. Perhaps your company bores him.” This time she brought herself into it on purpose, and the Baron was pleased to hear her fishing for a compliment with that reproach to her son.

The huntsman in him was aroused. He was intoxicated, excited to have found the right trail so quickly, to feel that the game was close to his gun. His eyes gleamed, the blood flowed easily through his veins, the words sprang from his lips with an effervescence that he himself could not explain. He was, like everyone of a strongly erotic disposition, twice as good, twice as much himself when he knew that women liked him, just as many actors find their most ardent vein when they sense that they have cast their spell over the audience, the breathing mass of spectators before them. He had always been a good story-teller, able to conjure up vivid images, but today he excelled himself, while now and then drinking a glass of the champagne that he had ordered in honour of this new friendship. He told tales of hunts in India in which he had taken part, as the guest of an aristocratic and distinguished English friend, cleverly choosing this subject as harmless although, on the other hand, he realized that anything exotic and naturally beyond her reach excited this woman. But the hearer whom he really enchanted with his stories was Edgar, whose eyes were bright with enthusiasm. He forgot to eat and gazed at the story-teller, drinking only the words from his lips. He had never hoped to see someone of the flesh who had known the amazing things he read about in his books: the big game hunts, the brown people, the Hindus, the terrible wheel of the juggernaut crushing thousands under its rim. Until now he had never stopped to think that such people really existed, he knew so little about those fairy-tale lands, and that moment lit a great fire in him for the first time. He couldn’t take his eyes off his friend, he stared with bated breath at the hands that had killed a tiger and were now there before him. He hardly liked to ask a question, and when he did his voice was feverishly excited. His quick imagination kept conjuring up in his mind’s eye the pictures that went with those stories, he saw his friend high up on an elephant with a purple cloth over it, brown men to right and left wearing gorgeous turbans, and then, suddenly, the tiger leaping out of the jungle, fangs bared, plunging its claws into the elephant’s trunk. Now the Baron told an even more interesting tale of a cunning way to catch elephants, by getting old, tame beasts to lure the young, wild, high-spirited elephants into enclosure and the child’s eyes flashed. And then—Edgar felt as if a knife were suddenly coming down in front of him—Mama suddenly said, glancing at the time, “*Neuf heures! Au lit!*”

Edgar turned pale with horror. Being sent to bed is a terrible command to all children, because it means the most public possible humiliation in front of adults, the confession that they bear the stigma of childhood, of being small and having a child’s need for sleep. But such shame was even more terrible at this fascinating moment, when it meant he must miss hearing such wonderful things.

“Just one more story, Mama, let me listen to one more, let me hear about the elephants!”

He was about to begin begging, but then he remembered his new dignity as a grown man. He ventured just one attempt, but his mother was remarkably strict today. “No, it’s late already. You go up to bed. *Sois sage, Edgar*. I’ll tell you all the Baron’s stories afterwards.”

Edgar hesitated. His mother usually accompanied him when he went to bed, but he wasn’t going to beg in front of his friend. In his childish pride he tried salvaging this pathetic retreat by putting a gloss of free will on it.

“Well, Mama, then you must tell me everything! All about the elephants and everything else!”

“Yes, I will, my dear.”

“And at once! Later this evening!”

“Yes, yes, but off you go to bed now. Off you go!” Edgar admired himself for succeeding in

shaking hands with the Baron and his Mama without going red in the face, although the sob was already rising in his throat. The Baron ruffled his hair in a friendly manner, which brought a smile to Edgar's tense face. But then he had to reach the door in a hurry, or they would have seen big tears rolling down his cheeks.

THE ELEPHANTS

HIS MOTHER STAYED DOWNSTAIRS sitting at the table with the Baron for a while, but they were no longer discussing elephants and hunts. Now that the boy had left them, a slightly sultry note and sudden touch of awkwardness entered their conversation. Finally they went out into the lobby and sat down in a corner. The Baron sparkled more brilliantly than ever, she herself was a little merry after those few glasses of champagne, and so the conversation quickly assumed a dangerous character. The Baron could not really be called handsome, he was merely young and looked very masculine with his brown, mobile, boyish face and short hair, enchanting her with his lively and almost over-familiar movements. By now she liked to see him at close quarters, and no longer feared his glance. But gradually a tone of audacity crept into what he was saying, bewildering her slightly, rather as if he were reaching out for her body, touching it and then letting go again. There was something extraordinarily desirable about it all that sent the blood flying to her cheeks. But then he laughed again, a light, unforced, boyish laugh which gave all these little liberties the easy appearance of childlike play. Sometimes she felt as if she ought to stop him with a curt word of reproof, but as she was naturally flirtatious she was only intrigued by those suggestive little remarks, and waited for more of them. Enchanted by the daring game, she ended up trying to emulate him. She cast him little fluttering glances full of promise, was already offering herself in words and gestures, even allowed him to come closer. She sensed the proximity of his voice, she sometimes felt his breath warm and caressing her shoulders. Like all gamblers, they forgot the time and lost themselves so entirely in their ardent conversation that only when the lights in the lobby were dimmed at midnight did they come to their senses with a start.

She immediately jumped up, obeying her first impulse of alarm, and suddenly realized how daringly far she had ventured to go. She was not unaccustomed to playing with fire, but now her excited instincts felt how close this game was to becoming serious. With a shudder, she realized that she did not feel entirely sure of herself, that something in her was beginning to slide away, moving alarmingly close to the whirlpool. Her head was full of a bewildering mixture of fear, wine, and risk-taking talk, and a muted, mindless anxiety came over her, the anxiety she had felt several times in her life before at such dangerous moments, although never before had it been so vertiginous and violent. "Good night, good night. We'll meet tomorrow morning," she said hastily, about to run away, not so much from him as from the danger of that moment and a new, strange uncertainty in herself. But the Baron took the hand she had offered in farewell and held it with gentle force, kissing it not just once in the correct way but four or five times, his quivering lips moving from her delicate fingertips to her wrist, and with a slight frisson she felt his rough moustache tickle the back of her hand. A kind of warm, oppressive sensation flew from her hand along her veins and through her whole body. Her alarm flared up, hammering menacingly at her temples, her head was burning, and the fear, that pointless fear now ran right through her. She quickly withdrew her hand.

"Ah, stay a little longer," whispered the Baron. But she was already hurrying away, with awkward haste that made her fear and confusion very obvious. The excitement that her partner in conversation wanted to arouse filled her now, she felt that everything in her was topsy-turvy. She was driven by her

ardent, cruel fear that the man behind her might pursue and catch her, but at the same time, even as she made her escape, she already felt some regret that he didn't. At that moment, what she had unconsciously been longing for over the years might have happened, the adventure that she voluptuously liked to imagine close, although so far she had always avoided it just in time: a real, dangerous relationship, not simply a light flirtation. But the Baron had too much pride to run after her and take advantage of the moment. He was certain of victory, and would not pounce on the woman now in a weak moment when she was tipsy; on the contrary, he played fair, and was excited only by the chase and the thought of her surrender to him in full awareness. She could not escape him. The burning venom, he could see, was already running through her veins.

At the top of the stairs she stopped, one hand pressed to her fluttering heart. She had to rest for a moment. Her nerves were giving way. A sigh burst from her breast, half in relief to have escaped danger, half in regret, but it was all confused, and she felt the turmoil in her blood only as a slight dizziness. Eyes half-closed, she groped her way to her door as if she were drunk, and breathed again when she held the cool handle. Now at last she was safe!

Quietly, she opened the door of her room—and next moment shrank back in alarm. Something or other had moved inside it, right at the back of the room in the dark. Her overstrained nerves cried out she was about to call for help, but then she heard a very sleepy voice inside the room saying quietly, “Is that you, Mama?”

“For God's sake, what are you doing here?” She hurried over to the divan where Edgar lay curled up in a ball, just waking from sleep. Her first thought was that the child must be ill or needed help.

But Edgar, still very drowsy, said in a slightly reproachful tone, “I waited so long for you, and then I went to sleep.”

“But why?”

“Because of the elephants.”

“What elephants?”

Only then did she understand. She had promised the child to tell him about them this very evening all about the hunt and the adventures. And the boy had stolen into her room, naïve and childish as he was, waiting for her to come in perfect confidence, and had fallen asleep as he waited. His extravagant behaviour made her indignant—although it was really with herself that she felt angry. She heard a soft murmur of guilt and shame within her and wanted to shout it down. “Go back to bed, you naughty boy,” she cried. Edgar stared at her in surprise. Why was she so angry with him when he'd done nothing wrong? But his surprise made the already agitated woman even angrier. “Go back to your room at once,” she shouted—furiously, because she felt that she was being unjust. Edgar went without a word. He really was extremely tired, and was only vaguely aware, through the mists of sleep closing in, that his mother had not kept her promise, and wrong had been done to him in some way or other. But he did not rebel. Everything in him was muted by weariness, and then again, he was very angry with himself for going to sleep up here instead of staying awake. Just like a small child, he told himself indignantly before he fell asleep again.

For since yesterday he had hated his own condition of childhood.

SKIRMISHING

THE BARON HAD SLEPT BADLY. It is always risky to go to bed after an adventure has been left unfinished; a restless night, full of sultry dreams, soon made him feel sorry he had not seized the moment after all. When he came down in the morning, still in a drowsy and discontented mood, the boy ran straight to him from some hiding place, gave him an enthusiastic hug, and began pestering him with countless questions. He was happy to have his great friend to himself for a minute or so again, not to have to share him with Mama. His friend was to tell stories to him, he insisted, just to him, not Mama any more, because in spite of her promise she hadn't passed on the tales of all those wonderful things. He besieged the displeased and startled Baron, who had some difficulty in hiding his ill humour, with a hundred childish demands. Moreover, he mingled these questions with earnest assurances of his love, blissfully happy to be alone again with the friend he had been looking for so long, whom he had expected since first thing in the morning.

The Baron replied brusquely. He was beginning to feel bored by the way the child was always lying in wait for him, by his silly questions and his unwanted passion in general. He was tired of going around with a twelve-year-old day in, day out, talking nonsense to him. All he wanted now was to strike while the iron was hot and get the mother alone, and here the child's unwelcome presence was a problem. For the first time he felt distaste for the affection he had incautiously aroused, because at the moment he saw no chance of shaking off his excessively devoted little friend.

All the same, the attempt must be made. He let the boy's eager talk wash over him unheeded until ten o'clock, the time when he had arranged to go out walking with the child's mother, throwing a word into the conversation now and then so as not to hurt Edgar's feelings, although at the same time he was leafing through the newspaper. At last, when the hands of the clock had almost reached the hour, he pretended to remember something all of a sudden, and asked Edgar to go over to the other hotel for a moment and ask them there whether his father Count Grundheim had arrived yet.

Suspecting nothing, the child was delighted to be able to do his friend a service at last and ran off at once, proud of his dignity as a messenger, racing along the road so stormily that people stared at him in surprise. He was anxious to show how nimble he could be when a message was entrusted to him. No, they told him at the other hotel, the Count had not arrived yet, and indeed at the moment wasn't even expected. He ran back with this message at the same rapid pace. But the Baron was not in the lobby any more. Edgar knocked at the door of his room—in vain! He looked in all the rooms, the music-room, the coffee-house, stormed excitedly away to find his Mama and ask if she knew anything, but she had gone out. The doorman, to whom he finally turned in desperation, told him, to his astonishment, that the two of them had left the hotel together a few minutes ago!

Edgar waited patiently. In his innocence he suspected nothing wrong. They couldn't stay out for more than a little while, he was sure, because the Baron wanted to know the answer to his message. However, time dragged on and on, hours passed, and uneasiness crept insidiously into his mind. Besides, since the day that seductive stranger had come into his guileless little life the child had been in a permanent state of tension, all on edge and confused. Every passion leaves its mark on the delicate organisms of children, as if making an impression on soft wax. Edgar's eyelids began

tremble nervously again; he was already looking paler. He waited and waited, patiently at first, then a state of frantic agitation, and finally close to tears. But he still was not suspicious. His blind faith in his wonderful friend made him assume that there was a misunderstanding, and he was tormented by secret fear that he might have misunderstood the Baron's message.

What seemed really strange, however, was that when they finally came back they were talking cheerfully, and showed no surprise. It was as if they hadn't particularly missed him. "We came back this way hoping to meet you, Edi," said the Baron, without even asking about the message. And when the child, horrified to think they might have been looking for him in vain, began assuring them that he had come straight back along the high street, and asked which way they would have gone instead, his Mama cut the conversation short. "Very well, that will do. Children ought not to talk so much."

Edgar flushed red with annoyance. This was her second mean, despicable attempt to belittle him. Why did she do it, why was she always trying to make him look like a child, when he was sure he wasn't one any more? Obviously she was envious of him for having such a friend, and was planning to get the Baron over to her side. Yes, and he was sure it was his mother who had intentionally taken the Baron the wrong way. But he wasn't going to let her treat him like that, as she'd soon see. He would defy her. And Edgar made up his mind not to say a word to her at their table in the dining-room; he wouldn't talk to anyone but his friend.

However, that turned out to be difficult. What he least expected happened: neither of them noticed his defiance. They didn't even seem to see Edgar himself, while yesterday he had been the central point of their threesome. They both talked over his head, joking and laughing together as if he had vanished under the table. The blood rose to his cheeks, there was a lump in his throat that choked him. With a shudder, he realized how terribly powerless he was. Was he to sit here and watch his mother take his friend away from him, the one person he loved, while he was unable to defend himself except by silence? He felt as if he must stand up and suddenly hammer on the table with both fists. Just to make them notice him. But he kept himself under control, merely laying his knife and fork down and not touching another morsel. However, they also ignored his stubborn refusal of food for a long time, and it wasn't until the next course came that his mother noticed and asked if he didn't feel well. It's so horrible, he thought, she always thinks the same thing, she asks if I don't feel well, nothing else matters to her. He answered briefly, saying he didn't want any more to eat, and she seemed satisfied with that. There was nothing, absolutely nothing he could do to attract attention. The Baron seemed to have forgotten him, or at least he never once spoke a word to him. His eyes burned worse and worse, spilled over, and he had to resort to the childish trick of raising his napkin quickly to his face before anyone could see the tears trickling down his cheeks, leaving salty moisture on his lips. He was glad when the meal was over.

During it his mother had suggested a carriage drive to the village of Maria-Schutz together. Biting his lower lip, Edgar had heard her. So she wasn't going to leave him alone with his friend for a single minute any more! However, his hatred was roused to fury only when she said to him, as they rose from the table, "Edgar, you'll be forgetting all about your school work, you'd better stay in the hotel today and catch up with some of it!" Once again he clenched his little fist. She was always trying to humiliate him in front of his friend, reminding everyone in public that he was still a child, he had to go to school, he was merely tolerated in adult company. But this time her intentions were too transparent. He did not answer at all, but simply turned away.

"Oh dear, I've hurt your feelings again!" she said, smiling, and added, turning to the Baron, "Would it really be so bad for him to do an hour or so of work for once?"

And then—something froze rigid in the child's heart—the Baron, who called himself his friend

who had joked that he, Edgar, was too much of a bookworm, agreed with her. "Well, I'm sure an hour or two could do no harm."

Was it a conspiracy? Were they really both in league against him? Fury flared up in the child's eyes. "My Papa said I wasn't to do any school work while I was here. Papa wants me to get better here," he flung at them with all the pride of an invalid, desperately clutching at his father's authority. It came out like a threat. And the strangest part of it was that what he had said really did appear to discompose them both. His mother looked away and drummed her fingers nervously on the table. There was a painful silence. "Just as you say, Edi," replied the Baron at last, forcing a smile. "At least I don't have to take any examinations myself, I failed all mine long ago."

But Edgar did not smile at his joke, just scrutinized him with a longing but penetrating glance, as if trying to probe his soul. What was going on? Something had changed between them, and the child didn't know why. His eyes wandered restlessly, and in his heart a small, rapid hammer was at work forging the first suspicion.

BURNING SECRET

WHAT'S CHANGED THEM so much, wondered the child, sitting opposite them in the carriage as they drove along, why aren't they the same to me as before? Why does Mama keep avoiding my eyes when I look at her? Why is he always trying to make jokes and clown about like that? They don't, either of them talk to me the way they did yesterday and the day before, it's almost as if they had new faces. Mama has such red lips today, she must have painted them. I never saw her do that before. And he keeps frowning as if I'd hurt his feelings. But I haven't done anything to them, I haven't said a word that could annoy them, have I? No, I can't be the reason, because they're acting differently with each other too, they're not the same as before. It's as if they'd done something they don't like to talk about. They're not chattering away like yesterday, they're not laughing either, they're embarrassed, they're hiding something. They have a secret of some kind, and they don't want to share it with me. I must find out what it is at any price. I know it must be the sort of thing that makes people send me out of the room, the sort of thing books are always going on about, and operas when men and women sing together with their arms spread wide, and hug and then push each other away. Somehow or other it must be the same as all that business about my French governess who behaved so badly with Papa, and then she was sent away. All those things are connected, I can feel that, it's just that I don't know how. Oh, I wish I knew the secret, I wish I understood it, I wish I had the key that opens all those doors, and I wasn't a child any more with people hiding things from me and pretending. I wish I didn't have to be deceived and put off with excuses. It's now or never! I'm going to get that terrible secret out of them. A line was dug into his brow, the slight twelve-year-old looked almost old as he sat there brooding, without sparing a glance for the landscape unfolding its resonant colours all around the mountains in the pure green of the coniferous forests, the valleys still young with the fresh bloom of spring, which was late this year. All he saw was the couple opposite him on the back seat of the carriage, as if his intense glances, like a fishing-line, could bring the secret up from the gleaming depths of their eyes. Nothing whets the intelligence more than a passionate suspicion, nothing develops all the faculties of an immature mind more than a trail running away into the darkness. Sometimes it is only a flimsy door that cuts children off from what we call the real world, and a chance gust of wind will blow it open for them.

Suddenly Edgar felt that the unknown, the great secret was closer than ever before, almost within reach, he felt it just before him—still locked away and unsolved, to be sure, but close, very close. This excited him and gave him a sudden, solemn gravity. For unconsciously he guessed that he was approaching the end of his childhood.

The couple opposite felt some kind of mute resistance before them, without guessing that it came from the boy. They felt constrained and inhibited as the three of them sat in the carriage together. The two eyes opposite them, with their dark and flickering glow, were an obstacle to both adults. They hardly dared to speak, hardly dared to look. They could not find the way back to their earlier light small-talk, they were already enmeshed too far in that tone of ardent intimacy, those dangerous words in which insidious lust trembles at secret touches. Their conversation kept coming up against lacunae and hesitations. It halted, tried to go on, but still stumbled again and again over the child's persistence.

silence.

That grim silence was particularly hard for his mother to bear. She cautiously looked at him sideways, and as the child compressed his lips she was suddenly startled to see, for the first time, similarity to her husband when he was annoyed or angry. It was uncomfortable for her to be reminded of her husband just now, when she wanted to play a game with an adventure, a game of hide and seek. The child seemed to her like a ghost, a guardian of her conscience, doubly intolerable here in the cramped carriage, sitting just opposite with his watchful eyes glowing darkly beneath his pale forehead. Then Edgar suddenly looked up, just for a second. Both of them lowered their eyes again; she felt, for the first time in her life, that they were keeping watch on each other. Until now they had trusted one another blindly, but today something between the two of them, mother and child, was suddenly different. For the first time they began observing each other, separating their two lives, both already feeling a secret dislike that was still too new for them to dare to acknowledge it.

All three breathed a sigh of relief when the horses stopped outside the hotel. As an outing it had been a failure; they all felt that, but no one dared say so. Edgar jumped down first. His mother excused herself, saying that she had a headache, and quickly went upstairs. She felt tired and wanted to be alone. Edgar and the Baron were left behind. The Baron paid the driver of the carriage, looked at his watch, and walked towards the lobby, ignoring the boy. He went past Edgar, turning his elegant slender back, walking with that slight, rhythmically springy gait that captivated the boy so much. Edgar had tried to imitate it yesterday. The Baron walked past him, he simply passed him by. Obviously he had forgotten the boy, leaving him there with the driver and the horses as if they had nothing to do with each other.

Something inside Edgar broke in two as he saw him pass like that—the man whom, in spite of everything, he still idolized. Desperation rose from his heart as the Baron passed by without a word, not even brushing him with his coat—and he wasn't aware of having done anything wrong. His laboriously maintained self-control gave way, the artificial burden of his new dignity slipped from his narrow shoulders, he was a child again, small and humble as he had been yesterday and for so long before that. It impelled him on against his will. With quick, unsteady steps he followed the Baron, stood in his way as he was about to go upstairs, and said in a strained voice, keeping back the tears only with difficulty:

“What have I done to you? You don't take any notice of me any more! Why are you always like that to me now? And Mama too! Why are you always trying to get rid of me? Am I in your way, or have I done something wrong, or what?”

The Baron gave a start of surprise. There was something in that voice that bewildered him and softened his heart. Pity for the innocent boy overcame him. “Oh, Edi, you're an idiot! I was in a bad mood today, that's all. And you're a good boy, I'm really fond of you.” So saying he ruffled the boy's hair vigorously, but with his face half turned away to avoid seeing those large, moist, pleading childish eyes. He was beginning to feel awkward about his play-acting. In fact he was already feeling ashamed of exploiting this child's love so ruthlessly, and that high little voice, shaken by suppressed sobs, physically hurt him.

“Upstairs you go now, Edi, we'll meet this evening and be friends again, you wait and see,” he said in mollifying tones.

“But you won't let Mama send me straight up to bed, will you?”

“No, no, Edi, I won't,” smiled the Baron. “So up you go now, I must dress for dinner.”

Edgar went, happy for the moment. But soon the hammer in his mind started working away again. He had grown years older since yesterday; distrust, previously a stranger to him, had taken u

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