



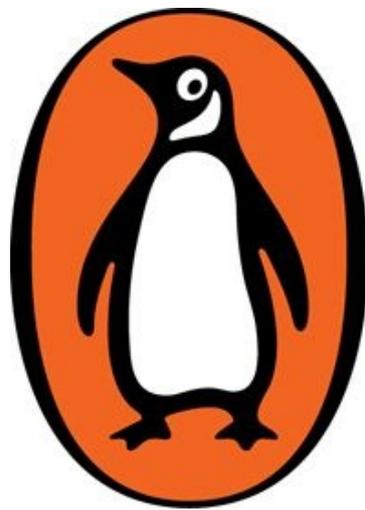
P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

THEODOR FONTANE

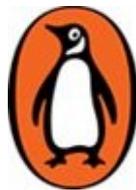
No Way Back



Theodor Fontane

no way back

*Translated from the German by Hugh Rorrison and Helen Chambers with an afterword by Helen
Chambers*



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NO WAY BACK

THEODOR FONTANE was born in the Prussian province of Brandenburg in 1819. After qualifying as a pharmacist, he made his living as a writer. From 1855 to 1859, he lived in London and worked as a freelance journalist and press agent for the Prussian embassy. While working as a war correspondent during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71 he was taken prisoner, but released after two months. His first novel, *Before the Storm*, was published when he was 58 and was followed by sixteen further novels, of which *Effi Briest*, *No Way Back* and *On Tangled Paths* are all published in Penguin Classics. He died in 1898.

HUGH RORRISON and HELEN CHAMBERS have both published extensively on German literature, and translated together the Penguin Classics translation of Fontane's *Effi Briest*.

The Historical Background

THE POLITICAL SITUATION in the novel here translated as *No Way Back* is the product of a centuries-old chequered dynastic past. The novel is set in Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark in the late 1850s and early 1860s, a transitional period of government with King Frederick VII on the Danish throne and the status of the linked duchies of Schleswig and Holstein under pressure. Schleswig was originally a Danish and Holstein a German fief, united under the Danish Schauenburger house, and when that line died out they passed to Christian I, an Oldenburger, who in 1460, in order to retain the allegiance of the Schleswig-Holstein knights famously promised that the two duchies would remain 'inseparable forever'. Over time the duchies passed to younger sons in the Danish royal line, with concomitant disputes about sovereignty, sometimes united, sometimes separated, and at times even with portions becoming independent. After the cession of Norway to Sweden in 1814, the Danish monarchy consisted of three principal parts, the kingdom of Denmark and the two duchies. Whereas Holstein was German-speaking and from 1815 also belonged to the German Confederation, Schleswig was divided into a Danish population primarily in the north and a German population in the south. As the nineteenth century wore on, the problems of succession, looming because Frederick VII was the last of the Oldenburg line, were exacerbated, and in 1848, the Year of Revolution in Europe, the Danish and German partisans sought opposing solutions. After the uprising in Schleswig-Holstein against Denmark was quelled and Prussian claims to the duchies temporarily abandoned after two years of war (1848–50), an uneasy peace followed, with agreement that the succession would pass to Christian of Glücksburg as ruler in the supranational state comprised of Denmark, Schleswig and Holstein. This solution was attacked by Danish sympathizers who wanted to cut Holstein loose, while German sympathizers supported the integration of the united duchies into the German Confederation. In the event, on his death in 1863 Frederick was succeeded by Christian IX, and the following year Bismarck would invade the duchies and defeat the Danes and Schleswig-Holstein would be ceded by Denmark to Prussia, with further Prussian victories over Austria and France resulting in the unification of Germany and the creation of the German Reich in 1871.

At the time when *No Way Back* is set, then, the Danish government is in an unsettled period, trying to maintain calm but at the same time bent on preventing German encroachment. Count Holk's position when he makes a plea for the Old Denmark shows his desire to maintain the status quo, with the preservation of the supranational state. His wife Christine inclines to the German side while somehow remaining true to Schleswig-Holstein. Both positions are, with hindsight, equally illusory, for within a very few years Prussian military might will have put paid to the old order. It has been suggested that when Fontane was writing the novel, between 1887 and 1890, he had his eye on parallels with contemporary German politics. Bismarck had recently been dismissed with the accession of young Wilhelm II, and so the account of the Danish Minister President Hall's dismissal and the sense that his loss will be felt is an allusion to public reactions to the political shift and

the attendant uncertainties in 1890s Germany.

Fontane visited Denmark in September 1864 to see at first hand the theatres of battle and report on the Schleswig-Holstein war. The most immediate product was a 374-page documentary report on the conflict (1865), but he also accumulated material and inspiration for later poems and fiction. Although the Schleswig localities featured in *No Way Back*, Holkenäs and Arnewiek, like Kessin in *Effi Briest*, are fictitious, they are based on Fontane's knowledge of Southern Schleswig, and can be imagined to be situated in the area which includes Glücksburg and the Angeln peninsula in the north-eastern corner of Schleswig-Holstein, close to the Danish border. Most of the Danish localities mentioned in the novel are real and their details largely authentic, only occasional place names being invented, such as Lille-Grimsby, which has the authentic ring of a Scandinavian settlement, partly a nod in the direction of England's Viking history. The topography of Copengagen as presented in *No Way Back* is generally accurate, although some details of the house in which Holk lodges are fictitious. The building at the location in question has more storeys than Fontane suggests; he appears to have reduced it to a more intimate and domestic scale.

It is still possible today to follow in Holk's footsteps, through Copenhagen, to the Hermitage and Deer Park at Klampenborg, to Hillerød and Frederiksborg Castle and Lake Arre. Fontane himself stayed on Kongens Nytorv, the great central square of the Danish capital, in the predecessor of the present Hotel d'Angleterre, where Vincent's restaurant was located. When Fontane visited the Renaissance castle of Frederiksborg in 1864, chosen by Frederick VII as his royal residence, only the outer façades had been restored after the fire of the night of 16 December 1859, which forms a centrepiece of the novel's action.

The principal characters of the novel, including the Princess, are all literary inventions. It is, however, easy to imagine the Princess's quarters in one of the four royal residences (called 'the Princesses' Palace' in the novel) that make up the Amalienborg Palace and stand imposingly around a spacious octagonal courtyard. The Princess herself is integrated plausibly into the royal family tree, as the King's aunt. The names of all the invented characters fit the geographical and historical context, with typical Schleswig and Danish ones like Petersen and Hansen, and others such as Schimmelmann, Bille and Moltke drawn from the Danish nobility while Pentz is an old Mecklenburg family name. Historical personages like King Frederick VII and the Danish officers Tersling and du Plat feature in the margins. The portrayal of the Danish general de Meza, a revered national figure until his controversial dismissal in the conflict with Prussia in 1864, is based firmly on his real-life model in whom Fontane took considerable interest, as his diaries record.

Fontane's German readers in 1891 would of course have been more familiar with the historical and geographical background to a novel set only thirty years in the past than present-day readers across the globe, but previous knowledge of the milieu is never a prerequisite for enjoying the work of a great novelist. Fontane is no exception: he constantly creates associations with time and place which contribute unobtrusively to our understanding of the characters' lives, allowing us to follow developments from a position close to the centre of the action. The stone inscribed by Christian IV in 1628 to commemorate his

unexplained exclusion from his wife's bedchamber prefigures Holk's predicament, while shifts in the narrative from the ordered and temperate milieu in Holkenäs to the pleasure-seeking and scandal-loving ambience in restaurant and palace in the Danish capital and on to the overheated intimacy of Frederiksborg mirror shifts in the plot which take the main character down a path he is ill-equipped to resist.



Five miles south of Glücksburg, on a dune that ran right down to the sea, stood Schloss Holkenäs, the family residence of Count Holk; to the occasional strangers who passed through the region, at this time still very much off the beaten track, it presented a remarkable sight. It was a building designed after Italian models, with just hint enough of classical Greece to allow the Count's brother-in-law, Baron Arne von Arnewiek, to speak of 'the latter-day temple at Paestum'. Quite ironically, of course. And yet with some justification. For what one saw from the sea was indeed an oblong formation of columns, behind which the lower part of the actual house with its living quarters and reception rooms was concealed, while the upper storey, which appeared to be set considerably further back, rose just over a man's height above the screen of columns which formed a portico on all four sides. It was this screen of columns that really gave the whole a Mediterranean feel; there were stone benches covered with rugs all round the portico, and there, day after day, the summer months were spent, except when it was preferred to climb up to the flat roof, which was less an actual roof than a broad terrace running round the whole upper storey. On this broad, flat roof-cum-terrace which rested on the columns of the ground floor stood potted cacti and aloes, and here, even on the hottest days, comparatively cool fresh air was to be enjoyed. If a breeze from the sea chanced to blow, it would catch the flag that hung limp on a flagstaff, making it swing back and forth with a heavy slap, adding a little to the slight movement of the air.

Schloss Holkenäs had not always stood on this dune. When seventeen years earlier the present Count married the beautiful Baroness Christine Arne, youngest sister of the neighbouring landowner Arne, he had moved into the modest quarters of the original old Schloss Holkenäs, which lay further inland in the large village of Holkeby, just opposite the fieldstone church which had neither choir nor tower. The old Schloss, like the church, dated back to the fourteenth century, and a new building had been planned by the Count's grandfather. But it took the present Count, who among an array of minor passions had a passion for building, to revive the project, and soon afterwards he built the much discussed and mocked, though admittedly also much admired castle on the dune, which was not only grander but above all more comfortable to live in. The Countess, however, had a persistent preference for the old Schloss, now reduced to the rank of bailiff's house, a preference so powerful that she never passed it without thinking with a touch of melancholy of the days spent there. For those had been her happiest times, the years when the two had always lived for love and had never known a difference of opinion. Here in the old Schloss opposite the church their three children had been born, and the death of the youngest, a boy who had been christened Estrid, had only brought the handsome youthful couple closer and increased their sense of belonging to one another.

All this had not entirely survived the move to the new Schloss, and the Countess, who had

been educated by the Moravian Brethren and was of a sensitive disposition, had had a strong premonition of it, so strong she would have far preferred a reconstruction and extension of the old Schloss so that they could stay on there. The Count however was stubbornly enthusiastic at the prospect of his 'castle by the sea', and the very first time he discussed it with the Countess, recited the lines:

'Hast thou beheld the castle?
The castle by the sea?
Clouds of gold and crimson
Glide over it silently ...'

a quotation that produced quite the opposite effect on the person it was intended to win over besides occasioning a certain derisive astonishment. For Holk was quite unliterary, and nobody knew this better than the Countess.

'Where did you pick that up, Helmuth?'

'At Arnewiek, where else? There's an engraving hanging on the wall at your brother's, and that was under it. And I have to say, Christine, I thought it was first-rate. A castle by the sea I think it'll be splendid, a joy for us both.'

'If one is happy, one shouldn't wish to be happier still. And then, Helmuth, to choose *that* quotation of all things. You only know the first lines of the Uhland poem I imagine ... forgive me, that's who it's by, Uhland ... but it doesn't go on the way it begins, and there's so much sadness to come at the end:

"The stormwinds and the waves
In tranquil slumber slept;
I heard within its chambers
A funeral dirge, and wept ..."

You see, Helmuth, that's how it ends.'

'Excellent, Christine, I like that too,' Holk laughed. 'And by Uhland you say. Well, good for him. But you're not going to ask that I don't build my castle by the sea just because of a funeral dirge drifting from the chambers of a castle in a poem, even if it is by Uhland?'

'No Helmuth, I'm not asking that. But I have to confess I would rather stay down here in the old stone house with all its inconveniences and its ghost. I don't mind about the ghost, but I do believe in premonitions, even though the Moravians have no time for them, and they're probably right. But in spite of that, we all have our human weaknesses, and some things linger in the mind, so that try as we may, we can't shake them off.'

That was how the conversation had gone and it had never been referred to again, except for one occasion when both of them climbed up the dune (the sun had already set) to take a look at the new building that was going up. And when they reached the top Holk smiled and pointed to the clouds which at that moment stood 'gold and crimson' directly above them.

'I know what you're thinking,' said the Countess.

'And ...'

'I've had to ... I've put aside my other preference now. At the time, when you first talked about the new building, I was in low spirits, you know why. I couldn't forget the child, and

wanted to be close to the place where he lay.'

He kissed her hand and confessed that her words during that conversation really had made an impression on him. 'And now you're being so generous. And how beautiful you look in the golden sunset. I think, Christine, we'll be happy here. Is that your wish too?'

And she clung tenderly to his arm. But she said nothing.

That had been the year before the completion of the building, and soon afterwards, because the old Schloss in the village below was becoming less and less habitable, Holk had arranged with his brother-in-law to send Christine and the children to Arnewiek where they were to stay until Whitsun, by which time everything would be finished.

And so it had been.

And now Whitsun was approaching, and the day of the move into the new Schloss was upon them. The garden on the rear slope of the dune was only half-planted, and in general a good deal of work was still in progress. But one thing had been completed, the narrow colonnaded front facing the sea. Here shrubberies and round flower beds had been laid out, and further down, where the slope of the dune began, a stepped terrace descended to the beach and continued as a pier, built far out into the sea to serve as a landing-stage for the steamer that plied between Glücksburg and Copenhagen.

Christine was filled with admiration and delight far beyond her own expectations, and when, after walking round the house, she climbed up to the flat roof, the splendid panorama that spread before her dispelled all the worries and premonitions that had continued to assail her soul ever since she had reconciled herself to the new building the previous year; and she called to the children, still down by the terrace, to come up and share her delight. Holk could see how deeply she was moved and wanted to speak, to thank her. But she anticipated him.

'It will soon be a year, Helmuth, since we last stood here on the dune, and you asked me whether I wished to be happy here. I said nothing then ...'

'And now?'

'Now I'll say yes.'



That was how the day the Countess moved into the new Schloss had ended. A few weeks later an old friend from her boarding school days at Gnadenfrei had arrived, Fräulein Julie von Dobschütz, a lady of slender means whose invitation had initially been intended for a short summer visit. But soon the wish arose to have the lady remain in the house as companion, friend and governess, a wish Holk shared, because at times he found Christine's loneliness depressing. And so Fräulein Dobschütz stayed and took over the instruction of Asta and Axel, the two children of the house. Asta continued to be entrusted to her; but when the doctoral student Strehlke joined the household the nature of Axel's lessons changed.

All that was seven years ago now, and the Count and Countess had grown accustomed to the house and really had experienced the 'days of happiness' that they had hoped for. The deep affection that had brought the couple together years before was still there, even if there were occasional differences of opinion, especially on matters of education and religion, but these were not such as might have seriously endangered the peace of the household. In recent times, to be sure, with the children growing up, there had been no lack of such disagreements, which was not surprising, given the difference in temperament between the Count and Countess. Holk, good and sound fellow that he was, was blessed with no more than average intelligence and fell well short of his wife, who was endowed with quite superior qualities. There was no doubt about that. But that didn't make it any less uncomfortable and oppressive for Holk, and no one understood this better than he did, for there were moments when he found Christine's virtues something of an incubus, and would have wished for a wife less excellent. In earlier days all this had been no more than an unspoken wish, scarcely acknowledged; but for some time now that wish had been growing articulate; it came to arguments, and if Julie von Dobschütz, who had a gift for diplomatic intervention, was mostly able to smooth over these differences with her deft touch, one thing never went away, and that was that Christine, who had had a presentiment of all this, kept recalling with a kind of melancholy the days in the old Schloss, where nothing like this had arisen, or at least far, far more rarely.

Now it was the end of September 1859 and the harvest was long in. The swallows that nested under the portico all the way round the house had left, a breeze was blowing and the flag up on the flat roof flapped languidly back and forth. They were sitting in the front portico, facing the sea, the grand dining room with its tall glass door standing open at their backs, while Fräulein Dobschütz prepared coffee. The Countess had sat down beside Fräulein Dobschütz but at a separate table, and was in conversation with Seminary Director Schwarzkoppen who had come over half an hour earlier with Baron Arne von Arnewiek to enjoy the fine day in the hospitality of the Holks' home. Arne himself was walking up and down the flagstones with his brother-in-law Holk, stopping every now and then, arrested by

the picture in front of him: boats were sailing out for the day's fishing, the sea was rippling gently, and the heavens hung blue above it. There was not a cloud in sight and all that was to be seen was the black smoke from a steamer trailing along the horizon.

'You did right, my friend, to move up here and build your temple on this spot. I was against it at the time, because the idea of moving out and changing house seemed somehow in bad taste, modern in a way that -'

'- only proletarians and civil servants went in for, that's what you said.'

'Yes, well, probably something like that. But since then I've been converted in a few matters, and this is one of them. Be that as it may, one thing I'm sure about, steadfast as I've remained in church and politics and indeed in agricultural questions - which are always the main thing, actually, for people of our sort - there's no denying it's charming up here, such a fresh, healthy breeze. You know, when you moved up here Holk, you added fifteen years to your life.'

And at that moment an old servant in gaiters, who had been taken over from the Count's father, served the coffee, and they each took a cup.

'Delicious,' said Arne, 'in fact a bit too good, especially for you, Holk; coffee like this will knock five years off the fifteen I just promised you, and homeopathy - philistine business but quite remarkable all the same, as you know it cuts out mocha and java - would probably deduct a few more. Apropos of homeopathy. Have you heard about the homeopathic vet we've had these last few weeks in Lille-Grimsby ...?'

And walking slowly up and down, the two brothers-in-law carried on their conversation.

Meanwhile the Countess was expatiating on a very different topic in her discussion with Seminary Director Schwarzkoppen, who had left his parish in Wernigerode years before and ended up here in Schleswig-Holstein, where he had been appointed to the Arnewiek Seminary. He had the reputation and enjoyed the prestige of taking a positive church line; but more important for the Countess was that Schwarzkoppen was also an authority on schools and educational questions, which of late had become burning issues for her, for Asta was sixteen and Axel almost fifteen. Schwarzkoppen, now consulted yet again on this extremely delicate topic, answered with circumspection, and when the Countess noticed he was, perhaps in deference to Holk, not entirely inclined to take her side, she broke off the conversation, albeit reluctantly, and turned to another of her favourite plans, one she had already discussed with the Director on a number of occasions, the building of a family vault.

'So, where does the matter stand?' said Schwarzkoppen, who was glad to escape from the question of education.

'I haven't,' said Christine, 'been able to broach the subject, because I fear Holk is going to turn it down.'

'That's not good, my lady. Fear of that kind is always bad; it's meant to promote peace, but in fact it only serves to annoy and cause conflict. And there are no grounds for that. If you can't find better ways to persuade him, you must try through his special interests. As you have often assured me, he does have a passion for building.'

'Yes, that's true,' the Countess affirmed. 'The Schloss here is witness and proof of it, for it was really quite unnecessary; a conversion would have done just as well. But although he loves any kind of building, he has clear preferences, and he'll hardly applaud what I'm proposing. I'll wager he would rather build a hall to play badminton in or, to be up with today's fashion, for roller-skating, anything at all rather than something connected with the church. And a vault at that. He doesn't like to think about dying and he prefers to postpone what is so aptly and beautifully called "setting one's house in order".'

'I know,' said Schwarzkoppen. 'But you mustn't forget that all his most appealing qualities are connected with this weakness.'

'His appealing qualities,' she repeated, 'yes he has those, almost too many of them, if one can have too many appealing qualities. And truly he would be the ideal husband, if only he had some ideals. Forgive my play on words, but I can't help it, because that's exactly how it is, and I now have to say it again: he only thinks of the moment and never of what is to come. He avoids anything that could remind him of that. Since we buried our Estrid, he has never once been to his grave in the vault. So he doesn't know that the whole thing is in danger of collapse. But that's a fact and a new vault has to be built. I say has to be, and if it weren't that I prefer to avoid anything cutting or hurtful, I would tell him it doesn't matter: the slightest whether or not he takes the lead here, it's something *I* want ...'

Schwarzkoppen was going to interrupt, but Christine paid no attention and repeating her last words, went on, '*I* want it; I should insist for my part on a future home that pleases me, and not one that is crumbling and derelict ... But let us leave aside speculation about what I would or wouldn't say; at the moment I'm more interested in showing you a watercolour by Fräulein Dobschütz which illustrates my plan for the building; she has just produced it for me. I asked her to, of course; she draws very well. It's an open hall, Gothic, and the stones that form the floor also cover the vault. What I particularly want you to see (the little drawing doesn't show them very well) are the decorative paintings on the walls and ceiling. On the long wall there's a Dance of Death, perhaps modelled on the one in Lübeck, and on the ceiling vaults angels and palm leaves. The more beautiful the better. And if we can't have first-rate artists because our means don't stretch to that, then we'll have second- or third-rate ones; after all it's the thought that counts. Julie my dear, forgive me for troubling you. But could you bring us that sketch ...'

Holk and Arne had meanwhile continued to walk round the portico and finally made for a gravel path which snaked down to the nearby terrace steps leading to the sea below. Just at this spot there was a little grove of cypresses and laurels with a marble bench in front of it, and here the two brothers-in-law sat down to smoke their cigars in peace, which the Countess never forbade when they were sitting under the portico, but never positively permitted either. The conversation of the two still revolved, strangely enough, around the wondrous vet, which might have been fairly inexplicable had Holk not had a second passion besides building – an enthusiasm for fine cattle. He was not a large-scale farmer like his brother-in-law Arne, in fact he made a point of *not* being one; but he was keen on his cattle, almost like

a sportsman, and enjoyed having them admired and being able to tell of miraculous milk yields. For that reason the new vet was a really important person to Holk, and it was only his homeopathic methods of treatment that gave rise to some misgivings. But Arne cut these short. The most interesting part of the whole thing, he claimed, was precisely that the new vet not only produced effective cures, there were others who could do that, no, it was the *means* by which he did it. The whole story marked nothing more nor less than the final triumph of a new principle; for the triumph of homeopathy, about which there could no longer be any doubt, dated from the successful treatment of cattle. Up to then the old-style quacks had never tired of talking about the power of the imagination, meaning of course that homeopathic pills in themselves cured nothing; but your Schleswig cow was thankfully devoid of imagination, and if she recovered, it was from the treatment and had nothing to do with faith. Arne expatiated further on this, at the same time pointing out that in the case of the new vet's treatments - the man was from Saxony by the way - there were other things involved which had nothing directly to do with allopathy or homeopathy. Among these was absolute cleanliness bordering on sheer luxury, necessitating newly built cowsheds and in some circumstances even the installation of marble mangers and nickel-plated hay-racks. Holk listened to all this entranced, and felt such an urge to tell Christine about it that he put out his cigar and strode back up to the portico.

'I'm just hearing some interesting things Christine. Your brother is telling me about homeopathic treatments by a new vet from Saxony who studied in Leipzig. I stress Leipzig because it's the home of homeopathy. Truly miraculous treatments! ... Tell me Schwarzkoppen, what's *your* position on this? Homeopathy, it has something mysterious, mystical about it. Interesting in itself, and the mysticism makes it an ideal subject for Christine.'

Schwarzkoppen smiled. 'To my knowledge, homeopathy has no truck with anything mysterious or miraculous. It's all a matter of more or less, and whether you can get as far with a grain as with a hundredweight.'

'Of course,' said Holk. 'And then there's the saying "Similia similibus", which can be taken any way you like, and to many it means nothing at all, including no doubt our Enlightenment man and veterinary ace here. He administers homeopathic pills, but above all he's for cleanliness in the cowsheds, and marble mangers, and I dare say troughs have to be as clean as baptismal fonts.'

'Helmuth, I think you might choose your similes with a little more consideration for my sake, and not least in Schwarzkoppen's presence.'

'Granted. This by the way is all in the new miracle doctor's own words, as quoted by your brother, though it can't be denied that the good doctor himself might be well advised to avoid such analogies, being a convert. His name, you see, is Lissauer.'^{*}

Schwarzkoppen and Christine exchanged glances.

'And of course if he comes out to the farm, I shall invite him to lunch down at the bailiff's house. Up here ...'

'We can do without him.'

'I know, and you needn't worry. But I respect him for having an independent mind and the courage to say what he thinks. The business about the marble mangers is pretty fair nonsense just exaggeration that we have to make allowances for. But as for insisting on cleanliness, he's perfectly right. My cowsheds will have to go, the whole lot date from the end of last century, and I'm glad to have an excuse to get rid of the dead wood at last.'

The Countess remained silent and searched with her needle among the silk threads on the table in front of her.

The Count was annoyed at her silence. 'I thought you would at least tell me you approved

'It's farm business, and I thought we agreed I have nothing useful to say about that. If you think marble mangers and that kind of thing are necessary, then they will be found, if need be in Carrara.'

'What makes you speak with such bitterness again, Christine?'

'Forgive me Helmuth, it's not a good time. I was just discussing things much closer to my heart with Schwarzkoppen, building matters too as it happens, and you come wanting to build cowsheds, *cowsheds* ...'

'Of course. You always forget, Christine - even if you don't want to have any part in it, as you just said - you always forget that I'm a farmer first and foremost, and farm business is the proper concern of a farmer. It's the main thing.'

'No it is *not* the main thing.'

'What is then?'

'It's my misfortune and painful for me to have to keep spelling out the obvious to you.'

'Ah, I see. The church is to be extended, or we'll build a home for nuns, or an orphanage. And then a mausoleum, and then we'll buy up the entire works of Cornelius and have them painted on the walls as frescoes ...'

It was rare for the Count to resort to such speeches; but there were a few topics which instantly prompted ill humour and irritation in him, making him forget the refined manners on which he could otherwise pride himself. His brother-in-law knew this and would intervene quickly to propel the conversation in another direction, in which his constant good humour served him well.

'Dear sister, dear brother-in-law, I have to say to you both that for my part I think you should do the one and not leave the other undone. There you have the sum total of my wisdom, and peace to boot. In addition to which, Holk, you don't know yet what this is about.'

Holk laughed good-naturedly.

'You don't know,' Arne went on, 'nor do I, although I'm usually a party to Christine's secrets. Of course, unless I'm very much mistaken, we have the key here ...', and with that he picked up the watercolour sketch that Fräulein Dobschütz had just brought in. 'Charming and by whose hand might this be, Gothic, angels, palms? Well, you know what Goethe says never dally under a palm tree.* And all because of this unfortunate vet, a man in bucket-top boots and to cap it all - with a Saxon accent. He really ought to speak Plattdeutsch, in fact Mecklenburg dialect. That reminds me, have you heard that there's a Low German school of

writers in Kiel and Rostock, or rather two, for whenever anything new happens, the German always divide at once into two camps ... Scarcely has the Low German school appeared when here comes our old friend *itio in partes* again, the Mecklenburgers are on the march under their man Fritz Reuter, and the Holsteiners under Klaus Groth. But Klaus Groth is one up on them, because he's a poet and can be set to music, and of course that's what everything depends on. In a year's time, perhaps less, he'll be a permanent fixture on every piano. I've already seen something of his lying on yours. Asta, you could sing one of his songs.'

'I don't like things in Low German.'

'Well, sing something in High German, something sweet and amusing of course.'

'I don't like amusing things.'

'Well, if it can't be amusing, sing something really sad. But then it has to be extremely sad if we're to have our money's worth. Something about a page who dies for Countess Asta, or a knight cut down by his rival in love and buried by the wayside. And his dog keeps watch by the knight's grave, and three ravens sit screeching in a black poplar and watch.'

Asta, who was always joking with her uncle, would have produced a rejoinder this time to if her attention at that moment had not been taken up in another quarter.

'There's Elisabeth,' she shouted excitedly, 'and old Petersen with her, and Schnuck too.'

And as she said this, they all stepped out from the portico into the front garden and joined Asta in waving to the others below.



Pastor Petersen and his granddaughter Elisabeth, perhaps dazzled by the sun, failed to notice the greeting addressed to them, but from the terrace and portico above they could be seen all the more clearly as they steadily approached from the beach. The old man, hat in hand, so that the wind was playing in his sparse but long white hair, was walking a few steps ahead, while Elisabeth bent to pick up small pieces of wood and bark lying among the seaweed and threw them into the sea for their wonderful black poodle Schnuck to fetch. Now she gave them up and contented herself with picking a few of the flowers growing among the marram grass. And thus strolling along, they eventually reached the pier, where they turned left to climb up the terrace steps.

‘They’re coming,’ Asta burst out jubilantly again. ‘And Elisabeth’s bringing her grandfather with her.’

‘Yes indeed,’ said Baron Arne. ‘Some might perhaps say her grandfather is bringing Elisabeth. But that’s what you’re like; youth is the main thing; when you’re old you’re just an appendage. To be young is to be selfish. Though actually it’s no better later. My first thought when I saw the old man was: here comes our game of whist. Schwarzkoppen isn’t in favour of card games, but he’s not against them either, thank the Lord, and if he were a Catholic he would probably call them “venial sins”. Which are the kind I like best. I admire that poodle too, what’s his name again?’

‘Schnuck,’ said Asta.

‘That’s right, Schnuck; more a name for a character in a comedy really. He’s already been up and down here three times. He’s obviously immensely pleased. So tell me Asta, what’s he so pleased about – seeing you, or about the tricks he’s allowed to perform, or the sugar lump he gets for them?’

Two hours later it was quiet in the portico, evening had fallen and only on the horizon was there still a glint of red. They had all retired to the drawing room that lay directly behind the dining room and was the same size. It looked out on a carefully tended garden with hothouses, which opened into extensive parkland running down the slope beyond.

The drawing room was lavishly furnished but still had space enough to move freely in. Beside the grand piano, in the most sheltered corner, stood a large round table with a moderator lamp* on it. It was here that the Countess and her friend Fräulein Dobschütz, who was going to read for them, were sitting, while Asta and Elisabeth had sat down close by on two footstools, and were alternately chatting quietly and putting the dog through his tricks, to his evident delight. But in the end he tired of the effort, and unable to keep his balance any longer, struck the keys of the open piano with one of his paws.

‘Aha, now he’s playing too,’ laughed Asta. ‘I think, when he wants to, Schnuck plays better than me; he’s so clever, and I don’t think Aunt Julie will deny it. A bit earlier they wanted

me to play or even sing, Uncle Arne was insisting, but I managed to get out of it. I quite enjoy playing, but I'm no good at all. Have you brought anything along Elisabeth? You always have something new, and you had a satchel under your arm when you arrived. Let's have a look.'

The girls chatted on in this fashion, while in the corner of the room diagonally opposite, the four gentlemen sat playing whist, Arne as usual scolding old Petersen for playing as slowly as they used to at the Congress of Vienna back in 1815.

'Yes,' old Petersen laughed, 'the Congress of Vienna; playing slowly was the done thing then, it was regarded as distinguished and there's a story, I must tell it to you later, it's a little-known story, one of Thorvaldsen's I believe, and he had it from Wilhelm von Humboldt.'

'Alexander von Humboldt,' said Arne.

'No, I beg to differ Arne, from Wilhelm von Humboldt. Wilhelm was after all ...'

'Have a care, Petersen ...'

And the game went on without further interruption, and the girls lowered their voices, for Fräulein Dobschütz had begun to read. It was from a news broadsheet that the postman had delivered in the course of the afternoon, and she didn't read it out in full: the war in Italy was still rumbling on in the papers, and Fräulein Dobschütz contented herself at first with reading the headlines, in a questioning tone. 'Archduke Albrecht and Admiral Tegetthoff ...' the Countess shook her head ... 'March on Magenta ... Bonnemain's Brigade of Cuirassiers.' More headshaking. 'There's a report from Charlottenburg on the condition of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV ...'

'Yes,' the Countess interrupted, 'read *that* Dobschütz, my dear. I'm not interested in war stories, they're always the same, always somebody collapsing mortally wounded and saying long live something or other with their dying breath, something called Poland or France, or Schleswig-Holstein for that matter. But it's all the same really. This modern fetish of nationalism, it just isn't an idol I can worship. People's human concerns interest me more, and one of these, in my view at any rate, is religion. This unfortunate king in his palace at Charlottenburg ... such a clever man, and now he's going out of his mind. Now that does interest me. Is it long?'

'A whole column.'

'That's rather a lot. But begin anyway, we can always stop.'

And Fräulein Dobschütz read on: '... All reports agree that the condition of the King is deteriorating; his concentration is failing, and the periods when he can follow what people say are becoming rarer all the time. Inevitably the invalid's condition is also beginning to have an effect on affairs of State, and some previous assumptions can no longer be made. There is no overlooking the fact that a regime change is being prepared, and that this will soon be revealed in foreign policy. Relations with Russia and Austria have been shattered, while a friendly relationship with the Western Powers is constantly being fostered, above all with Britain. Everything happening now is reminiscent of the period between 1806 and 1813 which saw a programme of rearmament and renewal of our armed forces after the

humiliation that had gone before. A similar programme now constantly occupies the mind of the Prince Regent, and once Prussia is militarily where the Prince Regent is intent on taking her, we shall see what happens. And nowhere will this be clearer than on the Schleswig-Holstein question.'

'That's enough,' said the Countess. 'I thought the article would have news from the Court, anecdotes, titbits, which are generally the main thing, but this is all just political speculation. I don't believe in predictions, they mostly come from the people least qualified to make them ... But what's that on the back, a picture of a castle and towers ...'

Fräulein Dobschütz, who hadn't noticed it, turned the newspaper over and saw an almost full-page advertisement on the back with a large wood engraving in the middle. She ran her eye over it. Then she said, 'It's an advertisement for a boarding school in Switzerland, on Lake Geneva, where else; the school is this small building here; the big hotel in the foreground is just for show.'

'Read it. That's the kind of advertisement that interests me.'

'Beau Rivage Boarding School is now entering its twenty-fifth year. In that time it has admitted young ladies from all over the world, and by all accounts they cherish happy memories of us. This we owe, apart from to the grace of God which there must always be, to the unswerving principles on which we run our boarding school. These are the principles of internationalism and confessional equality. The Head of the School is a Calvinist minister, but he is entirely imbued with the spirit of tolerance, and leaves it to the parents and guardians of the pupils entrusted to us whether or not to permit them to take part in this religious instruction ...'

The Countess was visibly amused. Like most pious churchgoing people, she was inclined not only to doubt the devotional sincerity of others, but mostly also to see the funny side of it, so that announcements from the Catholic camp, and almost more so from the Calvinist, were always a source of pleasant entertainment for her, even when there was not, as was the case here, a blatantly commercial angle to provide amusement. She took the broadsheet herself to read the rest of the boarding school advertisement, but the servant, who had been observing the whist table for the last quarter of an hour awaiting the end of the rubber, now stepped forward and announced that tea was served.

'Excellent,' said Baron Arne. 'When you've won, a partridge, which is what I'm counting on next, is one of the healthiest dishes there is; otherwise of course it isn't.'

And with that he stood up and offered Fräulein von Dobschütz his arm, while Schwarzkoppen went on ahead with the Countess.

'Well then Petersen,' said the Count, 'we'll just have to make do with each other,' and as he walked past Asta and Elisabeth he said to them, 'Come, ladies ...'

But Asta just stroked his hand tenderly and said, 'No Papa, we're staying here, Mama said we can; we still have lots to tell each other.'



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