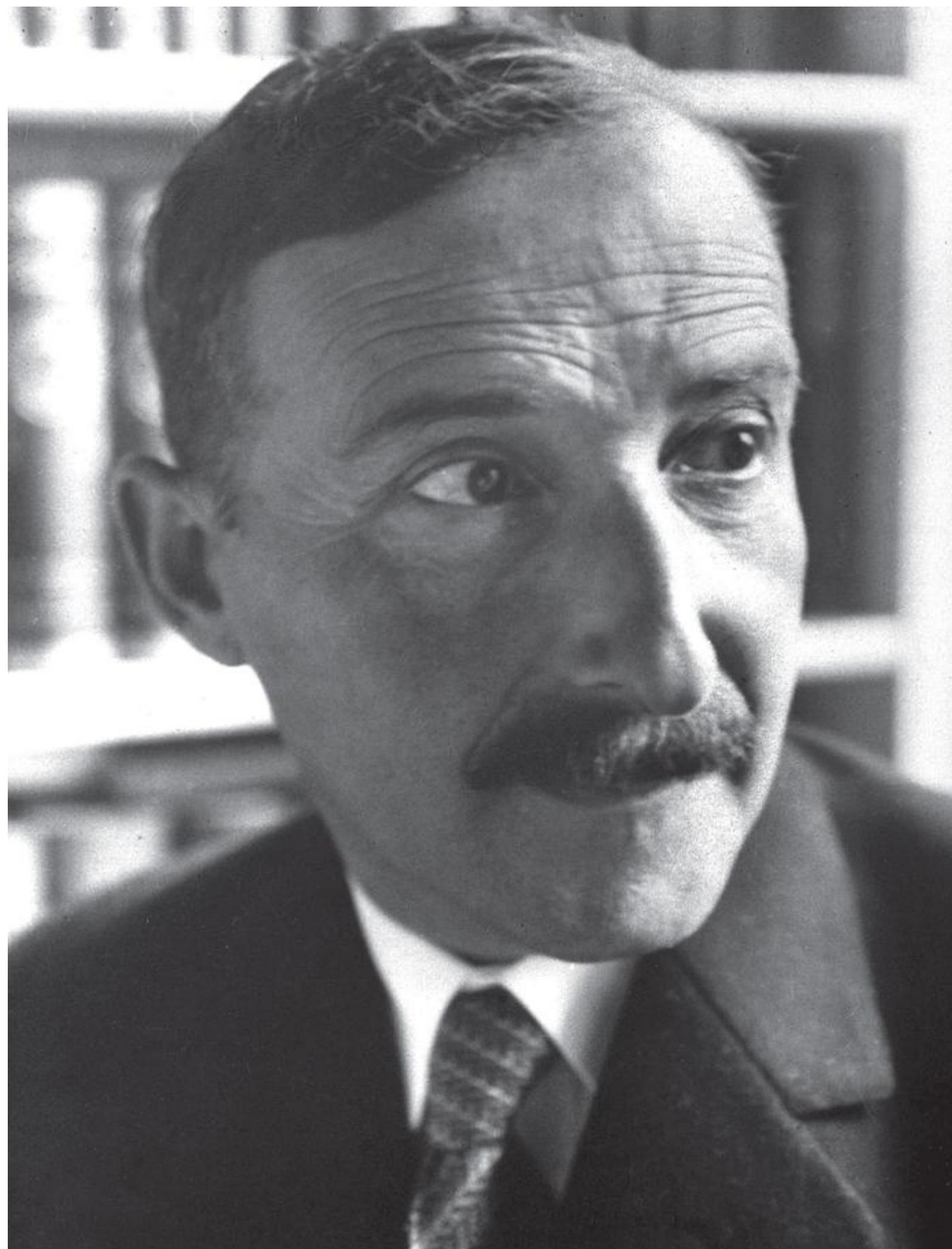


PUSHKIN PRESS



STEFAN ZWEIG

The Governess  
and Other Stories



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STEFAN ZWEIG

THE GOVERNESS

AND OTHER STORIES

Translated from the German by  
Anthea Bell

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# THE GOVERNESS

AND OTHER STORIES

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DID HE DO IT?

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PERSONALLY I'M AS GOOD as certain that he was the murderer. But I don't have the final incontrovertible proof. "Betsy," my husband always tells me, "you're a clever woman, a quiet observer, and you have a sharp eye, but you let your temperament lead you astray, and then you make up your mind too hastily." Well, my husband has known me for thirty-two years, and perhaps, indeed probably, he's right to warn me against forming a judgement in too much of a hurry. So as there is no conclusive evidence, I have to make myself suppress my suspicions, especially in front of other people. But whenever I meet him, whenever he comes over to me in that forthright, friendly way of his, my heart misses a beat. And a little voice inside me says: he and no one else was the murderer.

So I am going to try reconstructing the entire course of events again, just for my own satisfaction.

About six years ago my husband had come to the end of his term of service as a distinguished government official in the colonies, and we decided to retire to some quiet place in the English countryside, to spend the rest of our days, already approaching their evening, with such pleasures as life as flowers and books. Our choice was a small village in the country near Bath. A narrow, slowly flowing waterway, the Kennet and Avon Canal, winds its way from that ancient and venerable city passing under many bridges, towards the valley of Limpley Stoke, which is always green. The canal was built with much skill and at great expense over a century ago, to carry coal from Cardiff to London, and has many wooden locks and lock-keepers' stations along its length. Horses moving at a ponderous trot on the narrow towpaths to right and left of the canal used to pull the broad, black barges along the wide waterway at a leisurely pace. It was planned and built on a generous scale, and was a good means of transport for an age when time still did not mean much. But then came the railway to bring the black freight to the capital city far more cheaply and easily. Canal traffic ground to a halt, the canal fell into decay and dilapidation, but the very fact that it is entirely deserted and serves no useful purpose makes it a romantic, enchanted place today. Waterweed grows so dense from the bottom of the sluggish, black water that the surface has a shimmer of dark green, like malachite; pale water lilies sway on the smooth surface of the canal, which reflects the flower-grown banks, the bridges and the clouds with photographic accuracy. There is barely a ripple moving on this drowsy waterway. Now and then, half sunk in the water and already overgrown with plants, a broken old boat by the bank recalls the canal's busy past, of which even the visitors who come to take the waters in Bath hardly know anything, and when we two elderly folk walked on the level towpath where the horses used to pull barges laboriously along by ropes in the old days, we would meet no one for hours on end except, perhaps, pairs of lovers meeting in secret to protect, by coming to this remote place, their youthful happiness from neighbours' gossip, before it was officially declared by the engagement or marriage.

We were delighted by the quiet, romantic waterway set among rolling hills. We bought a plot of land in the middle of nowhere, just where the slope from Bathampton falls gently to the waterside as a beautiful, lush meadow. At the top of the rise we built a little country cottage, with a pleasant garden path leading past fruit trees, vegetable beds and flower beds and on down to the canal, so that when we sat out of doors on our little garden terrace beside the water we could see the meadow, the house and the garden reflected in the canal. The house was more peaceful and comfortable than anywhere I had ever dreamt of living, and my only complaint was that it was rather lonely, since we had no neighbours.

"Oh, they'll soon come when they see what a pretty place we've found to live in," said my husband, cheering me.

And sure enough; our little peach trees and plum trees had hardly established themselves in the garden before, one day, signs of another building going up next to our house suddenly appeared. First came busy estate agents, then surveyors, and after them builders and carpenters. Within a dozen or so weeks a little cottage with a red-tiled roof was nestling beside ours. Finally a removal van full of furniture arrived. We heard constant banging and hammering in the formerly quiet air, but we had not yet set eyes on our new neighbours.

One morning there was a knock at our door. A pretty, slender woman with clever, friendly eyes, not much more than twenty-eight or twenty-nine, introduced herself as our neighbour and asked if we could lend her a saw; the workmen had forgotten to bring one. We fell into conversation. She told us that her husband worked in a bank in Bristol, but for a long time they had both wanted to live somewhere more remote, outside the city, and as they were walking along the canal one Sunday they had fallen in love with the look of our house. Of course it would mean a journey of an hour each way for her husband from home to work and back, but he would be sure to find pleasant travelling companions and would easily get used to it. We returned her call next day. She was still on her own at the house, and told us cheerfully that her husband wouldn't be joining her until all the work was finished. She really couldn't do with having him underfoot until then, she said, and after all, there was no hurry. I don't know why, but I didn't quite like the casual way she spoke of her husband's absence almost as if she were pleased not to have him there. When we were sitting over our meal alone at home, I commented that she didn't appear to be very fond of him. My husband told me I shouldn't keep jumping to hasty conclusions; he had thought her a very agreeable young woman, intelligent and pleasant, and he hoped her husband would be the same.

And it wasn't long before we met him. As we were taking our usual evening walk one Saturday when we had just left our house, we heard footsteps behind us, brisk and heavy, and when we turned we saw a large, cheerful-looking man catching up with us, offering us a large, red, freckled hand. He was our new neighbour, he said, he'd heard how kind we had been to his wife. Of course he ought not to be greeting us like this in his shirtsleeves, without paying a formal visit first. But his wife had told him so many nice things about us that he really couldn't wait a minute longer to thank us. So here he was, John Charleston Limpley by name, and wasn't it a famous thing—they'd already called the valley Limpley in his honour long before he himself could ever guess that he'd be looking for a house here some day? Yes, here he was, he said, and here he hoped to stay as long as the good Lord let him live. He liked this place better than anywhere else in the world, and he would promise us here and now, hand on his heart, to be a good neighbour.

He talked so fast and cheerfully, with such a flow of words, that you hardly had a chance to get a word in. So I at least had plenty of time to scrutinise him thoroughly. Limpley was a powerful figure of a man, at least six foot tall, with broad, square shoulders that would have graced a navvy, but he seemed to have a good-natured, childlike disposition, as giants so often do. His narrowed, slightly watery eyes twinkled confidently at you from between their reddish lids. As he talked and laughed, he kept showing his perfect white teeth. He didn't know quite what to do with his big, heavy hands, and had some difficulty in keeping them still. You felt that he would have liked to clap you on the shoulder in comradely fashion with those hands, and as if to work off some of his strength he at least cracked the joints of his fingers now and then.

Could he, he asked, join us on our walk, in his shirtsleeves just as he was? When we said yes, he walked along with us talking nineteen to the dozen. He was of Scottish descent on his mother's side, he told us, but he had grown up in Canada. Now and then he pointed to a fine tree or an attractive slope; how beautiful, he said, how incomparably beautiful that was! He talked, he laughed, he

expressed enthusiasm for everything almost without stopping. An invigorating current of strength and cheerfulness emanated from this large, healthy, vital man, infectiously carrying us away with it. When we finally parted, my husband and I both felt pleased with the warmth of his personality. "It's a long time since I met such a hearty, full-blooded fellow," said my husband who, as I have already indicated, is usually rather cautious and withdrawn in assessing character.

But it wasn't long before our first pleasure in finding such an agreeable new neighbour began to diminish considerably. There could not be the least objection to Limpley as a human being. He was so good-natured to a fault, he was interested in others, and so anxious to be obliging that you were always having to decline his helpful offers. In addition he was a thoroughly decent man, modest, open and by no means stupid. But after a while it became difficult to put up with his effusive, noisy way of being permanently happy. His watery eyes were always beaming with contentment about anything and everything. All that he owned, all that he encountered was delightful, wonderful; his wife was the best woman in the world, his roses the finest roses, his pipe the best pipe ever seen, and he smoked the best tobacco in it. He could spend a full quarter-of-an-hour trying to convince my husband that a pipe ought to be filled just so, in exactly the way he filled his own, and that while his tobacco was a penny cheaper than more expensive brands it was even better. Always bubbling over as he was with excessive enthusiasm about the most unimportant, natural and indifferent of things, he evidently had an urge to expound the reasons for falling into such banal raptures at length. The noisy engine running inside him was never switched off. Limpley couldn't work in his garden without singing at the top of his voice, couldn't talk without laughing uproariously and gesticulating, couldn't read the paper without jumping up when he came upon a news item that aroused his interest and running round to tell us about it. His huge, freckled hands were always assertive, like his big heart. It wasn't just that he patted every horse and every dog he met; my husband had to put up with many a comradely and uninhibited Canadian slap on the knee when they sat comfortably talking together. Because his own warm, full heart, which constantly overflowed with emotion, took an interest in everything, I had assumed that it was only natural for everyone else to take a similar interest, and you had to resort to all kinds of little tricks to ward off his insistent kindness. He respected no one's hours of rest or even sleep, because bursting as he was with health and strength he simply could not imagine anyone else ever feeling tired or downcast. You found yourself secretly wishing he would take a daily dose of bromide to lower his magnificent but near-intolerable vitality to a more normal level. Several times when Limpley had spent an hour sitting with us—or rather not sitting, but leaping up and down and striding around—I caught my husband instinctively opening the window, as if the presence of this dynamic and somehow barbaric man had overheated the room. While you were with him, looking into his bright, kindly eyes—and they were indeed always brimming over with kindness—you couldn't dislike him. It was only later that you felt you were worn out and wished him at the Devil. Before we knew Limpley, we old folk had never guessed that such admirable qualities as kindness, goodness of heart, frankness and warmth of feeling could drive us to distraction in their obtrusive superfluity.

I now also understood what I had found incomprehensible at first, that it by no means showed lack of affection on his wife's part when she accepted his absence with such cheerful equanimity. For she was the real victim of his extravagant good humour. Of course he loved her passionately, just as he passionately loved everything that was his. It was touching to see him treat her so tenderly and with such care; she had only to cough once and he was off in search of a coat for her, or poking the fire fan the flames, and if she went on an expedition to Bath he overwhelmed her with good advice as she had to survive a dangerous journey. I never heard an unkind word pass between the two of them; on the contrary, he loved to sing her praises to the point where it became quite embarrassing. Even

front of us, he couldn't refrain from caressing her and stroking her hair, and above all enumerating her many beauties and virtues. "Have you noticed what pretty little fingernails my Ellen has?" he would suddenly ask, and in spite of her bashful protest he made her show us her hands. Then I was expected to admire the way she arranged her hair, and of course we had to taste every batch of jam she made since in his opinion it was infinitely better than anything the most famous jam manufacturers in England could produce. Ellen, a quiet, modest woman, always sat with her eyes cast down on the embarrassing occasions, looking uncomfortable. She seemed to have given up defending herself against her husband's boisterous behaviour. She let him talk and tell stories and laugh, putting in on an occasional weary, "Oh, really?" or, "Fancy that."

"She doesn't have an easy life," commented my husband one day when we were going home. "But one can't really hold it against him. He's a good soul at heart, and she may well be happy with him."

"I'm not so sure about the happiness," I said rather sharply. "If you ask me, all that ostentatious happiness is too much to take—fancy making such a show of his feelings! I'd go mad living with so much excessive emotion. Don't you see that he's making his wife very *unhappy* with all that effervescence and positively murderous vitality?"

"Oh, you're always exaggerating," said my husband, and I suppose he was right, really. Limpley's wife was by no means unhappy, or rather she wasn't even that any more. By now she was probably incapable of any pronounced feeling of her own; she was simply numbed and exhausted by Limpley's vast exuberance. When he went to his office in the morning, and his last cheery 'Goodbye' died away at the garden gate, I noticed that the first thing she did was to sit down or lie down for a little while without doing anything, just to enjoy the quiet atmosphere all around her. And there would be something slightly weary in her movements all day. It wasn't easy to get into conversation with her for she had almost forgotten how to speak for herself in their eight years of marriage. Once she told me how they had met. She had been living with her parents in the country, he had strolled by on a morning outing, and in his wild way he had swept her off her feet; they were engaged and then married before she really knew what he was like or even what his profession was. A quiet, pleasant woman, she never said a word, not a syllable to suggest that she wasn't happy, and yet as a woman myself I sensed where the real crux of that marriage lay. In the first year they had taken it for granted that they would have a baby, and it was the same in the second and third years of their marriage. Then after six or seven years they had given up hope, and now her days were too empty, while her evenings were too full of his boisterous high spirits. It would be a good idea, I thought to myself, if she were to adopt a child, take to some kind of sporting activity, or find a job. All that sitting around was bound to lead to melancholy, and melancholy in turn to a kind of hatred for his provoking cheerfulness, which was certainly likely to exhaust any normal person. She ought to have someone, anyone with her, or the tension would be too strong.

As chance would have it, I had owed an old friend of my youth who lived in Bath a visit for weeks. We had a comfortable chat, and then she suddenly remembered that she wanted to show me something charming, and took me out into the yard. At first all I could see in the dim light of a shed was a group of small creatures of some kind tumbling about in the straw, crawling over each other and mock-fighting. They were four bulldog puppies of six or seven weeks old, stumbling about on their big paws now and then trying to utter a little squeal of a bark. They were indeed charming as they staggered out of the basket where their mother lay, looking massive and suspicious. I picked one of them up by his profuse white coat. The puppy was brown and white, and with his pretty snub nose he did credit to his distinguished pedigree, as his mistress explained to me. I couldn't refrain from playing with him, teasing him and getting him excited so that he snapped clumsily at my fingers. My friend asked if

would like to take him home with me; she loved the puppies very much, she said, and she was ready to give them away if she could be sure they were going to good homes where they would be well cared for. I hesitated, because I knew that when my husband lost his beloved spaniel he had sworn never to let another dog into his heart again. But then it occurred to me that this charming little puppy might be just the thing for Mrs Limpley, and I promised my friend to let her know next day. That evening I put my idea to the Limpleys. Mrs Limpley was silent; she seldom expressed an opinion of her own. However, Limpley himself agreed with his usual enthusiasm. Yes, yes, he said, that was all that had been missing from their lives! A house wasn't really a home without a dog. Impetuous as he was, I tried persuading me to go to Bath with him that very night, rouse my friend and collect the puppy. But when I turned down this fanciful idea he had to wait, and not until the next day did the bulldog puppy arrive at their house in a little basket, yapping and scared by the unexpected journey.

The outcome was not quite what we had expected. I had meant to provide the quiet woman who spent her days alone in an empty house with a companion to share it. However, it was Limpley himself who turned the full force of his inexhaustible need to show affection on the dog. His delight in the comical little creature was boundless, and as always excessive and slightly ridiculous. Of course Ponto, as he called the puppy, I don't know why, was the best-looking, cleverest dog on earth, and Limpley discovered new virtues and talents in him every day, indeed every hour. He spent lavishly on the best equipment for his four-footed friend, on grooming tools, leashes, baskets, a muzzle, food bowls, toys, balls and bones. Limpley studied all the articles and advertisements in the newspaper offering information on the care and nutrition of dogs, and took out a subscription to a dog magazine with a view to acquiring expert knowledge. The large dog industry that makes its money exclusively from such enthusiastic dog-lovers found a new and assiduous customer in him. The least little thing was a reason for a visit to the vet. It would take volumes to describe all the foolish excesses arising from an unbroken succession from this new passion of his. We often heard loud barking from the house next door, not from the dog but from his master as he lay flat on the floor, trying to engage his pet in a dialogue that no one else could understand by imitating dog language. He paid more attention to the spoiled animal's care than to his own, earnestly following all the dietary advice of dog experts. Ponto ate better than Limpley and his wife, and once, when there was something in the newspaper about typhoid—in a completely different part of the country—the animal was given only bottled mineral water to drink. If a disrespectful flea ventured to come near the sacrosanct puppy and get his back scratching or biting in an undignified manner, the agitated Limpley would take the wretched business of flea-hunting upon himself. You would see him in his shirtsleeves, bent over a bucket of water and disinfectant, getting to work with brush and comb until the last unwanted guest had been disposed of. No trouble was too much for him to take, nothing was beneath his dignity, and no prince of the realm could have been more affectionately and carefully looked after than Ponto the puppy. The only good thing to come of all this foolishness was that as a result of Limpley's emotional fixation on his new object of affection, his wife and we were spared a considerable amount of his exuberance; he would spend hours walking the dog and talking to him, although that did not seem to deter the thick-skinned little creature from snuffling around as he liked, and Mrs Limpley watched, smiling and without the slightest jealousy, as her husband carried out a daily ritual at the altar of his four-footed idol. All that withdrew from her in the way of affection was the irritating excess of it, for he still lavished his tenderness on her in full measure. We could not help noticing that the new pet in the house had perhaps made their marriage happier than before.

Meanwhile Ponto was growing week by week. The thick puppy folds of his skin filled out with firm muscular flesh, he grew into a strong animal with a broad chest, strong jaws, and muscular

hindquarters that were kept well brushed. He was naturally good-tempered, but he became less pleasant company when he realised that his was the dominant position in the household, and thanks to that he began behaving with lordly arrogance. It had not taken the clever, observant animal long to work out that his master, or rather his slave, would forgive him any kind of naughtiness. First it was just disobedience, but he soon began behaving tyrannically, refusing on principle to do anything that might make him seem subservient. Worst of all, he would allow no one in the house any privacy. Nothing could be done without his presence and, in effect, his express permission. When ever visitors called he would fling himself imperiously against the door, well knowing that the dutiful Limpley would make haste to open it for him, and then Ponto would jump up proudly into an armchair, not deigning to honour the visitors with so much as a glance. He was showing them that he was the real master of the house, and all honour and veneration were owed to him. Of course no other dog was allowed even to approach the garden fence, and certain people to whom he had taken a dislike, expressed by growling at them, were obliged to put down the post or the milk bottles outside the gate instead of bringing them right up to the house. The more Limpley lowered himself in his childish passion for the now autocratic animal, the worse Ponto treated him, and improbable as it may sound, the dog even devised an entire system of ways to show that he might put up with petting and enthusiastic encomiums, but felt not in the least obliged to respond to these daily tributes with any kind of gratitude. As a matter of principle, he kept Limpley waiting every time his master called him, and in the end this unfortunate change in Ponto went so far that he would spend all day racing about like a normal, full-blooded dog who has not been trained in obedience will do, chasing chickens, jumping into the water, greedily devouring anything that came his way, and indulging in his favourite game of racing silently and with malice aforethought down the slope to the canal with the force of a small bomb, head-butting the baskets and tubs of washing standing there until they fell into the water, and then prancing around the washerwomen and girls who had brought them with howls of triumph, which they had to retrieve their laundry from the water item by item. But as soon as it was time for Limpley to come home from the office Ponto, that clever actor, abandoned his high-spirited pranks and assumed the unapproachable air of a sultan. Lounging lazily about, he waited without the slightest welcoming expression for the return of his master, who would fall on him with a hearty, "Hello there, Ponto!" even before he greeted his wife or took off his coat. Ponto did not so much as wag his tail in response. Sometimes he magnanimously rolled over on his back to have his soft, silky stomach scratched, but even at these gracious moments he took care not to show that he was enjoying it by snuffling or grunting with pleasure. His humble servant was to notice that Ponto was doing him no favour by accepting his attentions at all. And with a brief growl that was as much as to say, "That's enough!" he would suddenly turn and put an end to the game. Similarly, he always had to be implored to eat the chopped liver that Limpley fed him piece by piece. Sometimes he merely sniffed at it and despite all persuasions lay down, scorning it, just to show that he was not always to be induced to eat his dinner when his two-legged slave served it up. Invited to go out for a walk, he would begin by stretching lazily, yawning so widely that you could see down to the black spots in his throat. He always insisted on doing something to make it clear that personally he was not much in favour of a walk, and would get off the sofa only to oblige Limpley. All his spoiling made him badly behaved, and he thought up any number of tricks to make sure that his master always assumed the attitude of a beggar and petitioner with him. In fact Limpley's servile passion could well have been described as more like doglike devotion than the conduct of the insubordinate animal, who played the part of an oriental pasha to histrionic perfection.

Neither my husband nor I could bear to watch the outrageous behaviour of the tyrannical dog and

longer. Clever as he was, Ponto soon noticed our lack of respect for him, and took care to show us his disapproval in the most obvious way. There was no denying that he was a dog of character. After the day when our maid turned him out of the garden in short order when he had left his unmistakable visiting card in one of our rose beds, he never again slipped through the thick hedge that formed the boundary between our two properties, and despite Limpley's pleas and persuasions could not be induced to set foot inside our house. We were glad to dispense with his visits; more awkward was the fact that when we met Limpley in his company walking down the road or outside our house, and though the good-natured, talkative man fell into friendly conversation, the tyrannical animal's provocative behaviour made it impossible for us to talk at any length. After two minutes Ponto would begin to howl angrily, or growl and butt Limpley's leg, clearly meaning, "Stop it! Don't talk to the unpleasant people!" And I am sorry to say that Limpley always caved in. First he would try to soothe the disobedient animal. "Just a minute, and then we'll go on." But there was no fobbing off the tyrant and his unfortunate servant—rather ashamed and confused—would say goodbye to us. Then the haughty animal trotted off, hindquarters proudly raised, visibly triumphant after demonstrating his unlimited power. I am not a violent woman, but my hand always itched to give the spoilt creature a smart blow with a dog whip, just once.

By these means Ponto, a perfectly ordinary dog, had managed to cool our previously friendly relations with our neighbours to a considerable extent. It obviously annoyed Limpley that he could no longer drop in on us every five minutes as he used to; his wife, for her part, was upset because she could see how ridiculous her husband's servile devotion to the dog made him in everyone else's eyes. And so another year passed in little skirmishes of this kind, while the dog became, if possible, even bolder and more demanding, and above all more ingenious in humiliating Limpley, until one day there was a change that surprised all concerned equally. Some of us, indeed, were glad of it, but it was a tragedy for the one most affected.

I had been unable to avoid telling my husband that for the last two or three weeks Mrs Limpley had been curiously shy, avoiding a conversation of any length with me. As good neighbours we lent each other this or that household item from time to time, and these encounters always led to a comfortable chat. I really liked that quiet, modest woman very much. Recently, however, I had noticed that she seemed embarrassed to approach me, and would rather send round her housemaid when she wanted to ask a favour. If I spoke to her, she seemed obviously self-conscious and wouldn't let me look her in the eye. My husband, who had a special liking for her, persuaded me just to go over to her house and ask straight out if we had done something to offend her without knowing it. "One shouldn't let a little coolness of that kind come between neighbours. And maybe it's just the opposite of what you fear. Maybe—and I do think so—she wants to ask you a favour and can't summon up the courage."

I took his advice to heart. I went round to the Limpleys' house and found her sitting in a chair in the garden, so lost in reverie that she didn't even hear me coming. I put a hand on her shoulder and said, speaking frankly, "Mrs Limpley, I'm an old woman and you needn't be shy with me. Let me speak first. If you are annoyed with us about something, do tell me what the matter is."

The poor little woman was startled. How could I think such a thing, she asked? She had kept from visiting me only because ... And here she blushed instead of going on, and began to sob, but her sobs were, if I may say so, happy and glad. Finally she told me all about it. After nine years of marriage she had long ago given up all hope of being a mother, and even when her suspicion that the unexpected might have happened had grown stronger in the last few weeks, she said she hadn't felt brave enough to believe in it. The day before yesterday, however, she had secretly gone to see the doctor, and now she was certain. But she hadn't yet brought herself to tell her husband. I knew what he was like, she

said, she was almost afraid of his extreme joy. Might it be best—and she hadn't been able to summon up the courage to ask us—might we be kind enough to prepare him for the news?

I said we'd be happy to do so. My husband in particular liked the idea, and he set about it with great amusement. He left a note for Limpley asking him to come round to us as soon as he got home from the office. And of course the good man came racing round, anxious to oblige, without even stopping to take his coat off. He was obviously afraid that something was wrong in our house, but on the other hand delighted to let off steam by showing how friendly and willing to oblige us he was. He stood there, breathless. My husband asked him to sit down at the table. This unusual ceremony alarmed him and he hardly knew what to do with his large, heavy, freckled hands.

"Limpley," my husband began, "I thought of you yesterday evening when I read a maxim in an old book saying that no one should wish for too much, we should wish for only a single thing. And I thought to myself—what would our good neighbour, for instance, wish for if an angel or a good fairy or some other kindly being were to ask him—Limpley, what do you really want in life? I will grant you just one wish."

Limpley looked baffled. He was enjoying the joke, but he did not take it seriously. He still had an uneasy feeling that there was something ominous behind this solemn opening.

"Come along, Limpley, think of me as your good fairy," said my husband reassuringly, seeing him so much at a loss. "Don't you have anything to wish for at all?"

Half-in-earnest, half-laughing, Limpley scratched his short red hair.

"Well, not really," he finally confessed. "I have everything I could want, my house, my wife, my good safe job, my ..." I noticed that he was going to say 'my dog', but at the last moment he felt that was out of place. "Yes, I really have all I could wish for."

"So there's nothing for the angel or the fairy to grant you?"

Limpley was getting more cheerful by the minute. He was delighted to be offered the chance to tell us, straight out, how extremely happy he was. "No ... not really."

"What a pity," said my husband. "What a pity you can't think of anything." And he fell silent.

Limpley was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable under my husband's searching gaze. He clearly thought he ought to apologise.

"Well, one can always do with a little more money, of course ... maybe a promotion at work ... but as I said, I'm content ... I really don't know what else I could wish for."

"So the poor angel," said my husband, pretending to shake his head sadly, "has to leave his mission unaccomplished because Mr Limpley has nothing to wish for. Well, fortunately the kind angel didn't go straight away again, but had a word with Mrs Limpley first, and he seems to have had better luck with her."

Limpley was taken aback. The poor man looked almost simple-minded, sitting there with his watery eyes staring and his mouth half-open. But he pulled himself together and said with slight irritation, for he didn't see how anyone who belonged to him not be perfectly happy, "My wife? What can *she* have to wish for?"

"Well—perhaps something better than a dog to look after."

Now Limpley understood. He was thunderstruck. Instinctively he opened his eyes so wide in happy surprise that you could see the whites instead of the pupils. All at once he jumped up and ran out forgetting his coat and without a word of apology to us, storming off to his wife's room like a mad demented.

We both laughed. But we were not surprised; it was just what we would have expected of our famously impetuous neighbour.

Someone else, however, was surprised. Someone who was lounging on the sofa idly, eyes half-open and blinking, waiting for the homage that his master owed him, or that he thought his master owed him—the well-groomed and autocratic Ponto. But what on earth had happened? The man went rushing past him without a word of greeting or flattery, on into the bedroom, and he heard laughter and weeping and talk and sobs, going on and on, and no one bothered about him, Ponto, who by right and custom received the first loving greeting. An hour passed by. The maid brought him his bowl of food. Ponto scornfully left it untouched. He was used to being begged and urged to eat until he was half-fed. He growled angrily at the maid. They'd soon find out he wasn't to be fobbed off with indifference like that! But in their excitement his humans never even noticed that he had turned down his dinner that evening. He was forgotten, and forgotten he remained. Limpley was talking on and on to his wife, never stopping, bombarding her with concern and advice, lavishing caresses on her. In the first flush of his delight he had no eyes for Ponto, and the arrogant animal was too proud to remind his master of his existence by intruding. He crouched in a corner and waited. This could only be a misunderstanding, a single if inexcusable oversight. But he waited in vain. Even next morning, when the countless admonitions Limpley kept giving his wife to take it easy and spare herself almost made him miss his bus, he raced out of the house and past Ponto without a word to the dog.

There's no doubt that Ponto was an intelligent animal, but this sudden change was more than he could understand. I happened to be standing at the window when Limpley got on the bus, and I saw how, as soon as he had disappeared inside it, Ponto very slowly—I might almost say thoughtfully—slunk out of the house and watched the vehicle as it drove away. He waited there without moving for half-an-hour, obviously hoping that his master would come back and make up for the attention he had forgotten to pay him the evening before. He did not rush about playing, but only went round and round the house all day slowly, as if deep in thought. Perhaps—who knows how and to what extent sequences of thought can form in an animal mind?—he was brooding on whether he himself had done something clumsy to earn the incomprehensible withdrawal of the favours he was used to. Toward evening, about half-an-hour before Limpley usually came home, he became visibly nervous and kept patrolling the fence with his ears back, keeping an eye open to spot the bus in good time. But of course he wasn't going to show how impatiently he had been waiting; as soon as the bus came into view at its usual hour he hurried back into the living room, lay down on the sofa as usual and waited.

Once again, however, he waited in vain. Once again Limpley hurried past him. And so it went day after day. Now and then Limpley noticed him, gave him a fleeting, "Oh, there you are, Ponto," and patted him in passing. But it was only an indifferent, casual pat. There was no more flattering, servile attention, there were no more caresses, no games, no walks, nothing, nothing, nothing. Limpley, though fundamentally a kindly man, can hardly be blamed for this painful indifference, for he now had no thought in his head but to look after his wife. When he came home from work he accompanied her wherever she went, taking her for walks of just the right length, supporting her with his arm in case she took a hasty or incautious step; he watched over her diet, and made the maid give him a precise report on every hour of her day. Late at night, when she had gone to bed, he came round to our house almost daily to ask me, as a woman of experience, for advice and reassurance; he was already buying equipment in the big department stores for the coming baby. And he did all this in a state of uninterrupted busy excitement. His own personal life came nowhere; sometimes he forgot to shave for two days on end, and sometimes he was late at the office because the constant stream of advice he gave his wife had made him miss the bus. So it was not malice or unfaithfulness if he neglected to take Ponto for walks or pay him attention; only the confusion of a passionate man with an almost monomaniac disposition concentrating all his senses, thoughts and feelings on a single object. But

human beings, in spite of their ability to think logically of the past and the future, are hardly capable of accepting a slight inflicted on them without bearing resentment, how can a dumb animal take calmly? Ponto was more and more nervous and agitated as the weeks went by. His self-esteem could not tolerate being overlooked and downgraded in importance, when he was the real master of the house. It would have been sensible of him to adopt a pleading, flattering attitude to Limpley, who would then surely have been aware of his dereliction of duty. But Ponto was too proud to crawl before anyone. It was not he but his master who was to make the first approach. So the dog tried all kinds of ruses to draw attention to himself. In the third week he suddenly began limping, dragging his left hind leg as if he had gone lame. In normal circumstances, Limpley would have examined him at once with affectionate alarm, to see if he had a thorn in his paw. He would anxiously have phoned the vet, and would have got up three or four times in the night to see how the dog was doing. Now, however, neither he nor anyone else in the house took the slightest notice of Ponto's pathetically assumed limp, and the embittered dog had no alternative but to put up with it. A couple of weeks later he tried again, this time going on hunger strike. For two days he made the sacrifice of leaving his food untouched. But no one worried about his lack of appetite, whereas usually, if he failed to lick the last morsel out of his bowl in one of his tyrannical moods, the attentive Limpley would fetch him special dog biscuits or a slice of sausage. Finally animal hunger was too much for Ponto, and he secretly and guiltily ate all his food with little enjoyment. Another time he tried to attract attention by hiding for a day. He had prudently taken up quarters in the disused henhouse, where he would be able to listen with satisfaction to anxious cries of "Ponto! Ponto, where are you?" But no one called him, no one noticed his absence or felt worried. His masterful spirit caved in. He had been set aside, humiliated, forgotten, and he didn't even know why.

I think I was the first to notice the change that came over the dog in those weeks. He lost weight and his bearing was different. Instead of strutting briskly with his hindquarters proudly raised in the old way, he slunk about as if he had been whipped, and his coat, once carefully brushed every day, lost its silky gloss. When you met him he bowed his head so that you couldn't see his eyes and hurried past. But although he had been miserably humiliated, his old pride was not yet entirely broken; he still felt ashamed to face the rest of us, and his only outlet for his fury was to attack those baskets of laundry washing. Within a week he pushed no less than three of them into the canal to make it clear, through his violence, that he was still around and he demanded respect. But even that was no good, and the only effect was that the laundry maids threatened to beat him. All his cunning ruses were in vain—leaving his food, limping, pretending to go missing, assiduously looking for his master—and he racked his brain inside that square, heavy head—something mysterious that he didn't understand must have happened that day. After it, the house and everyone in it had changed, and the despairing Ponto realised that he was powerless in the face of whatever had happened or was still happening. There could be no doubt about it—someone, some strange and ill-disposed power was against him. He, Ponto, had an enemy. An enemy who was stronger than he was, and this enemy was invisible and out of his reach. So the enemy, that cunning, evil, cowardly adversary who had taken away all his authority in the household, couldn't be seized, torn to pieces, bitten until his bones cracked. No sniffing at doorways helped him, no alert watchfulness, no lying in wait with ears pricked, no brooding—his enemy, that thief, that devil, was and remained invisible. In those weeks Ponto kept pacing along the garden fence like a dog deranged, trying to find some trace of his diabolical, unseen enemy.

All that his alert senses did pick up was the fact that preparations of some kind were being made in the house; he didn't understand them, but they must be to do with his arch-enemy. Worst of all, the

was suddenly an elderly lady staying there—Mrs Limpley’s mother—who slept at night on the dining room sofa where Ponto used to lounge at his ease if his comfortably upholstered basket didn’t seem luxurious enough. And then again, all kinds of things kept being delivered to the house—what for?—bedclothes, packages, the doorbell was ringing all the time. Several times a black-clad man with glasses turned up smelling of something horrible, stinking of harsh, inhuman tinctures. The door to the mistress of the house’s bedroom was always opening and closing, and there was constant whispering behind it, or sometimes the two ladies would sit together snipping and clicking their sewing things. What did it all mean, and why was he, Ponto, shut out and deprived of his rights? All his brooding finally brought a vacant, almost glazed look to the dog’s eyes. What distinguishes an animal’s mind from human understanding, after all, is that the animal lives exclusively in the past and the present and is unable to imagine the future or speculate on what may happen. And here, the dumb animal fell in torments of despair, something was going on that meant him ill, and yet he couldn’t defend himself or fight back.

It was six months in all before the proud, masterful, Ponto, exhausted by his futile struggle, humbly capitulated, and oddly enough I was the one to whom he surrendered. I had been sitting in the garden one fine summer evening while my husband played patience indoors, and suddenly I felt the light, hesitant touch of something warm on my knee. It was Ponto, his pride broken. He had not been in the garden for a year-and-a-half, but now, in his distress, he was seeking refuge with me. Perhaps, in those weeks when everyone else was neglecting him, I had spoken to him or patted him in passing, so that he thought of me in this last moment of despair, and I shall never forget the urgent, pleading expression in his eyes as he looked up at me. The glance of an animal in great need can be a more penetrating, I might even say a more speaking look than the glance of a human being, for we put more of our feelings and thoughts into the words with which we communicate, while an animal, incapable of speech, expresses feelings only with its eyes. I have never seen perplexity more touchingly and desperately expressed than I did in that indescribable look from Ponto as he pawed gently at the hem of my skirt, begging. Much moved, I realised that he was saying, “Please tell me what my master and the rest of them have against me. What horrible thing are they planning to do to me in that house? Help me, tell me what to do.” I really had no idea what to do myself in view of that pleading look. Instinctively I patted him and murmured under my breath, “Poor Ponto, your time is over. You’ll have to get used to it, just as we all have to get used to things we don’t like.” Ponto pricked up his ears when I spoke to him, and the folds of skin on his brow moved painfully, as if he were trying to guess what my words meant. Then he scraped his paw impatiently on the ground. It was an urgent, restless gesture, meaning something like, “I don’t understand you! Explain! Help me!” But I knew there was nothing I could do for him. He must have sensed, deep down, that I had no comfort to offer. He stood up quietly and disappeared as soundlessly as he had come, without looking back.

Ponto was missing for a whole day and a whole night. If he had been human I would have been afraid he had committed suicide. He did not turn up until the evening of the next day, dirty, hungry, scruffy and with a couple of bites; in his helpless fury he must have attacked other dogs somewhere. But new humiliation awaited him. The maid wouldn’t let him into the house, but instead put his bowl of food outside the door and then took no more notice of him. It so happened that special circumstances accounted for this cruel insult, because Mrs Limpley had gone into labour, and the house was full of people bustling about. Limpley stood around helplessly, red-faced and trembling with excitement; the midwife was hurrying back and forth, assisted by the doctor; Limpley’s mother-in-law was sitting by the bed comforting her daughter; and the maid had her hands more than full. I had come round to the Limpleys’ house myself and was waiting in the dining room in case I could be

useful in any way. All things considered, Ponto's presence could only have been a nuisance. But how was his dull, doggy brain to understand that? The distressed animal realised only that for the first time he had been turned out of the house—*his* house—like a beggar, unwanted. He was being maliciously kept away from something important going on there behind closed doors. His fury was indescribable and with his powerful teeth he cracked the bones that had been thrown to him as if they were his unseen enemy's neck. Then he snuffled around; his sharpened senses could tell that other strange things had gone into the house—again, *his* house—and on the drive he picked up the scent of the black-clad man he hated, the man with the glasses. But there were others in league with him as well, and what were they doing in there? The agitated animal listened with his ears pricked up. Pressing close to the wall, he heard voices both soft and loud, groaning, cries, then water splashing, hurried footsteps, things being moved about, the clink of glass and metal—something was going on in there, something he didn't understand. But instinctively he sensed that it was hostile to him. It was to blame for his humiliation, the loss of his rights—it was the invisible, infamous, cowardly, malicious enemy, and now it was really there, now it would be in visible form, now at last he could seize it by the scruff of its neck as it richly deserved. Muscles tense and quivering with excitement, the powerful animal crouched beside the front door so that he could rush in the moment it opened. He wasn't going to go away this time, the evil enemy, the usurper of his rights and privileges who had murdered his peace of mind!

Inside the house no one gave a thought to the dog. We were too busy and excited. I had to reassure and console Limpley—no mean task—when the doctor and the midwife banished him from the bedroom; for those two hours, considering his vast capacity for sympathy, he may well have suffered more than the woman in labour herself. At last came the good news, and after a while Limpley, his feelings vacillating between joy and fear, was cautiously let into the bedroom to see his child—a little girl, as the midwife had just announced—and the new mother. He stayed there for a long time, while his mother-in-law and I, who had been through childbirth ourselves, exchanged reminiscences in a friendly conversation.

At last the door opened and Limpley appeared, followed by the doctor. The proud father was coming to show us the baby, and was carrying her lying on a changing pad, like a priest bearing a monstrance; his broad, kind, slightly simple face almost transfigured by radiant happiness. Tears kept running unstoppably down his cheeks, and he didn't know how to dry them, because his broad hands were holding the child like something inexpressibly precious and fragile. Meanwhile the doctor stood behind him, who was familiar with such scenes, was putting on his coat. "Well, my job here is done," he said smiling, and he shook hands and went to the door, suspecting no harm.

But in the split second when the doctor opened the door, with no idea what was about to happen, something shot past his legs, something that had been crouching there with muscles at full stretch, and there was Ponto in the middle of the room, filling it with the sound of furious barking. He had seen for the first time that Limpley was holding some new object that he didn't know, holding it tenderly, something small and red and alive that mewed like a cat and smelled human—aha! There was the enemy, the cunning, hidden enemy he had been searching for all this time, the adversary who had robbed him of his power, the creature that had destroyed his peace! Bite it! Tear it to bits! And with bared teeth he leapt up at Limpley to snatch the baby from him. I think we all screamed at the same time, for the powerful animal's movement was so sudden and violent that Limpley, although he was a heavily and sturdily built man, swayed under the weight of the impact and staggered back against the wall. But in the last moment he instinctively held the changing pad up in the air with the baby on it, so that no harm could come to her, and I myself, moving fast, had taken her from Limpley before he fell. The

dog immediately turned against me. Luckily the doctor, who had rushed back on hearing our cries with great presence of mind picked up a heavy chair and flung it. It landed with a heavy impact on the furious animal, cracking bones, as Ponto stood there with his eyes bloodshot and foaming at the mouth. The dog howled with pain and retreated for a moment, only to attack again in his frenzied rage. However, that brief moment had been long enough for Limpley to recover from his fall and fling himself on the dog, in a fury that was horrifyingly like Ponto's own. A terrible battle began. Limpley, a broad, heavy, powerful man, had landed on Ponto with his full weight and was trying to strangle him with his strong hands. The two of them were now rolling about on the floor in a tangle of limbs as they fought. Ponto snapped, and Limpley went on trying to choke him, his knee braced on the animal's chest, while Ponto kept wriggling out of his grasp. We old women fled into the next room to protect the baby, while the doctor and the maid, joining the fray, now joined the attack on the furious dog. They struck Ponto with anything that came to hand—wood cracked, glass clinked—they went for him with hands and feet, hammering and kicking his body, until the mad barking turned to heavy, stertorous breathing. Finally the animal, now completely exhausted, his breath coming irregularly, had his front and back legs tied by the doctor, the maid and my husband, who had come running from our house when he heard the noise. They used Ponto's own leather leash and some cord, and stuffed a cloth snatched off the table into his mouth. Now entirely defenceless and half-conscious, he was dragged out of the room. Outside the door they got him into a sack, and only then did the doctor hurry back to help.

Limpley, meanwhile, swaying like a drunk, staggered into the other room to make sure his child was all right. The baby was uninjured, and stared up at him with her sleepy little eyes. Nor was his wife in any danger, although she had been woken from her deep, exhausted sleep by all the noise. With some difficulty, she managed to give her husband a wan, affectionate smile as he stroked her hand. Only now was he able to think of himself. He looked terrible, his face white, mad-eyed, his collar torn open and his clothes crumpled and dusty. We were alarmed to see that blood was dripping from his torn right sleeve to the floor. In his fury he had not even noticed that, as he tried to throttle the animal, it had bitten him deeply twice in desperate self-defence. He removed his coat and shirt, and the doctor made haste to bandage his arm. Meanwhile the maid fetched him a brandy, for exhausted by his agitation and the loss of blood he was close to fainting, and it was only with some difficulty that we got him lying down on a sofa. Since he had had little rest for the last two nights as he waited in suspense for the baby's birth, he fell into a deep sleep.

Meanwhile we considered what to do with Ponto. "Shoot him," said my husband, and he was about to go home to fetch his revolver. But the doctor said it was his own duty to take him to have his saliva tested without a moment's delay, in case he was rabid, because if so then special measures must be taken to treat Limpley's bites. He would get Ponto into his car at once, he said. We all went out to help the doctor. The animal was lying defenceless outside the door, bound and gagged—a sight I shall never forget—but he was rolling his bloodshot eyes as if they would pop out of his head. He ground his teeth and retched and swallowed, trying to spit out the gag, while his muscles stood out like cords. His entire contorted body was vibrating and twitching convulsively, and I must confess that although we knew he was well trussed up we all hesitated to touch him. I had never in my life seen anything like such concentrated malice and fury, or such hatred in the eyes of any living creature as in his bloodshot and bloodthirsty gaze. I instinctively wondered if my husband had not been right in suggesting that the dog should be shot at once. But the doctor insisted on taking him away, and so the trussed animal was dragged to his car and driven off, in spite of his helpless resistance.

With this inglorious departure, Ponto vanished from our sight for quite a long time. My husband

found out that he had tested negative for rabies under observation for several days at the Pasteur Institute, and as there could be no question of a return to the scene of his crime Ponto had been given to a butcher in Bath who was looking for a strong, aggressive dog. We thought no more of him, and Limpley himself, after wearing his arm in a sling for only two or three days, entirely forgot him. Now that his wife had recovered from the strain of childbirth, his passion and care were concentrated entirely on his little daughter, and I need hardly say that he showed as much extreme and fanatic devotion as to Ponto in his time, and perhaps made even more of a fool of himself. The powerful heavy man would kneel beside the baby's pram like one of the Magi before the crib in the Nativity scenes of the old Italian masters; every day, every hour, every minute he discovered some new beauty in the little rosy creature, who was indeed a charming child. His quiet, sensible wife smiled with far more understanding on this paternal adoration than on his old senseless idolising of his four-footed friend, and we too benefited, for the presence of perfect, unclouded happiness next door could not help but cast its friendly light on our own house.

We had all, as I said, completely forgotten Ponto when I was surprisingly reminded of him one evening. My husband and I had come back from London late, after going to a concert conducted by Bruno Walter, and I could not drop off to sleep, I don't know why. Was it the echo of the melodies of the Jupiter Symphony that I was unconsciously trying to replay in my head, or was it the mild, clear moonlit summer night? I got up—it was about two in the morning—and looked out of the window. The moon was sailing in the sky high above, as if drifting before an invisible wind, through clouds that shone silver in its light, and every time it emerged pure and bright from those clouds it bathed the whole garden in snowy brightness. There was no sound; I felt that if a single leaf had stirred it would not have escaped me. So I started in alarm when, in the midst of this absolute silence, I suddenly noticed something moving stealthily along the hedge between our garden and the Limpleys—something black that stood out distinctly as it quietly but restlessly against the moonlit lawn. With instinctive interest, I looked more closely. It was not a living creature, it was nothing corporeal moving there, it was a shadow. Only a shadow, but a shadow that must be cast by some living thing cautiously stealing along under cover of the hedge, the shadow of a human being or an animal. Perhaps I am not expressing myself very well, but the furtive, sly silence of that stealthy shape had something alarming about it. My first thought—for we women worry about such things—was that there must be a burglar, even a murderous one, and my heart was in my mouth. But then the shadow reached the garden hedge on the upper terrace where the fence began, and now it was slinking along past the railing of the fence, curiously hunched. Now I could see the creature itself ahead of its shadow—it was a dog, and I recognised the dog at once. Ponto was back. Very slowly, very cautiously, obviously ready to run away at the first sound, Ponto was snuffling around the Limpleys' house. It was—and I don't know why this thought suddenly flashed through my mind—it was as if he wanted to give notice in advance of something, for his was not the free, loose-limbed movement of a dog picking up a scent; there was something about him suggesting that he had some forbidden or ill-intentioned plan in mind. He did not keep his nose close to the ground, sniffing, nor did he walk with his muscles relaxed, but he made his way slowly along, keeping low and almost on his belly, to make himself more inconspicuous. He was inching forward like as if stalking prey. I instinctively leant forward to get a better look at him. But I must have moved clumsily, touching the window frame and making some slight noise, for with a silent leap Ponto disappeared into the darkness. It seemed as if I had only dreamt it all. The garden lay there in the moonlight empty, white and brightly lit again, with nothing moving.

I don't know why, but I felt ashamed to tell my husband about this; it could have been just a

senses playing a trick on me. But when I happened to meet the Limpleys' maid in the road next morning, I asked her casually if she had happened to see Ponto again recently. The girl was uneasy and a little embarrassed, and only when I encouraged her did she admit that yes, she had in fact seen him around several times, and in strange circumstances. She couldn't really say why, but she was afraid of him. Four weeks ago, she told me, she had been taking the baby into town in her pram, and suddenly she had heard terrible barking. As the butcher's van rolled by with Ponto in it, he had howled at her or, as she thought, at the baby in the pram, and looked as if he were crouching to spring, but luckily the van had passed so quickly that he dared not jump out of it. However, she said, his furious barking had gone right through her. Of course she had not told Mr Limpley, she added; the news would only have upset him unnecessarily, and anyway she thought the dog was in safe keeping in Bath. But only the other day, one afternoon when she went out to the old woodshed to fetch a few logs, there had been something moving in there at the back. She had been about to scream in fright, but then she saw it was Ponto hiding there, and he had immediately shot away through the hedge and into the garden. Since then she had suspected that he hid there quite often, and he must have been walking around the house by night, because the other day, after that heavy storm in the night, she had clearly seen paw prints in the wet sand showing that he had circled the whole house several times. Did I think he might want to come back, she asked me? Mr Limpley certainly wouldn't have him in the house again, and living with a butcher Ponto could hardly be hungry. If he were, anyway, he would have come to her in the kitchen first to beg for food. Somehow she didn't like the way he was slinking about the place, she added, and did I think she ought to tell Mr Limpley after all, or at least his wife? We thought it over, and agreed that if Ponto turned up again we would tell his new master the butcher so that he could put an end to his visits. For the time being, at least, we wouldn't remind Limpley of the existence of the hated animal.

I think we made a mistake, for perhaps—who can say—that might have prevented what happened the next day, on that terrible and never-to-be-forgotten Sunday. My husband and I had gone round to the Limpleys', and we were sitting in deckchairs on the small lower terrace of the garden, talking. From the lower terrace, the turf ran down quite a steep slope to the canal. The pram was on the flat lawn on the terrace beside us, and I hardly need say that the besotted father got up in the middle of the conversation every five minutes to enjoy the sight of the baby. After all, she was a pretty child, and on that golden sunlit afternoon it was really charming to see her looking up at the sky with her bright blue eyes and smiling—the hood of the pram was put back—as she tried to pick up the patterns made by the sunlight on her blanket with her delicate if still rather awkward hands. Her father rejoiced at this as if such miraculous reasoning as hers had never been known, and we ourselves, to give him pleasure, acted as if we had never known anything like it. That sight of her, the last happy moment, is rooted in my mind for ever. Then Mrs Limpley called from the upper terrace, which was in the shade of the veranda, to tell us that tea was ready. Limpley spoke soothingly to the baby as if she could understand him, "There, there, we'll be back in a minute!" We left the pram with the baby in it on the lawn shaded from the hot sunlight by a cool canopy of leaves above, and strolled slowly to the usual place in the shade where the Limpleys drank afternoon tea. It was about twenty yards from the lower to the upper terrace of their garden, and you could not see one terrace from the other because of the rose-covered pergola between them. We talked as we walked, and I need hardly say what we talked about. Limpley was wonderfully cheerful, but his cheerfulness did not seem at all out of place today, when the sky was such a silky blue, it was such a peaceful Sunday, and we were sitting in the shade in front of a house full of blessings. Today, his mood was like a reflection of that fine summer's day.

Suddenly we were alarmed. Shrill, horrified screams came from the canal, voices of children and

women's cries of alarm. We rushed down the green slope with Limpley in the lead. His first thought was for the child. But to our horror the lower terrace, where the pram had been standing only a few minutes ago with the baby dozing peacefully in it in perfect safety, was empty, and the shouting from the canal was shriller and more agitated than ever. We hurried down to the water. On the opposite bank several women and children stood close together, gesticulating and staring at the canal. And there was the pram we had left safe and sound on the lower terrace, now floating upside down in the water. One man had already put out in a boat to save the child, another had dived in. But it was all too late. The baby's body was not brought up from the brackish water, which was covered with green waterweed, until quarter-of-an-hour later.

I cannot describe the despair of the wretched parents. Or rather, I will not even try to describe it because I never again in my life want to think of those dreadful moments. A police superintendent, informed by telephone, turned up to find out how this terrible thing had happened. Was it negligence on the part of the parents, or an accident, or a crime? The floating pram had been fished out of the water by now, and put back on the lower terrace on the police officer's instructions, just where it had been before. Then the Chief Constable himself joined the superintendent, and personally tested the pram to see whether a light touch would set it rolling down the slope of its own accord. But the wheels would hardly move through the thick, long grass. So it was out of the question for a sudden gust of wind, perhaps, to have made it roll so suddenly over the terrace, which itself was level. The superintendent also tried again, pushing a little harder. The pram rolled about a foot forward and then stopped. But the terrace was at least seven yards wide, and the pram, as the tracks of its wheels showed, had been standing securely some way from the place where the land began to slope. Only when the superintendent took a run up to the pram and pushed it really hard did it move along the terrace and begin to roll down the slope. So something unexpected must have set the pram suddenly in motion. But who or what had done it?

It was a mystery. The police superintendent took his cap off his sweating brow and scratched his short hair ever more thoughtfully. He couldn't make it out. Had any object, he asked, even just a ball when someone was playing with it, ever been known to roll over the terrace and down to the canal of its own accord? "No, never!" everyone assured him. Had there been a child nearby, or in the garden, a high-spirited child who might have been playing with the pram? No, no one! Had there been anyone else in the vicinity? Again, no. The garden gate had been closed, and none of the people walking by the canal had seen anyone coming or going. The one person who could really be regarded as an eyewitness was the labourer who had jumped straight into the water to save the baby, but even he, still dripping wet and greatly distressed, could say only that he and his wife had been walking beside the canal, and nothing seemed wrong. Then the pram had suddenly come rolling down the slope from the garden, going faster and faster, and tipped upside down as soon as it reached the water. As he thought he had seen a child in the water, he had run down to the bank at once, stripping off his jacket, and tried to rescue it, but he had not been able to make his way through the dense tangles of waterweeds as fast as he had hoped. That was all he knew.

The police superintendent was more and more baffled. He had never known such a puzzling case, he said. He simply could not imagine how that pram could have started rolling. The only possibility seemed to be that the baby might suddenly have sat up, or thrown herself violently to one side, thus unbalancing the lightweight pram. But it was hard to believe that, and he for one couldn't imagine it. Was there anything else that occurred to any of us?

I automatically glanced at the Limpleys' housemaid. Our eyes met. We were both thinking the same thing at the same moment. We both knew that the dog hated the child. We knew that he had been seen

several times recently slinking around the garden. We knew how he had often head-butted laundry baskets full of washing and sent them into the canal. We both—I saw it from the maid's pallor and her twitching lips—we both suspected that the sly and now vicious animal, finally seeing a chance to get his revenge, had come out of hiding as soon as we left the baby alone for a few minutes, and had then head-butted the pram containing his hated rival fiercely and fast, sending it rolling down to the canal before making his own escape as soundlessly as usual. But we neither of us voiced our suspicions. I knew the mere idea that if he had shot the raving animal after Ponto's attack, he might have saved the child would drive Limpley mad. And then, in spite of the logic of our thinking, we lacked any solid evidence. Neither the maid nor I, and none of the others, had actually seen the dog slinking around or running away that afternoon. The woodshed where he liked to hide—I looked there at once—was empty, the dry trodden earth of its floor showed no trace at all, we had not heard a note of the furious barking in which Ponto had always triumphantly indulged when he pushed a basket of washing into the canal. So we could not really claim that he had done it. It was more of a cruelly tormenting assumption. Only a justified, a terribly well justified suspicion. But the final, clinching certainty was missing.

And yet I have never since shaken off that dreadful suspicion—on the contrary, it was even more strongly confirmed over the next few days, almost to the point of certainty. A week later—the poor baby had been buried by then, and the Limpleys had left the house because they could not bear the sight of that fateful canal—something happened that affected me deeply. I had been shopping in Bakers for a few household items when I suddenly had a shock. Beside the butcher's van I saw Ponto, whom I had subconsciously been thinking in all those terrible hours, walking along at his leisure, and at the same moment he saw me. He stopped at once, and so did I. And now something that still weighs on my mind happened; in all the weeks that had passed since his humiliation, I had never seen Ponto looking anything but upset and distressed, and he had avoided any encounter with me, crouching low and turning his eyes away. Now he held his head high and looked at me—I can't put it any other way—with self-confident indifference. Overnight he had become the proud, arrogant animal of the other days again. He stood in that provocative position for a minute. Then, swaggering and almost dancing across the road with pretended friendliness, he came over to me and stopped a foot or so away, as if to say, "Well, here I am! Now what have you got to say? Are you going to accuse me?"

I felt paralysed. I had no power to push him away, no power to bear that self-confident and, indeed, I might almost say self-satisfied look. I walked quickly on. God forbid I should accuse even an innocent animal, let alone a human being, of a crime he did not commit. But since that day I cannot get rid of the terrible thought: "He did it. He was the one who did it."

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# THE MIRACLES OF LIFE

*To my dear friend Hans Müller*

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