

By way of introduction.

Anglophone readers have frequently been lured to the work of Theodor Storm (1817-88) by the promise that he is the German Thomas Hardy. Like most comparisons, it is only partly true. Both writers share a sense of place, Hardy's Wessex and Storm's Schleswig, Hardy's Dorchester and Storm's Husum, a small town just south of the Danish border. But Storm's world is on the whole gentler than that of Hardy. The savage blows of fate, the suicides, the class divides, frustrated ambitions and scorned love in the novels of Hardy are largely absent in the *Novellen* (stories) of Storm. In them we find regret, poignancy, irony, disappointment, roads not taken, lives unfulfilled. Storm is much closer to Chekhov than to Hardy; his treatment of suffering humanity is informed by greater empathy and his view that life does not offer easy solutions but must more often be endured than enjoyed is one shared by many of Chekhov's characters. As a translator of both Chekhov and Storm, I find the parallels striking and trying to recreate the style and above all the voice in English of these two masters of the Russian and German languages respectively has been a source of hard won pleasure whenever, on those infrequent occasions, I feel I have succeeded.

Theodor Storm spent the greater part of his life as a stipendiary magistrate in his native Husum after having studied law at the universities of Kiel and Berlin. Denmark occupied Schleswig-Holstein in 1850, an act steadfastly resisted by Storm whose post was abolished by the Danish king whereupon he moved to Berlin to work for the Prussian Civil Service. In 1856 he was appointed magistrate in a small town near Göttingen but when the Danes were driven out of Schleswig in 1864, he was reappointed to his old post in Husum. In 1880 he retired to the small village of Hademarschen where he spent the last eight years of his life. His first wife, his cousin Constanze Esmarch died in 1865 leaving him three sons and four daughters. He had another daughter with his second wife, Dorothea Jensen, who survived him.

Immensee, written in 1849, is probably the best known of Storm's *Novellen* and the most studied; there are at least 17 studies in English alone and more in German. The literal translation is Bee's Lake, *Imme* being a poetical and archaic word for bee but all English translations, of which there have been many, prefer the original title. The story concerns the relationship between childhood sweethearts Reinhard and Elisabeth who, we are led to believe, will grow up, marry and live happily ever after. But this does not happen and therein lies the mystery and fascination of the story. Storm very skilfully avoids giving any specific reason why they do not do so but provides a wonderfully rich tapestry of allusion, symbols, suggestion, flashback and the deceptions of memory. Elisabeth waits patiently for Reinhard who makes tantalising hints and ambiguous promises but in the end she accepts the hand of Erich, an honest and decent farmer but a man devoid of depth or sensibility, a man *sans soupçons* in the Camusian sense. *Immensee* is a moving and profound psychological study in promise unfulfilled, lives unconsummated, roads not taken, ambition thwarted and the irretrievability of times past, powerfully symbolised by the water lily which grows on the lake.

In my version, I have attempted to retain the rhymes in the poems which occur in the story. This is no easy undertaking so I have provided the original text so that those able to judge may do so – and apportion blame or praise accordingly.

Immensee

Theodor Storm

(Translation by G T Owen)

The Old Man

One afternoon in late autumn an elderly, well-dressed man was walking slowly down the street. He seemed to be just coming back home from a walk because his buckled shoes, which were decidedly old-fashioned, were covered in dust. He carried a long walking stick with a gold knob under his arm. His dark eyes, which seemed to reflect the days of his lost youth and which gazed out prominently from under his snow-white hair, quietly contemplated his surroundings and the town spread out beneath him in the fragrance of the evening sunshine. He seemed to be a stranger because few passers-by greeted him although many were struck by the serious look in his eyes. At last he came to a tall, gabled house, looked round once more at the town then went inside to the entrance hall. He rang the bell and a green curtain hanging behind the peephole was pushed aside revealing the face of an old woman. Waving his walking stick at her, he said in his southern accent, "No light yet" and his housekeeper replaced the curtain. He crossed the large entrance hall to a reception room furnished with oak cupboards and china vases and then through a door to a small corridor with a staircase leading to the upper rooms at the rear of the house. He climbed the stairs slowly, opened a door and entered a medium-sized room, quiet and secluded. One wall was lined with shelves and bookcases while on the other hung portraits and landscapes. A heavy armchair with red velvet cushions stood in front of a desk covered in green baize and a number of open books. After putting his hat and stick away in the corner, the old man sat in his armchair, clasped his hands and appeared to relax after his walk.

As he sat there it slowly became dark and eventually a moonbeam shone through the window and fell on a portrait on the wall. The old man's eyes followed the beam involuntarily as it began to illuminate a small picture in a simple, black frame.

"Elisabeth" he said softly to himself and as he uttered her name, time ran back, the years fell away and he was once more in his youth.

The Children.

Soon the lovely face of a little girl came to him. Her name was Elisabeth and she would have been about five years old, he himself being some five years older. She wore a red silken scarf around her neck which, with her brown eyes, suited her well.

"Reinhard" she called out, "We're free, free, no school today or tomorrow".

Reinhard quickly concealed his slate under his arm behind the front door and both children ran through the house into the garden and through the gate into the fields beyond. The unexpected break from school came in very handy because Reinhard, with Elisabeth's help, had built a little turf house in which they planned to spend

summer evenings but they lacked a bench. So now he set straight to work; nails, a hammer and wooden planks were already there. Meanwhile, Elisabeth walked along the embankment collecting mallow seeds in her apron to make chains and necklaces and by the time Reinhard had finally finished making the bench, despite several crookedly hammered in nails, she was already at the far end of the meadow.

“Elisabeth!” he called out and she came running, her hair all dishevelled.

“Come” he said, “our house is now ready. You’re all hot. Come in, let’s sit on our bench and I’ll tell you a story”.

They went into the little house and sat down on the new bench. Elisabeth took the little rings from her apron and threaded them together in long chains. Reinhard began his story.

“Once upon a time there were three weaver women.....”

“Oh, I know that story off by heart”, said Elisabeth. “Don’t keep on telling the same old story”.

So Reinhard stopped telling the story about the weavers and began a new one about a poor man thrown into the lion’s den.

“Now it was night”, he said, “you know, a really dark night and the lions were sleeping. Now and again they yawned in their sleep and their red tongues lolled out making the man shudder and think that morning was coming. Suddenly a bright light shone around and, looking up, he saw an angel beckoning him with his hand and then disappearing straight into the rocks.”

Elisabeth was listening intently.

“An angel” she said. “Did he have wings?”

“It’s only a story” Reinhard replied. “Angels don’t exist”.

“Oh Reinhard!” she said, gazing into his face. But when he frowned at her, she asked hesitantly;

“But why do they always say there are? Mother, aunty and also at school?”

“I’ve no idea” he replied.

“So tell me” said Elisabeth. “Don’t lions exist?”

“Lions? Oh yes, lions exist. In India. Those priestly idol worshippers yoke them to their carts and drive through the desert. When I’m older, I’ll go there myself. It’s thousands of times better than here and there are no winters. You must come with me. Would you like to?”

“Yes” said Elisabeth, “but mother must also come, and yours too”.

“No” said Reinhard, “they’ll be too old, they can’t come”.

“But I can’t go alone”

“Yes you can. You’ll be my wife and nobody else can tell you what to do”.

“But mother will cry”

“Don’t worry. We’ll come back” said Reinhard confidently. ”Tell me straight, will you come with me? If not, I’ll go on my own and will never come back”.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Don’t look so angry” she said. “I really do want to go to India”.

Reinhard seized her hands with delight and pulled her out into the meadow

“To India! To India!” he sang and swung her round and round until her red shawl flew off her neck. Then he suddenly let go of her and said in a serious tone of voice;

“Nothing will come of it. You lack courage”.

“Elisabeth! Reinhard!” Somebody was calling them from the garden gate.

“Here” answered the children and ran homewards, hand in hand

In the Woods.

And so the children lived together. Sometimes she was too quiet for him and sometimes he was too boisterous for her but they still remained together. They spent nearly all their free time together, winter in their parents' cramped rooms and summer outside in woods and fields. Once when Elisabeth was being reprimanded by the teacher, Reinhard threw his slate down angrily onto his desk to distract his attention but he didn't notice. But Reinhard had lost all interest in the geography lesson and instead composed a long poem in which he compared himself as a young eagle with the teacher as a grey crow and Elisabeth as a white dove. The eagle promised to take revenge on the crow as soon as his own wings had grown. Tears stood in the young poet's eyes and he felt himself inspired. When he got home he took a vellum bound notebook with many white sheets and on the first page carefully wrote out his first poem. Soon after he moved to another school and made friends with lots of boys of his own age but he still kept up with Elisabeth. He now began to write up her favourite stories from the many he had told her time and again and in doing so he often thought of including his own thoughts but somehow – he didn't know why – he couldn't quite manage to. So he wrote them down just as he had himself heard them. Then he gave the sheets to Elisabeth who carefully put them away in her jewel box. It afforded him peculiar satisfaction to hear her read his stories out to her mother of an evening.

Seven years now passed. Reinhard now had to leave town to further his education. Elisabeth found it difficult to imagine life without him but she was pleased when one day Reinhard told her he would still write stories for her and enclose them in letters to his mother. She would have to write back and tell him how she liked them. The day of his departure drew near by which time however many more verses had been written in his vellum notebook. This was Elisabeth's secret for she was the reason for the whole book and the songs which had slowly filled up nearly half of the white pages.

It was June and on the eve of Reinhard's departure a party was organised for everybody together in the form of a picnic in one of the nearby wood clearings. They took a cart for the hour's journey to the edge of the wood, then unloaded the picnic basket and continued on foot. At first they walked through a pine forest where it was cool and dark, the ground covered with pine needles. Half an hour later they emerged from the pine forest into a birch grove where it was bright and green and sunshine broke through the leafy branches while a squirrel hopped from branch to branch above their heads. They eventually stopped at a spot where the tops of ancient beech trees grew together and formed a natural arch and Elisabeth's mother started to open the picnic basket. An elderly gentleman appointed himself picnic master.

"Gather round youngsters and listen to me. For breakfast you'll each get two dry bread rolls; we've left the butter behind so you'll all have to find something to go with it on your own. There are plenty of strawberries in the woods for those who know where to look. If you're not smart enough, you'll have to make do with dry bread. That's life. Have you all understood?"

"Yes" cried the young people.

"Good. But I haven't finished yet. We oldies have been around long enough so we're going to stay here under these trees, peel the potatoes, make a fire and lay the table and at twelve o'clock we'll boil the eggs. So you'll owe us half your strawberries for our dessert. So off you go, east and west and play fair!"

The youngsters pulled faces.

“Wait!” said the old man again. “Just to remind you - those who find nothing won’t have to give us any. But, just remember this, they won’t get anything from us oldies either! So, that’s enough lessons for today. If you also find strawberries, then you’ll be successful in life too”.

The young people agreed and began to set off in pairs.

“Come Elisabeth” said Reinhard. “I know of a strawberry patch. You won’t have to eat dry bread”.

Elisabeth fastened the green bands of her straw hat together and hung it over her arm.

“Let’s go” she said. “The basket is ready”

They entered the woods going deeper and deeper into the damp, dark shadiness where it was completely quiet except for the cry of the falcon high above them. They came to a dense thicket where Reinhard had to go ahead to make a path for them, bending back a branch here and a stalk there. Soon he heard Elisabeth calling his name and he turned round.

“Reinhard” she called, “wait for me”.

He couldn’t see her at first then caught sight of her some distance away struggling through the undergrowth, her delicate head barely visible above the fern. He went back and guided her through the tangle of plants and bushes to a clearing where blue butterflies fluttered around wild flowers. Reinhard smoothed back the damp hair from her hot face and tried to put her straw hat back on her head but she refused but when he asked her, she relented.

“So where are your strawberries?” she asked standing still and breathing deeply.

“They were here but the toads have beaten us to them, or perhaps the pine martens or maybe the elves”.

“Yes” said Elisabeth. “The leaves are still there but don’t talk about elves here. Come on, I’m not in the least tired. Let’s go on looking”.

A little brook ran between them and the next part of the wood. Reinhard picked her up in his arms and carried her across. After a while they emerged from the shady trees into a wide clearing.

“There must be strawberries here” said the girl. “It smells so sweet”.

They searched the sunny spot but found none.

“Nothing” said Reinhard. “Just the smell of heather”.

Raspberry bushes and thorns grew in wild profusion all round them and the air was heavy with the pungent odour of heather and grass.

“It’s lonely here” said Elisabeth. “I wonder where the others are?”

Reinhard hadn’t thought about the way back.

“Wait”, he said, “where’s the wind coming from?”

He raised his hand but there was no wind at all.

“Quiet” said Elisabeth, “I thought I heard voices. Call out down there.”

Reinhard cupped his hands and shouted.

“Come here!”.

“Here” came back the answer.

“They’re answering” said Elisabeth and clapped her hands.

“No, it’s just the echo”

Elisabeth took Reinhard’s hand.

“I’m scared” she said.

“No” said Reinhard, “There’s no need to be. It’s beautiful here. Sit down over there in the shade on the heather. We’ll have a little rest before we find the others.”

Elisabeth sat down under an overhanging beech tree and listened intently all round her while Reinhard sat on a tree stump a few paces away and watched her silently. The hot midday sun was directly overhead and little blue and gold insects buzzed and hummed all round them and occasionally, deep in the woods, they could hear woodpeckers and the cry of other birds.

“Listen” said Elisabeth, “I can hear chimes”

“Where?” said Reinhard.

“Behind us. Can’t you hear? It’s midday.”

“In that case the town lies behind us. So if we go straight that way, we’re bound to meet the others”.

They started on the way back, having given up looking for strawberries because by now Elisabeth was tired. At last they heard the sounds of laughter through the trees and saw a white cloth on the ground on which lay enormous piles of strawberries. The old man had tucked a serviette into his button hole and was carrying on with his edifying stories while busily turning the spit roast.

“Here are the latecomers” said the young people as they saw Reinhard and Elisabeth coming through the trees.

“Here” said the old man, “empty your baskets, show us what you’ve got”.

“Hunger and thirst” said Reinhard.

“If that’s so” said the old man raising a full bowl towards them, “you’re on your own. You know the deal – no work, no food”.

But eventually he took pity on them and everybody was served while a thrush sang from the juniper bushes.

So the day passed – but Reinhard had in fact found something in the wood, if not strawberries. When he got home he wrote the following poem in his vellum notebook.

Hier an der Bergeshalde
Verstummet ganz der Wind;
Die Zweige hängen nieder
Darunter sitzt das Kind.

No wind is felt or heard
in the quiet woodland shade;
the branches hang like curtains
And under sits the maid.

Sie sitzt in Thymiane,
Sie sitzt in lauter Duft;
Die blauen Fliegen summen
Und blitzen durch die Luft.

The scent of thyme surrounds her
and perfume in her hair;
the insects hum and hover
and sparkle in the air.

Es steht der Wald so schweigend,
Sie schaut so klug darein;
Um ihre braunen Locken
Hin fließt der Sonnenschein.

The forest stands in silence
and holds her knowing gaze;
her brown hair falls in lockets
On which the sunshine plays.

Der Kuckuck lacht von ferne,
Es geht mir durch den Sinn;
Sie hat die goldenen Augen
Der Waldeskönigin.

A cuckoo in the distance
wakes rapture in my brain;
her golden eyes bear witness,
The Wood Queen reigns again.

She was not just his protégé; she was also the embodiment of everything that was beautiful and wonderful at the outset of his life.

The Child stood on the Wayside.

Christmas eve. It was still afternoon and Reinhard and other students were sitting at an old oak table in the Ratskeller, the Town Hall cellar bar. The wall lamps were lit because it was already dark but there were few guests and the waiters leaned idly against the pillars. A fiddler sat in the corner of an alcove with a zither player with gypsy-like features. Their instruments were lying idly on their laps and they looked bored and distracted.

The pop of a champagne cork resounded from the student's table

"Drink up, my Bohemian beauty!" said a young man of aristocratic appearance, offering the zither girl a full glass.

"No thanks" she said without stirring.

"Well, sing something" said the young aristocrat and threw a silver coin into her lap. She ran her fingers slowly through her black hair while the fiddler whispered into her ear but then she tossed her head back and rested her chin on her zither.

"I'm not playing for *him*" she said.

Reinhard jumped up with a glass in his hand and went up to her.

"What do *you* want?" she asked defiantly.

"To look into your eyes"

"What have my eyes got to do with you?"

Reinhard looked down at her with a twinkle in his eye.

"I know they are false".

She rested her cheek on her hand and looked up at him furtively.

Reinhard raised his glass to his lips.

"I drink to your beautiful and wicked eyes".

She laughed and tossed her head.

"Here" she said and drank the rest of the glass looking straight at him with her black eyes. Then she took her zither, struck a chord and sang in her deep, passionate voice.

Heute nur heute,	Only today
Bin ich so schön;	am I so fair.
Morgen, ach morgen	Tomorrow
Muss alles vergehn!	I must forbear.
Nur diese Stunde	Only this moment
Bist du noch mein;	will we be one;
Sterben, ach sterben,	but dying, dying,
soll ich allein.	I'll be undone.

While the fiddler was playing a postlude, a newcomer joined the student group.

"I've come to fetch you, Reinhard" he said. "You'd already gone when a Christmas present arrived".

"A Christmas present?" said Reinhard, "for me?"

"Indeed – your whole room smells of Christmas trees and brown cakes".

Reinhard put down his glass and reached for his cap.

"What are you doing?" asked the girl.

"Be back soon".

She frowned. "Stay" she said softly in a friendly tone of voice.

Reinhard hesitated. "I can't" he said.

She laughed and gave him a small kick with her toe.

"Then go" she said. "You're all the same, no good, the lot of you" and as she turned away, Reinhard slowly climbed the stairs out of the Cellar.

Outside it was already getting dark and he felt the keen winter air on his hot forehead. Here and there the bright lights of Christmas trees gleamed out of the windows and now and again he caught the sound of pipes and trumpets and children's happy voices. Hordes of child beggars went from house to house or climbed up the steps to look through the windows at the happy scenes inside denied to them. Occasionally a door would open and harsh voices would drive them back again to the dark streets while elsewhere Christmas carols could be heard, sung in clear girlish voices. But Reinhard didn't listen. When he arrived at his lodgings it was almost completely dark. He clambered up the stairs and entered his room. A sweet smell wafted towards him which reminded him of home and his mother's Christmas parlour. He lit the lamp with a trembling hand. A large parcel lay on the table and when he opened it he found familiar Christmas cakes inside, on some of which his name was inscribed in icing sugar. Only Elisabeth could have done that. Another parcel contained beautifully embroidered clothing, fabrics and cuffs together with letters from his mother and Elisabeth. Reinhard opened the latter's first and began to read.

"Your name on the cakes will tell you who helped out in the kitchen and the same person embroidered the cuffs for you. It will be a very quiet Christmas eve for us here. Mother always puts her spinning wheel away in the corner at half past nine; it is so lonely here this winter without you. Last Sunday the linnet you gave me died. I wept but I had always looked after him well. He would sing every afternoon when the sun shone on his cage. You know how mother would always hang a cloth over his cage to keep him quiet whenever he sang too loudly. It is now even quieter here except that now and again your old friend Erich visits us. You once said he looks just like his brown overcoat. I think of that every time he comes here and it makes me laugh – but don't tell mother, she'll get upset. Guess what I gave your mother for Christmas! Myself! Erich drew me using black chalk and I had to sit three times for him, each time lasting an hour. It was most unpleasant to have this stranger looking so closely at my face. I really didn't want him to do it but mother persuaded me. She said it would be doing Frau Werner a great favour.

But you haven't kept your promise, Reinhard. You haven't sent me any stories. I have often complained about you to your mother but she said you had better things to do than such childish things. I don't believe her, but somehow things are different."

Reinhard then read his mother's letter and when he had done so, he slowly folded both letters together and put them aside and a feeling of intense homesickness overcame him. For a while he walked up and down in his room, muttering quietly and almost incomprehensibly to himself.

Er wäre fast verirret,
Und wusste nicht hinaus;
Da stand das Kind am Wege
Und winkte ihm nach Haus.

He stood forlorn and hopeless
condemned to drift and roam.
The child stood on the wayside
And beckoned him back home.

Then he went to his desk, took some money and went back down to the street again. In the meantime it had become quieter, the Christmas tree lights had been extinguished and there were no longer any street children. A cold wind blew through the deserted streets while old and young sat together at home in their family circles. The second part of Christmas eve was under way.

When Reinhard approached the Cellar bar he could hear the fiddler playing and the voice of the zither girl. The door opened and a dark figure staggered out and climbed up the broad, dimly lit stairs. Reinhard stepped into the shadows and quickly moved on. After a while he came to a brightly illuminated jeweller's shop and after he had chosen a small red coral cross, he returned the way he had come.

Not far from his lodgings he caught sight of a little girl dressed in dirty rags in a doorway, trying in vain to open the door.

"Can I help?" he asked.

The child said nothing but let the door latch drop. Reinhard opened the door but then said,

"No, they'll only throw you out. Come with me. I've got some Christmas cakes for you". Closing the door, he took the little girl by the hand. She followed him silently into his lodgings.

The lamp was still burning when they entered.

"Here's some cakes" he said, putting half of his supply into her apron but none with his own name on.

"Now go home and give some to your mother".

The child looked shyly up at him. It seemed she wasn't used to such friendliness and didn't quite know how to respond. Reinhard opened the door to light up the stairs down which she flew like a bird with her cakes and out into the street.

Reinhard poked the fire in the stove, placed his dusty inkwell on his desk and then sat down and all night long wrote letters, one to his mother and one to Elisabeth. The rest of the cakes lay untouched but he had put on the cufflinks from Elisabeth which perfectly matched his fleecy jacket. And there he sat until the first rays of the winter sun shone through the frosted windows and reflected his pale, serious face in the mirror opposite.

At Home

At Easter Reinhard went home. In the morning after his arrival he went to see Elisabeth.

"How you've grown!" he said as the beautiful, slender girl came up to him with a smile. She blushed but said nothing and gently withdrew her hand that she had extended to welcome him. He looked at her quizzically – she had never done that before. It seemed something untoward had come between them and so it remained during the whole of his stay. Whenever they were alone pauses would occur in their conversation which Reinhard found unnerving and tried to avoid by anticipating them. So he began to teach her the elements of botany that he had imbibed during the first months of his university studies. Elisabeth, accustomed to defer to him in all things and who retained her liveliness, was happy to learn, so several times a week they went out into the fields and meadows. They would bring back a basket full of plants and flowers around midday and a few hours later Reinhard would return to sort them out with her.

With this intention, one afternoon he entered the room where Elisabeth was standing by the window decorating a gilt birdcage that Reinhard had not seen before. A canary was in the cage, beating its wings and pecking eagerly at Elisabeth's outstretched finger. Reinhard's bird had previously been there.

"So" he said cheerfully, "has my poor linnet come back after his death as a goldfinch?"

"Linnets don't do such things" said his mother at her spinning wheel.

"Your friend Erich had it sent over this afternoon for Elisabeth from his farm".

"What farm?"

"Don't you know?"

"No. What?"

"A month ago Erich took over his father's second farm at Immensee".

"You never told me".

"Well, you never asked after your old friend. He's a fine, upstanding young man".

His mother went out to make coffee. Elisabeth had her back to Reinhard and was still busy at the cage.

"Just a minute" she said, "nearly finished".

As Reinhard didn't reply as he usually did, she turned round. In his eyes she caught a sudden expression of anguish that she had never seen before.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked, moving towards him.

"With me?" he said absent-mindedly, fixing his eyes dreamily on hers.

"You look so sad".

"Elisabeth" he said. "I can't stand that yellow bird."

She looked at him with astonishment and incomprehension.

"You're so strange" she said.

He held both her hands in his and this time she did not withdraw them. Soon mother came back.

After coffee, mother took up her spinning again while Reinhard and Elisabeth went into the next room to sort out the plants. They counted the filaments and carefully spread out the leaves and buds and took two specimens of each plant to dry between the pages of a large volume. It was a quiet, sunny afternoon; mother's spinning wheel whirred in the background and occasionally Reinhard's low voice could be heard identifying the plants or correcting Elisabeth's wayward pronunciation of the Latin names.

"I'm missing a lily of the valley" she said after they had finished.

Reinhard took his small vellum notebook out of his pocket.

"Here's one" he said and took out a half-dried plant.

When Elisabeth saw the written pages she asked,

"Have you thought up any more stories?"

"They are not stories" he said, handing her the notebook. They were verses, most of them covering only one page. She turned the pages over and seemed to read only the titles; "When the teacher told her off", "When they were lost in the woods", "With the Easter Story", "When she first wrote to me" – nearly all of them had titles like these. Reinhard looked at her intensely as she paged her way through the notebook and watched a delicate pink colour spread slowly over her face. He wanted to look into her eyes but she averted her gaze and silently put the notebook aside.

"Don't give it back to me like that!" he said.

She took a little brown sprig from the lead capsule.

"I'll put your favourite plant in it here" she said and gave him his book back.

The last day of the vacation arrived and the morning of his departure. Elisabeth had requested and been allowed to accompany Reinhard to the stagecoach a few streets from where they lived. Arm in arm they walked silently down the street and the nearer they came to the stagecoach, the more Reinhard felt that before taking long leave of her, he had something he had to tell her, something on which the purpose and happiness of his whole future life depended, yet he could not find the right words to express it. This disturbed him and his pace slackened.

"You'll be late" she said, "it's already struck ten on St Mary's church clock".

But he still didn't hurry. Finally he began to stammer;

"Elisabeth, you won't see me now for two years. Will you still be as fond of me then as you are now when I return?"

She nodded and gave him a friendly look.

"I've even defended you" she said after a pause.

"Defended me? Against whom?"

"My mother. We spoke about you for a long time after you had left yesterday evening. She thought you were not the man you once were".

Reinhard was silent for a moment. Then he took her hands in his and looked earnestly into her innocent eyes.

"I haven't changed at all" he said. "I've always been the same. Believe me. Do you believe me, Elisabeth?"

"Yes" she said. He dropped her hands and they walked quickly along the last street to the coach. The nearer he came, the happier he felt and she could hardly keep up with him.

"What's the matter, Reinhard?" she said.

"I have a secret, a beautiful one" he said looking at her with shining eyes. "In two years when I return, I'll tell you what it is".

By now they had reached the coach, just in time. Reinhard took her hand.

"Farewell" he said, "Farewell Elisabeth – and don't forget!"

She shook her head.

"Farewell" she said.

Reinhard climbed aboard and the horses pulled away. As the coach turned the corner, Reinhard looked back and caught sight of her gentle face as she slowly walked back home.

A Letter

Nearly two years later Reinhard was sitting by his lamp surrounded by books and papers waiting for a friend with whom he studied. Somebody was coming upstairs.

"Come in!"

It was the landlady.

"A letter for you, Herr Werner" she said and went back downstairs again.

Reinhard had not written to Elisabeth since his last visit home nor had he received one from her. This letter was not from her either but he recognised his mother's handwriting. Reinhard opened the letter and read;

"At your age, my dear child, almost each year is different, for youth does not wish to get poorer. There have been many changes here which may be painful for you if I have understood you correctly. Yesterday Elisabeth accepted Erich's hand in

marriage after he had made two unsuccessful proposals over the last three months. She simply couldn't make up her mind but has now at last decided for she is still quite young. The wedding is soon and mother will go and live with them".

Immensee

The years passed. One spring afternoon a young man with tanned, prominent features was walking down a shady forest path scanning the distance with his grey eyes as if waiting for a change of view which never materialised. At last a cart came slowly into view ahead of him.

"Hallo, my friend" he said, addressing the farmer walking alongside, "is this the way to Immensee?"

"Straight ahead" said the man and touched his cap.

"Is it far?"

"The gentleman is nearly there. Half a tobacco pipe to the lake. The manor house is right there"

The farmer continued on his way while the other hastened along under the trees. Quarter of an hour later the forest suddenly gave out to his left and the path continued along a slope overlooking the tops of hundred year old oak trees beyond which lay open, sunny countryside. Deep below lay the lake, dark blue and placid, almost surrounded by green, sun-drenched forest except where clearings here and there afforded distant views of hazy blue mountains. Right opposite amid the dark trees fruit tree blossom shone like snow above which, high up on the shore, stood the manor house, white with red tiles. A stork flew up from the chimney and slowly circled the lake. Immensee. It seemed he had reached his destination as he stood there immobile, looking over the tree tops at his feet to the other side of the lake where the reflection of the manor house shimmered lazily in the waters of the lake. Then suddenly he set off again.

The path sloped steeply downwards into the shade of the forest again which obscured his view of the lake except for occasional glimpses through the branches. Soon the path rose gently again and the forest gave way to leafy vineyards flanked by fruit trees in full blossom around which bees hummed and hovered. A handsome man in a brown overcoat approached. Coming closer, he waved his cap and called out in a loud, clear voice;

"Welcome, welcome brother Reinhard. Welcome to Immensee"

"God's greeting, Erich, thank you for the welcome" replied the other. They shook hands.

"So, it's really you" said Erich as he peered at the serious face of his old school friend.

"It's really me, Erich and you too, only you look even more cheerful now than you always were"

A happy smile spread across Erich's face on hearing these words, making him look even more cheerful.

"Yes, brother Reinhard" he said, extending his hand again. "I've won that great prize, you know who"

He rubbed his hands and said contentedly;

"It'll be a huge surprise. You of all people will be the last person she'll be expecting"

"A surprise?" said Reinhard. "For whom?"

"For Elisabeth"

“Elisabeth!. You haven’t told her I was coming?”

“Not a word, Reinhard. They are not expecting you, nor her mother. I replied to you in secret so that their joy would be that much greater. You see, I have my little tricks”. Reinhard became pensive and his breathing became laboured the nearer they came to the farm. To the left of the path the vineyards now gave way to an extensive kitchen garden which stretched down almost to the lake edge. Meanwhile the stork had landed and was stalking around the vegetable patch.

“Hey” Erich shouted, clapping his hands. “our Egyptian visitor is stealing my peas again”.

The stork flew slowly up towards the roof of a new building at the end of the kitchen garden whose walls were festooned with peach and apricot.

“That’s the distillery” said Erich. “I built it two years ago. My late father added on the working quarters. My grandfather built the farmhouse. Bit by bit we make progress”.

They now came to a large square yard bounded on either side by the working quarters and at the far end by the manor house from whose wings a large garden wall extended behind which the dark outlines of yew trees could be seen, broken occasionally by syringa whose flowery tendrils hung over into the yard. Men with tanned and sweaty faces moved round the yard and greeted them while Erich gave orders and answered questions about the work in hand. Then they reached the house. They stepped into a cool, high entry hall at the end of which they turned left into a small, side corridor. Erich opened a door and they entered a spacious conservatory. Dense greenery covered the windows facing them giving the room a greenish tinge while on either side two double doors stood wide open allowing the spring sunshine to flood in and opening out onto a garden with circular flower beds and high foliage-covered walls separated by a broad, straight pathway affording a view of the lake and the forest beyond. As the two friends entered, a wave of perfume wafted towards them.

A white, girlish figure was sitting on the terrace by the garden gate. She rose and came towards them – then stopped abruptly as if rooted to the spot and stared at them motionlessly. Reinhard smiled and extended his hand.

“Reinhard!” she said, “Reinhard! My God, is it really you? How long has it been?”

“Too long” he replied and fell silent for when he heard her voice, his heart convulsed with pain and when she came right up to him, he looked into that same, delicate face he had once bade farewell to all those years ago in his home town.

Erich had remained by the door, looking on with pleasure.

“Well, Elisabeth, I bet you never expected to see *him*, not in a hundred years!”

Elisabeth looked at him with a sisterly expression.

“You are so kind, Erich”.

He took her dainty hand lovingly in his and said,

“Now that he’s here, we won’t let him go again so easily. He’s been away for so long that we want to make him feel at home again. Look how stiff and formal he’s become”.

Elisabeth gave Reinhard a shy look.

“It’s only because we’ve become strangers to each other” he said.

At that moment mother appeared with a bundle of keys over her arm.

“Herr Werner!” she explained on seeing Reinhard. “A welcome and unexpected guest”.

Questions and answers now flowed between them. The women resumed their work and while Reinhard partook of a meal prepared for him, Erich lit his pipe and sat by him, smoking and talking.

The next day Reinhard was taken out to see the farm; the fields, the vineyard, the hop garden, the distillery. Everything looked neat and tidy. The farm labourers and distillery workers looked healthy and happy. At midday the family gathered in the conservatory and the rest of the day was spent, more or less in company, depending on the host's other duties. Only the first hours of the morning and the time before supper did Reinhard stay in his room to work. Over the years he had been collecting folk songs and sayings wherever he could and was now putting them in order and adding explanatory notes. Elisabeth was always gentle and friendly and acknowledged Erich's constant attention with humble gratitude, so much so that Reinhard reflected from time to time how the lively child she once was had now become such a calm and placid adult.

Since the second day of his arrival he had got into the habit of taking an evening stroll along the side of the lake below the garden. At the end of the path there was a sort of jetty projecting into the lake on which stood a bench under tall birch trees which mother called the evening bench because it faced west and was thus frequently used to observe the sunset. One evening Reinhard was returning along this way when he was surprised by a sudden downpour and sought refuge under a lime tree on the lake edge but soon the heavy raindrops fell through the leaves. Soaked to the skin he decided he might as well continue his slow walk. It was by now almost dark and the rain fell even more heavily. Approaching the evening bench he thought he glimpsed through the dim light under the birch trees the white figure of a woman. She stood motionless and as Reinhard came nearer he thought she turned to him as if she was expecting somebody. He thought it was Elisabeth and quickened his step to reach her and return with her back home through the garden but as he did so, she turned slowly away and vanished into the darkness. Reinhard was puzzled; he was almost angry with Elisabeth but at the same time he was not sure it had been her and drew back from asking her. Indeed, on coming back he avoided going into the conservatory so as not to see Elisabeth possibly coming through the garden gate.

It's what my mother wanted.

A few days later, towards evening, the family was gathered together in the conservatory as usual at this time of day. The doors were open and the sun had already set behind the forest on the far side of the lake.

Reinhard was asked about some folk songs a friend had sent him that afternoon from somewhere in the country. He went upstairs and fetched a roll of paper which appeared to consist of neatly handwritten sheets. Reinhard and Elisabeth sat side by side at a table.

"We'll read one at random" he said. "I haven't gone through them yet".

Elisabeth unfurled the roll.

"Here's some music" she said. "Why don't you to sing it?"

Reinhard at first read some Tyrolean folk songs and as he read, he hummed the jolly tune to himself to everybody's general amusement.

"I wonder who wrote such beautiful songs" said Elisabeth.

"Oh, apprentices, barbers, riff-raff, people like that" said Erich.

"Nobody wrote them" said Reinhard. "They just grow, drop out of the air, float over the land like gossamer, here and there and are sung in a thousand places. They reflect our joys and sorrows, just as if we ourselves had helped to write them".

He took another sheet. "I stood on high mountains".

"I know that one" said Elisabeth. "Sing it, Reinhard, I'll join in".

Then together they sang the melody, so haunting that it was difficult to believe it had a human origin. Elisabeth's low alto voice accompanied Reinhard's tenor.

Meanwhile, mother worked busily at her sewing while Erich clasped his hands and listened reverently. When they had finished, Reinhard put the sheet silently to one side. The sound of cowbells drifted up to them from the lakeside through the calm evening air. As they listened, they heard a clear boy's voice singing;

Ich stand auf hohen Bergen
Und sah ins tiefe Tal...

I stood on high mountains
Looking into a deep valley....

Reinhard smiled. "Listen. That's how it spreads, from mouth to mouth".

"It's often sung in these parts" said Elisabeth.

"Yes", said Erich, "it's the cowherd rounding up the heifers".

They listened for a while until the sounds died out behind the working quarters.

"Those are immemorial sounds" said Reinhard. "They sleep in forest depths. God knows who found them".

He took out another sheet.

It had got darker. The setting sun cast a lurid red light over the forest beyond the lake.

Reinhard unfolded the sheet and Elisabeth held it down with her hand while they both looked at it. Reinhard read;

Meine Mutter hat's gewollt,
Den andern ich nehmen sollt;
Was ich zuvor besessen,
Mein Herz sollt' es vergessen;
Das hat es nicht gewollt.

It's what my mother wanted,
that I should take the other;
my longing to possess
I needs must now suppress;
That was not what I wanted.

Meine Mutter klag' ich an,
Sie hat nicht wohl getan;
Was sonst in Ehren stünde
Nun ist es worden Sünde
Was fang' ich an!

My mother is to blame,
now she must bear the shame;
what was once my delight
is now my sorry plight;
What can I do.

Für all mein Stolz und Freud,
Gewonnen hab' ich Leid;
Ach, wär' das nicht geschehen,
Ach, könnt' ich betteln gehen
Über die braune Heide!

Now all my joy and gladness
has given way to sadness;
but if it were not so,
a-begging would I go
o'er deserts wide and trackless.

While he was reading, he noticed a faint trembling of the paper and when he had finished, Elisabeth quietly pushed her chair back and went silently down into the garden, watched by her mother. Erich wanted to follow her but mother said, "Elisabeth has something to do in the garden" so he remained.

Dusk had now fallen over garden and lake and moths were fluttering around the wide open doors through which the scent of flowers and shrubs wafted in. Frogs could be heard croaking from the lake while a nightingale sang under the window, answered by another further back in the garden. The moon shone down on the forest. For a while

Reinhard gazed at the spot where Elisabeth's delicate face had disappeared beneath the pergola, then he rolled up his manuscript, took his leave and went down to the lake.

The silent forest cast its shadow far into the lake and in the middle its waters reflected a diffuse moonlight. Occasionally a soft breeze rustled the leaves but it was not wind but the breath of a summer night. Reinhard walked along the edge of the lake. A short distance from the shore he saw a white water lily and he was suddenly seized with the desire to examine it more closely. Throwing off his clothes, he entered the water. It was too shallow to swim and underwater plants and stones cut his feet. Suddenly he was out of his depth and the water swirled over his head so that it took him a few moments to break the surface again. He swam round in a circle until he recognised where he had jumped in and soon he saw the lily again. It lay forlorn between large, bare leaves. He swam slowly out, raising his arms from time to time causing drops of water to glisten in the moonlight but he seemed to be getting no nearer the lily. When he looked back only the increasingly blurred outline of the shore was visible. But he continued to swim vigorously in the same direction until he finally approached the lily and was able to distinguish each of its silver leaves in the moonlight. He felt he was caught in something like a net; long, smooth tendrils snaked up from the depths and entwined themselves around his naked body. The menacing black water lay all round him and behind him he heard a fish breaking the surface. Alarm suddenly seized him in this alien environment and he tore himself out of the tendrils' embrace and swam breathlessly back to shore. Once there, he looked back at the lake and saw the lily, lone and distant on the dark depths. He dressed himself and walked slowly home. On entering the house he found Erich and mother making preparations for a business trip on the following day.

"Where on earth have you been at this time of night?" said mother.

"Me?" he replied. "I wanted to visit the water lily but nothing came of it".

"You're an oddity" said Erich. "Why a water lily, for goodness sake?"

"I used to know one" said Reinhard, "but that was a long time ago".

Elisabeth.

On the following afternoon Reinhard and Elisabeth went for a walk on the other side of the lake, first through wood clearings then on to the high promontory overlooking the lake. Erich had told Elisabeth that while he and mother were away, she was to show Reinhard the most beautiful views of the area, namely the far side of the lake looking over to the farm. They walked from one viewpoint to the next until Elisabeth felt tired and sat down under the shade of a tree. Reinhard stood opposite her, leaning on a tree trunk. In the distance he could hear a cuckoo and suddenly it dawned on him that this was once how it had all been. He smiled at her in a knowing sort of way.

"Shall we pick strawberries?"

"They're out of season" she said.

"It'll come again, soon".

Elisabeth shook her head then got up and they continued their walk and as they did so, he kept looking at her because she seemed to be walking as if somehow supported by her clothes. He often remained a pace behind her so that he could look into her eyes. They came to an open space, covered with heather with wide views of the countryside. Reinhard bent down and picked some of the plants at his feet. When he looked up again, his face was a mask of impassioned anguish.

“ Do you know what this is? ” he asked.

She looked at him questioningly. “ It ’s heather. I’ve often picked it in the woods ”.

“ I ’ve got an old book at home ” he said. “ I used to write all sorts of songs and poems in it but I haven’t done so now for a long time. Some heather lies between the pages but it is now wilted. Do you know who gave it to me? ”

She nodded but said nothing and continued to look at the heather he held in his hand. When she raised her eyes, he noticed they were filled with tears.

“ Elisabeth ”, he said. “ Behind those blue mountains lies our youth. Where has it gone?”

They said nothing more and walked together down to the lake in silence. It had become sultry and black clouds appeared in the west.

“ A storm’s coming ” said Elisabeth and quickened her pace. Reinhard nodded and both hurried along the lake shore to their rowing-boat.

During the crossing, Elisabeth rested her hand on the side of the boat. He looked across at her while rowing but she did not meet his gaze but stared vacantly into the distance so he looked down at her hand and this pale hand told him everything that her face concealed. He read in it that tender expression of secret sorrow which beautiful feminine hands reflect when at night they comfort ailing hearts. When Elisabeth felt his gaze on her hand, she slowly let it slip into the water.

Back at the farm they encountered a knife-grinder with his cart in front of the manor house. The man with long, black hair was busily turning the grindstone and whistling between his teeth while a tethered dog lay panting nearby. A little girl dressed in rags with a beautiful but anguished face stood in the hallway and held out her cupped hand to Elisabeth

Reinhard felt in his pocket but Elisabeth was quicker; she emptied the whole contents of her purse into the girl’s outstretched hand then turned quickly away and Reinhard heard her sobbing as she ran upstairs. He was about to stop her but then thought better of it and remained at the foot of the stairs. The little girl was still standing in the hallway, motionless, holding the coins in her hand.

“ What else do you want? ” asked Reinhard.

She flinched and said “ Nothing else ” then, looking back at him with wild eyes, she went slowly to the door. He called a name out but she was no longer listening and with a bowed head and arms crossed over her breast, she walked down across the yard.

Sterben, ach sterben,
soll ich allein.

Dying dying
I am alone.

An old song resonated in his head and took his breath away. For a moment he stood still, then turned and went up to his room.

He sat at his desk to work but no ideas came to him. After an hour he went down to the family room. Nobody was there, just the cool, green light. Elisabeth’s red necklace that she had worn that afternoon lay on her sewing table. He picked it up but it caused him anguish so he replaced it. Unable to settle, he went down to the lake, untied the boat, rowed across and followed the same path that he and Elisabeth had taken that afternoon. When he got back, it was already dark. He encountered the coachman in the yard who was leading the horses to graze; the travellers had returned. Entering the hallway he heard Erich walking back and fore in the conservatory but he did not go in and, after pausing for a moment, quietly went upstairs to his room. He sat in his armchair by the window as if to listen to the nightingale singing in the yew

trees below but all he heard was the beating of his own heart. Downstairs the house gradually became quiet as night set in but he was unaware of it and sat for hours in his armchair. Dew formed on the leaves outside and the nightingale had stopped singing. Gradually the deep blue night sky gave way to the pale yellow glimmer of dawn in the east and a fresh breeze sprang up and caressed Reinhard's feverish forehead. The first lark rose joyously into the air. Reinhard suddenly stirred, went to his desk and after fumbling around for a pencil, sat down and wrote a few lines on a white piece of paper. Then he took his hat and walking stick and leaving the paper behind, carefully opened his door and went downstairs to the hallway. The light of dawn flooded every corner of the house and the cat, stretched out on the straw mat, arched its back as Reinhard absent-mindedly stroked it while passing. Outside, sparrows were twittering in the branches, announcing that night was over. He heard a door opening upstairs and someone was coming down. When he looked up he saw Elisabeth in front of him. She laid her hand on his arm, her lips moved but no sound came. At last she said, "You will not come again. I know, don't lie, you will never come again". "Never" said Reinhard.

She let go of his arm and was silent. He crossed the hall towards the door then turned around once more. She was standing motionless on the same spot, looking at him with a lifeless expression. He took a step towards her, stretched out his arms then turned abruptly around and went out of the door. Outside, the world was bathed in clear, morning light and dewdrops caught in spiders' webs sparkled in the first rays of the sun. He did not look back but walked quickly away and gradually the peaceful farmstead sank further and further into the distance and ahead of him lay the wide, wide world.

The Old Man

The moon had disappeared from the window pane and it had grown dark but the old man still sat in his armchair, his hands clasped together, gazing vacantly into the room. Gradually the darkness around him transformed itself into a dark lake whose waters stretched endlessly into the distance and there, so far away that the old man's eyes could scarcely see it, a single water lily floated on its broad leaves.

The door opened and a ray of light pierced the gloom.

"I'm glad you've come, Brigitte. Just put the lamp on my desk".

And with that he drew his chair up to the desk, took one of his already opened books and immersed himself in his studies as he used to do in the heyday of his youth.
