THOMAS MALORNY

NOVELLAS

Novellas

Thomas Malorny Novellas

1992 - 2000

To my mother

Foreword

Thomas had many talents and tried out almost everything. His love was for justice and music. He made the striving for justice his profession (self-employed lawyer) and music his hobby (see his compositions on YouTube under Thomas Malorny). He pursued both with passion. He also found time and leisure to write poems, plays and novellas, for example. In 2000, he selected a few novellas from his collection and created this booklet. He dedicated it to his mother and gave it to her as a birthday present.

After his death, we had reprinted a large number of this booklet and gave it as a gift to friends and relatives. It fills us with pride and gratitude that a copy of his booklet can still be borrowed today from the town library in Wetter, his last place of residence.

We have always regretted that we were not in a position to produce an English-language edition of the novellas. Our language skills are not sufficient for this. In the meantime – also with the help of AI – even someone with no language skills can have entire books translated by software in a matter of seconds. The result using "Deepl pro" is this little volume. It seems to have provided us with a relatively good, even if not error-free, translation. Klaus has done his best to eliminate the errors.

We are delighted that we can now use this booklet to revive the memory of our Thomas among English-speaking friends and relatives.

Paul, Gerlinde and Klaus
2024

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I left the ballroom shortly after eleven o'clock at night. The chatter of people talking to each other, the music trying to instil a sense of comfort, the smoke from the countless pipes and the boisterous dancing made me feel uneasy and by escape I tried to get out of my mood.

The night air was very cold, the sky was starry and a light but steady wind, which effortlessly cut is way like fairy whisper through the heavy, snow-covered branches, promised a refreshing walk for the whole body. It had snowed heavily in the days leading up to New Year's Eve and the whole landscape was bathed in a deep and cold, shimmering bluish white. Despite their skids, the sledges always had a hard time getting to the estate through the path, which was constantly covered in fresh snow.

But now they had all come and were eagerly awaiting the events that had been promised to them. They not only wanted to celebrate the start of a new year together, but also the beginning of a life together for two people who love each other.

My boyfriend had the fixed idea of saying "I do" just as the calendar jumped from December 31st to January 1st. Did he want to protect himself from the fear of many husbands of forgetting their own wedding day just by putting it on a day when people celebrate every year anyway, or did he want to not commit to a specific day and could still switch toJanuary 1st if he missed December 31st?

This question may have been on the minds of many guests, but my friend had thought up a special surprise for this evening: no one except him and the present man of God knew who the bride would be. It was not easy at all: my friend did not want to make it easy for his guests and invited more than two dozen young ladies to the party, each more beautiful than the next, and each of them would have loved it, to become 'Queen of the Night'.

So it was a special spectacle when the invited guests arrived in front of the estate in the early evening. Every newcomer, especially the young ladies, was subjected to a rigorous scrutiny and, when the young ladies were greeted by the master of the house, they tried to look them in the eye to perhaps catch that mysterious gleam that would reveal their special affection for the young creature. But my friend was too much of an actor to spoil the fun before it had even begun. So it happened that at the beginning of a dance my friend always asked another young lady to join in and whispered for a short time, so that the music had a hard time asserting itself. The ones who whispered the loudest kept telling the others to be quiet after they had made their own excitement known.

They observed closely and realised that the bridegroom had danced once with each of the young ladies. Since he did not favour or neglect any of them, it was considered whether there was any sympathy in the order for one lady or another. Whilst some thought that the best was saved until last and that you could only really dance when your legs were warm again, others thought that a gentleman would not let his sweetheart wait until the end and then, exhausted from all the dancing, would strut around like a mario-

nette and so the first of the young ladies must be the chosen one. Still others thought that the host was not so simple-minded as to make it easy for his guests: Rather, the bride should be sought among the remaining ones.

This is how the guests spent the merry evening. But I didn't keep up with the chattering crowd, I did the same as my friend and danced with each of the young ladies. They were all enchanting creatures, and if I had had to choose one as the lady of my heart, I would have been truly unenviable. But I was not spoilt for choice. I therefore preferred to refresh myself a little in the winter air and plunged into the cool of the night. As I wandered aimlessly through the snow, a figure scurried towards me from the stables.

"What are you doing out here?" it yelled at me. "Am I already being looked for?" Only now did I recognise him: it was my friend, wrapped up in thick furs as if he was about to set off on a journey.

"Not exactly..." I replied, a little startled to find him out here. Without letting me continue, he went on:

"I wanted to have a quick look at the foal; it's so miserably cold." He urged me again to go back to the stables, but I held him by the arm.

"Friend!" I hissed at him and looked him in the eye as if I wanted to take away his guilty conscience, "in less than half an hour you want to get married, you've invited company and you're running around outside because of a foal?"

"Friend!" he replied, holding me by my upper arms with both arms outstretched. A long pause for breath followed, as if he had something important to tell me:

"Doesn't it have time until tomorrow? I'll explain it to you then."

Despite the haste written on his face, he uttered these words with a calmness that made you think they had turned to ice in the cold. I did not know whether he expected an answer from me. So I turned round and was about to go back when I paused after the first few steps. He was still standing there, looking after me.

"Who is the young lady with the rose brooch?" I asked him. Without changing his expression, he replied: "Mademoiselle Juliette, the advocate's daughter."

"How did the old advocate get such an enchanting daughter? He's been greying in honour for a long time, hasn't he?" I looked at him in amazement.

"The one you mean fell off his horse four weeks ago and broke his neck. The old devil! He probably didn't think about the law of gravity."

He smiled a little, as far as the cold would allow. Despite the respect he had shown the advocate, he didn't think much of these people of the pettifogger:
"Last week, a new advocate arrived from Paris, with child and cone. Do you like her?"

I found the question distasteful. She could be his bride and I would rave about her in front of him. Yet I still remembered this first dance quite well: so much grace and poise. Shaking my head, I left the scene of our conversation and trudged back the way I had come. I was looking forward to the crackling of the firewood again, to the warmth that came from this fire, to the hot tea that would thaw my insides.

The party was in full swing when the music suddenly stopped in the middle of a waltz. Someone opened two opposite windows at the same time, so that the small gust of wind that caught in the hall extinguished all the lights. I looked at my pocket watch and could see the remaining ten minutes of the year on the clock face in the flickering of the fireplace. As if moved by a ghostly hand, a wall that no one had previously recognised as such rose up. Behind it was an equally large hall, bathed in the glowing light of hundreds of candles: it had been converted into a small chapel. The guests stood around in amazement. My friend had a really good feel for theatrical performances. A small organ began to play softly and the man of God emerged from the crowd. With great dignity, he walked leisurely up the path to the altar, beckoned two altar boys, looked round and asked his 'flock' to come closer. They quietly took their places. The organ fell silent. Nobody looked round to see who was missing. Indescribable silence reigned in the hall. The organ started again, the priest looked expectantly at the door at the other end of the hall, and the guests craned their necks to see everything.

But nothing happened, no door opened. No one would have been surprised if the bride and groom had suddenly slid down from the ceiling or climbed out of one of the side wings covered with mirrors. But nothing of the sort happened. The organist hesitantly repeated what had just been played and the guests looked at each other questioningly: But no one, apart from the host, was missing.

I ran out without getting dressed and pulled open the gate to the stable where I thought he was. Everything

was as usual – only his horse was not in its place. I saw many fresh traces of riding boots and then – hoof prints that left deep marks and ran in the direction of the stable gate. I followed them to the gate that led onto the estate. There I lost them, as they were no longer recognisable in the tracks of the skids. Slowly, I walked back, where they all pierced me with their questions. But I walked through them in silence, took a chair and sat down in front of the fireplace, staring into the flames. In time, they realised what had happened. Entering, they left the estate in silence. The last sleigh was just disappearing into the darkness of the night when the clock struck the twelfth time and shortly afterwards shots of firecrackers could be heard in the distance: The new year had begun.

I took the opportunity to wish the new neighbours a Happy New Year on New Year's Day. I visited the family in the late afternoon and expressed my dismay at the events of the previous night. They were of my opinion, but very quickly abandoned the conversation. The warm atmosphere in this house made me a welcome guest. But my relationship with the young Mademoiselle Juliette became particularly warm, and less than three months passed before the wedding bells finally rang.

Ten years had passed when one afternoon a messenger stopped outside our house and handed my wife a letter. She came slowly into my study, placed the letter addressed to me on the desk and stood on the other side of the desk, waiting for me to open it. I was astonished: the letter was from an English advocate, from India.

The envelope left no doubt as to its contents: My friend's will.

I opened the letter and next to the will another envelope fell out, on which it was noted in my friend's handwriting that in the event of his death this letter was to be forwarded to me. I opened the letter intended for me and a sheet of paper appeared on which was written in a few words:

"Dear friend!

When you hold these lines in your hands, I will no longer be with you. You were my best friend, almost like a brother, and I want you to know who my bride was: Mademoiselle Juliette.
I saw in your eyes that you feel more for her than I could ever give her. I hope she has become happy, happy with you.

Farewell!"

Light-footed, the two-in-hand made its tracks in the dust of the road. The hours of monotonous hoof beating had acquired the precision of a clockwork and had a soporific effect in the late afternoon heat. Only the accident when the left rear wheel broke disturbed the idyll of a multi-day journey in the carriage. I then had the opportunity to see the area on foot for three hours. Despite the scorching midday heat, I was grateful for this little interruption, as my buttocks had been badly affected: The carriage springs were in urgent need of a replacement.

But what should I really be complaining about? I had the rare pleasure of having the carriage to myself: No drunken and rowdy dawdlers, no rigid and dark matrons, no grouching children. If I no longer liked one seat, I simply changed it. Normally there were at least four, but usually six to seven passengers on a trip; and in such glorious summer weather, this journey would otherwise have been pure torture. So I put my feet down one way or the other and for the first time ever on a journey like this, I enjoyed looking outside.

As I was absorbed in looking outside, the coachman suddenly spoke to me through a skylight: "Hey, Monseigneur! Listen!"

This slightly cheeky tone made me angry. "It's getting pretty dark back there. We won't make it to our destination today anyway. We'll reach a small

hostel in half an hour. You can spend the night there and we'll continue our journey tomorrow morning."
With these words, he slammed the roof hatch shut again and stepped up the pace, as if he wanted to get away from the bad weather, even though it was getting closer and closer to us. At first I thought he wanted to ask me whether I agreed with his suggestion, but he assumed that I did and decided for himself. The journey became increasingly unpleasant: the sun disappeared behind the first precursors of the approaching dark grey and black wall of rain. Apparently, the night was coming early. A light wind picked up and whistled through the carriage walls with sinister tones: the late afternoon turned into an early evening and when the carriage finally came to a halt at the hostel after this almost diabolical ride, the first heavy drops were already pattering on the carriage roof. With a light coat thrown over me, I stormed out of the carriage and into the hostel; the coachman followed with my luggage.

It was dead quiet in the hostel, nobody was to be seen; only a faint light blazed here and there. A small fire was burning in the cooker in the kitchen, providing a little warmth after the storm had brought in the cold. Everything else in the hostel was more of a desolate picture: it seemed as if there had been people here a few moments ago, as if there had been life in every corner, and only our arrival had scared them all away. Meanwhile, the coachman had looked around the upper rooms, which were used for overnight accommodation, and only returned with a shrug, almost a little disgruntled.

I called out for someone and the kitchen floor creaked. As I stuck my head in the door, I saw an age-

old woman emerge from behind the stove and tried to make her way through the kitchen, supporting herself between two sticks. She didn't get far and the bench in front of the stove caught her sudden fall. Moaning, she mumbled a few words to herself and I had to get very close to her to be able to understand a single word. There was something so rotten about the smell that wafted towards me that I would have thought the woman had been dead for years if she had not just moved. As a small bell chimed in the distance, a few tears rolled from her dead eyes, dripping down her old, withered skin. In the flickering of the hearth fire, her eyes now looked glassy and began to glow themselves, which looked more than ghostly because of her almost dead body.

I went back into the parlour, slightly agitated, when the coachman came to me and reported that people were approaching the hostel in a procession. I ran to the door and saw a column approaching slowly, heads bowed and all dressed in black. Now I understood the old woman's reaction to the little bell: it had been a death knell.

The procession entered the hostel in silence. Everyone took their seats, not a word was exchanged. Without us being a disturbance – we had probably not even been noticed – a man stood up and addressed those gathered in a cold voice, barely feeling the strength to open his lips: "I have now carried my son to his grave. He brought grief and shame to me - not being able to bury him in the cemetery. He judged himself; he decided to go himself; he didn't wait for the Lord's call."

All his grief was accompanied by all his anger, which he did not want to have, which he was not allowed to

have: "Does the meaning of life lie in death if life no longer has any meaning? How can a young person no longer see any meaning in his life if he doesn't know what it means to live, what it means to love, what it means to be born and be allowed to die and not have to die?"

If the father had not been in tears, he would probably never have stopped tormenting himself with questions about the inevitable, the inescapable. None of those present comforted him, no one looked at him, but everyone's face was lowered to the ground. But neither reverence nor grief compelled them to do so. The only thing to be seen in their gazes was a sense of alienation, as if none of this concerned them, as if they were only present for the sake of form. Although the presence of these 'guests' was so strange, I was startled when the first one suddenly stood up and left the room without saying a word. In time, all the others left the hostel as well. I followed the last one: Outside, everyone ran off on their own, each in a different direction. The evening that had fallen in the meantime and the dreadful rainfall didn't bother anyone. Within a few moments I was completely soaked from top to bottom and if the coachman hadn't pulled me back into the hostel, I would have been swept away in the falling floods. After I had got rid of my wet clothes in one of the hostel rooms and put on my evening coat, I went back down to the grieving father. The coachman had given me a hint that I should leave it alone, but my curiosity tormented me more than would have been appropriate to respect the mourner.

In the meantime, the father had prepared an evening meal and served it to two people. It was not a particularly sumptuous meal, but it was ample by peasant

standards. I made him understand that the coachman would not be joining us for dinner and asked him to take his place. He reluctantly complied with my request and admitted, somewhat hesitantly at first, but then frankly, why he was refusing: "You don't socialise with people like me, not anymore!" I initially related his emphasis on 'socialise' to myself, as I really was not of the same class as him. As he wanted to get up again immediately, I held him firmly and replied: "My dear landlord, death knows no difference."

Even this attempt seemed to be no consolation to the distraught father. You could sense that he was less concerned with where his son would be buried than with how it must have happened. I did not know whether I should ask him about the story, because it would obviously be agonising for him. But he did not give me time to think about it, because he began to tell me:

"My son had become my pride and joy since the death of his mother, my beloved wife, five years ago. He was a strong, well-grown and always cheerful person. There was never a moment when I saw him disgruntled, unfriendly or even angry. After my wife's death, he had started to make sure that there was always enough food for the guests and us at the hostel. He regularly travelled to the market, traded with the travelling merchants and also went into the woods to collect berries and mushrooms. It was my wish, as it would be the wish of many fathers, that one day, when I retired, he would take over the hostel.

One day, in the early evening, I waited impatiently for him to return from the market; the house was full of guests. Night fell, but he didn't come back. The

next morning, leaving everything here, I walked in the direction of the town from which I was expecting him. He came towards me calmly and unconcernedly and was very surprised to find me here on the street. I reproached him, forbade him and insulted him without any reason, not realising that it didn't bother him at all. The same thing happened twice more and as he didn't change, I let him go, reluctantly, but remembering my own youth. He talked a lot about how beautiful the nights were outdoors, sitting around the campfire and listening to the sounds of the night. One evening, when we had no guests, I asked him whether he would take me to the place. A little hesitantly, he agreed. After we had been walking for about an hour, I heard the sound of a shawm in the distance. The melody was so unusual that I was intrigued to meet its player: it was – contrary to my expectations – a young shepherdess, and it was also where my son was heading. My eyes opened like those of a sleeping person, and inwardly satisfied, I turned back at the same moment so as not to spoil the happiness of the moment with my presence. My son thanked me for this decision with a benevolent look. I returned home with joy in my eyes and joy in my heart, hoping to finally have a young woman in the house again soon."

He spoke the last sentence carefully because he noticed how my eyes turned away from him and towards the kitchen. He continued to whisper quietly, almost so that I could barely understand: "The old woman in the kitchen is my wife's grandmother, nobody really knows how old she is. I've never had the heart to chase her away. Because she always makes such a strange impression on the guests. And she doesn't die either! She always disappears behind the

stove when guests arrive." I pretended to accept his attitude, although I could hardly imagine the old woman's suffering. How bad must it feel to want to die but not be called?

The father continued: "It went on like this for a few days. My son began to take his tasks less seriously. In the meantime, I had become so reliant on his skills and sense of duty when it came to providing food that the first complaints from guests came to me out of the blue. When he wanted to leave again one evening, I confronted him. Evasive and very reserved, he tried to make me realise that the job he had in mind had nothing to do with that of a landlord. He was rather made for life in the open air in nature and not behind the pub with eternally nagging guests. This statement sent me into such a rage that I gave him a resounding slap in the face. He ran out of the hostel like a wild bull. After he had not returned for hours, I made my way to the place where I thought he was with the shepherdess; after all, it was she who had put such nonsense into his head, if not deliberately, then knowing full well the consequences. When I arrived at the spot, all could find was the burnt-out fireplace: No sign of sheep or shepherdess. As it had become dark in the meantime, I could see fire in the distance. It was a much bigger fire than the shepherdess usually lit. I could also see a lot of people making an unpleasant noise. I walked carefully in that direction and stayed under the cover of darkness. When I got close to the fire, I saw that a troupe of jugglers, bag-players, hawkers and other rabble had gathered there. The shepherdess was also sitting by their fire, playing her shawm for everyone. Some of the strangers danced around the fire. One by one, however, they

fell to the ground, exhausted, until finally only one was still dancing. He danced and danced and circled around himself, around the fire, around the shepherdess, becoming more and more ecstatic and staring at her with piercing and demanding eyes. His eyes, burning red in the fire, turned him more and more into a fire-breathing dragon, who invited the sacrificed virgin to the dance of death. At the moment of his greatest passion, he pounced on the shepherdess and bewitched her. At that moment, my son rushed out of the undergrowth. Only a few steps away from me, he too had watched the spectacle unnoticed and had fallen under its spell.

The next morning – he hadn't even noticed my absence when he arrived in the night – he was sitting at the table, deep in thought, completely overworked and out of sorts. He was a little surprised not to be insulted, barely able to recognise me at all. But it seemed more important to me to leave him in peace and forget the night's events; even if they were a little the result of his own imagination, of his fantasies about other people's lives. Without a word, he got up and went out the door: the bleating of a passing flock of sheep had woken him from his daydreams. I followed him and could see her, his shepherdess. Without looking at him, she drove her flock past the inn. I put my hand on my son's shoulder in a fatherly way. We looked after her until she disappeared from our sight behind a hill, and then he too disappeared into the shed to chop wood. I told him that I was going to the market today and that he only had to chop the wood. He nodded and carried on working. When I returned a few hours later, there was silence everywhere. I called everywhere for my son, but couldn't find him anywhere. A small

breeze opened the gate to the barn slightly as I stood around the yard searching. A ray of sunlight hit my son's dead face and cast a long shadow: he had hung himself with a rope from a ..."

Tears welled up in the father's eyes again. He apologised and stood up. At his last words, my mouthful got stuck in my throat and I began to cough; I almost spilt the wine I had drunk in a hurry. I left the table in a hurry, wanted to wish the landlord a good night, but refrained from doing so: How could he ever have one again? So I disappeared into my room.

Bad dreams haunted me all night. Despite what seemed to me to be a very short night, I was glad when the coachman roused me from bed very early in the morning. He had slept very well, at least that was the impression he gave. I, on the other hand, must have looked like a ghost when he looked me in the face. In any case, I felt like one. I categorically rejected his suggestion that we first have breakfast in peace, already slipping into my pantaloons. When he hesitated a little, I pointed out to him that we should have reached our destination last night. I left some money on the bedside table and rushed out of the hostel with the coachman, who could not understand my haste. I suddenly felt the urgent need to get as far away from the hostel as quickly as possible. In my subconscious, I was further assailed by the image of the ancient woman walking through the hostel, more a shadow of herself.

In no time at all, after I had urged the coachman again and again to hurry, we reached the next larger town, our destination. When I finally arrived at my friend's house, I told him about what had happened at the hostel the previous night. My host listened to

my stories in disbelief. Eventually, even a gentle smile appeared on his face. I became angry, whereupon he said to me: "My dearest, you are not the first person I have heard this story from: the age-old woman, the procession, the innkeeper, the jugglers. The inn you tell me about has been uninhabited for more than twenty years and is quite dilapidated. You should have noticed it. But above all, this story of the love between the son and the shepherdess: more than implausible!" Sipping his port, he settled down in a heavy armchair and continued to have a great time all day.

Is murder the most serious crime? It is a guilt that can never be repaired and, in its cruelty, a testimony to the fact that there is no difference between man and animal.

On the evening of 12 December, I returned from a six-month archaeological expedition from Luxor, which I had led on behalf of the university. My luggage had been mistakenly loaded onto the ship that was to transport the various exhibits from the excavations and was due to arrive a week after my arrival at the earliest. So I returned home with nothing but what I was wearing.

When the carriage turned into the street where my home was located, it was bustling with people, which was unusual for the street in general and for this late hour in particular. Only the small bistro at the end of the street occasionally attracted people. As I approached, I realised to my horror that the crowd was right in front of my home and that the event that had brought people together here did not seem to promise anything pleasant: the gendarmes present had to calm down the screaming or even just quietly whimpering 'broads' and call the angry men to order.

But I still could not see the reason for the commotion. I got out of the carriage near the commotion and headed in the direction of my front door. But I had hardly got anywhere near the bunch of people when the crowd greedily pounced on me and pulled me

into the centre of the swirl. The screaming got louder and louder, and when I reached the centre of the swirl, the full horror was revealed to me: Surrounded protectively by gendarmes, lying in a pool of blood, horribly dismembered and mutilated, a young woman, perhaps twenty years young, but how can I tell from this sight, lay in the street as a gendarme threw a white linen over the dead woman and which greedily absorbed the blood. The outline of a human being emerged like a shadow, and as the blood nourished the linen, the horror in the crowd grew again.

Suddenly I, who was still staring mesmerised at the blood-soaked linen, felt all eyes searching for me and clinging to me. Did they think the perpetrator was returning to the scene of the crime? The gendarmes also seemed to interpret this sudden silence and tried with all their might to get me to safety from the angry crowd.

It was only later that I learnt from the gendarmerie that six murders had taken place in this street within a month, the victims were always young women, and the perpetrators had acted with unspeakable cruelty.

In the days that followed, the street became quieter again. But the whiff of death was still in the air and everyone was suspicious of each other. The blood at the crime scenes had only been washed away very sparingly and people walked past these places with unease.

Without attaching any particular significance to the circumstance at first, I observed that at nightfall a man I did not recognise appeared with some regularity. He roamed the street completely aimlessly, glancing

furtively here and there, disappearing again for a while and coming out of the bistro every now and then. I could not believe that a man could be so naive as to kill young women in a bestial manner and then 'walk' through the street in this way for a long time without attracting attention. I therefore felt it was my duty to report this to the gendarmerie, even though I was aware that there would be serious consequences for me if the wrong person was caught. But I was reassured that the stranger was one of them. With these words it was now easier and safer to live.

On the night of 19 to 20 December, perhaps around one o'clock in the morning, a bright scream cut through the stillness of the night. Initially believing it was a dream, I woke up. But just a short time later, a new scream went through me. I ran to the window and looked down at the street: A figure was beating and stabbing a young woman who, struggling less and less, sank to the ground covered in blood. But the murderer did not let go of the dying woman and continued to stab her like a man possessed. I was petrified with horror, unable to make a sound or move. Suddenly I heard the rapid footsteps of the gendarme rushing out of the darkness. The murderer immediately disappeared into the darkness of the night. In the meantime, the lights had come on in several of the flats. The gendarme had reached the scene of the crime and, kneeling down, tried to determine whether there was still life in the body. He did not realise how a furiously raging horde of people, armed for the moment with axes, swords and daggers, had gathered around him – and he – with bloody hands among them – and nobody knew him.

I was paralysed with horror, unable to make a sound to prevent this mistake – when they struck him.

When a scream finally left my body, it was miserably drowned out by the howling of the mob. Barely a minute had passed since the supposed revenge had taken its course and this bloodthirsty mob had done its work: it left behind a pile of flesh, bones and blood – in its madness.

It promised to be a balmy night on this marvellous late summer afternoon. Nobody seemed to mind that the first leaves were already covering the streets. Everyone stretched out their necks, held their heads high and took in the air in the streets in long draughts. Constantly changing scents and flavours permeated the air. One time it smelled of sweet wine, another time of hearty beer, baked goods changed with fruit and vegetables. This 'spectacle' was emphasised by a constant wave, like a sea breeze, coming up from the Seine. If you stopped for a moment and were lucky enough to be able to stick your nose into one of these breezes, and closed your eyes, you felt as if you had been transported to a Provençal fishing village for a moment, sensing the rough waves of the sea, its unique scent of salt, seaweed and kelp.

More driven than marching with a fixed destination, I wandered the streets of the city. I walked along the Rue St Clément, which ended directly on the banks of the Seine and continued over a small wooden bridge that led to the Ile de la Cité. This was my route.

Shortly before the end of the street, I noticed an old man sitting on the pavement, leaning against the wall of the house. 'Another one of those beggars,' I thought, but I was wrong. As I approached, I realised that he was selling lottery tickets. I stopped in front of him. There was a small sign next to him, on which it was

written in almost illegible handwriting that the money should only be given to him in the correct amount.

"Monseigneur, buy a ticket," he whined at me, "just one sous."

"What am I supposed to do with a lottery ticket?" I thought to myself. Only now did I realise that the old man was not looking at me as he spoke, but continued to stare into space: he was blind. I felt sorry for him, took half a sous from my purse, threw it into the copper bowl in front of him and wanted to go on.

His stick came down like a guillotine's axe and it would not have taken much for me to be hit.

"Monseigneur," he said without raising his voice, "half a sous is too little." How did he know? Ashamed of my behaviour, I reached into my purse a second time and gave him a five-sous piece. I decided to move on at last.

"Monseigneur," he addressed me again, "thank you very much for the half sous. But don't forget your five tickets!" He had noticed again.

"I don't want any tickets at all," I replied somewhat gruffly. His face darkened. He picked up his stick with a threatening gesture, like a schoolmaster.

"Monseigneur, at least take one ticket," he pleaded, and his expression immediately lost its sternness. His eyes glowed red from the setting sun reflected in the Seine. In this bloody lane, one of these new steamships cut through the waves with a great roar and thick smoke. Its smoke, as pitch-black as the night, menacingly obscured the last rays of the sun.

"Just one ticket; it won't be to your detriment," was his last attempt.

I wanted to do him a favour and reached one hand into the box containing the lottery tickets. My hand

wandered aimlessly, undecided whether to hold on to a ticket. "Monseigneur, take any one of them. Any one will bring you the win."

I pulled my hand out again. 'What kind of lottery is this where every ticket wins,' I thought to myself.

"Monseigneur, take your time, give your fortune a real chance!" He suddenly sounded so convincing that I believed it myself. I reached in, took a lottery ticket and left. This time the old man smiled: he finally had me where he wanted me. I put the ticket in my pocket and had not quite pulled my hand out again when the old man suddenly called after me gruffly: "Monseigneur, go and see what you've won. Now!" I flinched and stood rooted to the spot for a moment: No one had ever shouted at me like that before.

Slowly, I took one step after the other towards the wooden bridge. I quickened my pace and was less than five steps away from the bridge when it burst with an infernal thunder, followed shortly afterwards by a deafening detonation. The shockwave tore all my clothes off and knocked me to the ground. Black smoke surrounded the whole scene. This monster of a steamship had rammed into the bridge, the falling timbers pierced the ship, capsizing it and causing the steam boiler to explode.

I never found out what I had won from the lottery - but I had won something that you can only lose otherwise: life.

He had grown old. In his forty years as a postman, he had seen many a life come and go. But time had also left its mark on him. His black hair fell out more and more, especially in the last few years, and the hair he had left took on a silvery grey tone. The skin on his face wilted like a fallen leaf in late autumn. His small, delicate nose looked almost lost in the deep eye sockets that dominated his face. His eyes, in which all fire had been extinguished, now lay dormant, except for the right one: He had lost it in the war of 1870 when a shell fell near him and took many to their deaths. Although he found himself repulsive because of his lost eye and avoided any introspection, he did not want to wear an eye patch. He wore his mutilation like a medal; that was all he had left of the war.

His lips were puffy and pale, as if no drops of blood had flowed through them in the last few moments to keep them alive. His posture had been that of a nobleman: his head always straight out, his nose in the air, his arms and legs in a harmonious stride, light and elegant. But here, too, time had left its mark and the weight of his labour had done the rest. It now looked almost ridiculous when he tried to walk upright. His steps became slower and shorter and so it was not uncommon for him to be already recognised by the dragging of his worn-out shoes.

It was a Saturday when he returned home from work. He paused at the entrance for a moment to catch his

breath and brace himself for the difficult climb up the staircase. He had been living on the seventh floor for forty years now. He came to this house after the war in 1870 on his way to Paris to find a new job. As he had never learnt anything, the prospects seemed very slim. But France had lost many sons in the war, so there was a great shortage of goodly workmen. At the time, he had never thought, never even feared, that he would spend the many years of his life in this house on the seventh floor. In the past, the many steps were not a question of time or strength, but now he had to ask himself every time whether he would make it this time.

The way he opened the front door made such a noise that you could not be wrong in assuming it was at least as old as Claude himself. Every inhabitant of this house now knew that 'he' was back. Slowly, like a sighing ghost, he took stair after stair. Each step was accompanied by a different creak of the old, rotten wooden planks.

Whenever Claude climbed the stairs, the whole house fell dead silent. You could not help thinking that people were crouching behind the doors of their flats, listening to see if Claude had already passed by. If they heard him approaching their door, betrayed by the creaking of the floorboards, but did not go any further, after a while the door would open a crack and one eye would try to spy something in the stairwell, fearing it would have to help Claude. When they realised that he had passed them by, relief was clearly visible in their eyes. They had no sympathy for him, they had nothing but scorn and derision for him, he was just an old, half-blind cripple.

Claude had not been bothered by this for a long time, he was so preoccupied with himself. As he climbed the stairs, he reminisced about the earlier years of this house. All the respectable people had moved out when the quarter fell into disrepute. Those who could not afford to move or could not find new accommodation were forced to stay put and were subjected to the constant harassment of the riffraff who had now taken up residence in the empty flats. Strangely enough, Claude was spared. Whether this was due to his almost ghostly appearance remained a mystery to him. He hardly knew anyone in the house and no one really knew him. When he closed the door behind him, he was in his own world.

The room in which his life took place was less than four by five metres in size. In one corner, to the left under the window, stood his bed, next to it a wardrobe containing the few possessions he had acquired in his life. In the centre of the room was a table and a chair, which was always positioned so that Claude could look out over the rooftops of Paris through the room's only window. Finally, in the other corner was a makeshift kitchen. As simple and poorly furnished as everything was, Claude felt at home here, this was his world. Claude looked at time and the world through this window. For a few hours a day, the sun also looked through and observed this lonely life.

One day, however, in 1885, the view from the window changed: a madman began to build a tower out of steel and iron in the centre of the city. For a few years, Claude gazed out of the window every morning and evening, mesmerised by the progress of the work. But again, he lived so far away from the building site that

he could not even guess the people. Like the sting of a wasp, the colossus pushed itself out of the earth that was giving birth to it, towards the sky. Claude felt how enormous the strength of the people could be, how much they could achieve together if they did not fight and destroy each other, but built and created together. Every day, as the size of the building became more and more apparent, Claude was increasingly inspired by the desire to one day stand at the head of this structure. On the day of the inauguration, his body was filled with such joy at this achievement, as if the tower had grown solely through his own labour.

Over time, however, the fascination waned, as the building had become something familiar, commonplace and impossible to ignore from the cityscape. Although Claude had firmly resolved to do so and had many good intentions, he had not managed to get anywhere near the tower until that day. Now he was getting old, his strength was waning and any hope of ever being able to climb the tower under his own steam had vanished.

Claude stood at the window of his room and watched the tower as it bled in the last rays of the setting sun. Its metallic surface made it appear different from the other stone buildings in the evening sun. A distant greeting from the future, a sign of the new age, characterised by new and larger dimensions in which man now thought to think. Would these 'new people' also remember those whose world was limited only by four walls, who knew and would know nothing else? Claude began to doubt, his brain began to work. His thoughts chased mercilessly back and forth and the glorification of human achievements seemed increasingly pointless to him. His growing excitement sudden-

ly gripped his whole body until he banged his clenched fist on the table in rage: Had man now created his own idol!

His uproar reached its peak and the little spirit raged like never before in his life. As the sun went down, his excitement also faded. Shocked by his own uproar, he sat down on the edge of his bed. Slowly, he regained his senses and his emotional storms smoothed out again. As before, it occurred to him: something had to happen again. He felt that there was only one last chance to realise his great dream of climbing the tower: tomorrow. With this thought, Claude fell asleep.

The next morning, long before the first rays of sunlight came over the horizon and discovered Paris, he was already on his feet. He neglected the usual course of events, as he usually did every Sunday. He took the one suit out of his wardrobe, which he thought he had hung up in a different state when he saw it. He could not remember the last time he had worn it. After a quick clean-up, however, the roughest traces of past decades have been swept away. If Claude had been able to look at himself in the mirror, he would not have stepped outside the door: Although the suit had by no means made him a neat and tidy person, but he wanted to give the impression of being one, he cut a strange figure. So Claude walked down the stairs, across seven floors and opened the front door: Paris lay at his feet. Now it was up to him to find his way. There were hardly any people about at the time. Everything was still in Morpheus' arms. But he wandered through the streets, his destination in sight from time to time, but mostly guessing, instinctively feeling his way. He was often on the verge of despair that he might

miss the building. If he thought he was going round in circles, his steps were directed more directly towards his destination than his local knowledge would have led him to expect. As time passed, the streets filled up, bells rang and called to prayer. He felt like he was in a foreign city and stared at the people in confusion – nobody looked like they did in his quarter. But the eyes of the others were on him too and to escape them, he quickened his pace as best he could. All of a sudden, completely unexpectedly, he stood in front of his destination: everything looked even bigger and more majestic than he had imagined. In the joy of being so close to the dream, he forgot that the far more difficult part was still ahead of him. He did not know how many steps would lead him up, but as long as they led higher, he would take them. There was no longer any sign of surprise on his face. Whereas yesterday he had struggled to get to the seventh floor, now he was expecting many times more, and his advanced age and diminished strength seemed to have become obsolete as he took the first steps. No creaking, but even, metallic, dull footsteps followed his steps. Although his senses were initially deceived by his eagerness, his old ailments soon made themselves felt again. Should he give up now? Would he capitulate if he could see the way up? But he had already come this far and he did not want to let this unique opportunity go to waste. So he fixed his eyes on the next stairs, held on to the railing with both hands and pushed himself up stair by stair. He did not dare look up or down. When he thought he was close to the last steps, his eyes went black. Despairing, clinging to his mother like a small child, he clutched the cold iron. He had closed his eyes.

After a while he pulled himself up, still with his eyes closed. When he had climbed five more stairs, his blind feet searched for the next stair but could not find it. Every surface he blindly felt had been on the same level as the last stair. He thought he had finally reached his destination. Slowly and carefully, he pulled himself up a pillar. He thought he could stand safely on his feet and opened his eyes. The sun shone directly into his face, dazzling light dazzled his eyes; the outline of the city from an unfamiliar perspective made him stagger powerlessly and sink forwards, looking for a foothold ...

'To be refrained from urgently and prohibited under penalty of law'

Leaning out of the windows – this is how the railway company tried to stop the enthusiasm for travelling by train – this letting the wind blow around your nose. For passengers in the front carriages, it was a bitter necessity to open the windows, even in winter, albeit to a lesser extent; the smoke from the steam locomotive made its way through all the cracks and corners. For the rear carriages, however, the scent of the meadows and forests, the fields and rivers opened up during the journey, and if it weren't for the constant rumble of the wheels under your feet, you felt like you were on a walk through nature.

Most people only use the railway as a means of transport to get from one place to another as quickly as possible. They therefore usually sit in second, third or fourth class and have to share their seats with various small animals, especially on market days. I therefore took the liberty of travelling in first class, which, unlike the other classes, has closed compartments with four seats each, and which guarantees at least a certain external seclusion as a prerequisite for an inner expectation. Because I was not travelling for the sake of the destination. I was much more attracted by the spectacle that begins on the platform, when all kinds of people push and shove each other in a tumultuous rush and treat their children and animals like pieces of luggage, and then the spectacle continues in the

landscape flying past the compartment window. After all, it is the people with whom I share the compartment: a freely chosen temporary captivity that anyone can get rid of at any time.

Early one Saturday morning, I decided – at fairly short notice – to take the train to Reims and, after a short stop to enjoy a déjeuner, to return home. As expected and hoped for, there was a lot of hustle and bustle on the platform. It was market day in some of the smaller towns we would be travelling through. Every trader was out and about selling his wares in some town or other. The first-class compartments were very sparsely occupied. So I did not have to search for long before I found a compartment that was completely empty. The first thing I did was open the window and stick my head out. From up here I was able to observe the colourful chaos, even though the stationmaster gave me a nasty look for my disobedience: he would be the last person to spoil my good mood. As the crowd on the platform became smaller and smaller, as almost everyone was now inside the train, an older male voice approached me from behind and asked if the other seats in the compartment were still free. I replied in the affirmative.

It is sometimes strange to observe: Entering passengers see without doubt that you are alone in the compartment and yet they ask – all for the sake of politeness!

After the gentleman to whom the voice belonged and who sat down in the window seat opposite me, a lady of the same age and a young man followed. I offered the lady my seat, which she took, accompanied by a friendly smile. The young man, whom I thought I recognised as his parents' son, took his seat next to

his mother; I sat opposite him. The train began to move.

Before you enter into conversation, you examine your fellow travellers: The fact that they could afford to travel in first class was more than just an indication of a more elevated position in middle-class life. Their clothing, on the other hand, was atypical for a railway journey; one would have expected to see them at a reception or other festivity. If, despite all this, the journey had this purpose, it would have been more appropriate to arrive in one's own coach, and if the journey therefore took longer, to postpone the date of travel by a day or two, not least in order to be able to recover from the unpleasant aspects of a journey. But this seems to be becoming increasingly rare in the new age of the railways.

The gentleman looked older than he probably was in reality. He seemed to have been a soldier, as the scar over his left eye bore the mark of a dragoon's sabre. His sunken face, the bulging wrinkles on his forehead, the long, narrow eyes, the broken nose and his small mouth gave little idea of what he must have looked like just a few years ago. His life must have been hard and full of privation.

His wife was the complete opposite. She was already struggling to get through the compartment door, let alone to her seat. It took a load off my mind that I did not have to sit next to her. The slightly sweet smell of her perfume quickly filled the whole compartment, and if it had not been for the occasional gusts of wind that reached me through the slightly open compartment window, this situation would have become unbearable over time. Every time I looked

over at this lady in horror, she smiled at me, giggling more. More than a small smile was not to be expected from her mouth, as it was only with difficulty that the corners of her mouth could overcome the fierce resistance of her truly fat cheeks.

Their son did not seem to have noticed any of his parents' characteristics, yet he looked not unlike them. He slouched in his seat, slightly daydreaming. His rather reserved nature also seemed to have affected his appearance. He looked a little pale, as if he only knew the sun by ear. But I was wrong, and let it be said at this point that first glances can be deceptive: When he got bored of being bored, he reached into the inside of his skirt pocket and pulled out a small booklet. I watched him as he read, and from his gestures I thought I could read the book with him. Suddenly there was life in his face.

"What are you reading, young sir?" I asked him. He looked at me in bewilderment, as if to ask who I was talking about. With a nod of my head, I pointed to what he was reading.

"Balzac," he replied shyly, and as he immersed himself in his book again, he muttered once more to himself: "Balzac."

His father glanced at him, not without pride. But then his interest turned back to the landscape and, full of enthusiasm, he exclaimed: "Look, dear, we're in ..." as the steam locomotive signalled for all to hear. - He had called her 'dear' - it matched her perfume.

After a short stopover, the journey continued. However, my enjoyment of the journey was slightly dampened by my fellow travellers. I had actually intended to

watch the colourful hustle and bustle at the stations. But I couldn't ask the two people sitting at the window to get up for me every time. Not only would it have been unpleasant for me, but such behaviour was simply not to be expected of me. But I would also have found it rude to move to another compartment. So I hoped that at least some of the stations still to come would be on the other side of the train.

"Dear," the old man addresses his words to his wife, "It was a really good idea of the Gerands to organise the engagement for today." He was beaming with the sun. Now I was curious to see what she would call him.

"Yes, yes, mon petit general." I was completely unprepared - 'my little general' - I was speechless. If the two of them had been on their honeymoon or alone in that compartment, I would have understood. It was not funny, it was simply ridiculous. I wish I would have had a book to hand just to hide behind. The son was unimpressed by it all. He was more engrossed in the book than before.

"The last time Lisa was with us, didn't she look enchanting, dear?"

"Yes, you're right. Maybe we'll see her more often now."

This 'dear' slowly began to drive me crazy, and every time the 'mon petit general' failed to materialise, I thanked my creator. Unexpectedly, however, there was a reaction from the young gentleman when the name 'Lisa' was mentioned. For a short time his eyes moved without his head moving and he looked at his father out of the corner of his eye. I could almost understand this reaction: I sometimes felt the same

way when I heard a name that I had actually 'forgotten'. But there was more in his eyes: a sparkle that was so indescribable to me that it could also instil fear. But I did not need to worry any more, because a bright beep signalled the arrival of the train in the next town.

It was to be feared that my travelling companions also wanted to go as far as Reims. The first signs of this came from the lady in our compartment: She pulled out a small travelling bag from a hidden corner and spread out the food she had brought with her in front of her. Realising that she was being watched the whole time, she did not have the heart to offer me anything. I declined gratefully, pointing to my stomach. It was only when she pulled a grim face and viciously tore the bread away from me that I realised the ambiguity of my behaviour. So as not to give her the impression that I had to watch my figure – she would have needed that much more – I said to her: "Madam, please don't misunderstand me. I had a hearty breakfast not so long ago and a delicious déjeuner awaits me in Reims." She had understood: Her fierce look turned back into chubby-cheeked charm. Her husband also withdrew his manoeuvre when it came to flanking his wife. "You must understand my wife," he said to me, "she's a bit excited. We're also travelling to Reims for a special family celebration: our son is getting engaged today – to the Gerands' daughter, Lisa. - Do you know the Gerands? A long-established and wealthy banking family!"

He leant back, satisfied and smug.

"I'm sure you know them!" his wife added, taking up the conversation, "The Gerands live in the white

palace on Place de la Concorde, with the large avenue driveway and the ..."

"Dear, why don't you leave the Lord alone with that? He probably doesn't know her after all. What a pity!"

All of a sudden and completely unexpectedly, the son intervened: "Our son is getting engaged today!" You could hear what he meant just from the undertone. "You heard him, sir!"

"Have you been asked?"

Mum tried to wave off the conversation. But I replied: "No, because ....", and again the sound of the steam locomotive silenced everything.

This time I was lucky: the platform was on my side of the compartment. I got up and left the compartment. At the same moment as I closed the door behind me, I could hear the parents talking quietly to their son. I did not pay any attention to it, but stuck my head out of the window and watched the colourful hustle and bustle on the platform.

When I sat down in the compartment after the train had started up again, the young gentleman spoke to me immediately; all my mother's resistance was of no avail.

"We've just been interrupted and you couldn't finish your sentence. You weren't asked because...?" I could tell by the looks on the parents' faces that I was supposed to say something they wanted to hear. On the other hand, of course, I owed the young man honesty: "I wasn't asked because I didn't need to be asked."

The parents were relieved. They were probably hoping that I would say that I had completely agreed to my parents' proposal. But they were wrong: "Young sir, I didn't get married." The parents were disappointed.

But the young gentleman was not to be dissuaded: "Perhaps you didn't get married because you didn't want the woman they had chosen for you?"

Again I felt the parents begging me with their eyes not to answer this question in the affirmative. Here, too, I did not have to take the path of a lie: "You may not believe it, young sir, but I chose this life myself and no other person ever had the intention or dared to try to dissuade me from this endeavour."

The young gentleman seemed irritated. For him, there were obviously only two options: to be married, with or against his will, or not to be married – against his parents' will alone. I had previously believed that this only applied to unmarried daughters. So it was obviously fundamentally important for those who were to rise in society to simply 'make a good match'. The reluctance of those who refused was usually not due to the fact that such a "match" would be a bad one. It is rather the case that the parents or whoever expected benefits for themselves without addressing the concerns of their own child, ultimately only suppressing them.

To reinforce this impression in me, the lady handed over a small portrait of her future daughter-in-law. Here it became apparent again that the painters of our time still tend to exaggerate just to maintain the good will of their clients: The creature looked more like an angel than a human being, and even the most foolish would not have denied himself this fair beauty.

I therefore unabashedly gave my first impression: "Enchanting ..." Beaming with joy, the lady took the portrait back and tucked her treasure safely away in her travelling bag. "... as one can see things in a different light also." Again, the lady's face tightened into a thunderstorm. This time I had hit her harder. It was not about her personally, but about an autocratic decision for the 'good' of her son and, in fact, herself. Only the son had understood; it suited him: "The gentleman is right!" he replied to his mother, who was ready to throw herself on me with the fullness of her body and eat me with 'skin and hair'.

"For weeks and months, you've been telling me to finally marry Lisa. But isn't it the other way round? Are we doing so badly that we have to be mentioned in the same breath as the Gerands? Beauty is not a number on a bank account, and wealth does not make a princess out of a scarecrow – but Lisa is a marvellously beautiful woman, there is not the slightest doubt about that; also, and this should be said here in all clarity, without any sous. But you keep making it out as if I had to marry her because she is rich, not because she is beautiful. When you speak of her beauty, you mean the 'beauty' of her parents' bank account. Have you even once thought about why the Gerands have agreed to this connection? One hint from them would have been enough and we would have been thrown out the door like beggars! Certainly not because of our name, but because they have recognised and understood that their daughter's happiness is the most important thing they can give her for the rest of her life", and in the same breath, but with a devout pause introducing the conclusion: "I will not marry Lisa! It was an incredibly difficult

decision and one that deeply affected my whole heart. Your thoughts and actions solely from the point of view of profit, in whatever form, and the quest for recognition that drives you alone, make it impossible for me to follow your decision, to be able to follow it at all."

The son's speech had not failed to have an effect. I was both astonished and shocked. Of the parents, it hit the mother the hardest. Her previously aggressive demeanour had turned into a pale, milky face, trying to find an answer in her husband's gaze. No reflection or questioning emerged from her face. Only horror could be read from them as their son's speech condensed into the single word 'no' in their little brains.

So monstrous was this one word, so merciless the consequences, that nobody heard the shrill whistle of the steam locomotive as it pulled into Reims station. It was only when the train came to a sudden halt that my fellow travellers woke up from their stupor. The son pulled open the compartment door, jumped onto the platform and threatened to drown in the crowd. Only his father seemed to be able to follow him, but then, when his heart was beating at its highest, he paused at a window. He opened it to look after his son as he hurried away. He also turned round to see if he was being followed. When he saw his father standing at the window, he shouted a few words to him, but continued to run backwards when his father suddenly began to gesticulate wildly with his arms. He could not get any more screams out of him as his son fell backwards down the platform – in front of the wheels of an incoming train.

There are truly many events in a person's life that can be categorised as cheerful and sad, entertaining and boring. Nevertheless, it does happen that one experiences something beyond the imaginable, yet so clearly and distinctly that one dares not dream it. And it is precisely these events that you often do not hear about because the narrator does not want to expose himself to ridicule.

But this personal experience of such an event turns the confusion of impossibilities into something incomprehensible and invisible to outsiders, but it proves that there must be more between heaven and earth.

One day, the colonel went for a walk in the park on the boulevard. The sun was shining, as was to be expected at this time of year, and children were playing among the trees and on the expansive greenery. A lot of wildlife had gathered on the recently created small lake and, to everyone's delight, a pair of young swans had found a new home here for the summer.

In the rear part of the park, it became noticeably quieter. From time to time, couples would flit past, and when they were spotted, they would flutter away like startled birds. Not many people sought the solitude and tranquillity of these park paths.

One of them was the colonel, who, with his great love on his mind, chose these paths, which he himself had travelled more than half a century ago in his

dearest company, and traversed the time and space of love.

Dusk was falling lightly. A cool wind, accompanied by dark grey clouds, announced the approaching night. Nevertheless, the colonel did not think of setting off for home. Perhaps it would be the last time he travelled these roads. His heart began to pound slightly and his breath caught. Staggering, he took the next few steps, holding on to a tree for support. 'My grave will be made of your wood,' he thought as his shaky hands gripped the bark. As if whispering an answer, the branches swayed in the wind. A small bench came to the rescue. It picked him up, carried him and gave him new strength.

When he came to his senses, the twilight had given way to the darkness of night. It had become so dark that he could not recognise the hands of his pocket watch. Surprised by the late hour, he mustered all his strength to get up. As if struck by lightning, he was startled when he felt a person next to him. He could barely see, hear or feel him and yet there he was – sitting on the bench just like him. The colonel sank back.

"Don't be frightened!" a voice spoke to him, "I've been waiting for you here. But now you're here." With that, the voice fell silent again.

The colonel shook himself, gave no meaning to what he had heard and wanted to get moving.

"I've waited a long time for you and you want to leave already?" the voice repeated.

"How long have you waited for me here?" asked the colonel, trying to put an end to the spook. He did not believe to get an answer, because neither when he

arrived nor while he was sitting on the bench did he think he saw a single creature.

"I haven't counted the years, but it must have been fifty," his neighbour replied.

The colonel began to doubt himself. It had been obvious to him that his body had suffered greatly from his lifestyle over time; those wars that had so terribly scarred his body. But that his mind, which he had always considered to be alert, had been so badly affected, he had not thought possible until this moment.

"I realise that I've startled you unduly," the voice brought him back from his thoughts, "but don't you think it's unseemly to make me, who has waited so long, wait a single second longer?"

"Far be it from me to keep a person waiting, but if you absolutely want to demand satisfaction from me, you have me at your disposal."

"Do you always have to think about dying?"

The colonel was now indifferent to what would happen. He mustered all his strength, hoped for his war-experienced courage and wanted to leave this place of conversation. But nothing helped.

"I don't want you to leave now. Why else would I have waited all this time?"

As he had finally become completely indifferent to what would happen, the colonel rumbled out: "I have fought armies in the dark, chased them, shot at them and let them chase and shoot at me without even seeing them once. If you had come with peaceful intentions, it could have happened at a time when people usually meet and when they have something to say to each other."

"You needn't be afraid, and if you're really so keen to see my face, I won't stand in the way of your wish any longer. But I will say one thing in advance: it was your wish."

The colonel felt vindicated. He was probably completely disfigured and only dared to walk among people at such times of night, if there were any out and about, to spy on them and then, if it was worth it, to ambush them and disappear into the darkness of the night. The colonel had not yet finished thinking when, unexpectedly, a lantern standing next to the bench began to burn, even though nobody had lit it. He was dazzled by the unexpected light. To get used to it, he closed his eyes and bowed his head to the ground. But as time went on, his curiosity grew. He opened his eyes again without raising his head. Slowly, his eyes searched for the source of the voice. He saw boots - soldiers' boots – his eyes rose further – a uniform, and then a young cadet – holding a rose in his hands. Then he looked at the face and was startled – but he did not recognise it.

"Father, why are you staring at me like that?" the cadet tried to address the colonel. But he remained puzzled, as if he had seen the incarnate being. Only a sighing "Son?" escaped his lips.

"You don't have a son!" the cadet replied.
"How do you know ...? Are you - the Grim Reaper?"

"No, of course not!" the cadet said firmly, "I really didn't want to frighten you – why are you always thinking about death?"

"Death is part of our lives and it is your and my duty to accept it for the fatherland," the colonel replied, feeling his strength slowly returning.

He could not tear himself away from the sight of the soldier. This slender, yet sturdy young man gave the colonel a headache, as it seemed impossible for him to recognise him. In addition, the colonel had to deal with such young 'talents' and, had he been among them, his appearance would certainly have made him stand out from the crowd. After all, his behaviour was extremely strange, but he gave the cadet every chance of winning over a young lady. For it was precisely this behaviour that the young men expected from a well-bred man. And apart from a few exceptions, the cadets no longer conformed to this, for they believed they could conquer a woman like a bastion, even though they were still unaware of the latter.

By now it had also become unpleasantly cool.

"I would like to end our conversation now and ask you to visit me occasionally as my guest. I currently live in the Rue de ..." the colonel was about to resume the conversation when the cadet interrupted him again:

"I think you still haven't recognised the seriousness of your situation. It is not enough for you just to be able to see my face, but you are constantly preoccupied with the question of who I am. Until this moment I thought it right to leave you in your ignorance. But now I will finally lay my cards on the table." With these words, he paused. His expression became visibly darker:

"Do you remember 21 October 1786? Sitting on this park bench, you waited impatiently for the love of your life. You had sworn to kill yourself if she didn't come. And she didn't come: she left you sitting with the German cavalry captain. With the pistol pointed at your temple, you were ready to die when a good

spirit – if I may say so myself – appeared to you, a part of yourself, and dissuaded you from your suicidal plan. My price and your punishment was that I and a part of yourself were trapped in this place, and you had a life without love ahead of you. But now that you have returned to this place, I find my redemption in your death."

The colonel's pistol was snatched from him without the cadet moving. He rose quietly and moved away, more floating than walking. After a few steps he turned round and fired. The colonel collapsed, hit.

The next morning he was found: his right hand bleeding, his left hand holding a rose.

Victory! Victory! Victory! It had been shouted through the streets and alleyways for days. A crazy joy had broken out. Heroic texts could be read everywhere, every coatee was greeted with applause, marching music could be heard from every corner. The war for the liberation of the fatherland was proclaimed by the authorities in large and huge letters, the barbarians who dared to attack the fatherland, who took no prisoners, who plundered and pillaged were condemned. Not a day went by without crowds of young men marching through the streets, sabres rattling, bayonets fixed. Wives cheered their husbands, mothers their sons. "We'll be back in a fortnight!" - "You'll be able to make a mop out of their flag," they shouted back mockingly.

Nobody really knew what had happened. Nobody had noticed. All of a sudden they were there, advancing further and further. Nothing stopped them. The front ranks were overrun as if they had never been there. The cavalry and artillery had been also massacred and had to give way. In the retreat they lost all their ammunition and blood flowed profusely.

Hardly a man or son returned; and the enemy was only a few kilometres from the town. Those who could flee set out to leave the town. But the gates had fallen: Those who wanted to flee could also let themselves be killed here, because the enemy would do it outside.

In desperation, the town fathers took every child who could walk and hold a sabre, put them in uniform and marched them out – and the mothers stopped cheering. When the first of these companies were led into the field, the amazing thing happened: The enemy retreated. Thinking it was all a game, a last stand, he had probably reckoned with childish naivety. How did he think a child would react if he found the body of his fallen father or brother shredded in a shell hole?

The time gained was used to re-establish regular troops.

So one day there was a knock on our door and the 'recruiters' wheedled my mum. She herself lied and made up the most outrageous stories to save me from becoming a soldier. They forced their way into our house without respect and dragged me out by my hair. I could see from the shocked faces of the others that they must have felt the same way. They also had my friend Jacques in their grip, and they were all tied to a long rope like prisoners on the march to the quarries; Jacques was the last in the line, I was behind him. I could still hear my mother sobbing heartbreakingly and in my heart of hearts I swore to myself that I would survive this war. I was suddenly thrown back into life as the shackles cut into my skin.

We were all taken to a camp a few kilometres outside the town, which must have been an enemy position in the past; the bodies of dead enemies were still lying around everywhere. However, no one was particularly pleased about the dead, even though they had been wished nothing else weeks before. At the sight of death, the colour of the uniform coat no longer mattered.

Even the most stubborn among them had realised that.

We were not given any training. We were each given a sabre and a musket, where available. The uniforms we were given had been taken off our own dead bodies shortly beforehand and had not even been washed: So from the outside we were already dead. We were shown the direction in which we had to march and left to our fate. When the first shots were fired or the grenades crashed down, the first dozen of us were also dead inside. The rest dropped down and waited for nightfall. Every time we thought we could retreat to our old positions without danger, some busybody would appear and leave us lying in the dirt. He would then blather something about "hold on, victory is near" or "reinforcements will arrive tomorrow, you have to hold the fort here". Our basic needs for food and drink were completely ignored, but we were given plenty of writing paper so that we could write home 'how heroically we fought' and 'our comrades had fallen for the fatherland in the face of victory'. Because I refused to send mail home, they threatened me. I pretended not to be able to write, which they refused to believe. My feigned incompetence in the written language elicited foul-mouthed remarks from the person threatening me, after which he probably felt visibly relieved and did not bother me again from then on. The only reason I did not write was so that my mother would not have to worry if one day, after daily mail, none arrived and she would have to fear the worst. Jacques, on the other hand, wrote almost regularly. Sometimes I asked him to send a few greetings from me to my mum.

In the meantime, a few weeks must have passed, the front had moved a few kilometres away from my home town. Jacques, myself and half a dozen other young lads were ordered one evening to reconnoitre a section of the front that lay a few kilometres ahead. These so-called 'excursions' had long since lost their appeal, if they could ever have had any. They were always 'gladly' accepted as a change from life in the dugouts and trenches, but over time the number of comrades who did not return increased. Whenever such a troop was on the move and the noise of war could be heard from their direction in the otherwise quiet night, those who had stayed behind in their trenches would bet on the number of returnees. This 'game' took on macabre forms when it was decided that the winnings were to be divided equally between the winner and the returnees so that they could bet themselves on the next round. For this reason, they had to hope that as few people as possible would return so that their own winnings would increase.

This scouting party was to be particularly unpleasant: After many weeks in the wet, cold and dirty dugouts, our company was given a four-day furlough, as reinforcements were actually approaching for the first time. Nobody wanted to 'catch a bullet' hours before going on leave. Under the threat of cancelling the leave for us, the troop set off in the direction of enemy territory. When we were barely out of sight of our trenches, our leader – a lad barely older than us – ordered us to take up position in the next trench. With the suggestion that we should settle down here for a while and later, instead of pushing towards the enemy lines, just walk along this line and tell some-

thing on our return – after all, others should also 'bite the dust' one day, he met with general approval.

The hours passed and the endless silence was more frightening than the constant artillery fire. Nobody dared to speak a word or even move. The imagination played tricks on us and soon everyone believed that there were snipers hiding behind all the bushes, just waiting for us to make a mistake. When all of a sudden there was a noise in the distance, the shock was as great as if a grenade had just hit us. The sound repeated itself at short intervals, sometimes softer, sometimes louder. I surmised that it was some kind of animal, perhaps a hare leaving its burrow to see what was going on. So I kept quiet. Another member of our troop, on the other hand, was very disturbed by this noise. At first he tossed and turned restlessly, and when he started talking, the little fellow tried to calm him down by telling him that it was probably just an animal. This attempt at reassurance only made his comrade even more agitated and he himself surmised that it was a sniper that had to be dealt with. Not wanting to pay any attention to these words, we did not notice how he lifted himself out o f cover and scurried in the direction of the noise. Only fractions of a second later, the whistle of an approaching grenade could be heard. Everyone froze in horror and could hardly take cover. I made another jump away from the squad behind a fallen and shot-up tree trunk and held my arms above my head. Then the grenade hit.

Many seconds passed - it seemed like hours - before the cloud of smoke cleared. There was nothing more to be seen of the camerades. Only a few limbs were not burnt or torn, so that you could still recognise what

they used to be. The grenade had hit right in our hiding place. The moon came out from behind a black cloud and looked sadly at the cratered landscape. It was almost as if it wanted to say 'I didn't betray you'. I now used its light to search for the things that bore witness to the death of my comrades. When I found my friend's blood-soaked scarf, which his mother had given him, tears welled up in my eyes. I could no longer identify him. On the way back to our position, I did not take advantage of any cover, but walked across the battlefield in an upright position. I hoped that a bullet might go astray that night and end my life too. But nothing happened.

That's how much we had planned for the four days. Jacques and I wanted to finally go fishing again at the little pond outside the town, let our mums spoil us and finally have a proper swim again. Now I had the painful task of bringing his mother the news of her son's death. I wanted to get this chore over with before I went home myself, so I headed straight for the house where Jacques' mum lived. I did not have to climb the steps to her flat because she was standing at the bottom of the gate. The field post had just left the gate and I could see her holding a bundle of letters in her hand. When she saw me coming, she waved at me invitingly. By the time I got to her, she had already opened one of the letters.

"Jacques has written a few letters again," she began happily. "This one has been travelling for almost three weeks, but what the heck! At least it's a sign of life! Your mum is already very anxious because you're not writing at all," she added reproachfully. "At least you're sending your regards." After a short pause,

during which she returned to the letter, she began: "Let's hear what he writes."

"Dear mum!
There's not much going on here. It's very rainy and we all look like pigs if we've only been on it for a short time. The food is miserable as hell and I'm already looking forward to going home if we ever get furlough. When they fire their grenades from over there, the walls shake more and more and sometimes the ceiling comes down. It gets bad when we have to get out of our holes, counter-attack and all that."

"Is it really that bad," she interrupted her reading, "Or is Jacques once again proving his penchant for drama?" I did not notice a slight smile on her face, I was so busy trying to find a way to bring her closer to real life. As a result, she only elicited a brief and insignificant "Yes, yes."

"Actually, I should write to you about the heroism with which we are fighting here and that victory is only a matter of days away. But you alone will be interested in what happens to me. It's bad enough when your comrade next to you suddenly cries out and then falls over with a hole in his skull. You could just as easily have been hit yourself.

But the worst thing was the day before yesterday, when I killed one of my own comrades. While we were wading through the mud, I saw a comrade who hadn't come back from a night mission the day before. A shell splinter had slashed his stomach open and he must have bled like a stuck pig. At first it looked as if

he was dead. But when I got closer I realised that there was still a spark of life in him. When he saw me, he started to whisper something, but I couldn't understand a single word. When he realised that I didn't understand him either, he turned his head to the side where my musket lay with the bayonet fixed to it, his face contorted with pain. I took the bayonet and he closed his eyes briefly. For me it was the signal. I took the bayonet from the musket and stabbed him through the heart. I had expected him to feel pain. But his face was happy. I just can't forget that face. I hope it goes faster for me when it's my turn!"

The mother was a little frightened by the frankness with which her child spoke of his death. "Is it really that bad?" she repeated. "Everyone sees it in their own way," I replied, "and I believe," I continued, "that this great and senseless dying that we have to experience every day gives us more respect for life. Just the people who order death only value their own lives."

Fortunately, Jacques had other things to say in his letter:

"By the way, as always, I should ask you to pass on Jean-Michel's greetings to his mum. I'm always trying to persuade him to write himself. But he's even lazier than me. See you soon!
Jacques!"

Jacques' mum had given up her pensive face, which left deep wrinkles on her forehead, and was looking friendly again. She put the first letter away and began to open the next one.

"Then you can bring your own greetings to your mum," she said to me. "I'm sure she'll be delighted."

Only now did she realise that I was standing opposite her. "How come you're here?" she said, suddenly looking at me as if from above. I knew that now was the moment of truth. All thoughts of how I could tell her as gently as possible were suddenly invalid. In my own interest, I wanted to keep it as short as possible. So I started to look for Jacques' scarf. In his mother's eyes, my long silence had given shape to an idea. That's why I thought it was essential to say something to her.

"The whole company was given furlough two days ago and the day before eight soldiers had to return to the front lines before being relieved. Jacques was among them, me too. Someone jumped out of hiding, a grenade hit ..." – "... and Jacques was hit!" she added. It sounded like the end of a counting rhyme coming out of her mouth. Her face had darkened, her gaze pierced me and her eyes were trying to find a point in infinity. Although she became very serious, there were no wrinkles on her forehead and not even a tear in her eye. She must have come to terms with this news a long time ago and it seemed as if all that remained to be determined was the day when the truth would become tangible for her too. No proof of death was needed; nevertheless, she accepted his scarf. A mother senses when her child is no longer alive. The child is far too much a part of herself for that.

She turned round and went back into the house. I sat down on the ledge and waited for my face to brighten up a little. I did not want to face my mum like this after such a long time.

A few minutes passed. For the first time I realised how superfluous we were in this war. We dealt death, we suffered death. Rarely did those who ordered death become a victim themselves. If a general falls in battle, the fatherland weeps; if a thousand men die in a shellfire, that is the course of history. Tens of thousands return home as invalids and cripples, unable to do any work, unable even to live. If these soldiers have then caused even greater damage among their enemies, the general who commanded them receives a medal pinned to his chest and struts through the remnants of his men, puffed up like a peacock, proclaiming his great successes. To him, we were just numbers and figures, flags on a map, pawns on a chessboard that he could hide behind.

The decision to win or lose was always in our hands: If we did not shoot, the others would. If the others did not die, we would. Our chances of survival increased with the number of dead; on both sides. The general was only interested in the number of dead as long as there were always new soldiers. Once the people had been bled dry, there could be no more deaths. If this calculation no longer worked out, then the war was lost. But the people had already lost it before that.

I was deeply saddened by Jacques' death. Should I myself be happy to have escaped with my life so far? I caught a voice. It was Jacques' voice. I did not understand what it was trying to say. Daydreams mingled with memories from my time in the trenches. Suddenly there was a hand on my shoulder. I only felt a slight pressure but, as if lost in a nightmare, I thought I had been hit by a bullet and fell to the ground. A strong hand pulled me up again. I thought I felt a pain, thought

my arm would be cut off in the field hospital – until I saw a face: Jacques. I thought he was a ghost, saw him in a dream. Now the madness of the battlefield, the hour-long barrage of guns and grenade launchers had penetrated my brain and blown my skull into a thousand pieces. I closed my eyes: the image was gone, but the noise of the battlefield still raged through my ears. My name came up, I hastily opened my eyes again and looked into an astonished face: it was Jacques.

I just could not believe it: two days earlier I thought I had left him as a human pulp with other body parts, and now he was standing in front of me, laughing uproariously at my astonishment. My cries of joy did not go unheard and I had barely regained my composure when Jacques' mother came running out of the gate. She hugged him so fiercely that he threatened to suffocate and could only free himself with difficulty from the tentacle-like embrace. His mother began to cry unrestrainedly and uttered joyful insults. Jacques pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dried his mother's tears. Only now did I realise that Jacques was not wearing a uniform coat. I looked him up and down. He must have felt that I was looking at him like that.

"Jean-Michel, don't look at me like that. Rejoice with me that I'm still alive." When he realised that I could not free myself from the sight of him, that pensive lines had creased my happy face, he came up to me and grabbed my upper arms with outstretched arms: "I'm very sorry that you had to have this terrible experience during our patrol, that you had to believe that I had fallen. I didn't come through the shelling completely unscathed: It tore my clothes off and

burnt my whole left arm. Look!" He was about to roll up his left sleeve. But I held on to his left hand.

"I took advantage of the long-lasting cloud of smoke to flee in any direction, even towards the enemy if I had to. After two or three hours I came to a farmstead where the farmer's wife treated me with a home-brewed ointment. Devil's stuff, I tell you!" I left him to it again and a slight smile slowly appeared on my face. The mother pulled her son close again and I thought the opportunity had come to pay my mother a visit myself. As I turned round and marched towards my parents' house, two soldiers approached me at a straight pace.

"Are you the soldier Jacques Lebreil?" the sergeant snapped at me. "No!" I replied in a barracks tone and pointed at my friend. Without slowing his forward momentum, the sergeant pushed me aside. When he reached Jacques, he repeated his question. Without much ado, the other soldier grabbed Jacques by the collar and dragged him along. The sergeant shouted at Jacques: "You're under arrest! Come with me!" Without much resistance, Jacques allowed himself to be led away. His mother, visibly confused by the back and forth of death, return and arrest, looked after the group questioningly. I promised to accompany her to the barracks to find out what had happened. A short time later, she came out of the house dressed in a stole and we made our way to the barracks.

In the barracks commander's office, he greeted us as if he had been expecting us: "You are Madame Lebreil! Sit down!" He seemed to be a real warhorse, but because of his age he was probably no longer fit for battle. As he walked through the room, his limp could not be overlooked and the uneven sound of his

gait, probably caused by a wooden leg, could not be ignored. His whole demeanour was as gruff as if he were trying to explain the use of muskets to old washerwomen.

"We have arrested the soldier Jacques Lebreil. He has gone AWOL after he failed to return from a patrol and was apprehended in civilian clothes. In accordance with military regulations, he is therefore to be sentenced to death and executed by firing squad!"

Madame Lebreil slowly slid from her chair, close to fainting. The commandant made no move to help her: "Madame, Jacques Lebreil is not only your son, but also a son of France. If he refuses to serve the state, he will be punished by the state! Or would he be allowed to steal a jar of jam from you without a second thought?" What was probably intended to lighten the atmosphere was given a gruesome dimension by the commandant's malicious grin.

Madame Lebreil had regained her composure. She finally stood up and walked confidently towards the commander. She came to a halt half a metre in front of him. She addressed him with a sharp and firm look in his eyes: "Monseigneur Commandant, by a twist of fate, my son was almost the only one, with the exception of his friend, to survive a grenade attack. He suffered severe burns. It is nothing short of a miracle that he is still alive."

"If he has survived, it is also for the good of France, which he has to serve!" the commander countered without making a face.

"If he hadn't come back, you would have had to tell me that he had died fighting for his country, even if he hadn't been killed."

"Only dead is dead!" was heard from the commander.

"If he were really dead, he would have done justice to his service to France. For heaven's sake, let it be so! Don't let the happiness of his life become the reason for his death. A living man helps France more than a dead one."

This plea in favour of her son also left the commander unmoved and, as if from an official instruction, he followed: "Madame Lebreil, as a mother you must be prepared for your son to give his life for France. The fact that this event has not yet occurred does not authorise your son to answer the further question of whether France will let him live. If he is now executed on the basis of the regulations just mentioned, this is done in the name and for the good of the state and thus also for his good, and for you it is the same as if your son had died in that grenade attack."

"I will never allow him to be executed. I want to see him now and immediately!" And as if she had any power in the world to make an impression on the commander, she pressed him.

"That won't be possible at the moment!" replied the commander, when suddenly a volley of gunfire erupted in the barracks courtyard. Stunned with horror, without really knowing what it meant, the office fell into a stifling silence. The unbearable situation suddenly eased when the commander gave permission to visit: "You can see him now!"

Jacques' mother and I ran as fast as our feet could carry us to the barracks yard. A firing squad walked away in monotonous step. They left a lifeless body behind, which slowly sank to the ground against the wall, immersed in its own blood: Jacques Lebreil.

Ninth day at sea.

The 'Princess of Wales' now glided gently over the waves. They had finally left the rough Atlantic behind and had reached the first foothills of the Gulf Stream. With it came a light trade wind that carried a gentle hint of the Caribbean from the still distant islands. At last, some of the passengers dared to promenade on the upper deck again.

Among them were the brothers Dick and Chester Browne, who had stepped onto the swaying planks of a ship for the first time in their lives, even though they had spent their lives in Plymouth and had a sweeping view of the city's harbour from the window of the office.

The two brothers traded in tobacco products. Only Chester, the older and more enterprising of the two, actually traded. Their father had given them the business together, so that all Dick's work was limited to sharing the profits with his brother at certain intervals.

And this profit had not materialised for some time. Someone had the undisclosed, but all the more unwelcome, intention of taking control of the tobacco trade in southern England. This someone started rightly in the harbour towns, including Plymouth. The brothers were in a bad way: if their mission failed, their office would have been 'silvered' by the creditors on their return. They therefore decided to travel to Havana to make the vital contacts themselves.

The brothers stepped onto the upper deck without paying any attention to the new weather conditions. Their pale, almost white faces were not only due to the gruelling crossing of the Atlantic. They set foot on the upper deck with deliberate steps. "Ches, I've spoken to the captain," Dick Browne interrupted the shared silence, "tomorrow morning we'll pass Nassau and the day after tomorrow we'll be in Havana. If it stays that way, we can meet the plantation owner in the evening, to whom I cabled our arrival before we left."

"I hope your sudden ambition doesn't come too late!" Chester replied grumpily, without looking at his brother.

"I almost forgot: his daughter is on the ship!" Dick added more casually. "His daughter?" Chester turned to his brother. Dick nodded. "Apparently only in the company of a chaperone."

"That's good, that's even very good," Chester muttered to himself after a short pause, lost in thought, and put on a sardonic grin. "What are you up to again?" Dick begged him questioningly, "you know that ..."

"Leave it, I'll do it!" With these words, Chester disappeared.

Dick felt fear; not because of his brother.

There was something between Dick and the daughter. He had seen her for the first time at an auction in Plymouth. Later in the harbour, in the park and in church, and suddenly everywhere. It was always just glances, they never spoke a word to each other. Always that sparkle in her eyes and – always a chaperone nearby. Dick never plucked up the courage and – again she was right next to him.

Chester had not returned to the cabin all day or even in the evening. When it was twenty-two o'clock and Dick was about to go to bed, he changed his mind and went on deck to catch a fresh breeze. Contrary to his expectations, there was a light, sweetish air on the ship that had nothing to do with the sea, and the crash of the waves against the ship's side sounded like music to his ears. He strolled lightly along the railing and watched the moon as it tentatively peeked out from behind the clouds and cast its glow on the undulating sea. Almost unnoticed by him, a couple scurried onto the deck some distance away and disappeared behind a lifeboat. Dick changed his step and tiptoed towards the spot, keeping a polite distance. By the time he had reached the couple, the moonlight was fully shimmering over the waves. The young man raised his right arm slightly and placed it gently around the young woman's waist, pulling her towards him in a demanding embrace. Overwhelmed by the grace of this scene, Dick stumbled over a deckchair lying on the deck and made a noise that threatened to make their blood run cold. Startled, the couple turned round to face the culprit. Dick was struck with sheer horror: His brother and ... the daughter. Worlds collapsed for Dick. Not a word escaped his lips. Only one thing formed in his brain: go! Without paying attention to anything or expecting an explanation, he ran away, stormed into the cabin, locked it from the inside, rushed to the bed, but bumped his head on a cupboard door that had been left open – he had forgotten to switch on the light after all – and fell to the ground lengthways and remained lying there in a daze.

At some point, Dick came to his senses. He sat down on the floor and held his head, which hurt badly. Barely sitting upright, he almost toppled over again. The ship rocked uneasily back and forth and tilted dangerously to starboard. When the pain finally allowed him to think halfway clearly again, Dick heard a loud screeching from all sides, and doors were slammed in the corridor in front of the cabin. 'Chester wasn't in the cabin, how could he be,' Dick thought to himself.

He ran as best he could to the door, opened it and saw the other passengers pushing and shoving their way towards the upper deck in panic. Dick pulled an older man out of the stream by his sleeve. "We're sinking, save yourself if you can!" he shouted at Dick, pushed him away and jumped back into the stream of people. When Dick realised the danger and thought about what to take with him, he did not have time to answer, as the ship was no longer able to right itself and the first waves were already coming in through the porthole of the cabin.

Dick also left the cabin and fought his way to the upper deck. It was early morning and the sun had just risen. When he saw the captain with some sailors trying to clear a lifeboat, he rushed towards them: "What happened?"

"Don't worry about what has happened, but about what will happen if you don't leave the ship as soon as possible," the captain replied hastily. Dick was not satisfied with this information and persisted. "We had to change course. Then we probably hit a reef that tore open our entire starboard side. And now we're sinking. It's as simple as that!"

"When is help coming?"

"Help? Two hundred nautical miles from the nearest shipping route and the nearest island? How should I know? Jump! God with you!"

Dick did not know what to do. Chester was nowhere to be seen, and neither were they. So he jumped. At first, the water was just wet. The discomfort of being in the water was balanced by the feeling of finally being off the sinking ship. Without turning round, Dick swam away. The direction was completely indifferent, although he did not need to swim anywhere. But the uncertainty was stronger than the certainty. So he swam.

A muffled bang broke through the wailing of the shipwrecked men fighting for their lives in the distance: The steam boiler had exploded and torn the 'Princess of Wales' into a thousand pieces. Within a few moments, all that was left of the once proud ship was a heap of misery. The powerful explosion scattered the remains over a wide radius of the disaster.

Dick headed for a plank. As he came closer, it was barely more than a metre square and floated more below than above the surface of the water. She had to carry him. He clung tightly to her and caught his breath for the first time. When he looked round in the direction he thought he had come from, there was nothing but the vast sea. The current had driven the castaways far apart. Dick recalled the captain's words to himself and closed his eyes. There was nothing and nobody to be seen for miles around.

More and more, Dick felt his strength leaving him. Believing or even hoping for a rescue seemed to be beyond his imagination. The constant, quiet sound of the waves left him lethargic, which is why he didn't notice the faint calls at first. The approach of the un-

expected sounds awakened his consciousness. He looked round and saw a person swimming towards him in the distance.

Delighted to have a human soul near him, Dick tried to pull himself up by the plank. The plank gave way and he was unable to settle on the plank. It will just about be able to hold a second one, Dick secretly hoped.

Dick, for his part, now headed towards the other to relieve him of his troubles. When the two castaways came within thirty metres of each other, Dick was delighted to recognise the other: It was his brother. He waved to him, all hatred forgotten. Dick sped up his pace. He occasionally looked in Chester's direction so as not to lose sight of him.

He heard his name being called. Why should Chester call him? He'd better save his strength, Dick wanted to shout at him. But the shouts did not stop. Dick became restless. Would he be late again? For no reason, he looked around as if he sensed the presence of another person – and was startled: barely twenty metres behind him, another person was swimming for his life. He had no difficulty recognising who it was: her.

She flapped her arms intensely until her head went under water and she struggled to fight her way back to the surface each time. Dick lapsed into inactivity. While his body clung to the plank and let things take their course, his mind was working at full speed to solve this maths problem: Three people and two chances to live. 'One would be him, that's for sure,' he thought to himself at first. Who may the other one be? Dick had a feeling of being like God, master of life and death. But he was tormented by the

compulsion to decide. Should he let chance decide? Who would reach the plank first?

Dick looked over at his brother. He got on very well with him; Chester practically worked for him too. His life had to be preserved to protect them both from the machinations of this someone. If Chester died, he too would be doomed and would be left with nothing.

'Or maybe not?'

If he saved his daughter's life, the daughter he loved above all else, then perhaps the father would spare her office, perhaps there would be a wedding with her, a partner, a successor? But all without his brother!

They both came closer. Dick suddenly remembered last night, the secretive behaviour between Chester and her. He had wished his brother dead. And now it was so close.

But whatever he decided, he did not like the solution, he no longer wanted to be like God.

And Dick doved under.

It's almost a miracle that I can tell this story! The rescue from this danger is still incomprehensible to me.

At first I remember feeling the urge to run, to flee actually. The late morning hours had already been unbearably hot for some time and the air was pregnant with water. Every piece of clothing was as greedy as a sponge and soaked with sweat. At first I only noticed the small drops of water rolling out of my hairline and tried to wipe them away, but I soon gave up as it would have cost me the whole day: sometimes it ran into the front of my eyes, which then began to burn from the salty vapours in my sudor, then into my nose and finally into my mouth. At first it seemed 'aromatic', but then it disgusted me. Sometimes it ran backwards down my throat, could hardly be stopped by my collar, then tumbled down my back like a waterfall and ..., I do not really want to describe it any further.

As it condensed on my skin, for a brief moment at least, it made me believe that it was cooling. A small breeze, a brief movement of air gently stroked my skin.

And so I crouched down, squatting and leaning against a palm tree at the edge of the jungle, pondering the purpose of my presence here. Actually, it was not an unusual mission to capture a wild and free-roaming tiger. But it was not to be harmed or subjected to

violence during capture; even the use of a tranquilliser gun was not permitted. My client was a passionate animal lover and absolutely had to own a tiger; he could not seriously believe that my tiger could be caught with an invitation card or that I could simply take him by the hand or paw.

Under these conditions, the only suitable means were nets; they were easy to install without much physical effort, easy to camouflage and the tiger would be halfway 'packed' for shipment as soon as he had recovered from his capture. So I spread about twenty nets around my small tent site after I thought I had discovered its tracks. That made me feel a little safer, but I always had a rifle to hand in the camp. If it ever came down to me or him, I would have been the one who ...

So every morning I would start by walking all the nets, checking their camouflage and occasionally whether they were still doing their job. The humid and muggy air, the occasional but then heavy rain, attacked the ropes of the nets and caused mould to set in. The round was always adventurous and ultimately dangerous: my camouflage of the nets was so good that I was sometimes afraid of getting caught in them myself. I was not really afraid of starving or dying of thirst, because then I would probably have become the prey of others myself. That's why I regularly felt my way very carefully through the thicket of the jungle. Every unexpected crackle made my foot stick to the ground like stone, hoping to be able to tear it away if necessary before the net pulled me up. I then stared into the air to recognise one of my nets and

was relieved to find that it was something else that had startled me.

This usually passed part of the morning. The last nets were at the edge of the jungle to the beach: an almost snow-white beach with glowing hot sand, as if molten lava were flowing beneath it, untouched by any civilisation, and a welcome invitation for a short and refreshing swim. As regularly today too, I tore off my clothes, ran in and out of the sea, put my clothes back on and now crouched by that very palm tree.

In the meantime, the scorching hot sun had dried the sweat off my clothes; they almost felt like thin cardboard. The skin and hair on my body were also quickly dried by the embers, so that I felt a little refreshed. But soon this happiness was gone again and the first beads of sweat ran down my body. Short, cool spurts alternated with the discomfort of sweating. Without realising it at first, I felt an unexpected coolness on the back of my neck. My first glance disappeared into the tops of the palm trees to register a gust of wind from the sea, but it did not come from there.

Slowly, I put one hand to the back of my neck, thinking that streams of perspiration have to run down my back. But that was not the case either. With my hand on the back of my neck, the coolness suddenly stopped. A slight and rhythmic panting or wheezing, gasping or panting – I cannot and do not want to commit myself to this now – came from behind me. Why had not I heard it before? If it was an animal, then why no creaking, crackling or ... It did not matter in the end, because it did not sound

reassuring: it became louder, more hectic, more irregular and seemed to get closer and closer.

With my hand on the back of my neck, I tried to turn round carefully. However, as I did not change my position in any other way, I was in danger of losing my balance and almost toppled over, but then I used my other hand to support myself a little on the trunk of the palm tree. I sensed danger. If I was not already sweating enough from the heat, beads of fear were now shooting out of my pores. And finally the time had come: I could finally see in the direction from which everything seemed to be coming ... and nothing! Nothing but naked, green jungle.

Relieved and at the same time worried that I had finally suffered a sunstroke, I finally stood up when the strong snap of a branch lying on the ground, barely ten metres away from me, caused my heartbeat to start galloping. I strained to look in that direction and stretched my neck in all directions: the many colours and shapes of the jungle, the many leaves, plants and trees barely revealed the structure of anything until a brief flash of red shattered all my hopes of daydreaming: it had come, my tiger.

His red eyes lit up briefly as rays of sunlight filtered through the dense jungle and focussed in his eyes. I stood there, petrified, where I no longer wanted to be, where I should not have been ... and the camp was a good two hundred metres away. As you know, good advice is expensive in situations like this: walk back, crawl, run, crawl? - No matter what I did, he would always be faster. Up the palm tree? No, I was not a

monkey after all. Standing still seemed to be the best thing to do at the moment. If he did not move, I would not either.

But I did not have to worry about that for long, because he began to walk slowly towards me. It was frightening: he put one paw in front of the other as if he was walking on a narrow plank. His head was slightly lowered and formed a straight line with his spine. No imposing demeanour like a lion, but still aware of who was the stronger. But now the choice of my future behaviour had been made: Slowly, I took one step after the other backwards and tried to pick up the same pace as him. A short time later, I had taken over his pace and we were moving in the style of a 'pas de deux', eye to eye.

I tried to find my way back to the camp. It would have been hard enough to find the way forwards; the jungle looks different every day and is unrecognisable. The way to the camp backwards seemed almost hopeless. But what else could I do? As I took one step after another, a short crack under the soles of my shoes reminded me of a new danger: There must be at least two of my traps on the way back. If I fell into one, my fate would be sealed! While I was thus preoccupied with my new dangers, the actual danger faded more and more from my mind, but quickly came back to mind when I realised that the tiger was quickening his pace. He had now become so fast that it was hardly possible to walk backwards safely, even without falling. So I decided – as inconspicuously as possible – to turn halfway round my own axis and, now facing forwards, to sneak away in the direction of

the camp. I caught myself moving as if on silent soles, as if I did not want him to notice. But a quick glance backwards into the tiger's eyes, which had long since fixed on me, only brought me to the new realisation that he had shortened the distance to me again. Now I also quickened my pace in order to re-establish the old distance. The proximity to him not only made me feel his hot and probably hungry breath; I also thought I could hear the play of his muscles and the smoothness of his gait.

All of a sudden, a thought popped into my head that I had not even considered amidst all the fear, because I did not think it was possible: Was he not hungry at all, but did he just want to play with me – before or at all? Was he enjoying my fear? I could not imagine these human traits in an animal, but I could not really come to any other conclusion because he could have 'preyed' me a long time ago, perhaps ever since I had been hunting him. To find out – at least that would have meant a chance, to reach the camp in one piece – I kept running faster and faster, making hooks, waving my arms, jumping here and there. I just thought to myself that if he did not strike now, he wouldnot be hungry, and if that was the end of it, at least it would finally be over.

But nothing happened! I only heard that he was still behind me and was perhaps keeping a 'respectful' distance. The consequence of my 'tactics', however, was that the way back to the camp became longer and longer and led through areas I did not know; at least not from the direction I was now coming from.

My apprehension grew suddenly when I sensed the approaching danger just from the cracking of

branches getting closer and closer. I began to fear that he might be starting his final spurt. But when I saw my tent and the rifle leaning against it at a distance of around fifty metres, I was unexpectedly filled with courage, perhaps the courage of desperation. What's more, the path to my camp was no longer surrounded by trees, but formed a small clearing. So I summoned up all my courage, mobilised the last of my strength and set off running. I got closer and closer to the camp. Even if this hunt would now probably end in my favour and I would have to kill the tiger, which I would have been sorry about in the end, this nagging fear would finally be over.

In the belief that nothing could happen, as I needed trees nearby for my traps, I suddenly heard an unexpectedly loud crack through my footsteps, although I had not seen any branches on the ground, I could only feel myself going downhill and a great darkness enveloped me.

I woke up hours later. It had become dark. But it was not the darkness of night that surrounded me, but the darkness of a pit. I woke up in a damp quagmire, my face and the rest of my body filthy; a little groundwater had collected in the pit and made me look like a dirty pig. Slowly and painfully, I pulled myself up and looked around. My prison was about five metres square and – what was probably worse – more than three metres deep. Someone had actually gone to the trouble of digging a pit like this as a trap, presumably for hunting; presumably also for hunting tigers. As I looked around, I carefully felt my body: apart from a few bruises, I did not seem to have suffered anything

serious, but even these hurt like hell. Before I could think about what to do next I drank a small sip of the water, but spat it out again as undrinkable and at least washed the dirt off my body as best I could. After a while I almost looked human again.

Now the time had come for me to plan my 'exit' from the pit. I walked along the walls to find a suitable spot. Remains of roots were hanging down in some places. But these gave way mercilessly after a short pull, so that I almost fell backwards into the mud. Climbing up directly did not seem to have any success: Either the walls were so saturated with water that they were as slippery as slides and did not allow any grip, or they were dry as dust so that they crumbled to dust with every grip. As a further measure, I decided to try beating steps. A stone in the shape of a hand wedge was to help me with this. The first two steps that I knocked into the dry earth were very promising, so that I made an effort to knock out the others up to a height of one and a half metres; once I had reached that height, I would pull myself out of the rest of the pit. After a short time I had finished and finally started to leave my dungeon. The first steps went by themselves. When I reached the last steps, I slowed down again in the hope that I would be able to reach the surface with my arms and find a firm foothold there. But I had barely got my hand level with the pit opening when I felt a faint touch on my hand and before I could realise it, I screamed out in an insane amount of pain, lost my balance and fell backwards into the mire. There, lying on my back, I saw the reason for my sudden fall: the tiger had settled down directly above my planned exit

point and was probably just waiting for this moment. With a mighty swipe of his paw, he made me realise that he still wanted to see me in the pit. My hand was bleeding from several welts from the extended claws; I was out of action for the time being.

Over time – I had now bandaged my hand with a makeshift bandage - it had become dark and, above all, cool. My constantly soaked clothes no longer dried so easily and I began to freeze. The chill of the air gave away the tiger's hiding place by turning its breath into mist. It had also become much quieter in the jungle by now, so that I sometimes thought I could hear the tiger's heart beating; but it was more my own heartbeat that refused to calm down in the face of the almost hopeless situation.

All at once, the tiger's shadow rose in the moonlight and his footsteps disappeared into the thicket of the jungle. I thought I had won this unequal battle and got up again to find the place of my first ascent. But I had hardly got there when I heard a very strange noise a short distance outside the pit. I had no real idea how this sound was supposed to come about. It occurred continuously, was always steady and reminded me most of the grinding of a mill. The wildest thoughts and speculations spread through my mind. I surmised that the tiger had started to bite the bark off trees in order to eat them: After all, he had initially promised himself a better meal and I had sneaked off his 'menu' in this way. He seemed to have recognised his situation, but above all that he should not jump down into the pit himself, even though I would probably be the tastiest prey for miles around: it

would only be a short-term advantage. And at some point I would have to eat again and leave the pit.

And so hour after hour passed. There seemed to be no end to the grinding when it suddenly came to an abrupt end. As the moon had set again in the meantime and it had become almost pitch dark, I could not recognise any reason for the end. Instead, it was getting louder by the second, and huge amounts of branches seemed to be falling to the ground or dragging past others. Intuitively, I ran through the mud in the direction from which the noise seemed to be coming. I did the only right thing, which was confirmed the next morning: the tiger had, for what ever reason, bitten the bark of a tree until it lost its grip, toppled over and fell with its tip into the pit.

When I recognised this sign from the heavens and finally saw an opportunity to escape, I ran to the top of the tree that was now protruding into the pit to shimmy up and out of the pit. However, I very quickly abandoned this idea when I saw that the tiger was also aware of the new situation and thus also had an opportunity to climb down into the pit more or less safely. He had already placed his front paws on the tree trunk and was eyeing me with a greedy, frighteningly hungry look when I had the saving idea of turning the tree round and round on its new axis to the best of my ability. The idea didn't fail to work and the tiger, frightened by the unstable ground beneath its paws, refrained from further action and disappeared from my field of vision.

This was my chance: I did not want to wait for his

hunger to become greater than his fear again and crept back to the top of the tree. As light as a cat, I pulled myself up from branch to branch. I was almost at the top when suddenly, from somewhere – I would have sworn they were footsteps – clear noises could be heard. But it could only be the tiger; presumably it had seen me and was finally about to kill its long-awaited prey. I froze in horror when the noises appeared just a few metres behind me and suddenly stopped. This is what I imagined it must be like for someone standing blindfolded in front of a firing squad, the last drum roll having just stopped and the volley that would send the delinquent from life to death only a blink away. I closed my eyes.

"What are you doing?" I had reckoned with everything, but no longer with a human voice. It must have been the voice of an angel, albeit an angry one; fortunately, I thought, my death was quick and painless.

"Wait, I'll help you!" I did not look up, but only now realised that I was still clinging to the trunk. I was a little disappointed to realise that I could not have been in heaven yet. Two hands grabbed me under the arms and pulled me up with great force. Such an effort seemed to be necessary, as I struggled violently against my 'liberation', but ultimately lost.

"Have you seen Mephisto?" I did not understand and clearly showed this to my counterpart. "Our tiger? Mephisto is our royal tiger, the attraction par excellence because he is so trusting." I did not answer him, because the presence of another human being here and the harmlessness of the tiger that had been besieging me for hours seemed so unbelievable to me. But no sooner had the tiger's supposed name been uttered a second time than it emerged from the

nearby thicket and ran purposefully towards us. I wanted to run away again and this time jump into the pit voluntarily.

"You don't have to be afraid, he won't hurt you!" was supposed to have a calming effect on me. And as if the tiger had understood what he had said, he now came straight towards me, snuggled up to me like a Siamese cat and, without moving his head noticeably, pulled his eyes up, looked deep into mine and seemed to want to apologise for the fears he had caused me. My anxiety dissipated a little and I carefully wanted to put my hand on his head to show my reconciliation.

"I'd rather not," came out of my counterpart as if shot from a pistol. He held out the stump of his left forearm to me: "This is the memento of our first encounter." I suddenly pulled my hand back towards me and a short, sharp look from the tiger, a flick of his eyes, made it clear to me that I had done the right thing.

Without knowing the details of this duo, who had probably been missing each other for some time, without exhanging a single word with the person who had ultimately saved my life, the odd couple marched off and disappeared somewhere in the depths of the jungle.

Thomas Malorny

was born on 7 June 1964 in Munich.

He studied law because he had a passion for fighting injustice wherever he encountered it. He loved this profession not least because it included the possibility, indeed the necessity, of analysing facts, different statements and opinions and presenting them in a comprehensible verbal form.

Thomas wrote countless pages of notes, letters and briefs in his professional life. However, he still found time for narrative and poetic writings, from which he enjoyed reading aloud.

He dedicated and gave ten of his novellas to his mother for her sixtieth birthday in the form of this lovingly designed booklet, which is reproduced here in its original form.

In the middle of his life and filled with plans and dreams for the future, he died suddenly on the evening of 11 May 2010 in Wetter an der Ruhr.