

Baron Tale I

It once so happened that as I was virtually mounting to set out for Spain, a letter reached me in timely fashion, summoning me without delay to the baronial seat of a childhood friend. I was instantly diverted from all fancies of Iberia by pleasure at my friend's remembrance of me and concern for the anxious tone of his missive. Surmising that his longstanding infirmity precluded penmanship, I inferred that his clear but unspecified distress sprang from causes too private to impart to an intermediary scribe. His having used a masculine amanuensis led me to conclude that the disruption in his affairs was one from which he sought to shield his wife, or one which she herself had brought about.

Having reached this state of conjecture en route, I arrived at the hall of the Baron von Rothenburg one evening within a fortnight of his original dispatch. More than a score of years had passed since I had last visited his stately home and witnessed the beginnings of his physical decline. We had been then perhaps sixteen years of age, and whereas I was embarking on a martial career, he was engaged in battling a weakness of the frame that threatened his very ability to carry himself erect. Valiant though he was, his parents' hopes for the retrieval of his previous health had been obliged to ebb. In subsequent years, which saw the death of both parents and his accession to the title, I had been kept periodically apprised of his condition and was therefore prepared to encounter him now in a diminished state.

However, as anyone of charitable nature will appreciate, I had managed during my journey to indulge the hope that previous reports had been gloomily exaggerated and that I should find him rather more robust than otherwise. Here was a man, I reasoned, who had seen fit to marry six years ago, when the pace of his illness was already well known to him; he must have had, and expected to retain, a measure of physical fortitude. In short, I glibly prepared myself for a pleasant surprise.

Thus, I was staggered to see, upon my arrival, the dismal contraction of his figure and its capacities. The Baron was conveyed into the reception hall by means of a wheeled contraption on which he reposed, his wasted body buttressed by numerous pillows. If he noticed my dismay, he gave no indication, but greeted me cordially and ordered the servant to push him to the smoking-room, whither I accompanied them. My sidewise glances along the way detected the frozen curvatures of his shrunken lower limbs, the flaccidity of the carefully positioned arms, and the faint, incessant strokings of the pillow fabric by fingers desperately savoring the last capability for motion.

But his face was the face of my friend, alert and kindly as he directed me to take a seat and to demand what I would from the larder. The servant adjusted the fire and betook himself to fulfil my request.

I reclined in my chair, making a semblance of examining the room's appointments because of a certain unwillingness to fix my gaze on my companion.

The Baron von Rothenburg spoke gently, arresting my eyes. "Dear Karl, do not attempt to conceal your distress at what I am reduced to; I myself have been given pause by it on rare occasions." His wryness immediately closed our distance, and we smiled tenderly at one another, neither making a secret of his pain. I saw that not even his devastation had prevented my friend's face from realizing the manly beauty of his middle years. His rich hair framed a strong and worldly countenance from which the eyes, alternately probing and amused, penetrated whatever passed before them. The thin lips moved with economy when he spoke, and re-formed a fine ironic line while he absorbed the comments of his guest. With the merest flicker of an eyelid or pointed brow he could register acceptance of a subtle piece of rhetoric or indicate his readiness to advance a refutation. Pride of intellect suffused his face, unaccompanied by the distortion of hauteur.

I found myself in the most stimulating of discussions, ranging over a variety of subjects but so conducted by my host that dextrous interweavings of divergent notions brought each topic into play with all preceding ones. And play it was: we chased, ambushed, and tweaked each other and exhausted ourselves in hearty rounds of laughter. Only as we chuckled our way to a conclusion in the streaming rays of a late-rising moon did I realize that we had omitted to discuss the problem that had compelled my visit. Immediately I sensed that he himself had not forgotten but had consigned this evening to the task of reacquainting us with one another.

His incisive glance discerned the substance of my thoughts, and he bade me a good night, saying, "Sleep well, my friend. Let us not abuse tonight's good cheer with intimations of what must be divulged tomorrow." I nodded agreement as he summoned the servants, and we were separately escorted to our apartments.

I awoke to a glorious summer morning and breakfasted in an apse of my suite overlooking the garden. I remembered the landscape from bygone visits, when amidst its lawns, hedgerows, and ferny copses childish feats of soldiering had been heroically enacted. In the distance gleamed the Elbe river, to which my boyhood host and I had made a day's splendid expedition.

Emerging along a path from around a clump of foliage, a fine-figured lady came striding briskly toward the house. Since she was hatted and passing below, I could not see whether her face were as exquisite as her shape; and my attention, moreover, was diverted by the sudden appearance of two servants, man and maid, from around the same bend, who proceeded in her wake. These seemed to be not idle strollers but a diligent pair intent on staying within discretionary distance of the lady. I conceived the impression that she was in their charge.

Shortly after these three had disappeared within, I saw my host the Baron being wheeled in his reclining-chair onto a patch of lawn. His manservant took a seat beside him on a bench and held a series of printed pamphlets up before his eyes, turning their pages swiftly, presumably as his master dictated. I recognized this to be the Baron's means of maintaining his extraordinary worldliness despite a cloistered existence.

A servant arrived to inform me that the Baron welcomed my presence in the garden whenever I might be disposed to join him. I complied promptly and greeted him below, whereupon he dismissed his assistant and enjoined me to push him myself along one of the fieldstone paths, through a brace of thicket, and thence into a private glen on the outskirts of the garden. Here stood a stone bench dappled with shadow, on which I sat to face him.

After last night's intimacy and this morning's opportunity to view him from afar, I had lost altogether my estrangement from the Baron's physical substance, which had become, to me, an inevitability, a precondition of his being—neither more nor less arbitrary than the contours of his very face. His imprisonment seemed kinder to me now because more natural, and I fancied myself to have discovered therein the key to his own tolerance of it.

He watched me knowingly, and a sardonic smile flickered over his lips. When it had faded, he addressed me in deliberate and newly stilted speech.

"Perhaps you spied my lady wife concluding her matinade just prior to my own emergence," he began. I was astonished, realizing that my presence at the window had been marked by him, though he had never glanced overtly toward my quarters. "Yes," he answered my barest frown, "I pride myself on perspicacity, as my wife can ruefully attest." There was a certain solemnity with which he uttered "wife," albeit nothing of distaste. "I have asked you here to assist me in reaching an understanding with my Baroness regarding her future whereabouts. It seems," he added, for the first time avoiding my eyes, "that she would prefer to be elsewhere than with me."

I indicated my readiness to listen, and he proceeded with increasing ease. "Just under six years ago we married each other after a courtship consisting entirely of a proposal tendered to her father and accepted by him on her behalf. You will think this a barbaric, or at best medieval, process; but let me explain.

"If a man in my circumstances means to marry, he must generally seek his facsimile of a helpmeet within the lowest society, amongst whom some wretched maid can be induced to trade her difficulties for the sterile splendor of the match. Recognizing this, and conceiving of no ecstasy in such a union, I relegated the dream of matrimony to the strongbox wherein all my dreams had lain for many years. However, there came to my attention a certain case within this neighborhood of two educated sisters, reputedly identical beauties, who, along with their father, were headed toward utter destitution. Reports of their refinement, intelligence, and looming ruin spurred me to action; I tendered my proposal to marry whichever would consent to be my bride. Thus Adelaide became my Baroness, and I provided handsomely for her father and sister."

I pictured the graceful, energetic figure I had witnessed on the garden path and suddenly despised my friend's audacity. Had he allowed his acceptance of infirmity to blind him to its consequences?

"You wonder at me," he immediately asserted. "You embrace your equanimity towards my lot but think me grown unnaturally insouciant, vilely lax in feeling my

constraints, and finally unfettered by the paramount and proper one, that of self-discipline.

"Yea, but though the years inexorably turned me flaccid, I did not relax. Endurance of my plight required not bland acceptance, such as yours, but some reaffirmation of my place in the natural world, a world progressively barred to my intervention. I observed it, yes, I observed it keenly. Rolling along this very path I perceived how the tree in the foreground sweeps across the one behind: the inanimate danced before my watchful eye. Yet I never embraced my heightened awareness of such things as equal recompense for a blighted frame. Were immobility the fair price of discernment, scholars of nature would be commonly afflicted as I.

"I never became contented merely to absorb the world; I still yearned to act within it, and such was my predicament that every action became abomination. I flouted nature to marry: an act so well assisted by the world that I could complete it by speaking two words—nor could aeons of inaction within our union dissolve the iron bonds I had forged around my Baroness.

"I violated her further: I sought to engage her in every intimacy approaching that of which I was incapable...." He paused. "I sought to instill in her my pleasures, to share my manifold impressions and loose a similar flow from her. And close we approached, and nearly united... but, ultimately, she has found before her a rotting carcass spewing insubstantialities.

"I had feared this scenario beforehand and chosen deliberately a wife of such renowned intelligence, not only for the sake of my stimulation but for the sake of hers with me. Her possessing a twin sister ensured, as I supposed, her realizing a virtually maternal joy in the offspring of that sister—such joy as neither of the dowerless maids might be enabled to grasp without my means at their disposal. Of two spinsters would come two brides: one my precious helpmeet, the other the bearer of children as like to their aunt as to their mother—a cherished brood on whom their uncle would settle a great estate, perhaps inspiring the parents to raise the future owners here in the family seat.

"I did not discern that I concocted tragedy."

The Baron now closed his eyes and recited in monotone. "Two years after I married Adelaide, her sister, Clara, married one Colonel von Hauptmann, in whom I found increasingly a friend, as well as brother. (Therein, it seems, did my perspicacity abandon me.) Two years thereafter, Adelaide quarrelled with her sister, evidently about the Colonel, and in the conflict Clara accidentally died. A fortnight ago, sensing things amiss, I positioned myself to hear a private conference between Adelaide and the Colonel, and heard my wife petition our brother-in-law to steal her away to adultery—and the Colonel respond that he would so do on condition that she return here if she failed to meet his sensual expectations. I moved swiftly to detain her here, and now must contemplate her fate."

With a subtle, imperious wince he indicated that the sunlight was full upon his face. I wheeled the chair back a pace into the leafy shadows and sat down again on the bench before him.

"It is rumored that I am a harsh master," he wearily resumed, "and even my wife has appeared to live in dread of my anger, though she has never borne its brunt. I believe this view of me to be a misinterpretation of the manner I perform adopted as enfeebled lord of Rothenburgschloss. Should a man in my position become as lax of authority as he is of limb, his household will decline into a hotbed of thievery, deceit, and even wantonness. Many persons are in my charge; if I neglect to powerfully enforce propriety on its offenders, all will perceive themselves to be living in a masterless house and will take the utmost advantage of me, my lady, and one another. There is no room here for the sort of humorous absolution that a robust lord may extend his errant vassal; I must be reckoned intolerant of all transgression. My wife has chanced to see the plowhand being whipped for brawling, the stable-boy for neglect of the horses, and considers me a very tyrant. Yet the cook, the steward, the field manager all will tell you that they flourish under my even-handed justice. My wife, too, did she but know it, has transcended an ordinary lot. She knows nothing of those endless accommodations other women make in marriage: the effacings of the intellect, the constant placatings of the master and indulgence of his whims. With me she enjoys unusual stature and forgets, in all her sarcastic vehemence, how grandly she is accustomed to indulge her brilliant tongue. I have valued her truly, encouraged her mental expansion even if it redounded to my detriment, as when she worked her rhetoric to persuade herself and me that our marriage was blatant sin. Was this another misdeed of mine: engaging in such dialogue? Did I fortify, even with counter-arguments, her determination to violate our marriage? As we grappled each other intellectually, she was gaining strength—to act, decisively.

"Now she has acted, and forces from me some response. Do I retain her here, the angry ghost of attempted cuckoldry; do I thrust her upon a man who will take her only on condition that he be allowed to abandon her at will; do I place her into a sheltered situation such as those arranged for destitute gentlewomen? I, who have never been able even to capture her chin and turn her face-to-face with me in our evenings of desperate silence—how can I act upon her now? She has been wife to me as fully as ever a woman could; I have been husband to her less than any other man would have been. Where is my right? She has injured my honor; must I act with my vaunted harshness against her truancy—and, if so, does that entail repossessing her, or casting her off?

"Karl, there are times when I can discern in her a true, if snarling, sort of love for me. I do not believe she has courted infamy lightly but is impelled toward it by something as yet inexplicable to me. She is not so shallow as to worship male bravado where the character is contemptible.

"I wish her present, yet I am exhausted with abusing her and nature itself. Therefore, I ask you to do for me as you have done in bringing me to this glen: push me whither I must go."

...

My afflicted friend and I dined that evening in the glorious room that I remembered from childhood. Here we had sat, dwarfed by our high-backed chairs, in company of various elders, all powdered and elegant in the luster of the great gilded chandelier. The ancestral portraits had gazed with detached indulgence on the decorous cheer of the assemblage, and even on the suppressed mirth of two small boys whose shoulders barely rose to table-height. Whenever one miscreant perceived the other in combat with the piece of veal above him, or attempting the transfer of water-goblet to lips without a spill, his sneezes of laughter would induce his own hand to tremble, his knife to rattle upon the plate, and glances of disapproval to light upon his sorry head. His foe, gleeful at this development, would then experience a similar mishap, his gloating abruptly stifled as the fleeting censorious glances fell his way. After eating the required pittance from off their loaded plates, the two would be dismissed from the table and set at liberty in the garden, where under the lantern-light they capered and caricatured each other's foibles.

This evening, however, we dined alone, save for the steward who sat at the head of the table beside his master and fed him, bite by bite, what little he cared to take. Our vivacity of the previous night had given way to a more contemplative mood, and we shared a comfortable silence broken by casual exchanges on the subject of several common acquaintances. Thereafter, we withdrew separately, I having decided to take a turn in the garden before repairing to my rooms.

When a contemporary lies in straits too dire for comprehension, particularly then does the evening breeze, imbued with the scent of lilacs, waft one a shameful ecstasy in being. A deep, remembered garden beckons to feet that can wander it at will; fronds rise and sink in graceful waves; poplars loom against the stars. Joy abounds—till the raspy sigh of the ailing friend escapes through a distant window and the starry vault begins to suggest indifference and emptiness. Feet hasten back, guilty and abject in their swiftness. One nods to the steward, inquires after the master, and betakes oneself to the comforts of tome and brandy at the bedside.

...

The following morning I was conveyed to the residence of Colonel von Hauptmann, the baron's treacherous brother-in-law, who had been apprised beforehand of my intended visit. The widower, a stalwart man of five-and-thirty, greeted me with quiet cordiality and led me to a small, dark-panelled room in which were hung the implements of his calling. I accepted some small refreshment, in which he joined me, and we settled ourselves in leather armchairs before an empty hearth.

This man was possessed of military bearing without the swagger typical of his station. His speech to a servant was low and dignified; to me, direct and undissembling. On his countenance lay evidence of trials past and present; the brows converged in a sober furrow over dark eyes further deepened by care. A

crease running down each weathered cheek lent dolorous nobility to the visage. This was a man I scarce believed cruelly whimsical in his behavior toward the fairer sex.

I addressed him with utmost courtesy. "I have come, my dear Colonel, on extremely delicate business, in which you are perhaps empowered to tender me assistance."

"Indeed," he offered with alacrity, "it is my greatest desire to do so. I realize, of course," he added gravely, "that this concerns the Baroness von Rothenburg, and I beg you to tell me if you have found her well."

I responded somewhat coolly that the lady was, to my knowledge, in excellent health, but that there were rather more pressing considerations in her case. "The Baron your brother-in-law," I went on, "is, as you know, a man of great discernment, but in certain circumstances even the subtlest of men will misunderstand a turn of events. It would greatly benefit me to learn from you the nature of your relations with your sister-in-law."

"Yes..." He stroked his chin absently, seeming to gather his thoughts. "Well," he uttered on a gusty exhalation, and with perhaps a tinge of wryness, "it is not a question to be answered in a few words. You will indulge a piece of history?" I signalled my willingness to listen.

"Just over six years ago," he began, "my regiment, en route to Wurtemberg, was quartered for some weeks in Bavaria, not far from here. Early in our sojourn, I recollected that I had distant cousins in this neighborhood and went straightaway to pay them my respects, as should any man of character. I was directed to this very spot, although what you see today is not what I found then; most of this house was built thereafter by the munificence of the Baron.

"I arrived beneath the eaves of a small cottage nestled amidst a profusion of blooms, the habitation of people whose contracted means had clearly not precluded cheerful domesticity. From within came the most entrancing music; also the industrious sound of a spinning wheel. I knocked, and was answered by the spinner; for the music continued to rise and fall within.

"The maiden who greeted me was thoroughly captivating, if not a classic beauty. Great dark eyes were her finest feature; the nose was perhaps a bit excessively aquiline for the modern taste, though the bow-shaped mouth beneath provided a most inviting distraction, particularly when the lips lay gracefully at rest. Her brow, if not especially broad, was high, and the waves of chestnut hair, gilded wherever the sunlight fell, framed the whole attractively. I felt immediately rewarded for my diligence in performing family courtesies," the Colonel smiled in gentle self-mockery.

"When I had presented myself to her," he went on, "she responded warmly, giving her name as Adelaide and entreating me in to meet her father and her sister Clara. In the parlor their father sat at a desk, working figures; he rose and echoed Adelaide's welcome. By now the musician had ceased playing at her pianoforte and was looking up in expectation of an introduction. I was astonished to see a countenance identical to that which had greeted me at the door—the same face,

lips slightly parted over the even teeth and traces of wistfulness left from her immersion in the music.

"I spent my afternoon in this delightful company and was prevailed upon to sup with them as well. At parting they pressed me earnestly to honor them with further visits, as military duties should allow, and I was not slow to promise my compliance. Over the weeks that followed it became my practice to ride out in the afternoon, when all the business of the regiment was completed, and spend the choicest portion of the day with my lovely cousins, who shared with me the beauties of their garden and its larger environs so that I grew nearly as attached to the place as to its inhabitants. It grieved me to discern the pecuniary constraints with which this family struggled, despite its air of joyous hospitality. The father, an educated widower, had suffered setbacks leading to the ruin of his business five years since, and now put his clerical talents out for hire to merchants in the region. He did their books at home to maintain the safety and reputation of his daughters, thus forfeiting the income and stability he might have attained to in a steadier position. The girls rewarded his efforts with their own: they gardened assiduously to achieve both beauty and some minor bounty in the household; Adelaide spun to gain an extra bit of income; and Clara played to lighten the tasks of the other two. Despite all this industry, I perceived, they were often forced to do without. I was then in no position to help them, having spent my own limited inheritance on my education and equipage for the service, but I knew myself to be in view of a promotion and determined to share my resources with my cousins when it was in my power to do so.

"As the idyll progressed, I began to achieve opportunities for befriending each maid individually; the one would prepare our supper while the other strolled with me; then they would shift duties during the washing-up. Although their resemblance was so thorough, I was enabled to distinguish them by small adornments. While they shared the same wardrobe—both thereby enjoying a somewhat larger selection than either thrifty maiden would have indulged alone—each wore consistently a specific brooch bequeathed her by her mother. Their father himself confided to me that he used these tokens to distinguish his daughters when neither was engaged in her characteristic pursuit of spinning or playing.

"I discovered in each girl a wealth of good sense and a surprising degree of learning. The father's educated presence in the home had not been squandered; either daughter was capable of helping him at his books, of engaging him in discussion, of setting forth her own opinion in persuasive words. I was charmed—nay, there is too much of condescension in that word; I was excited by my cousins' mental powers, and by degrees I became aware that they had permanently altered the expectations I had of womankind in general, and of my future wife in particular. Here a difficulty presented itself: if I had found an ideal wife, I had found her doubled and could hardly choose her without simultaneously rejecting her. I strove to discern whether either girl betrayed a pleasure in my company beyond that of the other. And while I received no distinguishing signal, I could

not dissuade myself of a growing, if immodest, impression that I was, in fact, most wonderfully loved by both these maidens. I examined my heart and found that my choice reduced to their avocations of music or spinning, a choice so painfully simple that it would be dishonorable to make. How could I injure the best of women because she had forced herself to the labor of spinning a living for her family? Entangled in wracking indecision, I could make no declaration to either maid before my regiment pulled up and headed for the south.

"The two years that followed saw my ascension to the rank of colonel for actions in combat that pale before the sacrifices made by others who did not return. My spirit, never a sanguinary one before, had surrendered any zest for righteous battle under the onslaught of my cousins' arguments; their attitudes had, I may say, conquered my own. I pursued the warrior's trade only for practical reasons, seeking advancement and its monetary emblems. Do not mistake me: I fought well and served my unit honorably, but my heart lay with the future deployment of my rewards. Yet although I entered battle with my beloved's face before my eyes, there was no single name upon my lips—I was somehow expecting destiny to choose it for me.

"After two years' service I sustained an injury to the right arm that ended my career as cavalry officer but provided me a pension with which to pursue my uncertain dream. I returned to this place in a sort of terror, stopping in the village to inquire after my cousins' affairs before attempting to re-enter them. Thus did I learn of the tremendous changes in their fortunes: Adelaide had espoused the invalid Baron von Rothenburg, and her sister was richly dowered and courted by many suitors, none of whom she seemed disposed to accept.

"I knew sorrow and rapture at these tidings, grasping immediately that Adelaide had sacrificed herself for her family and that Clara awaited my return. What shameful satisfaction to discover that the sweet musician had become mine after all! I banished this guilty reflection by wondering what had occasioned these changes. Why had a man of principle and fatherly devotion consigned his daughter to wive decrepitude? —Either because she heartily willed it or because of sorest need. Conjuring the former option to be the real, I hastened along the well-remembered path to the cottage.

"What I found instead was the house wherein we sit today; parts of the garden had been conscripted and a large new wing erected on them. This very room we now occupy had been originally the father's study, of which he had no further need, not merely because he was no longer obliged to keep the merchants' books but because his health had rapidly failed and left him bedridden shortly after my departure. This was the clue to Adelaide's action, and it smote me painfully.

"All of these things I learned from Clara herself, whom I surprised in the parlor alone at her pianoforte. Her expression and contented sighs assured me that I should attain my heart's desire, and I went to her father's bedside to ask for her hand. He pulled me down into his embrace, exclaiming, 'My son! I knew you were a man of honor, but now indeed am I at peace.'

Startled, I knelt and asked him, 'Father, indeed I am a man of honor, but you seem to have been needful of assurance. On what basis, pray?'

"'Oh,' cried he, 'I did not truly doubt, I merely suffered idle fancies of what it would mean to Clara if you did not return to redeem her vow of constancy; after all, you had never confirmed your troth with *me*. But it is meaningless; I was merely a doting, ailing father dreading the worst—you must forgive me!'

"I embraced him warmly but kept my face averted as I took my leave. Hearing Clara playing, I stole out to the garden to ponder the implications of her father's words. My lovely mistress of dulcet tones had connived to reserve herself for me, throwing her sister to the titled wolf. I had won the wrong maiden after all. On the verge of despair, I summoned the tool I had used in battle to fire my courage: I pictured the bright, beloved face and the hours of exquisite conversation we would share, and I challenged myself whether it were not sinful to so deplore an act taken for love of me as to reject its fair perpetrator. Was this not perhaps the sign I had once sought, the sign of a love for me transcending any other? Repulsing her now would not reclaim her sister's liberty.... With such devices did I rebuild my happy future. I did not confront Clara with my disappointment nor my consequent indecision but behaved as though I had simply received her father's blessing, to our mutual delight.

"We were married, and only her father's death marred our joy during those two years together. —No, that is manifestly false; our frequent contact with Adelaide and her husband was a source of heartache to us both. We grew greatly to esteem the Baron for his stellar intellect and courage, but we clearly saw that Adelaide could not accept her wifehood. She never assisted him at table; he could still grasp a fork then but needed his hand lifted to his mouth; this she caused a servant to perform. Her wits sharpened to causticity. She evidently profited from his instruction, confiding to Clara various concepts to which he was awakening her, but she confided as well an endless store of gall and wormwood. She entreated Clara to bear a child, to give her a source of happiness.

"We wished to comply and remained confident, despite Adelaide's mounting consternation, that eventually such a blessing would be ours. For it seemed, in truth, an edenic period for us. My misgivings about my bride were laid to rest by my sheer pleasure in her. The Baron's generous wedding present was invested to good effect, and we prospered. I regret that we never travelled, but Clara felt we could not abandon Adelaide until she had become more reconciled to her existence, and unbeknownst to my wife, I understood that she had a sin to expiate however possible.

"That which ended our idyll and made a widower of me took place two years ago after a sumptuous baronial ball to mark the second anniversary of our nuptials. Adelaide had arranged the affair, having gone so far as to intrigue the guests by having identical black satin gowns made for her sister and herself. The Baron and I could interpret the wedding bands on our ladies' fingers, but the company took delight in mistaking the hostess for the guest of honor, and vice versa. It was a tedious business, made all the more unseemly, as I felt, when I was prevailed upon

to dance in turns with the black-gowned ladies, the Baron being, of course, incapable. Which of the two husbands suffered more humiliation I can't say.

"I was therefore most relieved to see the guests and musicians depart and to partake of a cordial with my brother-in-law at evening's end. The ladies had gone, as was their custom, to Adelaide's bedroom, directly above the smoking-room in which the Baron and I conversed. We had finished many a quieter evening in this fashion, and had developed the understanding among us that when the Baron grew fatigued I would tap with my walking stick on the ceiling to summon both ladies for a general farewell before we rang for the servants to assist us. I mention this only to illustrate both the distance and the proximity from which I heard what transpired between the sisters that fatal night.

"As we sipped our drinks and ironized over the events of the evening, the Baron and I began to hear an unaccustomed pitch of conversation above. Whereas previously only an occasional trill of laughter might have met our ears, we now heard a sustained intermingling of voices apparently raised in disputation. It was impossible to ascertain the content until, as the voices escalated, we heard a bitter cry, 'Why should he *not* be mine?,' followed by raging incoherencies and then a hideous, shrieking taunt, three syllables clear as day but never to be deciphered: 'Baroness!' —or 'barrenness!'

"—A violent crash, and all was silent.

"I fled from my ashen host and raced upstairs to the scene that rent my life. On the floor before the raised hearth lay one of the sisters, her head at a horrible angle. Beside the still figure, wringing her hands and keening, knelt the other, who turned on me a face so frenzied with fear and yearning I cannot erase it from my dreams. My eyes rushed to her finger: it was my Clara kneeling and weeping beside her sister. The back of Adelaide's head was bleeding; her neck was broken. A poker lay a few yards beyond, unstained by blood.

"I seized Clara in my arms. Heart pounding, I had a sudden vivid recollection of Adelaide's face, contorted with disgust, whispering about the Baron one night under cover of diningroom clatter, 'He tolerates nothing! The most minor infraction receives a beating. He is implacable!' I clutched my wife, tempted to flee with her from the iron hand of the Baron, who would surely wreak vengeance on her, justly or not, for the death of his wife. Still I wavered, seeking a surer path to safety.

"Trembling, she raised her palms to my cheeks and pulled my gaze into hers. 'Surely he is dying. How can it be otherwise? It cannot be long!' she whispered fiercely. Simultaneously we grabbed, she for her ring and I for Adelaide's. We effected the exchange just before the Baron's attendants hurried him into the room.

"I stood inert, trying to fathom my role as newmade widower. The Baron took in the scene, his eyes darting immediately to each woman's hand. He looked at me.

"'She is dead,' I rasped, stumbling to a chair and burying my face in my hands; I was not dissembling in my grief.

"The Baron dismissed his servants and bade his wife, as he thought her to be, approach and recount what had taken place. She addressed him and me together, begging us to understand that she had made no assault on her sister; that, in fact, her sister had been rushing toward her with upraised poker when she slid on the carpet-tassels, fell backwards, and struck her head on the hearth. Traces of blood on the hearth confirmed such a fall.

"The Baron, from his wheelchair, took command. 'I believe you, my dear, and now you shall give me a moment to speak with the Colonel.' Casting me a tormented glance, Clara followed his bidding. When she had gone, the Baron allowed his face to crumple into an agony that he could not raise his hands to conceal from me. I turned away, out of respect, and lurched over to cover the face of the beloved dead with my handkerchief. Kneeling there, I felt that I was covering the face of my wife who might have been and shutting away from my sight that of her who still was.

"From the midst of his tears the Baron beseeched me chokingly, 'Colonel, forgive us. This is a tragedy from which none of us can ever recover. Do you believe her story, as I do?'

"'I believe her,' I groaned. And from that moment a strange dread seized hold of me and has been a canker upon me ever since."

The handsome, careworn features tightened momentarily as the Colonel saw me nod. "Yes," he sighed, "you are too subtle not to have seen it as well. There was enough time during my flight upstairs for her to have switched the rings before I got there. Perhaps the woman now posing as Adelaide is indeed Adelaide, and I am indeed a widower. Admittedly, in the first few months after her sister's death she seemed gentler than the Adelaide I had known of late, but this was as consistent with her being in mourning as with her being Clara. In the throes of my doubt, I ceased to visit them for a while: it was torment to be in the presence of my incarcerated wife—or her pretender—beneath the ever-observant eye of the Baron. When I resumed a sort of stilted intercourse with them, I found the Baroness become her former self: caustic toward him, mutely reproachful toward me. Is this my wife, transfigured to the same degree as her sister by the selfsame condition of false marriage—or my sister-in-law despairing of retaining my belief in her? Is it my musical Clara serving out the term she connived to evade six years ago—or my spinning Adelaide, bilked of her chance at happiness then, though she never knew the connivance used against her? Whoever she is, she has fought with her sister for my love, and her sister lies dead. Either woman she is is dear to me, and either is terribly distorted in my sight.

"You will ask," he continued, precluding my interruption, "why I do not merely have her sit down and play to me on the pianoforte. You would have been right once, but no longer. After becoming Baroness and setting her spinning wheel aside forever, Adelaide made herself as complete a mistress of the pianoforte as Clara was, under the tutelage of her sister. Her progress was perhaps less amazing than it sounds; she had, after all, received in childhood the same instruction as Clara and achieved a proficiency on which to base her later study. Hearing her

rapid development, I have wondered—somewhat mistrustfully, I must own—how it came about that Clara was chosen for the instrument and Adelaide for the wheel when their father's fortunes ebbed. But however that was, the distinction between the two accomplished sisters no longer obtained by the time our tragedy befell us."

He placed his palms flat on the arms of his chair and leaned forward slightly as he spoke with a carefully bridled intensity. "Herr Baron, I know of only one way to distinguish my wife from her sister, and I would be risking adultery to so do. I must explain that this is not a mere matter of intact virtue, which a midwife can sometimes affirm. My wife did not bleed in the bridal bed; many a virtuous maid does not. Nor would her untouched identical sister be likely to betray such sign of virginity. But there was between us some impediment that was painful to her, if not altogether prohibitive of consummation, for the first year of our marriage. This was a trouble I had never heard discussed, and because she was stoical and persevering—and I willing to subdue my ardor for protracted intervals—we sought neither explanation nor remedy for it. In fact, the remedy spontaneously, though gradually, arrived. As if learning together a musical score, we slowly achieved the pattern of pause and stress that allowed symphonic completion. I describe our union thus not for reasons of delicacy—which can hardly be over-indulged under the circumstances—but because I find no better language for what occurred unspoken between us. I can only tell you that her body became able to accept mine with joy instead of pain. Were my wife to return to me after the two years that have elapsed, I believe we should rediscover, if not immediately, at least within a matter of days, our secret key. Were her sister, under false pretenses, to enter my bed, I cannot imagine our achieving such a prompt accommodation.

"A fortnight ago the Baroness entreated me, in what she thought was a moment of privacy, 'Take me away; I cannot remain—it is dishonorable for me!' I did not entirely repulse her but agreed to devise a plan for fleeing with her, to the ruin of my name, on condition that she allow me to return her if she did not meet my expectations in the bedchamber. You see, my lord, I can incur dishonor calmly enough if I know myself innocent; but I do not relish committing adultery in my own eyes as well as the world's. However," he added with disarming candor, "I may have threatened her thus merely to shield my conscience, while still abetting her plan. I do not know whether honor would conquer love were I to find myself deceived in her. As it happened, the Baron heard our brief exchange, evicted me from his house, and remained steadfastly silent until yesternight, when he sent to inform me of your impending visit. My greatest fear is that he is punishing her, and I pray that you can assure me otherwise."

I now hastened to set his mind at rest and informed him furthermore that I believed the Baron's reputed vengefulness to be a gross misrepresentation of his true character. The Colonel regarded me pensively some moments before observing, "Then perhaps our fear of him that night was also ill-founded and Clara has needlessly sacrificed herself these two years. Or else Adelaide has blindly perpetuated her marriage, when she could have seized the very opportunity

she now demands to escape it. I might have learned two years ago whether I were widower or not...."

Leaving the unfortunate Colonel to his meditations, I returned to the Baronial manse and lingered over refreshment in the privacy of my suite. Solitude was essential in preparing for my meeting with the Baroness. I girded myself to discover, through detachment and strategy, which sister inhabited the Baron's home, and which the grave. Presently I sent word to the sequestered lady that I waited at her disposal and promptly received a summons to her apartments.

In a room that commanded a sweeping view of the garden and river beyond sat a richly garbed lady of classical aspect, who rose swiftly to greet me. "Herr Baron," she said, sweet-toned but wary, "the Baron von Rothenburg has spoken of you so warmly in other times that I have often wished for the honor of such a visit."

"Baroness," I murmured over her hand, "I am likewise gratified to be your guest, however regrettable the circumstances."

This seemed to disarm her. "I was told that you are direct in your speech with either sex," she said, gesturing me to a seat, "and I see for myself the truth of this. My father raised me to value open discourse; now it comes to pass that my entire future may depend on it. Do I correctly perceive you to be the Baron's agent in determining my fate?"

With a faint inclination of the head, I amended, "I perceive myself the instrument by which three people may come to recognize each other's claims."

"Recognition—yes, indeed," she responded. "May I then introduce myself to you, for I am not she whom you addressed. I am Clara von Hauptmann, twin sister to the Baroness von Rothenburg, who died in this house two years ago."

As I pondered whether she expected this information to astound me, she elaborated quickly, "I am aware that you have spoken this morning with my husband the Colonel. I am also aware, though I inferred it only a fortnight ago from a reply he made to me, that he himself has come to question my identity. I presume he has been forthright with you—he is not a man to be otherwise—therefore you know the circumstances of my sister's death and my exchange of identity with her. Please signal me if what I say confounds you... Very well." Her animation suddenly increased. "I am aghast at my husband's loss of trust in me, and I maintain my absolute right to end the deception we entered into two years ago during a moment of shock and dreadful misjudgment. I admit to womanly weakness: instead of enduring the arrangement until the Baron's passing, I hereby expose myself and my husband to whatever punishment he may mete out. For that I would beg my husband's forgiveness were I at liberty to see him. But he must be brought to understand that I am obliged to return to him—permanently, not conditionally—to protect our marriage, his honor, and my own. Punishment at our brother-in-law's hands is preferable to what may otherwise ensue."

"You do not, then, fear the Baron's wrath?"

"I feared it up to a fortnight ago; therefore, I did not simply run to my husband but, rather, begged him to devise a plan of flight that could outstrip pursuit. When

the Baron overheard us, I fully expected to feel his wrath and considered myself lost—but aside from his installing a close watch on me, I have experienced no sign of outrage. Your arrival here further reassures me that he is disposed to negotiate, rather than punish, my resumption of my proper role in life."

"At the risk of playing too heavily upon your feelings," I replied, "let us suppose that your resumption of that role may rest to a real extent on your convincing me that you are Clara and not Adelaide."

Her large, unreadable eyes moved searchingly over my face.

"Let us further suppose," I added, "that my conviction will spring not from your assertions of identity but from your very ease with me, from your ability to speak unguardedly of both Clara's life and Adelaide's. I reason thusly: as Clara, you will understand both Clara's existence and Adelaide's, which you have assumed of late; as Adelaide, you will understand Adelaide's life intimately but less so Clara's, and may attempt to disguise your deficit by disproportionately representing Clara's as your own." She nodded silently.

I continued, "Let me beg an indulgence of you before we proceed. In the service of clarity, I would ask that you render your account disinterestedly, that you speak of 'Clara' and 'Adelaide' as if neither—or either—were in fact yourself. This, I believe, will assist me to examine your speech impartially and penetrate to the truth."

She acceded with alacrity to my request, discarding her former declamatory tone for a quietly knowledgeable one. During her subsequent narrative she unflinchingly adhered to my injunction, except to describe the conjoined sentiments of the sisters; in such cases she spoke of 'we' rather than 'they.' I posed my questions, and she responded like the most faithful of eyewitnesses.

"Tell me, firstly," I said, "how it came about that Clara retained the pianoforte while Adelaide adopted the spinning wheel during their years of penury."

She looked perplexed but answered me gravely and thoroughly. "Our family's difficulties coincided with the period when we, from children, were becoming maidens, a time when the innocent, prankish delight in resembling each other underwent a pronounced change. The ability to confound even our parents' eyes began to exasperate us; interchangeability seemed an insult to each mind's burgeoning maturity. Just at this time our mother died, deepening our pensiveness and our craving for personal identity. Our mother, in fact, bequeathed us our object: by leaving us each a unique piece of jewelry, she enabled us to don womanhood and personhood at the same time.

"We longed to express our separateness through activity as well. When we discerned our father's impending ruin, we resolved to divert our energies from the common pursuit of music toward two different and remunerative employments, but our father strenuously objected to a home devoid of music. What he proposed, that we trade off spinning and playing, was disagreeable to our newfound individuality, though we were hard put to explain this. Clara solved the dilemma directly, by advising our father that the spinning wheel callused one's fingers and marred one's playing. Our father, observing that Adelaide did not so complain,

directed Clara to play a slightly greater proportion of the time and Adelaide a lesser, and once the die had been cast, it was a swift and natural result that each maid colonized her own domain. Each wished to have an exclusive pursuit, and we never discussed whether it were weakness or strength that had enabled Clara to effect this separation. Only much later, when love came into view, did the distinction between our accomplishments become a barb between us..."

"I should like to hear about love," I prompted.

"It arrived," she answered dreamily, "one spring afternoon in the person of a young lieutenant, a distant cousin of ours, who had come to pay his respects. He had a face and figure more beautiful, if less handsome, than they are today. The expression and bearing were then so lively with youthful promise; now they are dignified and saddened.... His manner of speaking was delightfully like our father's: quick and supple; vigorously persuasive and gracefully yielding by turns. A young man of such qualities does not escape two maidens' notice, be they ever so innocent. In each devoted sister contrary impulses arose, to tell her secret or to conceal it; but however long the battle, there could be only one conclusion. After a period of jealous silence, we two, who were so much of one mind despite our pretensions to the contrary, spilled out our hearts to each other on the subject of our cousin. Adelaide vowed herself willing to die for him, Clara confessed herself unable to live without him; each begged forgiveness, pardoned the other, and bloomed in his dear presence.

"Suddenly he was gone, and we were as sisters in famine, each nourishing the other's hunger with her own precious fare. We reminisced: he had accidentally touched Adelaide's hand in the garden, sending a thrill to her very heart; he had gazed on Clara at the piano with such warmth that her tempo had quickened shamelessly. Each of us appropriated the other's memories, feeling entitled by virtue of the fact that the lieutenant had been paying his addresses to her perfect likeness. This was a melding of experience more intense than any we had known in childhood, yet it was a stealthily growing wedge between us. Adelaide, worried that the spinning wheel's hum might prove less conducive to love-making than the piano's melody, would again demand her share of time on the instrument. Clara, playing more beautifully than ever, would break off in mid-measure to leap from her seat in a silent fury.

"Adversity briefly reunited us as we noticed our father's failing health and undertook to nurse him and carry on his clerkly duties. Our garden languished, money flowed out for medicines, income dwindled as the merchants began to suspect who was doing their books, however accurately—in short, we were headed toward ruin. Then all was changed by the proposition made to our desperate parent by the Baron von Rothenburg.

"Our father called us in from the garden that summer evening after the Baron's emissary had taken his leave and asked directly whether either of us were agreeable to becoming Baroness of a great estate and spending her days in company with a wise but cruelly afflicted man for as long as he should live. When

we winced and clutched at each other's hands, the cautious expression on our father's face gave way to one of absolute despondency.

"My children,' he sighed, 'I shall force neither of you; only understand that our alternatives may be even harder to bear.' He let us consider for a few moments, then added, 'Should one of you take this courageous step, I shall charge the other to share her future offspring with you as if they were your own.'

"We had, by this time, dropped hands, while each looked deep within for the strength of self-sacrifice. Slowly, as if entranced, each maid let her gaze be drawn into that of her sister, wherein she saw reflected the raging battle between self-love and love of the other. The objects around us, even our father, dimmed and tilted away as a peculiar vertigo enveloped us. Clara stiffened, Adelaide swayed, each striving to withstand it.

"Suddenly Clara, staggering under the pain of sundering, groped through streaming tears to our father's side and knelt there, crying, 'Father, I ask not on my own behalf but on his to whom I have pledged constancy: do not require this. I have vowed to await the lieutenant's return, and I know you cannot wish me to sacrifice my honor, even for your dear sake or my Adelaide's. —Nor would I have her do it for me: we must live however poorly, until the lieutenant comes back from the battlefield to rescue us.'

"Silence gathered as Clara gazed steadfastly up at our father, and he at Adelaide. Then, with a sob of agonal relief, Adelaide advanced toward him, knelt beside Clara, head bowed, and asked his blessing on her marriage to the Baron. Through blinding sorrow, the three of us glowed with a dazzling pride at the nobility and righteousness enacted within our midst."

Poised for this moment, alert for the revelation to follow, I leaned toward the speaker and inquired, smoothly and piercingly, "Righteousness? —despite the fact that Clara had flatly lied?"

I was not surprised that the lady reacted visibly to my assertion. But whereas I had expected the purple blush of Clara's suddenly naked shame or the deathly pallor of Adelaide's stunned discovery, I encountered instead an expression of tremulous pity, soon expounded in quietly fervent speech. "Oh, Baron, your readiness to condemn suggests that the Colonel has prepared you to do so. Then he has always doubted, always misunderstood.... He must suffer still, believing his love was the ill-gotten gain of her who least deserved it. Did he not know that we both were pledged to him in our hearts, that the strength of constancy and the strength of renunciation were the same, and that there was no ignobility in either?"

I recognized that my fair opponent had betrayed no mistrust or surprise that might injure her claim to being the wife of the Colonel. We studied each other in silence until I surrendered the moment and proceeded, asking, "Tell me, then, about marriage to the Colonel. Did it recompense all the nobility required to gain it?"

She met my sarcasm with a punishing stare, then yielded to me and answered, with unmistakable feeling, "Yes, it could redeem anything a woman might undergo for its sake. In the Colonel is all that a woman yearns to find: strength

and tenderness, amorousness and true gentility. In the first year there were difficulties for Clara," she said, looking aside, "as she suffered an inability to gratify the Colonel's desires with ease. But as time wore on, this trouble abated, and she discovered a new and overwhelming joy in his embraces."

"How came this about?" I pursued.

She looked hesitant, perhaps offended, but continued speaking with admirable determination. "It is hard to express what changed. Clara's best sense was that they developed a powerful incantation between them—a ritual of movement, not sound—that relaxed the barriers. But she never attempted to put it more clearly into words lest she dismantle its power."

"And to whom might she have put it into words?" I queried.

"Why, to herself or her husband—or Adelaide," she mumbled.

"There was that much confidence between them?"

"Well..., yes. Adelaide spoke to disburden herself, Clara to make a vicarious life for her sister."

"I see," I answered. "Then I should like to know about life with the Baron, that so necessitated a vicarious alternative."

To my surprise, she blushed deeply. "The Baron is... a most unfortunate man, and no one, least of all his wife, ever denied his valiance. He possesses a swift, masterful intellect, and at times—nay, often—his reluctant wife felt a distinct excitement in pleasing him. Were this the full extent of their mutual addresses, she might have loved him in a filial way—or, in a maternal one, have tended him in his suffering. But such modes of feeling were barred by another.

"Clara once upbraided Adelaide for undervaluing the Baron, for avenging herself on her fate by refusing to tender him various small forms of assistance. Then she was made acquainted with the life led by the Baroness, and her chiding ceased."

"Proceed," I murmured, seeing distress threaten to choke off her speech. She rose and walked over to the expansive view, speaking with her back turned to me.

"When a maid is in the bloom of...womanhood," she faltered, "and learns that her desires, thoroughly aroused by nascent love, are to be stifled in service to an invalid, she suffers as the proverbial maiden thrust unwilling into a convent. But whereas the cloistered novice may eventually accustom herself to celibacy, seeing it reign the lives about her, here—" her voice broke momentarily, "she must sustain daily insults to her chastity. Her olden love, espoused to her image, will come to dine; or she will stumble upon two servants locked in close embrace; or, attending weddings and christenings in her husband's stead, she may note the curious eyes of men relentlessly upon her. But worse...worse is how her very husband will inflame her simmering desire." She cooled her cheeks against her palms a moment and continued.

"Before Adelaide married, both she and Clara wondered why the Baron sought a wife at all, when, with his resources and renowned wit, he might have enticed a variety of interesting companions into his salon to alleviate his loneliness. But

Adelaide was soon brought to realize that he had married for the same reason as any man, even though he was not empowered to act as other men.

"In due course the Baron summoned his wife to spend an evening in his chamber and, when they were quite alone, commanded her to disrobe before him in the candlelight. She flushed, and searched his face for signs of indecision. There were none. He wore an aspect taut with sensual challenge: eyes insolent in their implacable stare, lips closed and cruelly askew. Then, as she stood transfixed and nearly swooning, something overwrote his face: the keenest comprehension of her plight, the steady promise to accompany her through her agony of shame. He succored but did not beseech her.

"As she did his bidding, still those piercing eyes supported her, and when her trial had reached its peak, she saw the glow of admiration there. She saw the domination and devotion etched upon his barely smiling lips and heard the deepened timbre of his voice.

"And, in that voice's thrall, she learned to overcome the most exquisite modesty and bring his hand to rest against her flesh, deriving from its slightest tremor the sensation of a fiery caress. His smile would fade and his gaze intensify in concert with her yearning. And, in due course, he caused her to go further: to disrobe him, too, and gratify him as she might. She did this, Baron, using her touch to free him from his terrible incarceration, if only for the shortest while. But she remained imprisoned within her own longing.

"One night in their second year of marriage, during such intimacies, the Baron told her to extinguish the candles and take the final step toward making them man and wife. In a low, urgent voice he instructed her how to accomplish this. And she tried," the lady sighed piercingly, "she tried! But what would befall Clara in the Colonel's arms befell Adelaide now, only her brilliant helpmeet could not help her overcome the obstacle. She had forced herself to the masculine role and was thwarted in the feminine. The humiliation! —But more, the intense, ceaseless need he had awakened in her! No, she could not play daughter, mother, or maidservant to him; she desired and resented him far too deeply. She heard herself grow irascible with him, and she saw his penetrating mind forgive her her withdrawal.

"He let his Baroness eschew his bedchamber until one year after her sister's death. Since then he has sought her attentions so pressingly that she has been obliged to start slowly down the path trodden before. But now how redoubled the error, for this wife is not his! Clara must not remain here, possibly to commit an act of which she may be capable, influenced by mutual need and her own experience. Even were you not convinced that I am she, had you not rather risk espousing a virginal Adelaide to the Colonel than allow the unchaste union of Clara with the Baron?" She had turned, hands clasped, to face me.

"Lady," I said thoughtfully, "your reasoning moves me to a degree, but I yet hesitate.... You have faithfully represented Adelaide's experience to the fullest, even under-emphasizing Clara's, perhaps as you sought to preserve, at the cost of my credulity, the sanctity of a marital union dear to Clara. Yet, could you not be

Adelaide, to whom union with the Colonel is as unknown as it is dear? You are the most true-hearted or the most cunning of narrators—and yet these traits have hereby crossed, for I recall that Adelaide was once the more ingenuous and Clara the conniving.

"You have posed the risks of the illegal unions in terms of chastity and have asked to be pledged unconditionally to the Colonel. But I must entertain another moral consideration: that of legitimacy. Either such coupling—Clara with the Baron or Adelaide with the Colonel—may result in progeny born to shame. I do, however, concede that in neither event would the world's opinion dictate the consequences. In the former case, only Clara and I myself would realize that she had consummated what Adelaide's inexperience could not effect. In the latter, Adelaide and the Colonel, alone, having overcome certain obstacles, would know that their child was born out of wedlock. Were legitimacy merely a matter of placating my own and public perception, I would with impunity pledge you to the Colonel, expecting the world to abide by my vindication of you. However, it is a far more serious issue of conscience, not only for me but for the Colonel himself. Much as he loves you and chaste as you still are—under whatever guise—he must not be allowed to take another man's wife and conduct, throughout that man's lifetime, an illegitimate marriage. It would ruin his honor, even in secrecy.

"If I could trust that your honor were as sacred to you as the Colonel's and mine are to me, I should scarcely need to elaborate further; you would freely take the proper course. If you are indeed Clara, your inclinations are commendable; but if Adelaide, you must beware the consequences of deception. Know, then, that should you go to the Colonel and be found wanting in the art of consummation, he not only can but shall cast you off and your possible offspring with you. Infamy shall be your lot; no man shall open his door to you nor save your infant from destitution. Should you think to soften the Colonel's heart with loving-kindness, know, too, that before I return you to him I shall swear him to the most binding of oaths to perform his duty against Adelaide. For otherwise he will perceive that I have placed my conscience at his disposal and he will be similarly lax with his own.

"Lest you think me partial, understand that I am committed to ensuring your proper disposition in either case. Indeed, were I to learn that Clara had remained with the Baron and borne fruit of that union, I should exact the selfsame toll from her."

The lady had blanched astonishingly and groped her way to a chair while I was speaking. Eyes aghast and nostrils slightly flared, she followed my argument as if watching the antics of a repellent insect. Having made my case clearly, I now endeavored to show the compassion I felt for her.

"Dear lady, your looks suggest that you may be Adelaide, appalled at the course I have laid out for you. If so, accept both my sympathy and my promise to represent you most favorably to your husband the Baron and to confirm with him that you shall suffer no penalty for your lapse.

"If perchance you are Clara, afraid of a too-prompt appraisal by your husband the Colonel, understand that your two years of abstinence—nay, recent humiliation—in the bedchamber will be taken into account and that you will not be expected to demonstrate wifely capacities until fully a fortnight has passed."

The lady arose from her seat as if lifted from without and commenced to pace vigorously before me, her color rising and a sudden savage energy possessing her speech and gestures.

"Ah, Baron, what a powerful judge of character you are," she declaimed with lancinating sarcasm. "So the chastened Adelaide is to receive your pardon, or the timorous Clara your encouragement, so soon as she declares herself. Know, then!" she announced, wheeling to stop before me, "that your reasoning is a chain of fallacies, your 'commitment to my proper disposition' the commitment of a simpleton to porridge!

"You command me to divulge my identity as you would account for yours, your small, univocal one. Can you not ponder my equivocality?"

"—Think of defining your existence in contradistinction to a parallel and exquisitely proximate course taken by your alternate self. Further imagine convergence of the two lifelines at a fatal point, following which you have charted minutely a perfectly centered course. Then challenge yourself to reverse direction and choose, at the hairsbreadth divergence of the two, which fork in the road was yours. Your compass is memory, but both paths lie toward the selfsame pole.

"Do you not understand that vicarious life and receded reality flavor the memory identically? that in envy and pity mirror-images can press so close that all that remains on the glass is mist? that dreams in the deepest sleep alchemize hearsay into remembered bliss and remembrance into wistful yearning? Isn't nostalgia the coveting of what belonged to one's other self?"

"Where can I sift for identity but among the insubstantial flickerings of all that has been? I have tendered the Colonel my maiden love, the Baron my passionate, unrequited womanhood. Wherein could not Clara or Adelaide say this equally? With the specter of adultery before me, what can I choose but the risk of chaste adultery over that of unchaste? which love choose but my original one: sublime but for a tinge of faint mutual disappointment likely to be redressed by progeny? which love renounce but my second, my shattering one: penetrating to every depth of being—save that forbidden by circumstance or virtue?"

"Yet, Baron, wherever I go, to whichever spousal bedchamber—and it must be unconditionally—I go as to painful ravishment, knowing that I am about to discover that half my memories are false, that I am reduced, like you, to the flatness of single identity."

...

It thus came about that the Baroness von Rothenburg was conveyed, shortly before my departure, to a finely appointed and well-reputed charitable house for destitute gentlewomen.

