

## At the Castle

**D**, MARY, D,” Olga repeated with mechanistic patience. Little Mary reluctantly hammered out a very easy piano étude they’d already been at for fourteen days, but the more time they spent on it, the worse the result. That detested childish melody haunted Olga even in her dreams.

“D, Mary, look: C D G D,” Olga hummed the notes and played them on the piano. “Try to pay better attention: C D G D – D, Mary, D! Why do you persist in playing E?”

Mary didn’t know why she was playing badly, she only knew that she was being forced to play. Her eyes flashed with hatred, she kicked her legs against the piano bench, and at the earliest possible moment she would run off to her papa; meanwhile, she willfully played E and then E again. Olga abandoned her efforts and gazed out the window with the eyes of a martyr. The sun shone, the great trees on the park-like grounds bowed before the hot wind, but there was no freedom, no lack of constraint out on those grounds, not even in the rye fields beyond – ah, when would the hour end? E again, once again E!

“D, Mary, D” Olga repeated, filled with despair, and suddenly she burst out: “You’ll never know how to play!”

The young girl rose to her feet, scorched Olga with a glare of ancestral pride, and replied: “Miss Olga, why don’t you say that in front of Papa?”

Olga bit her lip. “Play!” she shouted with undue sharpness. She caught sight of the child’s hateful glance and emphatically, impatiently, she began to count: “One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. C D G D. Wrong. One, two, three, four...”

The door to the drawing room swayed. No doubt the old count was standing behind it, eavesdropping once again. Olga

lowered her voice. “One, two, three, four. C D G D. Much better, Mary!” Much better it certainly was not, but the old count was listening. “One, two, three, four. Much better now. That wasn’t so difficult, was it? One, two...”

The door flew open and the lame count entered, his cane clattering. “Mary, Mary, wie gehts? How beautifully you play! Eh, Miss?”

“Oh, yes, my lord,” Olga fervently agreed as she rose from the piano bench.

“Mary, du hast Talent,” the lame old man cried out, and suddenly – it was terrible to see – he fell to his knees with a loud thump, and with what sounded like a sobbing wail he nuzzled his child’s neck, planting wild, noisy kisses. “Du hast Talent,” he murmured, “du bist so gescheit, Mary, so brilliant! Tell me, what sort of present should Papa give you?”

“Danke, nichts,” replied Mary, her small, ticklish shoulders wriggling beneath his kisses. “I’d just like...”

“What, what would you like?” asked the count enthusiastically.

“I’d just like to have not so many lessons.”

“Ha, ha, natürlich,” the count laughed, enchanted, “wie gescheit bist du! Eh, miss?”

“Yes,” Olga said in a whisper.

“Wie gescheit,” repeated the old man, and he started to stand up. Olga sprang to help him. “Let me be,” the count fiercely shouted, and on hands and knees like an animal he tried to rise to his feet. Olga turned away. Then five convulsive fingers gripped her arm, and thus supporting his entire weight, the old count stood up. By some miracle, Olga did not collapse under the weight of this huge, frightful, apoplectically palsied body; it was an act above and beyond courage. Little Mary laughed.

The count straightened himself, affixed his pince-nez, and gazed at Olga with some surprise, as if he’d never seen her before.

“Miss Olga,” he said, now addressing her in English.

“Please?”

“Miss Olga,” he continued in English, “you speak too much during the lessons; you confound the child with your eternal admonishings. You will make me the pleasure to be a little kinder.”

“Yes, sir,” Olga whispered, blushing to her hairline. Mary understood that her papa was scolding Olga, and haughtily pretended that it did not concern her.

“My respects to you, miss,” the count said in his odd, old-fashioned Czech.

Olga curtsied and left. But on her way out, she was struck by a need for revenge, and she returned, her eyes flashing, to say, “Mary, you might acknowledge it when I take my leave.”

“Ja, mein Kind, das kannst du,” the old count benignly agreed. Mary smirked and tossed off a quick little curtsy.

Scarcely had Olga gone beyond the door when she pressed her hand to her forehead. Oh, heavens, I can’t bear this, I can’t! Oh, heavens, for five months not a day, not even an hour has passed when they haven’t tormented me ... But in fact they don’t torment me, she said to herself as she proceeded along the chilly hall with her fingers pressed to her temples. I’m a stranger here, a servant, and no one gives me a thought. This is simply the way they are, God knows, and no one is ever so alone as when among strangers. But Mary is wicked, something within her fiercely shouted, and she hates me, she wants to bedevil me and she knows how to do it. Osvald is a rascal, but Mary is wicked. The countess is a proud woman and she insults me, but Mary is wicked. The child I so wanted to love! The child with whom I spend the entire day, the entire day! My God, how many more years will I be here?

Two chambermaids came giggling along the corridor. As soon as they noticed Olga, they fell silent and greeted her with sidelong glances. From pure envy of their laughter, Olga nearly

snapped at them; she would have liked to order them about in a lofty way, but she didn't know how. If at least she could be in the servants' hall with those girls, it occurred to her, squealing well into the night, gossiping and chasing each other, and Franz the footman with them, every moment one or another of them screaming with laughter – oh, heavens, it was disgusting! A frightful memory forced its way into her head: yesterday she had surprised Franz with the scullery maid in an empty guest room next to Olga's bedroom. Olga could have struck him in the face with a small, raging fist for the idiotic way he grinned while buttoning himself up. She buried her fingers in her face. No, no, I can't bear this! C D G D, C D G D ... But at least the servant girls enjoy themselves. At least they're not so lonely, they don't take their meals with the gentlefolk, they jabber all day long, and in the evening they sing softly in the courtyard ... If at least they would let me join them in the evening! Sweetly, melodiously she could hear the duet they'd been singing last night under the old linden:

Oh, how my heart is aching,  
Oh, how I could weep.

She had listened at her window, her eyes filled with tears, and sung along with them under her breath; she forgave them everything and extended her hand to them in ardent friendship. Girls, I am truly just like you! I too am only a servant girl, the unhappiest of us all!

The unhappiest of all, Olga repeated to herself as she proceeded along the hall. What was it the count said? "Miss Olga, you speak too much during the lessons. You only confuse the child with your – everlasting – reprimands. You will do me the pleasure of being – a little – kinder." She repeated it word by word, so as not to lose a drop of bitterness. She clenched her fist, burning with anger and pain. Yes, this was her weakness: she took her work as governess too seriously. She had arrived at the castle glowing with enthusiasm, already in love with the

little girl to be entrusted to her care. She had hurled herself passionately into instruction. Zealous, meticulous, brimming with knowledge, she had believed wholeheartedly in the importance of education. But now she merely drudged wearily through her bits of grammar and arithmetic, letting herself become upset over and over again, banging her knuckles on the table and then fleeing the schoolroom in tears, while little Mary stayed there, victorious in her defiance and her mistakes. At first she had played with Mary exuberantly, passionately, always in high spirits, as engrossed as a child with Mary's toys, but eventually she found that she was being toyed with under Mary's cold, bored, mocking glance, and the game was over. Olga trailed along behind her little charge like a shadow, not knowing what to say to her or how to amuse her. Accepting the task as a sacred trust, filled with resolutions of love, gentleness, and patience, but now look at her blazing eyes, hear how violently and erratically her heart beats, that heart which now feels only pain, not love. "A – little – kinder," Olga repeated to herself, horrified: God in heaven, can I ever be kind again?

All upset, her cheeks blazing, she ran between the two rows of metal-plated figures, knights in armor, which used to make her laugh. A thousand replies to the count's admonishments occurred to her, words of great dignity, replies both decisive and proud, which would ensure her importance forever in that house. My lord, she might say with head held high, I know what I want: I want Mary to gain a thorough understanding of all things and to learn self-discipline; I want to make of her someone who will not permit herself to take the wrong path in anything. My lord, it is not a matter of false notes on the piano, but of false upbringing. I cannot love Mary and not be concerned about her faults; it is because I love her that I will be as strict with her as I am with myself. – Upon saying all this to herself, her eyes shining and her heart lifted from its recent pain, Olga became almost cheerful; she felt relieved, and she firmly

resolved that soon, tomorrow, she would have a word with the count. The count himself was not so bad, he had his generous moments, and after all, he suffered so much! If only there weren't those frightful, pale, domineering eyes staring out from behind his pince-nez!

She went out in front of the castle, dazzled by the sunlight; damp air rose from the glistening pavement, which had been sprinkled with water not long before. "Watch out, Miss Olga," Oswald shouted in his breaking voice, and then a wet soccer ball bounded up into Olga's white skirt. Oswald howled with laughter but stopped when he saw the poor girl standing there stunned. The skirt was splattered with mud; Olga gathered it up and without a word of reproach began to sob. Oswald turned red and stammered, "I didn't see you, miss."

"Beg your pardon, miss." These words, in English, came from Oswald's tutor, Mister Kennedy, who in white shirt and trousers was lolling about on the lawn; with a single movement he leaped up, gave Oswald a cuff on the head, and lay down again. All Olga could see was her skirt; she had been especially fond of this white outfit. Without a word she turned and went back inside, controlling herself with all her might to keep from bursting out in tears.

By the time she opened the door to her room, her throat was shaking with the need to weep. She stood there in complete amazement, unable to understand what was happening: in the middle of the room, seated in an armchair, was the countess, and a chambermaid was rummaging through her, Olga's, wardrobe ...

"Ah, c'est vous," the countess greeted her without turning around.

"Oui, madame la comtesse," Olga forced out, scarcely breathing, her eyes staring in alarm.

The chambermaid pulled out an entire armful of clothing. "My lady, it's not here, I'm sure of it."

“Very vell then,” replied the countess, rising heavily to go. Olga, stunned, did not even think to step away from the door. The countess halted three steps in front of her. “Mademoiselle?”

“Oui, madame.”

“Vous n’attendez pas, peut-être, que je m’excuse?”

“Non, non, madame!” exclaimed the young woman.

“Alors il n’y pas pourquoi me barrer le passage.” The countess’s r’s rumbled in her throat.

“Ah, pardon, madame la comtesse,” whispered Olga, swiftly making way for her. The countess and the chambermaid left, and all that remained were the scattered articles of clothing on the table and the bed.

Olga sat in the armchair as if made of wood; tears passed her by. They had been going through her wardrobe as if she were some thieving maid. “You are not, perhaps, waiting for me to apologize?” No, no, countess, God forbid that you should ever apologize to someone in your service! Here are my pockets, there’s my purse, have a good look through everything, to see what I have stolen. I am poor and surely dishonest. Olga stared at the floor, stunned. Now at last she knew why she had so often found her dresses and linens in disarray. And I eat with them at the same table! I answer, smile, provide companionship, force myself to be cheerful ... Olga was overcome with boundless humiliation. Her eyes were staring, tearless, her clenched hands were pressed against her breast; she was incapable of thought, there was only her heart pounding painfully, horribly.

A fly settled on one of her her clasped hands, rubbed its tiny head, attended to its wings, scurried to and fro – but the hands did not move. From time to time a hoof stamped or a chain rattled in the stable. Crockery clinked in the pantry, a hawk shrieked out over the grounds, a train whistled at a distant curve in the track. Eventually, it was too long a time even for a fly, it jerked open its wings and flew through the open window. Absolute silence stretched out over the castle.

One, two, three, four. Four o'clock. Yawning noisily, a kitchen maid came to prepare tea. Rapid steps crossed the courtyard, at the well the winch screamed, and a certain haste was noticeable in the house. Olga rose, passed her hands across her forehead, and set about arranging her dresses neatly on the table. Then she knelt by the bureau, took out her linens, and laid them on the bed. Her books she placed on the chair, and when she was quite ready she stood above it all, as if standing over the ruins of Jerusalem, and rubbed her forehead: What do I really want from them?

Why am I doing this?

I will leave, a clear, distinct voice within her replied. I will give an hour's notice and I will leave tomorrow at five o'clock in the morning. Old Vavrys will take my trunk to the station. But that can't be done, protested Olga, dismayed; where would I go from here? How would I manage without a position? – I'll go home, replied the voice that, so far, had thought everything through for her. Of course Mama will cry, but Papa will approve. It's good this way, my little girl, he'll say, better honor than a good table.

But Papa, Olga objected with quiet joy and pride, what do I do now? – Go to the factory, replied the voice that had thought everything through. You'll work with your hands, you'll bring home a weekly paycheck, and you'll help Mama at home; she's old and frail. You'll do the wash and scrub the floor; you'll go to sleep tired and eat when hungry. My little girl, you will go home!

Olga threw out her hands in joyous rapture. Away from here, away! By tomorrow evening I'll be home! How is it possible that I didn't think of this long ago? How did I bear it? Immediately, right after tea, I'll give notice and go home; this evening I'll put everything in order, bring the countess in here, and show her: here is what I'm taking home; if there is a single



thread that belongs to you, tear it off. Only the mud on this dress is yours, my lady, and that I will take with me.

Ruddy with joy, Olga pulled off her mud-spattered clothes. Tomorrow, tomorrow! I'll hide myself in a corner of the carriage where no one can see me; I'll fly like a bird from a cage! A rascally mood came over her, and she whistled and donned a red scarf. Smiling at herself in the mirror, proud, her hair tousled, she whistled as loudly as she could: C D G D, C D G D.

People were rushing around the courtyard; a gong clanged for tea. Olga flew downstairs; she didn't want to miss, for the last time, the spectacle of the ceremonial entry of the count's family. There descending, behold, the old count, half-crippled, leaning on the arm of the spindly Osvald. The countess, with her heavy, bloated, sickly belly, was nagging at Mary, jerking her along by the ribbon in her hair. At the rear lounged the athletic Mr. Kennedy, loftily indifferent to all that was going on around him.

The courtly old man reached the door first, opened it, and said: "Madame?"

The countess, with heavy steps, entered the dining room.

"Mademoiselle?" The count looked around for Olga, who entered with her head held high. After her came the count, Kennedy, Mary, and Osvald. The count seated himself at the head of the table, with the countess on his right and Olga on his left. The countess rang the bell. The maids entered, with downcast eyes and inaudible steps, like puppets who only hear orders and only see what they are told to see, as if those young lips never uttered a sound and those downcast eyes were never raised in a show of interest or understanding. Olga's eyes were fixed on this dumb show, "so that I will never ever forget it..."

"Du beurre, mademoiselle?" asked the count.

"Merci." She drank plain tea with dry bread; in a week, the invigorating thought danced in her head, I will be working

at the factory. The count struggled to adjust his false teeth, the countess ate nothing, Oswald spilled his cocoa on the tablecloth, Mary ignored the food and sucked on a sugar plum. Only Mr. Kennedy was preparing to eat, spreading a centimeter of butter on his slice of bread. Triumphant disdain of everyone and everything filled Olga's heart. Wretched people, tomorrow I shall be the only one of you who is free. I shall look back with horror on your dinners, where you have nothing to say to each other, no exchange of laughter or groans.

With every bit of haughtiness within her, Olga looked down on Mr. Kennedy. She had hated him heartily from the first day; she hated the indifferent ease with which he managed to live as he pleased, caring not a whit for what anyone else might think; she hated him because no one dared stand up to him and because he slighted everyone and everything with his indolent superiority. God knows why he was there; he boxed brutally with Oswald, rode with him on horseback, and allowed himself to be idolized by the boy; he went out to shoot whenever he was so inclined, and if he was lolling somewhere on the grounds, nothing could induce him to budge. Sometimes when he was alone he would sit at the piano and improvise; he was a highly accomplished pianist, but he played without feeling, thinking only of himself. Olga used to listen in secret, offended that she could not penetrate that cold, complex, egotistic music. He took no notice of anyone or anything; if he were asked a direct question, he would barely move his lips to answer, in English, "yes" or "no." A young athlete, cruel, vain, and lazy, who did everything as if out of charity. Sometimes the old count ventured to propose a game of chess; without a word, Mr. Kennedy would sit down to the chessboard and in a few undeliberated, frighteningly savage moves checkmate the old gentleman, who, sweating with anxiety and prattling like a child, would give each move a half hour's deliberation, drawing back his piece fully a dozen times before deciding. Olga would

watch these uneven contests with unconcealed rage. She herself used to play chess occasionally with the count, and found him a good, deliberate player; a game with him would be endless, filled with much meditation and thoughtful plotting, which required flattering her opponent for his shrewdness and evaluating his play. Olga did not ask if she had any right, but she felt herself far superior to the accomplished Mr. Kennedy, whose accomplishments cost him not the least effort, and who dominated everyone and everything with his self-confidence and sovereign haughtiness. She despised him and made him aware of it; yes, all her girlish pride and conceit, struck down so many times day after day, was restored again and again in this show of scorn.

Meanwhile Mr. Kennedy took his afternoon tea with great composure, completely disregarding Olga's lethal glances. He ignores me here, thought Olga, provoked, and yet every night, on his way to his room, he knocks at my door: "Open, Miss Olga ..."

It was one of the castle's mysteries, and Olga never suspected how greatly this mystery amused the servants. The young English fellow, who, insultingly, paid no attention whatsoever to the chambermaids, had conducted this secret escapade for quite some time. It was his "fancy," as he called it in English, that they prepare a room for him in the castle tower which, as everybody'd said for generations, is haunted. Of course, Olga did not believe in ghosts, and she saw in Kennedy's whim only the affectations of a show-off, but this did not prevent her from being in mortal fear on the staircase and in the passageway at night. Besides, it's God's truth that sounds were heard at night which could be attributed neither to Franz's philandering nor, still worse, to the erotic goings-on in the women's quarters. In a nutshell, one night, after Olga had gone to bed, Mr. Kennedy knocked at her door: "Open, Miss Olga." Olga threw on a dressing-gown, opened the door a crack, and

asked what he wanted. Mr. Kennedy then began to rattle off no end of foolishness in English, of which she scarcely understood a quarter, but enough nonetheless to grasp that he was calling her “sweet Olga” and other interesting things. This sufficed for her to slam the door on his nose and lock it, and upon encountering him the next morning, she asked him, with an extremely severe look in her eyes, what he had been doing at her door last night. Mr. Kennedy didn’t think it at all necessary to explain, or indeed act as if he remembered it at all, but from that time on, he knocked every night, said, “Open, Miss Olga,” turned the door handle and prattled in the most comical manner, while Olga hauled the covers up to her chin and screamed tearfully in English, “You’re a rascal” or in Czech “You’re mad” – mortified to despair that this rascal, this madman was laughing. That was the only time he laughed the whole day long.

Now Olga was gazing at Mr. Kennedy with shining eyes. As soon as he looks this way I’ll ask him, in front of everyone, “Mr. Kennedy, what do you mean by trying to gain entrance to my room every night?” There will be a scandal, but before I leave I’ll have still other things to tell. This appetite for revenge exhilarated her. Then Mr. Kennedy looked her way with calm, steely-blue eyes; Olga began to move her lips, but suddenly she blushed. She remembered...

Those beautiful moonlit nights about a week ago were to blame. Inexpressibly enchanting nights, nights of a clear full moon in the height of summer, silvery nights, the sort of moonlit nights sacred to pagans! Olga was wandering about in front of the castle, she had no intention of going to bed on such a magical night. She was alone and happy, filled with a soaring astonishment at the excess of beauty which flooded the sleeping world. Slowly, with an awe full of pleasure and delight, she ventured out into the grounds. She saw handsome birch trees and deep black oaks in silvery meadows, mysterious shadows

and wondrous light; it was more than can be endured. She set off across a large meadow to the pond with a fountain, and as she came around a thicket she spied at the edge of the lake a white statue of a naked man, his face upraised to the full moon, his hands clasped behind his head, his powerful chest arched above his firm abdomen. It was Mr. Kennedy. Olga was not a silly girl, she didn't scream or run away. Her eyes half-closed, she stared at the white figure. With a compact movement of its muscles, the statue came to life. From the calves a wave of taut sinews gradually rolled upward, across the thighs and abdomen to the chest, and flowed into the beautiful, powerful arms; and then a new muscular wave rose from the slender calves, once more to swell the biceps sculpted as if from boulders. This is how Mr. Kennedy exercised, without moving from his place. Then suddenly he arched his back, raised his hands, and dived backwards into the pond. The water spurted, glittered, and purred. Olga silently disappeared and, thinking no more about the mysterious, fearsome shadows of the night, she made her way straight home; oddly enough, she saw no more the beautiful birches or ancient oaks on silvery lawns. This is why she blushed.

Truth be told, she really didn't know why she blushed; there was nothing whatsoever to be ashamed of and so much marvelous beauty to that adventure. But something worse happened, and it happened the very next day. It was a clear, charming night, and once again she took a walk in front of the castle, but this time she didn't go out into the grounds. She thought about Mr. Kennedy, who might be swimming this evening as well, about the secret depths of the grounds, and about the white statue of the young man; when the gossipy housekeeper came near she avoided the woman, wishing to be alone. By then it was quite late, eleven o'clock, and Olga was afraid to go home alone up the staircase and along the passageways. Kennedy returned to the castle, his hands in his pockets. When

he saw Olga, he wanted to start in on his bizarre nightly courtship, but Olga cut short his speech and commanded quite imperiously that he light her way home. Somewhat puzzled, Kennedy lit a candle and didn't say another word until they were at her door, when he rather tamely said, "Good night." Olga turned fiercely, shot him an abnormally threatening look and, as if having taken leave of her senses, thrust her hand into his hair. It was damp and softly disheveled, like the coat of a Newfoundland puppy fresh from a bath. Olga released a brief hiss of delight and, unmindful of what she was doing, gave his hair a hard tug. Before he could recover from the shock, she had slammed the door and locked it. Mr. Kennedy left for his own quarters as if in a daze, but in half an hour he returned, barefoot and half-undressed, knocked gently, and whispered, "Olga, oh Olga..." She made no reply, and eventually Mr. Kennedy stole away.

That was the incident which now caused Olga such mortification. It was, of course, shamefully stupid, and Olga wanted to sink through the floor because of what she had done, but at least she had doubly avenged herself on Mr. Kennedy, who was somehow to blame. The next night she took the shaggy-haired terrier Fritz to her room, and when Kennedy came to knock on the door, Fritz let out a frightful racket. For the next few days Mr. Kennedy left Olga in peace, but then twice he came back, cutting loose with the most lyrical twaddle, but Olga, fed up with it all and full of fastidious spite toward the brazen man, buried her ears in her pillow so as not to hear.

That was all that passed between Olga and Mr. Kennedy, and that is why Olga was so unutterably and painfully embarrassed that she turned red under his glance, and she could have smacked herself for it. She was immensely troubled in her irritably virginal heart. So much the better that I leave, she told herself, if for no other reason than that man. She felt weary from her nightly struggle and humiliated by her powerlessness;

such a torrent of distaste and defiance rose in her throat that she could have screamed. But she succeeded in lightening her mood: Hallelujah! I'm leaving! And were I to stay one day longer, I'd set off the most appalling scandal.

"Prenez des prunes, mademoiselle."

"Pardon, madame?"

"Prenez des prunes."

"Merci, merci, madame la comtesse."

She broke her thoughts away from Mr. Kennedy and turned her gaze on the handsome face of Oswald. Her heart was a bit consoled by his cheerfulness. It was no secret to her that, in his own way, the boy was in love with her, although he was, naturally, unable to admit it other than by unnecessary rudeness and averted eyes. On the other hand, Olga took special delight in tormenting him; she would place her hand around his nice, slender neck and drag him out to the castle grounds with her, inordinately amused by his grumbling and light-hearted fury. At that very moment, sensing her glance, he swallowed an enormous mouthful and glared fiercely. Poor Oswald! What will become of you here, in this frightful house, child on the verge of young manhood, burdened at one and the same time by an excess of delicacy and an excess of savagery? How will your heart awaken, what examples will you have before you? Olga suddenly felt resentment at the memory of having gone recently into Oswald's room to find him wrestling and boxing with the chambermaid Paulina, the worst of all the girls. Needless to say, it was only the juvenile play of a spirited pup, but there was no need for Oswald to blush, no need for Paulina's eyes and face to be so inflamed, in short, no need for it to have happened at all, no need, no need at all. Highly suspicious, Olga was on the alert from that moment on; never again did she tenderly run her fingers through Oswald's hair, never again did she place her hand around his neck; she kept watch over him with Argus eyes, pervaded by anxiety, stooping even to spying, determined

not to surrender Oswald's childhood to premature and shameful experience. Often when she was with Mary she would suddenly run off to keep an eye on Oswald; she was coldly severe with him, but this resulted only in his youthful love becoming riddled with rebellious hatred. But why, Olga now asked herself, why should I be keeping such a watchful eye on him? What have I, a stranger, to do with whatever lessons about life he receives from Paulina or anyone else? Why should I plague myself with anxiety and my own severity, when it hurts me more than him? Goodbye, goodbye, Oswald, I won't tell you that you are my dear child, I won't tell you of my love for your boyish innocence, more loveable than a girl's. I'll no longer keep an eye on you, you'll just open your eyes and arms and seize the first opportunity – I won't be there to weep over you.

And you, my lady countess, all at once Olga switched to a brisk reckoning, you have suspected me. You have spied on me during my lessons with Oswald; you have made it unmistakably clear that "it is better for him to be in the company of Mr. Kennedy." Perhaps it is also better for him to be in the company of Paulina; you trust Paulina. When one night Oswald secretly went out with Kennedy to see an otter, you came into my room, I had to let you in, and you searched for the boy even under the coverlets on my bed. Very well, my lady, he is your child, but you send Paulina to his bedroom to awaken him, Paulina, a woman over thirty and as depraved as the devil himself. You hunt through my wardrobe and sniff around my bureau, then you order me into your carriage and demand that I entertain you. You offer me prunes, oh, thank you, madame, you are so kind! If you consider me frivolous and a thief, then send me from the table to the servants' hall, or still better, to the laundry; I'll swallow a bit of bread with my tears of rage and humiliation, but at least ... at least I'll not be obliged to smile!

— — "Aren't you listening, miss?"

"Pardon." Olga reddened.



“Perhaps you are – a little – unwell?” asked the count, staring fixedly at her. “Are you not perhaps – feverish?”

“No, my lord,” Olga hastily objected. “There is nothing whatsoever the matter with me.”

“So much the better,” said the count slowly. “I don’t like people who are – unwell.”

Olga’s spirits suddenly fell. I didn’t grow up among these people, she thought despairingly, I don’t know how to stand up to them. God, grant me the strength to give notice today! God, grant me the strength! She anticipated the horrible state of nerves that would accompany her speaking about it to the count. He would most certainly raise his eyebrows and say, “An hour’s notice, miss? Such a thing is not done!” What excuses can I dream up now? How can I explain that I must ... I must go home immediately, this very minute? I’ll run away if I’m not allowed to go, I’ll definitely run away! Olga waited fearfully for the next moment to arrive.

The family rose from the table and settled down in the adjacent drawing room; the count and Kennedy smoked, the countess picked up some embroidery, and then they all waited for the afternoon mail delivery. As soon as the children go out, Olga decided, I will speak about it then. In the meantime, her heart pounding, she forced herself to think of her home. She pictured her mother in a blue apron, the scrubbed, unpainted furniture, her father sitting coatless with his pipe, reading his newspaper with prudent thoroughness. That is my only salvation, she felt with growing anxiety, I cannot bear this another day. God, grant me the strength this very moment!

Paulina, her eyes downcast, brought in the letters on a silver tray. The count scooped the letters into his lap; he wanted to grab the last letter as well, which lay apart from the others, but Paulina respectfully plucked it away. “For mademoiselle,” she murmured.

From a distance Olga recognized her mother's handwriting on the pitifully scrawled envelope with its obvious rustic origins and atrocious spelling, a letter like all those others of which she was ashamed and yet which she carried next to her heart. She turned red even today – forgive me, Mama! She picked up the rustic letter with trembling fingers; moved, she looked at the address, written with great thoroughness, as though the world were wicked and would not, without detailed directions, deliver a letter into the right hands so far away, among other sorts of people – but that moment a weight fell from her heart: Mama, what a help you are! I'll read the letter and suddenly cry out that my father is ill, I must go to him, I'll collect my things and be off, and no one will be able to hold me back; in a week I'll write that I must stay at home and have them send my trunk to me. Much the easiest way, she told herself joyfully. Like every woman, she found it easier to help herself by means of excuses than by making a good case for herself. Filled with joy, she tore open the envelope. When she drew out the letter, her heart was pierced; she held her breath and began to read:

Dear little Daughter,

I must write you with sad news, your Papa is sick the doktor says its his hart and he is week and his feet swelled up and he cant walk, Doktor says he cant get upset, Doktor says dont complane when you write as Papa frets about it so dont do it just write that your fine then he wont be upset as you know how he loves you and Thank The Good Lord you have a good job

Pray for Papa and dont come its to far but your money came thank You Many Times, its very bad, Papa must lay down Frantík stole his watch we cant tell him what happened it would kill him so we say its geting fixed. All the time he says when will it be fixed as he cant tell the time and I cant cry in front of him.

Dear little daughter I must write you to Thank God you have a fine job so Pray for the Master and Mistres and serve

them faithfully theres no place so good if you eat good there, do it for your Health as your week in the chest and send us something every month daughter dear and we Thank you the Good Lord will reward you for your Family.

Pray for your Master serve them many years they will Take Care of you till you Dy like a goverment office job and dont get yourself talked about Greet the Master and Mistres, its bad with Papa hes like a candel hes almost gone.

Kisses from your Mother in Kostelec no. 37

The count left off reading his letters and stared at Olga.

“Mademoiselle, you don’t feel well,” he exclaimed, genuinely concerned.

Olga rose, as if completely drained of her spirit, and pressed her fingers to her temples. “It’s only – only a headache, my lord,” she gasped.

“Go and lie down at once, miss, go and lie down at once,” exclaimed the count, disturbed. Olga curtsied mechanistically and slowly left the room.

The count looked quizzically at his wife; she shrugged her shoulders and said sharply in German, “Osvald, sit up straight!” Mr. Kennedy smoked and gazed at the ceiling. There was a disconcerting silence.

The countess went on sewing, her lips tightly clamped together. After a while she rang and Paulina appeared. “Paulina, where has mademoiselle gone?” she asked, scarcely opening her mouth.

“To her room, my lady,” replied the maid, “and she’s locked herself in there.”

“Have the horses harnessed.”

The carriage wheels rattled on the sand in the courtyard, and the coachman led out the horses and buckled their straps.

“Papa, may I ride?” ventured Osvald.

“Ja.” The count nodded, numbly staring nowhere at all.

The countess turned on him a searching, hostile glance. "Will you be joining us?" she asked.

"Nein," he said, preoccupied.

The groom brought the riding horses and saddled them. Kennedy's horse danced all around the yard before allowing itself to be saddled, while Oswald's half-blooded gelding peacefully and sagely pawed the ground, sadly contemplating his hoof.

The family went out to the courtyard. Oswald, a good horseman, vaulted right onto his horse. He couldn't keep from casting an upward glance at Olga's window, for she often waved her hand to him when he was setting out for his ride. The window was empty.

The countess climbed heavily into the carriage. "Mary," she said peremptorily. Little Mary made a face and reluctantly followed her into the carriage. "Paulina," the countess called to the chambermaid, "go see what Miss Olga is doing. But don't let her catch you at it."

Mr. Kennedy threw away his cigarette, and with one bound was in the saddle, gripping the horse with his knees. The horse broke into a gallop; its thundering hooves pounded across the wooden planks lining the vaulted entry to the courtyard and struck an explosion of sparks from the cobbled pavement beyond. "Halloo, Mr. Kennedy!" Oswald shouted, and he hurried after him.

Paulina came running back, her hands in the pockets of her white apron. "Madame," she reported confidentially, "Miss Olga is hanging up her dresses in her wardrobe and arranging her linens in her bureau." The countess waved her hand. "Go," she called to the coachman.

The carriage rolled out of the courtyard; the old count waved to them and was now alone. He sat down on a bench beneath the arcade, his cane between his knees, and forlornly, in an ill humor, he stared out into the courtyard. For perhaps

half an hour he sat there, then he rose and clumped heavily on his palsied legs into the drawing room. He seated himself in the armchair beside the chessboard where the game he had been playing yesterday with Olga lay still unfinished. He scrutinized the board; obviously he was at a disadvantage: Olga had moved her knight and was threatening an attack. Bending over the board in an effort to anticipate her moves, he discovered the neat little scheme by which she intended to defeat him, thoroughly. Then he stood, raised himself upright and, cane clattering, went upstairs to the guests' wing. He stopped before Olga's door. It was quiet, absolutely, frighteningly quiet; nothing stirred. Finally he knocked. "Miss Olga, how are you?"

A moment's silence. "Better now, thank you," replied Olga, her voice full of distress. "Did you wish anything, my lord?"

"No, no, just lie down." And suddenly, as if he had said too much, thereby spoiling things again, he added, "So that you will be able to teach again tomorrow." And conspicuously making noise, he went back down to the drawing room.

If he had remained only a moment longer, he would have heard her softly groaning, and then quietly, ceaselessly weeping.

Hours of solitude are long, very long. At length the carriage returned, the heated horses were led up and down the courtyard, and from the kitchen came the usual hurrying clatter, as happened every day. At half-past seven the gong rang for dinner. All were seated, but Olga was missing. For a while all went on as if no one had noticed this, until the old count raised his eyebrows and asked with surprise, "Was, die Olga kommt nicht?"

The countess shot a look at him and said nothing. Not for a long time did she call to Paulina, "Ask Miss Olga what she would like to eat."

Paulina was back in an instant. "My lady, Miss Olga wishes to thank you, but she's not hungry. However, she'll be up and about tomorrow." The countess gave a brief toss of her head; there was more than dissatisfaction in her gesture.

Osvald barely pecked at his food and cast beseeching glances at Mr. Kennedy, as if imploring the tutor to rescue him by taking him outside as soon as possible after dinner; Mr. Kennedy, as usual, chose not to understand.

By now, twilight had come, bringing merciful night for those who are weary, boundless night for those who are sad. There is light, it dims, and night is here; one cannot tell exactly when it sets in, this darkness that stifles and oppresses one so; darkness, that abysmal hole whose depths are dug by human despair.

You, silent night, you know this, you who hear the breathing of sleepers and the groaning of the sick, for you have listened carefully to the feeble, feverish breath of a girl who has wept long and now weeps no more. You have held your ear to her heart and cruelly constricted the throat that is wound about with tousled hair. You have heard cries smothered in a pillow and then the silence even more terrible to hear.

You know, mute night, how the silence spreads through the entire castle, floor by floor, room by room, you who with burning fingers stifle a woman's shrieks of passion in a corner of the stairwell. You accommodate the echo of a young man's footsteps as, hair still wet from bathing, whistling softly, he makes his way belatedly to bed along the lengthy castle corridor.

Dark night, you see how a young woman, exhausted from weeping, trembles at the sound of those youthful footsteps. You see how she bounds off the bed as if hurled forward by some blind force, throws her hair back from her burning forehead, and dashes to the door, unlocking it and leaving it ajar.

Then she again lies rigid on her feverish bed, waiting in dreadful expectation, as one for whom there is no help.