

Rather Quiet for a Monday

Al Lichtenberg

After the game, Millie just nodded to her partner, put her racket into the press and gathered the tennis balls quickly into a net.

“Let’s go,” she urged me. “I’ll race you to the bikes.”

After winning two sets at mixed doubles in the hot July sun she was still ready for an extra workout. It wasn’t very sensible, but then Millie didn’t always act her age. Though almost twenty-three, she was not averse to childish pranks, and therefore good company for a boy of eight, spending his summer vacations away from home.

The sprint was to be for my benefit; she wanted to keep her little cousin amused. Millie couldn’t understand what made me want to hang around the tennis court and run after stray balls for hours on end. A modest person, really, she would have dismissed the idea that it was done for the pleasure of being with her, pure and simple.

But it was. Besides, what else was there to do on a Sunday afternoon for someone like me? It was a good excuse for wearing just a pair of knee pants and sneakers—not the starched white sailor suit with long pants which the occasion called for.

Millie wouldn’t have cared so much, but her younger sister Helen was pretty strict, and keen on etiquette; not to mention Aunt Irma, the girls’ mother, who ruled the roost. Uncle Leo was nominal head of the family—a thoroughly domesticated father of four daughters, two of whom were already married. They lived in one of the smaller cities of the German Palatinate which is known for its wines, truffles and goose liver paste, but this is of little importance to the story; it could have happened any other place where a conscientious father was faced with the task of marrying off four daughters in the style to which they were accustomed. With “two down and two to go” at the time of my visit, Uncle Leo had reason to be satisfied with the course of events, quite apart from the fact that he owned a fine house and a profitable business, dealing in seed and fertilizer—wholesale.

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When we reached the bike shed we were both out of breath, and Millie stopped to fix her hair. It was ash blond, thick and copious, shaped to a widow’s peak at the line of the forehead. She wore it in bob style, which was first coming into fashion then.

“I look a mess,” she said in her husky voice, viewing herself in a hand mirror. “*Comme une sauvage*, as Mama would say.”

Aunt Irma had gone to a Swiss boarding school in her youth and was fond of using French expressions. Millie, on the other hand, was sent to a German *Pensionat* when her turn came to attend a finishing school.

“You look fine to me,” I volunteered, wondering why Millie so often found fault with herself, for no obvious reason.

“You are my most faithful admirer.” Her voice had a laugh in it now, as it often did when she addressed me. “Are you still willing to marry me when you grow up? You once promised when you were five years old.”

I thought for a moment, and then I assured her that the offer was still standing.

“But what about Mr. Freund, your tennis partner? I think he likes you.”

“Fancy that,” she remarked. “You only say so because he gave you caddy money.”

“No, *honestly*. I can tell from the way he looks at you sometimes.”

“With his sad dog eyes? It makes me giggle. If he only weren’t so bowlegged...”

“I didn’t notice. He sure can run fast.”

“That’s true. He is very quick at the net and his service is terrific. Actually, I rather like him. He seems sincere.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Oh, when people are not trying to pretend—when they say what they mean and mean what they say.”

I pondered her answer for a minute; it puzzled me.

Millie and I were great pals, maintaining an easy comradeship under which the age difference somehow vanished. Unlike cousin Helen, who was so mature and carried her twenty-one years with dignity, Millie was capable of playing the fool. When it came to monkey business she could be counted upon to hold up her end of the bargain.

Like the time we had with Bobo the terrier, whose normal function was that of watchdog and keeping the mice from overpopulating Uncle Leo’s grain bins. Millie fitted him with bedclothes and a roughly tailored bonnet and then we paraded him around in an old baby carriage, showing him off to all the world as Red Ridinghood’s grandmother. Bobo seemed to like it well enough, and didn’t even mind being fed from a baby bottle, but Uncle Leo grumbled. “The way you pamper him he will be spoiled for catching my rats.”

Millie taught me all kinds of more or less useful tricks, such as turning up the fountain on the front lawn all the way, until it would squirt higher than the roof, making lovely rainbow colors in the sunshine and splashing gaily through open windows. Madam Dupré, the officer’s wife, responded from the top floor with a temperamental outburst in rapid fire French, quite unmistakably critical.

And over everybody’s protests Millie allowed me to keep young chicks on the terrace and showed me how to take care of them.

No wonder I was fond of Millie; if she didn't always act her age, that was certainly no concern of mine.

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We were ready to go now. Millie nimbly mounted her bicycle; her trim, athletic figure looked good in the white tennis dress. The rear wheel was covered with a multi-colored net to prevent her half-long skirt from getting caught in the spokes. My bike had one too—much to my dismay; Helen let me use hers. It was humiliating to have to ride a girl's bike but there were no others in this all-girl household. What's more, it was much too big for me, and I had to pump the pedals from a standing position, bracing myself on the handlebars.

We rode through the park adjoining the tennis courts and then turned into a country lane. Skirting the center of town, we reached home by way of a tree-lined back road, within sight of the fortifications which had last witnessed action during the war of 1870. Now, years after World War I, the town was still a part of the occupied zone, and a French officer, Captain Dupré, with his family was quartered on the top floor of Uncle Leo's house. It was an impressive yellow sandstone structure, with bay windows, balconies and an open-air terrace, flanked by a garden which boasted goldfish in a circular fountain.

They were waiting for us, already seated around the dinner table, and Aunt Irma's kindly features betrayed some impatience. Her large, shapeless body was wrapped into an ankle-length dressing gown, her usual attire around the house. Aunt Irma was ailing and officially never left her home. She took occasional walks through the neighborhood under the cover of darkness.

"You know that the maids are off early on Sundays. Why can't you manage to be on time?" she demanded of Millie.

"Sorry, we had to finish the set. Our opponents didn't know when they were licked, and so it took a little longer."

"Who was your partner?" inquired Aunt Irma.

"Millie played with Mr. Freund," I said, a little hastily. "He gave me a quarter for getting the stray balls."

Aunt Irma looked me over and then said to Millie: "The boy is all hot and out of breath. You know that I don't want him to get so exhausted in the hot sun."

"But I like it, and there is nothing else to do," I insisted.

"The boy is *bored*," cried Aunt Irma. "We will have to find him a playmate. Tell Annemarie to come over—she is the same age, and a well-behaved child."

I remembered Annemarie, a neighbor girl, quite clearly from an earlier visit. That was a long time ago—when I was six—and now I really didn't care for girls anymore. Except Millie, of course, but that was different. And I vaguely recalled that Annemarie had gotten me into hot water at the time.

When I remained silent Aunt Irma tried another tack. "Tomorrow morning we will order some toys and games for you—anything you desire. We want you to be *happy* here. And when you go back home you must let everybody know that this was the finest vacation you ever had!"

I promised, and she was pleased. As we started eating, Aunt Irma got back to the subject of Millie's tennis partner.

"Who is this Mr. Freund? Any relation to the Friends who own the shoe store? I wasn't aware that they had a son."

Millie did not sit at the table; for some strange reason she shunned the family circle whenever possible, usually under some pretext, such as helping out the *servense*, or lack of room when there was a large gathering, which was often. Her parents, although dismayed by Millie's self-imposed exclusion, had learned to accept this habit, putting it down to mere stubbornness. Now she was seated on the armrest of an easy chair behind me, balancing her plate expertly on her knees and talking over my shoulder.

"I think he is a nephew from out of town, just here on a visit," she said evenly.

"Freund has a brother in Frankfurt," said Uncle Leo. He was an expert in the intricate science of family affiliations and could keep track of everybody's next of kin for several generations back. "He used to be a junior partner in the shoe store before he moved away and started one of his own."

"The retail business has its pitfalls," said Aunt Irma, "besides, it is common and lacks refinement."

"Fitting and selling shoes must be rather repulsive," Helen asserted while buttering a roll with dainty fingers.

"The Friends are respectable people—*rechte Leute*," said Uncle Leo in his low, colorless voice. "They seem to be doing fine."

"Money is important but it isn't everything, Papa," Helen replied. "What about breeding—*die gute Kinderstube*?"

"It is necessary to maintain *perspective*," Aunt Irma now said with authority, ready to lay down the law. Whenever she wanted to drive home a point, she would switch from the soft local dialect into precise High German. "In today's modern world, there is nothing more impressive than a manufacturer, a captain of industry; they are the masters of modern technique. When it comes to commerce give me an entrepreneur, a man of action able to

take the initiative when the time is ripe for it, almost like a general deploying his troops. But a mere storekeeper is at everybody's mercy—a sitting target, if you will.”

“Personally, I think there is a lot to be said for a professional man,” said Helen. Her two oldest sisters had married businessmen, and she secretly hoped to do better for herself when her turn came. She was two years younger than Millie; under the “house rules” laid down by her parents she could not expect to be married before her. Millie was next in line; all the more surprising that she had hardly said a word.

While the girls cleared away the dishes Uncle Leo retired to his armchair with the *Börsenblatt*, concentrating on the notations of the produce exchange. It was only a matter of time until the paper would sink to his knees—a sure sign that his siesta had started. Then Millie suggested that it was a fine evening for a constitutional, and after some discussion, her mother consented.

The precise nature of Aunt Irma's affliction had long been a mystery to me, deepened by the anxious concern of everybody, especially Mama, who was her only sister and very close to her. It was quite obvious, though, that this rigid confinement was voluntary and went much further than her condition required since she was well able to get about when she wanted to.

For these nocturnal excursions Aunt Irma armed herself with a cane and wore a dark cape, adding volume to her already large form. She seemed ill at ease and devoid of her usual stature as soon as she set foot outdoors. Millie and Helen took their accustomed posts at her side—for protection from unknown assailants and camouflage from curious neighbors. Their mother was sensitive about her awkward appearance, not to say vain.

“Watch the railroad tracks so you won't trip,” she was warned. The tracks crisscrossed the road in this area since it bordered on the town's commercial district. Uncle Leo's business premises and the warehouse, located just behind his home, had their own railroad siding, adding much excitement to the place in my eyes. His family considered it something of a drawback; they would have preferred to live in the more desirable residential parts.

While the women made their way over the prescribed route, I scampered about, catching odd bits of conversation which centered on the subject of Aunt Irma's health.

“Dr. Herbst thinks that you shouldn't postpone the operation any longer,” I heard Millie say. Aunt Irma demurred in a plaintive voice, like that of an obstinate child.

“Surgery for hernia is just a routine operation, and not dangerous in the least,” said Helen reassuringly.

“I still remember my last operation, over ten years ago,” her mother said. “It was a terrible experience and what's more, the rupture recurred. I could never go through with it again.”

“But Mama, you must think of your health, of the future,” urged Millie now. I missed the rest of the conversation because at that moment an idea occurred to me. I ran ahead and hid in a clump of bushes at the roadside. All was still at first but slowly their voices came into hearing range again as they approached my hideout.

“No, no, the very thought of it frightens me,” I heard Aunt Irma say, and then I broke out into a prolonged war whoop, circling the women as I hollered. They had come to a halt; the old lady was rigid with fright, her right hand clasping her heart. The girls only laughed, and then I stopped yelling.

When Aunt Irma finally recovered her composure she said with a faint smile: “What are you trying to do to me, you terrible boy?,” giving me the uncomfortable feeling that I had made a fool of myself.

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The next morning, the hooting of a locomotive whistle woke me up. The engine came huffing and puffing down the street, pouring out big white clouds from its smokestack, and I watched from my bedroom window as a boxcar was shunted onto Uncle Leo’s siding. At that very moment a horse-drawn farm cart, fresh from unloading at the ramp, emerged from the passageway into the street.

The sudden appearance of the big black engine proved too much for the nerves of two elderly country nags, and the ensuing melee was something to behold. The horses reared and whinnied, the driver cursed and yelled and the train came to a sudden stop. As the farmer frantically tried to calm the horses and straighten out their harness the engineer in his cabin was beside himself with laughter. “Stupid horses,” he said between guffaws, “they should stay where they belong—on the farm.”

When calm was restored I went in for breakfast. I had seen as much excitement as any boy could hope for so early in the morning—without as much effort as getting out of my pajamas—and I proceeded to tell Aunt Irma about it.

“Keep your distance from the horses when you are down in the yard,” she admonished me. “It’s safer.”

“I’m not afraid of them,” I said. “Dad lets me take the reins sometimes when we are out with the surrey. I know how to drive.”

“That’s different,” she said as she went into the kitchen to discuss the day’s menu with Bienchen, the cook. “Why don’t you go and help Millie with the marketing this morning? You will be out of harm’s way then.”

The door to the girls’ room was half open and I stuck my head in as I passed. “Come in and tell me something,” Millie called out to me. “Something old and something new. Keep me company, anyway.”

I went in and found her alone. Helen had gotten up early and gone over to the office to help with the receiving and dispatching, as she often did on busy days. She had a good head for figures and was eager to be useful to her father.

Millie sat at the piano in her slip, idly leafing through a book of sheet music with a bright cover. "I am looking for something to cheer me up," she said. After a while she began to play the score of "Mein Herr Marquis" from *Die Fledermaus*, alternately singing and humming the tune, but clearly without much enthusiasm.

I sat on the thick soft carpet, listening and watching her movements. The girls' room had great appeal for me; the gaily flowered wallpaper, the organdy curtains and the cream-colored lacquer furniture with its clean simple lines were attractive by themselves, but there was more to it than that. It meant being close to Millie, and she never asked me to leave, even when she was dressing. Helen, with her marked sense of propriety, always closed the door on me on such occasions.

In the early days I would have been hard put to choose between Millie and Helen—to say which one I rated higher. They were both lovely, lively young girls, more vivacious and, yes, more desirable than Mama with her matronly ways, not to mention Aunt Irma. But then something happened with Helen that served to put a distance between us. As an incident it was a mere trifle, bound to be quickly forgotten, but in my memory it refused to budge and stood henceforth as the instant when Helen had made fun of me.

We were to go out together; I had just gotten into a sparkling clean, freshly pressed white suit. When I reached for my white shoes I found them badly scuffed and, seized by a momentary turn towards tidiness, I put up a fuss. Helen first tried to pooh-pooh it but when I persisted she looked around for some shoe polish. When none was found—to my continued dismay—she hit upon an idea. "Go into the kitchen and ask for some Obinisodum. That will get them clean in a jiffy."

The kitchen was Sabine's domain: a large room with big windows facing to the yard and up-to-date equipment at her command to conjure up ever new culinary concoctions. Everyone called her Bienchen; a bit incongruously in view of her large frame supported by heavy ankles which ended in carpet slippers, but then again appropriately because she was, after all, a "busy little bee."

Now she sat firmly planted on a kitchen stool, stirring the dough in a mixing bowl between her knees. When I first made my request she didn't seem to understand and just shook her head under the knotted scarf she always wore—for neatness' sake. With growing anxiety I repeated the word over and over again, almost like a magic formula, until Bienchen finally said: "Obinisodum? Obinisodum? There ain't no such thing. Just think what you are saying, boy."

Only then I began to repeat the big word slowly until it finally dawned on me what it really meant: O-bin-i-so-dum, something like "Oh, how dumb am I." I was so angry I almost cried. As I withdrew from the kitchen, Bienchen called after me: "I think Miss Helen got the better of you. And tell her we are all out of white shoe polish."

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Millie and I were off to market. It was a suitable chore for a Monday morning when empty larders had to be replenished. I liked to go because there were always certain “fringe benefits”—crumbs off the table, as it were—a piece of fruit, a handful of hazelnuts, some pickles or radishes. In the open square, the farmers had laid out their appetizing wares on shelves and tables under bright awnings; they had come from the surrounding countryside, a region favored with more than its share of rich soil and sunshine. Some of the farm women wore their colorful local garb, others arrived in work clothes adroitly balancing heavy baskets on their heads which were shielded by small round cushions.

Throughout the market were quiet little stands selling candy and Turkish Delight, but most fascinating were the pitchmen offering their wares under an avalanche of words. Their faces took on contorted expressions as they talked incessantly in clipped phrases while offering a variety of articles ranging from knife sharpeners to patent medicines.

At a corner booth, a man in shirt sleeves and bowler hat assured the crowd that his remedy for falling hair was equally effective against frostbite, lumbago and rheumatism. “How is it possible?” asked a skeptic in the audience, and “Won’t hair grow in the wrong places?” inquired a timid voice in the back, but the salesman insisted that his mixture would do all of these things without fail. “If it doesn’t, I’ll *drink* it,” he cried.

“I bet he is bald under his black hat,” mumbled the heckler, and went on his way. Millie had finished her shopping and joined me to watch the demonstration. “Let’s go,” she said after a while. “Soon he will start all over again—it’s like listening to a gramophone record.”

“I like to watch his expression,” I insisted. “He makes funny faces while he talks and throws his arms around.”

“The things people have to do for a living!” Millie remarked when we finally turned to go. I offered to carry one of the bags, and she let me. It was heavier than expected, and I was glad when she suggested that we stop for an ice cream.

“Nice weather we are having,” the street vendor said. “Too warm for lugging such a load, though, especially for pretty young ladies.” Millie acknowledged the compliment with a wan smile.

After we finished eating the pink stuff I asked her whether she was going to play tennis later on. I was feeling the quarter in my pocket—the one Mr. Freund had given me—and considered the possibility of earning another one.

“I could pick up the balls again,” I offered.

“It looks like I am not going to play today. Mama has other plans for me.”

“Mr. Freund will be unhappy; he said he would be looking for you at the courts.” I was trying to disguise my own disappointment. “Don’t you *want* to play?”

“I don’t really know,” she said moodily.

“He promised to show me how to use my new racket. Perhaps I can practice some of the strokes.”

Millie didn’t comment. She is really strange today, I thought; not her usual self.

When we got back upstairs Aunt Irma received us in the hall. A large bouquet of pink carnations had just been delivered by the florist, with a card addressed to Millie, and her mother was eager to learn who had sent them.

“I can open it later,” Millie said evasively, but she hadn’t counted on her mother’s determination.

“I know you can, but why be so secretive about it? Are you trying to keep things from me—the one person who has your best interest at heart?”

“I have nothing to hide, Mama.” She held the flowers close.

“Indeed you don’t. It is quite obvious where the flowers come from. With your mania for tennis you have completely isolated yourself from sensible young men with serious intentions. *Alles mit Mass und Ziel*, is my motto. When will you learn to act your age?”

Millie did not answer, or preferred to keep her own counsel, but her mother enlarged on the subject at considerable length, using some French expressions, such as “*pas de bonne famille*” and others I couldn’t understand.

“He just isn’t suitable company for you—*er ist kein Verkehr für Dich*.” It was clear that she was referring to Mr. Freund.

The doorbell rang, and Millie went to answer it. “Hello, Annemarie,” I heard her say. “How nice of you to come so soon after we called. The two of you can go out and play together.” The tone of her voice betrayed little of the strain she was under; perhaps she was glad to end the scene gracefully.

I hardly recognized the girl with brown eyes and pigtails who now faced me. It was over two years since my last visit—a long time in a boy’s life. But I vaguely remembered that I had gotten into trouble because of Annemarie. Mama was visiting, too, then—actually she had brought me along—and it was she who gave me a hard time.

By now, it seemed that everybody had forgotten—except myself. Annemarie didn’t appear as if she remembered anything. Perhaps she had never known; about the fuss, I mean.

“Let’s play hopscotch,” she suggested when we got outside. “There’s a new way where you have to skip every other time.”

“All right,” I said, condescendingly, and looked on while she drew the lines on the sidewalk. “What happens when you forget to skip?”

“You have to start all over again.”

She beat me, winning three times in a row, and then I offered to show her my chicks. There were five of them, kept in an open box with the wire mesh on top. We let them out, and they wandered about the terrace in all directions, peeping and preening themselves in the sunlight; all except one, who stayed close to the box and hardly moved.

“Look, he is limping,” cried Annemarie.

“I know. He must have hurt himself. Millie says he is a *Sorgenkind*, a troubled child. He is sickly and hardly eats anything.”

And now I suddenly remembered what all the fuss had been about with Annemarie, when we were about six years old.

She had been sick in bed for a few days—something wrong with her foot—but it was not catching and they allowed me to visit her. We played some games, and then she offered to show me the sore spot; it was her idea. She had some kind of a rash around her instep, all red and blotchy, and rather startling to look at. Then and there I decided to “play doctor” and investigate matters further. I told Annemarie that we would keep it a secret—doctors never talked about such things to others, I assured her—and she consented.

After a while her mother came in but by then we had resumed our game of Parcheesi, and it was all right. Or so I thought.

That same afternoon Mama took me aside and tried to cross-examine me. I gathered that Annemarie had told her mother, and she, in turn, told mine. Faced with their plot, I decided to deny everything. What else was there to do? It had seemed like a natural thing, and now Mama acted as if I had committed a crime.

When I continued to plead innocence, and ignorance of the whole matter, Mama took a firm stand. I would be confined to my room until ready to tell the truth. Apparently there was no further punishment in store for me, as long as I admitted everything. But I had to break down and confess.

The pleasant airy guestroom seemed to turn into a prison cell while I brooded in isolation. Its furniture took on menacing proportions; the massive chest and the tall bookshelf seemed to crowd in on me, just like the hateful grown-ups who told secrets and demanded confessions. Encountering myself in the mirror I saw dark shadows rising behind me as the hours rolled on.

Finally I tried the door handle and, lo and behold!, it was open; it had been open all the time. I knew that it was up to me now to make a clean breast of it and chuck the whole thing.

I felt better afterwards—but I didn't forget.

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Annemarie asked whether she could have one of the chicks but Aunt Irma said not, it wasn't fair to take him away from the rest of the brood, he would be unhappy and might die. "But you are welcome to take the whole menagerie if your mother permits it. They are really in the way here."

We put them all back into the box and then Annemarie said she had to go home, it would be time for lunch soon.

Millie was nowhere in sight, and I was about to look for her when the man with the fire extinguisher arrived. Aunt Irma had been expecting him, and we went out to the terrace for a demonstration.

"You probably don't get many calls from private people for your product," she inquired.

"Not too often, madam," the salesman said. "Mostly from factories and institutions. But we are equipped for every contingency. Our slogan is *Feuer breitet sich nicht aus, das Du Minimax im Haus.*"

"I must tell you about my condition," Aunt Irma said, in a confidential voice. "I am an invalid. My illness doesn't permit me to go out, I am chained to this house—permanently."

"Sorry to hear it, Madam," the man said. "For home use, we have this convenient small model, easy enough for a child to handle." He made me hold it, and it felt light and handy indeed.

"Let me see the big size," she insisted. "You see, I would be helpless if anything happened while I am all alone in the house. It's for my peace of mind as well as my safety."

"I have never sold the standard model for residential use, but as you wish. I am afraid it will be too heavy for you to hold, though."

"Can I try it out?" she asked eagerly.

"You are entitled to a trial demonstration, to learn its use. All you have to do is push the bottom lever hard against floor or table. But, Madam, please remember your condition."

Aunt Irma took firm hold of the heavy, yard-long container, banged its bottom hard against the stone ledge of the terrace and then swung it around with agility to direct the outpouring chemical towards an imaginary conflagration. Most of it spurted in a great arc on the corrugated roof over the warehouse ramp.

In her long dark housecoat she looked almost like a fire captain taking charge in an emergency, and her face took on an appropriate hawk-like expression.

“You have handled it extremely well, not a bit like an invalid,” said the man after the stream had subsided. He took out his order book and started writing. “We will get the big size then.”

After he had gathered up his equipment and formally taken leave, Aunt Irma reclined in her armchair to catch a few minutes of sunshine before lunch. Soon Uncle Leo would alight from his office, regular as clockwork, and come upstairs to join us for the noonday meal, usually a three-course affair. Bienchen always kept an eye out for him from the kitchen window; she would have the soup on the table before her master arrived.

Now we heard Bobo’s barking, a sure sign that Uncle Leo was on his way. With much noise and excitement he always escorted him on his short walk to the house door. There he stopped and ran back, knowing full well that he was not allowed inside.

Uncle Leo promptly appeared, turned the key in the lock behind him and waved up to us. He slowly made his way across the yard, dragging his feet a little as he went and one shoulder slightly hunched. Bobo was very wild today, getting constantly in the way. Aunt Irma kept a close, almost anxious watch on her husband as he proceeded. He was taking his time.

“He seems tired,” she said, half to herself. “He has really aged these past few years. Look how he drags himself; all the spring is gone from his step.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, trying hard to say something pleasant. “He is the same as always. It’s only that Bobo is in his way.”

“No, no,” she insisted, “your uncle and aunt are getting old. But you are a good boy, trying to cheer me up. Let’s go inside and see what Bienchen has cooked up today.”

“Where is Millie?” Uncle Leo asked when we had sat down.

“She complained of a headache and is staying in her room,” Aunt Irma said curtly.

“That’s strange. She seemed perfectly all right this morning,” Helen remarked. “Who sent her the flowers, by the way?”

Aunt Irma hushed her, and I thought it better to keep quiet.

“How was business this morning? Judging from the traffic it must have been rather quiet—especially for a Monday.” Aunt Irma was in the habit of counting the farm carts from the window, for a rough estimate of the turnover.

“Don’t be so sure,” said Helen. “Wait till you hear about the big deal Papa made over the telephone.”

All eyes were on Uncle Leo now.

“Yes, I bought a whole shipload of Canadian wheat today.”

“A whole ship full of wheat?” I cried out in amazement. “But will you ever get it up here?”

“It’s on the Rhine now, coming up from Rotterdam, but you will never see it here. I sold it again right away, at a nice profit.”

“Imagine,” said Helen, “making a deal like that—just with a few telephone calls. That takes quite a bit of *savoir faire*.”

Uncle Leo chuckled, and noisily ate the rest of his soup.

How curious, I thought. A shipload of wheat is bought and sold and doesn’t even know a thing about it.

Before I got up from the table Aunt Irma reminded me that I had not written home in almost a week. “I have started a letter to your mother and you can add a few lines. It’s on the dresser in my bedroom.” As I was leaving I heard her say to the others: “That will keep him occupied for a while.”

I went to see how Millie was doing.

She was lying on her bed, fully dressed, reading. The flowers were in a vase on the piano, lending the room something of their fragrance. Millie half raised herself when I came in and said: “Glad to see you. How did it go with Annemarie? I meant to ask you.”

Wasn’t it just like Millie? There she was, supposedly sick and suffering, and the first thing coming to her mind was to inquire about Annemarie.

“She’s all right,” I said in an offhand way. “We played together, and she liked the chicks. The trouble is, I don’t really care for girls anymore. They bore me.”

My remark made her sit up; she was startled and amused by it. I began to feel embarrassed as she continued to laugh uncontrollably, for no obvious reason.

“What’s the matter? Did I say something funny?”

“Very, very funny,” she said when she had calmed down. “The funniest thing I have heard in years. Except, it’s also very sad. Sad news for me because it could mean a broken promise. Remember your promise?”

It slowly dawned on me what she meant: my promise to marry her, made at age five. That was a long time ago—promises weren’t meant forever. But then it occurred to me that this wasn’t the time to let Millie down—not this very minute, anyway.

“I remember, but it has nothing to do with us. I haven’t changed my mind about *that*.”

“What a relief,” Millie said. “I feel much better now.” She put her arm around me in an impulsive gesture and kissed me on the cheek.

“How is your headache, by the way?” I inquired, remembering what I had really come for.

“What made you think I had a headache?”

“Your mother told us, since you didn’t come for lunch.”

“That wasn’t the reason. Mama and I had a little argument which upset me. But I can see her point now.”

“You argued about Mr. Freund, didn’t you? I think he is nice.”

“So do I—and quite a tennis player. But Mama is probably right—it couldn’t lead to anything—for reasons you can’t understand yet.”

“I guess you won’t go to the courts today.” My heart sank as I saw my hope for earning pocket money dwindle.

“No, I have to stay home for the next few days. Mama hasn’t been feeling too well and needs my attention.”

“I didn’t notice anything—she *seems* all right.”

“Mama is not in the habit of complaining. You have to draw it out of her. That reminds me; I must see that she is taking her afternoon nap.” She got up. “What are you going to do with yourself now?”

Aunt Irma’s room was at the end of the hall; only on rare occasions had I been inside, and then just briefly.

Now, as usual, the windows were closed and curtains drawn, compounding a stale sickroom air and obscuring the outlines of the heavy, old-fashioned furnishings. On the dresser was a large collection of bottles and jars with medicine, pillboxes, tubes and assorted containers: Aunt Irma’s arsenal in her war against illness. There was also a porcelain pitcher with matching basin, but it served decorative purposes only because a large modern bathroom was right next door. There the basin and tub were of white marble; it was even equipped with a bidet—which was a kind of foot-bath, I had been told.

I finally discovered the letter, in Aunt Irma’s neat, curly handwriting on pale blue stationery. I skimmed over it.

There were the usual sentiments and conventional phrases, full of sweetness and light; about “my good Leo, working so hard” and “the darling girls trying to lighten my burden”; finally a line about “our little sunshine whose visit gives us so much pleasure.” Inevitably, towards the end of the letter, there was a reference to “the poor state of my health, and the future that rests with the Almighty.”

The back page, left blank, stared me reproachfully in the face, as a reminder of the task ahead. Letter writing, in my opinion, was invented to dampen a boy’s vacation spirit.

“Dear folks,” I began, and then I paused. After a while I put down two or three lines reporting a few random occurrences; about the chicks, perhaps, and the new tennis racket.

Only a third of the page was filled, and I had already run out of things to say. I frantically searched for an idea while chewing the end of my pencil. Then I read Aunt Irma’s letter again for inspiration, and suddenly a thought struck me.

“Aunt Irma is *mean* to Millie,” I wrote in big letters, using up much room, “She keeps her cooped up in the house.”

I ended the letter with “love and kisses” and then quickly sealed it. Seized by a vague sense of wrongdoing, I decided to get rid of the evidence as soon as possible and took a walk to the mailbox. I felt safe as soon as I had dropped it in the slot. Afterwards, from a respectable distance, I watched the steam engine take away the boxcar on Uncle Leo’s siding. The engineer waved to me and blew the whistle, as if to salute.

When I got back upstairs Aunt Irma had just finished napping and wanted to know whether I had written yet.

“Yes, auntie,” I assured her. “I have already mailed it.”

“Why didn’t you let me see it first?” She look at me quizzically. I felt the blood rising to my head, and didn’t answer.

“My goodness,” she suddenly remembered, “the letter didn’t have a stamp on it. Sometimes it comes back; otherwise the receiver has to pay a penalty, and that’s very awkward. Downright discourteous, in fact.”

“I am sure my mother won’t mind,” I said, but Aunt Irma would have none of it.

“They don’t collect the mail until four o’clock, and if you hurry you can catch the postman and ask him very politely to return the letter.”

“But it will be very hard to find among all that mail.”

“Not at all,” she insisted. “Remember, it’s light blue.”

My mission to the mailbox was unsuccessful—from Aunt Irma’s point of view, at any rate. I dutifully posted myself at the strategic corner—with time to spare until collection time—but the man never showed up. I waited an hour and then I decided that fate was on my side.

I had underestimated the long arm of justice—and the efficiency of the post office. The letter came back the next day, due to “insufficient postage,” and Aunt Irma opened it.

If it upset her, she didn’t admit as much. I suggested we tear up the letter and write a new one, but she was against it; it went on its way in the original form. Being on the back page, my message was inseparable from her own, which she considered faultless, no doubt.

The two letters were wedded together, for better or worse.

Aunt Irma had a final word of advice, though. “When you are a guest away from home you should never criticize your hosts—the people who invited you—or talk about them behind their backs to your own family.”

She said it quite calmly, but in precise High German, as she always did when she wanted to drive home a point.