

THE ANGEL AND THE SPHINX

At the foot of the deserted castle the weary knight
went to sleep. At midnight he went up into the
illuminated hall. Next to the blazing hearth, an
unknown bride was waiting.

She was weaving a crown of myrtle in her
dark tresses and her gaze was a gaze of
eternity...

Their eyes met; they were exchanged rings
when the cock suddenly crowed.

She paled like a phantom; everything
vanished in a gray dawn...and the knight
woke up.

The Legend of the Black Forest.

From a German Manuscript of the Sixteenth Century

Am I truly a monk, a tonsured monk in the silence of the cloister, me, Konrad von Felseneck, the free knight? I once had a castle perched on a mountain; at my feet, dense forests in which deer were abundant, profound valleys with fresh mills, handsome squires and gray falcons. I had all that... And now, the bare walls of a cell, the black crucifix, and, behind my grilled window, the great elms of the brothers' covered walk, are all that remain to me.

But Lord God, could I do otherwise? Am I not criminal, perhaps less criminal than mad, the victim of a malediction come from afar...yes, from before me...from another self...from sins accumulated in my other existence...as Master Rupertus said?

What is there in my life that is true? Feasts, tourneys, hunts, war cries and cajoling women's voices have all fled. No, nothing was true. They were shadows, nothing but shadows. Life in decline is like water running over dead leaves, the laughter of the wind that glides through the thickets and has already gone when one talks about it.

Something was real, however, terribly real, in my evil life: something ineffaceable. Two images remain to me, two indestructible memories. They are there, between me and the blank wall of my cell; they accompany me over the funereal paving stones of the cloister. They come back, above all, when I sing the office with the brothers in the apse, beneath the tenebrous arch of the choir, where the eternal lamp hangs. From the height of the vault they gaze at me, the two women who made my destiny and who are still disputing the shreds of my agonizing heart.

She is still there, the Unique, the Unforgettable, the Fiancée of the Dream, the Shade, impalpable and distant, but so real and so present that all the women of flesh have been unable to efface the imprint. How pale she is beneath her bridal veil! How profound her gaze is! It is a gaze of eternity...

And the other is also there, alas: the Sphinx-Woman, the subtle and carnal monster that has burned my nights and devastated my days. Begone, accursed! But no; she arches her white torso; her breasts are erect; she twists her neck and laughs malevolently... Disappear, or I shall strike!

Oh, who can decipher the unfathomable enigma of those two ever-present images, in which my entire life is concentrated? By virtue of seeing them, my cheeks have become hollow and the flesh has melted over my bones; and, young as yet in years, I am already old.

What do I hear? The light trills of the nightingale suspended in its cage, in front of the prior's cell.
Poor captive, its voice becomes sad with the falling dusk. It hurls its long, dolorous notes into the night...

Oh, the folly of song, amour and life!

Before dying or losing my reason, let us write down the memories that obsess me.

I. The Virgin of the Stained-Glass Window

I see myself, as a child twelve years old, perched on the highest tower of the castle, which stands on a wooded summit of the Black Forest, overlooking a vast extent of mountains and the entire valley of the Rhine. At my feet is the heavy building with the tangled roofs, the walls bristling with crenellations and slender turrets. On the square terrace of the keep, which serves as my vantage point, stands a large pole, on which a yellow banner floats, armored with a black griffin. The flag announces the presence in the castle of my father, Graf von Felseneck. By my side, my master-of-arms, the old squire Siegwart with the harsh features and a steely gaze, tugs the cord that retains the banner, brings it down and rolls it up; for the lord is going away.

From the interior courtyard, as deep as a well, confused sounds rise: the whinnying of horses, the clink of arms, rude human voices. My father, with thirty vassals, is going to join the Elector, who is accompanying the Emperor to the war. The troop has already crossed the drawbridge. The sentry salutes them with a blast of the trumpet, to which the men-at-arms respond: "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Now the file of horsemen descends the path that snakes around the base of the huge castle and then plunges into the forest. It appears again in a clearing; I see helmets glistening in the sunlight; finally, it disappears under the trees.

Then I too utter a cry of joy into the blue sky, a cry of deliverance that causes Siegwart to say: "Silence, little wild falcon, or I'll shut you in your cage—you know, the dark armory where the evil black panoplies are."

But old Siegwart doesn't scare me, in spite of his terrible eyes. I stroke his white and yellow beard, which resembles the moss of fir-trees torn by the wind.

"Tomorrow," I say to him, "we'll go hunting, a long, long way. And when I'm grown up, I'll give you a fine fief..."

"A fief? What would I do with it? But if you don't learn to handle the sword and the lance, you'll never be a knight."

Siegwart, bending down, grunting, opens the trap-door with his arm of iron and descends the staircase into the tower. I remain on the terrace. With my father gone, I feel that I have become the monarch of the country. The thousand arrows of the fir-trees that are mounting an assault toward me from abyssal depths, the kite that is soaring overhead, and the silver clouds murmur: "You're free!"

I see the dense forests undulate, blurred by light, and the green plain dissolving at the horizon. Then my heart swells and responds to things: "Yes, the world belongs to me!"

I have not conserved any memory of my mother. I was scarcely two years old when she died. My father only made rare appearances at the castle. His life was spent far away, at the Elector's court or at war. I grew up thus, like an orphan, in the vast castle, with my two masters, the good chaplain and squire Siegwart.

As far as my memory goes back, I led two lives: that of the castle and that outside; one of meditation and dream, plunged in study and books, the other of movement and action, spread out in the open air, dispersed in the woods. For a long time, those two existences ran parallel within me, like two rivers of different hues, which were juxtaposed without mingling. Delivered to one, I absorbed myself within it passionately and forgot the other, until the moment when it gripped me entirely again.

Oh, the long hours spent listening to the interminable stories that the chaplain told me, or reading romances of chivalry, to the sway of the linden trees in the double arch of the window—how lightly and diaphanously they passed, and how I savored them! And I loved no less riding with Siegwart beneath the spring foliage, and the barking of dogs over the snow in the forest sparkling with frost. In the free days of twelve to fifteen years of age, they were the sole joys of my life. I was unaware of the world, but I possessed myself without knowing myself, in an interior and inexpressible dream.

And yet, strange impressions were already disquieting me then; I saw looming up before me the painful enigma, the undecipherable enigma, of existence.

In the castle of Felseneck there is one place that inspired me from early childhood with an ardent curiosity and a superstitious dread. I mean the chapel that my mother had had constructed, in the year of my birth and her death, by a young master of Nuremberg, equally renowned as an architect and as a painter on glass. It was the only living memory of my mother, a monument to her vanished soul, so I adored it.

From one of the interior courtyards one penetrates into a little nave of bare gray granite. To the left there is a sarcophagus in a niche. The upper part represents my mother, supine, her hands joined over her breast, a greyhound curled up at her feet. At the back is a stone Christ; one can scarcely see the two arms of the cross and the body of the Savior in the penumbra. The marvel of the place is a brace of ogival windows ornamented with stained glass. They are flamboyant against the blackness of the walls and cast a supernatural gaze into the darkness of the sanctuary.

The window to the right represents a svelte virgin in a crimson robe, her pale face raised to the sky, her eyes ecstatic. The nimbus of her hair flows from her head over her shoulders like a river ablaze with amour. Her luminous feet, martyred feet speckled with drops of blood, are trampling a cloud where an impotent chimera is writhing. The saint is holding a red tulip in her left hand, from which flames are escaping, and a palm of victory in her right hand. Behind her, the celestial Jerusalem is staged beneath the azure sky, like a white fortress.

Facing the triumphant virgin, another ogival stained glass window shines. It depicts a knight in bright armor standing in a leafy forest. He is holding a beautiful horse by the bridle, which has an almost human gaze, seemingly scenting combat with its flared nostrils, and whinnying at the fanfare. The face of the knight, beneath his raised visor, framed by the helm and gorgerin, is sad but resolute. Around him, in the forest, an entire population of demons, monsters and sinister larvae is climbing and sniggering. They are emerging from the roots, swarming over the branches, extending their claws, their wing-cases and their hairy wings toward the warrior, widening their rapacious eyes over him. But the knight does not see them. His firm and cold gaze is contemplating a distant bloody battle before hurling himself into it, while his iron-gloved fist restrains the superb horse by the shaggy mane.

With what spell had the unknown master infused his glass-work? What marvelous power made their dark reds, their intense blues and their snowy and steely pallors sparkle? I don't know; but those two figures attracted me invincibly. It would have been impossible for me to translate what they said to me; it penetrated into me by means of a magical language. It was like a filtration of voices from beyond the sea and radiance from beyond the sky. I gazed, I was fascinated, and dormant layers of memory stirred in the crepuscular depths of my soul.

Yes, for me, the virgin of the window and the knight of the terrible forest were fulgurant messengers from an unknown world, from a region that was distant, and yet more familiar than my surroundings. Such was my veneration for those two persons that I refrained from interrogating the chaplain on their subject. I was convinced that I knew them better than he did; his confused explanations would have troubled me in the secret worship so dear to my heart.

I recall exactly the day when a more intimate bond was established between me and the two immaterial beings painted on glass, whom I called in my silent monologues "the two angels of the chapel." Ought I to confide to you, unknown reader of this confession, these insensate things of my childhood, so dear to my memory that I tremble to write them? Perhaps I'm wrong and you're going to laugh at me, and yet it's from that mysterious moment that my better life emerged...

To enable you to comprehend my adventure, however, it's necessary for me to say something about the good chaplain who was charged with my education: I could do with him almost what I pleased, but I loved him dearly.

Oh, the good chaplain, with his well-nourished and clean-shaven face, and his broad features, whose creases had the heaviness of an old book of prayers with iron corners and Gothic characters, but which expanded in a benevolent smile as soon as he opened his mouth. He sat down facing me in a low room furnished with a little organ and a dresser filled with parchments; there he taught me sacred and profane

history according to the Latin Bible and an old German chronicle that recounted the events of the human race from the fall of Adam to the Emperors of Germany.

Biblical and profane stories impassioned me, but they also caused me anxieties. The history of the human race seemed to me to be a lugubrious melee, like the engravings on wood from Nuremberg that ambulant merchants brought us, in which one saw naïve artisans, rich Pharisees, sinister rogues and executioners in turbans pressing around Christ in a frightful and compact crowd. On some days, my curiosity was amused by that pell-mell; on others a host of questions crowded my mind. I asked myself: “Why so much misfortune? Why so many wars? Why must we all suffer because of Adam’s sin? Why have I been born in a century in which one hears talk of nothing but sacrilegious wars, when the Emperor’s crown is sold at auction, and not in the time of the crusades?”

When I posed one of those questions to the excellent chaplain, I saw his face contract and a great furrow hollow out in his forehead. “God wanted it thus, my child,” he stammered.

When I added: “But that is unjust, and I want to know why,” he said to me, raising his large hand with a menacing index finger: “Beware of heresy! May the holy Church preserve you from the spirit of Satan!” Then his eyes expressed such terror that I had a desire to laugh, but I soon took pity on my master.

“Herr chaplain,” I said, smiling, “I no longer want to know, and I will believe anything you wish, but this evening you’ll give me, won’t you, the book that contains the adventures of King Arthur?”

Immediately, the good priest’s face lit up. “Konrad, Konrad,” he said, “how much difficulty I have expelling your malign spirit! But I’ll succeed in that; yes, I’ll bind it with cords and precipitate it into the depths of Hell!”

As he concluded that sentence, in a resounding voice, the poor chaplain was reminiscent of Saint Michael transpiercing the dragon. I, who knew him, knew that I could obtain anything from him at such moments, and I added in a submissive voice: “Yes, my good father, you have defeated it forever; but you know, the book I need is the one that contains the story of Lancelot and Queen Guinevere.”

“You shall have it,” said the chaplain, “And now we’ll sing a psalm and say a prayer...” And he placed his triumphant hands on the keyboard.

But that evening, in my somber bedroom, where Siegwart lay down beside me muttering stories of battle, the troubling questions returned to assail me. I rolled over in my blanket in order not to see the horrible crowd of the Nuremberg engraving, which surrounded me and jostled me: the murderers the executioners and the men in turbans threatening me with torture. Sometimes I woke up abruptly with an indescribable astonishment and a frightful fear of existence. It seemed to me then that a demonic power had hurled me out of nothingness, and I addressed questions to myself with a veritable bewilderment.

“Who am I? Why am I in the world? Why has the darkness give birth to me? How was I born from nothing?”

In the bright morning I slipped into the deserted chapel, I looked at the stained glass windows, and they consoled me a little. The knight of the terrible forest said: “Life is a battle!” and the virgin with the nimbus of streaming hair added: “Hope, my child; I can see the light!”

Among the books that the chaplain enabled me to read, I had a veritable passion for stories of the crusades. No other epoch of history attracted me as powerfully. The old oak dresser, our only library, contained a precious volume. It was a Latin chronicle brought back from a convent in Syria by one of my ancestors. It was written on parchment and difficult to read. I had the chaplain translate long chapters for me which he intoned with the emphatic voice of a church cantor. I listened to him, and my mind wandered in Palestine with the crusaders. I shall never forget the singular emotion I felt on the day when he read me the following passage:

The Christian knights were camped on the Syrian coast, near the mouth of the river Nasr-el-Ramyn, facing Saint-Jean-d’Acre, to which they had laid siege. Around them flourished the roses of Sharon, beloved by the daughters of Israel, and the great lilies of the fields, at which the Sons of God smiled, gazing at their virginal blooms. One morning, the crusaders saw five hundred ships arriving by sea, with all sails aloft, bearing the standards of the Cross. Those vessels were bringing new crusaders from Frisia, Denmark, France and Germany. A cry of joy rose up from the fleet and the Christian camp; the crusaders

ran toward the shore to salute their brothers. But Saladin, the redoubtable sultan, the great enemy of Christ, taking advantage of that moment of confusion, threw his troops upon the posts that the Christians occupied on the sea shore, drove them back and entered the city. Then a great cry of indignation and rage ran through the camp of the crusaders. There were cries of "Saladin! Saladin, the enemy of God, the king of Babylon, the vanquisher of Jerusalem, has entered Saint-Jean-d'Acre!"

The interior vision that the story in question provoked in me had an almost supernatural precision. At the first words I felt that I was transported beneath a dazzling light. Before me the yellow sands of the Syrian beach snaked away as far as the eye could see, between a double band of sea and mountains staged in blue domes. I also saw rose-bushes like enormous bouquets blossoming in gardens planted with palm trees, and pale lilies of an unknown pride looking up amid the stones of hills.

Then, on the edge of a marshy plain, a fortified city launched like a peninsula into the sea designed its black walls and square towers. I could see the wooden towers of the besiegers distinctly. The coats of mail and helmets of latter were scintillating, and human clusters were tumbling from ladders. I also saw, on the ramparts, a swarm of multicolored coats and Saracen turbans. The name of Saint-Jean-d'Acre, heard for the first time, traversed me like a trumpet blast. It made me vibrate all the way to the marrow of my bones, and the enthusiasm of the crusaders lifted me up entirely, like a ship borne aloft by a wave. That of Saladin, on the other hand, touched me like the point of a dagger. I saw red and I had the sentiment of falling helplessly into a forest of scimitars and curved swords.

The sensation was so violent that I stood up and quit the chaplain instantly, alleging my lesson in arms with Siegwart. In reality, an irresistible desire drew me toward the chapel.

At the first glance cast toward the stained glass windows, they appeared to me to be brighter than usual. Was it the sun that was coloring them, or had a mysterious life entered into the windows? The virgin with the hair streaming like a nimbus around the face was resplendent in a fulguration of blood, gold and light, which sprang from her diaphanous and transfigured body. Was she trying to speak to me?

Immediately, I saw the tulip that she was holding catch fire, and I felt a profound commotion in my heart. That torch—I had understood now—was her own heart. It was burning without being consumed, burning with an eternal love for the person she loved, and its red flame, its bloody flame, was showing him the route of splendors...

I looked at the knight. His attitude and expression had changed. He seemed now to be launching himself out of the ogive, his eyes ablaze, and his gaze darted into the gloom like a thin ray, toward the flamboyant heart of the martyr. I even asked myself, sometimes, whether he and I might not be one and the same person, and that thought gave me a frisson of pride.

Such was my life of dream, hidden in the utmost depths of myself, nothing of which was betrayed externally. It shone in the night of my soul like an intangible lamp in a closed sanctuary. But I had another, anxious and seething, as if released from outside. Hunting and excursions of horseback carried me into the woods. I departed early in the morning with Siegwart, my crossbow on my back and a quiver of arrows at my saddle-bow. As soon as we had crossed the ditch of the castle I became another person. The bright birch-trees quivered over the dark pond, blackbirds chirped in the hedges.

With what a palpitation I entered into the great arcade of beeches! Last year's dead leaves crackled under the hooves of my horse, but the new year's leaves, swollen by sap, babbled over our heads in melodious frissons. In the coolness of the profound wood, the rising morning sun sowed silvery splendors. The moving latticework of branches was dotted with a thousand holes of light. Oh, the first gust of the forest, which the odor of damp earth was mingle with the ligneous scent of the trees and the perfume of wild flowers! It intoxicated me, multiplied my being a hundredfold. There was a blossoming of all my senses in the breath of the forest.

I experienced an intense sensuality in living a thousand lives through my dilated eyes, my attentive ears and my excited sense of smell, and all my open pores. I absorbed the songs of the birds, the cries of beasts and the murmur of the leaves. I felt myself becoming, by turns, the vigorous oak, the babbling stream, the bounding roe-deer, the yapping dog, and the rapid falcon that I launched toward its aerial prey by removing its leather hood.

That initial intoxication was soon mingled with an impetuous desire for conquest and possession. The pursuit of a red deer or a capercaillie began, breathlessly, through the thickets. The gilded plumage of a bird or the tawny fur of a lynx fixed my desire. I discovered in myself, not without fear, the savage instincts to which hunting and war give birth, the thirst for blood and the pleasure of killing. But fits of black remorse and bitter sorrow traversed my intoxications, and I remember having wept for an entire week after having grievously wounded a hind that had not wanted to abandon her fawn.

Those mad chases through the woods only acted on the surface of my being, however. A profound disturbance soon upset them: that of woman. It did not come to me from one woman alone, but from the entire sex. At the age when the senses awake, from further away than I could see, women appeared to me simultaneously as the supreme seduction and the most redoubtable of enemies.

Sometimes, we went for long rides in the plain. In the month of May, near villages and hamlets, on Sundays, I saw peasants of both sexes coming out to dance. They went down on to lawns, the women in multicolored dresses, coiffed with their chapel hats, the young women crowned with verdure. At their noisy and vulgar gaiety I felt a mixture of disdain and desire. Their gestures and words shocked me, but in their insensate joy I divined that to be part of a couple is the only happiness.

One day, I came across a round dance around a linden tree, to the sound of a precipitate tune. The peasants perceived me at a distance. Immediately breaking the circle, the troop snaked into the meadow, the fiddler at the head. The saraband drew nearer in a spiral. I stopped surprised. They formed a circle around my horse, continuing to dance to the sound of the violin, with great leaps. Girls and boys invited me to join the dance, and, when I made no response, the peasant girls threw flowers at my face. Then they took hold of their dancing-partners again, and the couples returned, arm in arm to the linden. Cries of joy resounded, punctuated by kisses.

I resumed my route, humiliated, harassed and red with shame. I revolted against the vulgarity of the villeins. The savage cries had whipped my blood, however, and the kisses of the rustic couples burned my neck. I went back into the forest like a wounded animal. Passing over the drawbridge of the castle again, I thought myself accursed in my lordly solitude.

Another adventure finished enfevering me. I was coming back late through a narrow valley in the grassy depths of which a sinuous stream ran. Moonlight was sliding furtively between dark clouds. In places, pools of water glistened like silver basins. I perceived a mill half-hidden by clumps of alders. Light laughter was coming from it, in a splash of water. I pushed my horse through the dense shadow of the trees and stopped, fascinated.

Facing me on the opposite bank, a white form was outlined by the moonlight in the darkness of the bosage. The naked bather, having escaped from the bath, emerged from the long grass like a human flower with nacreous flesh, and combed her long hair, which was mingled with vegetation. Huge pale pink flowers raised their poisonous blooms amorously toward the woman, and the woman teased the flowers lasciviously with the black serpents of her hair. With a languorous gesture she bent down and intoxicated herself with their perfumes. Then, suddenly straightening up, she displayed the lustrous mass of her hair in the moonlight with a superb slowness and wove a tenebrous aureole, a diadem of somber voluptuousness.

Was it the miller's daughter who was taking her bath under the cover of the night and the alders? Was it the nixie of legends, a beautiful soulless body that acquires life by drinking the souls of men and drawing them into the depths of the water? She seemed to be undulating in the caresses of the nocturnal star, a jealous watcher. I gazed at her, avid and terrified; I devoured her with my eyes; my blood was hammering in my arteries.