

Kiss Stolen Kisses

A Collection
of Vintage
Love Stories



Lady Courths-Mahler

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

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BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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The Collection

With This Ring

As Nurse Maria tries to escape her haunted past, she becomes caretaker for the sickly son of a widowed prince. Now, Maria must decide what to do about her growing feelings for Prince Rastenbergl - stay or flee?

Catching Dorothy

Albert Groner is trying to accomplish two goals at once: To see his daughter Dorothy happily married, and to secure the future of his company, Groner Aircraft. What could be better than to have his daughter paired off with Jim Boker, heir to another aircraft company?

It Was Not Betrayal

Ruth Waldeck leads a charmed life. Beautiful and talented, the young heiress is content to roam the mountains with her widowed father and sing in the parlor for Mrs. Grotthus, their devoted housekeeper. Then her father remarries - and to Ruth's dismay, the woman she must now call "Mother" is a scheming artiste with a dubious past. Does the glamorous Erna really love the wealthy Consul? And can Ruth resist the charms of Mrs. Grotthus' handsome son Fred?

Exiled Love

Daniela Falkner has accepted a position under the employment of an elderly Russian countess, who has lost her husband and her only son, Dimitri. The Countess keeps everything she treasures, including a picture of Dimitri, in her personal sanctuary. One day, the picture disappears and the Countess suspects Daniela and expels the young

woman from the house. However, fate will bring the two women together again in a dramatic and surprising way ...

California Sweetheart

Dick Garring and Gladys Forester travel to Germany to attend to the firm they have inherited. On their trip, they hire Hans Dernburg as their new architect, and his sister, Rose Marie, as Gladys's companion. Despite their class differences, Dick falls in love with Rose Marie, and Gladys is attracted to Hans at first sight. But the past and the dubious history of their wealth seems to catch with them as their father's legacy threatens to destroy their own romantic future ...

Lady Courths-Mahler – A Collection of Vintage Love Stories

In this collection of vintage love stories there are neither cell phones nor computers – but love letters that sometimes take weeks to reach their starry-eyed recipients. Suitors court their sweethearts, and gentlemen woo their ladies. Legendary German author Lady Courths-Mahler paints a portrait of magical romance, giving a glimpse into the life of beautiful damsels and handsome heroes. These “fairytales for adults,” from the early 1900s have been revived from the vaults and appear now for the first time in English. Their tender charm will leave your heart singing for more.

Lady Courths-Mahler

The author's story could have come from one of her novels. Born out-of-wedlock in 1867, Hedwig Courths Mahler was raised by various foster parents. She worked as a saleswoman in Leipzig while she wrote her first novels. Between 1905 and 1939, after marrying and giving birth to two daughters, she became a highly circulated author with her romance novels. As the Nazis refused to publish her work, Hedwig Courths-Mahler stopped writing in 1939. When her daughter was arrested by the Gestapo, the author suffered such great agony, she never wrote again. On November 26, 1950 Hedwig Courths Mahler died on her farm at Lake Tegern without witnessing the ensuing Renaissance of her novels in Germany.

Lady Courths Mahler – A Collection of Vintage Love Stories



Stolen Kisses

By Hedwig Courths-Mahler

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

With This Ring

A hot summer's day was coming to an end. Ruth Waldeck was sitting on the balcony in front of her living room and looking up at the mountains.

Mount Watzmann's outline was in stark contrast to the sky, bathed in vibrant colors by the setting sun. Down in the valley, the shadows were already growing long.

Ruth didn't seem to notice the festive mood of her natural surroundings. Painful thoughts had numbed her senses to any external impressions.

She stepped back inside, switching on the light that illuminated the harmonious room in pale colors. It looked like the living quarters of a spoiled young lady.

Ruth's appearance matched her surroundings. She was of slight build with soft, round contours. She had a delicate face, not beautiful in the strictest sense of the word but with graceful features. Her eyes, mouth, and hands, however, were truly stunning.

This sad, pensive gaze did not befit her young face and was surely still too new to have etched any deep lines into it.

Overall, Ruth Waldeck had had a happy childhood, despite fate taking her mother from her early. Her father had compensated her loss with so much love that she no longer attached great importance to the sad incident.

Mrs. Grotthus, whom her father had hired as a house matron, had managed to gain the child's trust in a very short amount of time. She didn't just keep their household in exemplary order, but also strived to make little Ruth's life as comfortable as possible and to navigate her through

youth's many ups and downs. Ruth was therefore of the conviction that life would continue to take a well-ordered path, was content with herself and her surroundings, and believed herself to be so close to her father that nothing could muddy the harmonious relationship between the two of them.

That is why the message, which had reached her only a few days earlier, had truly stunned her. Her father intended to get married once more and give her a new mother.

The thought filled her with horror: This woman was threatening to destroy a perfect order of things that had seemed to be set in stone for all eternity.

She couldn't understand why her father was seemingly pushing her aside. Even less so, she couldn't imagine how her life would now unfold.

Everything had happened so terribly quickly—like an unexpected thunderstorm on a beautiful day. With a single letter her life had changed, and now she was expected to come to terms not only with the fact that her father had a new wife, but also that she'd have to call this strange woman "mother" in the future.

It was fast for her father, too: He had only known the woman for a short while before making her his wife.

Although it had been difficult for him to abstain from remarrying for all these years, he had told himself that he couldn't do so for his daughter's sake.

Now fifty years old, he believed had already overcome everything. That's when a certain singer stepped into his field of vision.

A long-forsaken love had gripped him with a spell of dizziness. At first he didn't dare dream of Erna Setten returning his affection, since she was still young. But when he felt that she was making advances towards him and

could tell from her behavior that he did indeed matter to her, all his doubts disintegrated.

The warnings he received from all sides, however, weren't completely baseless. Erna Setten was known to be arrogant, boastful, and even sneaky.

But who could blame the old gentleman Waldeck for overlooking these characteristics, since love is infamous for making one blind? He saw her smile, the passion in her eyes, her graceful figure, and was bewitched.

An older woman entered and approached the girl. She lovingly placed her arm around her shoulders.

"Still so sad, Ruth?"

The young girl sat up quickly.

"Oh, it's you, Auntie Grotthus!"

She wiped her hand over her face and looked despondently into the friendly eyes that were watching her with concern.

"You're surprised that I'm not excited about this marriage?"

Mrs. Grotthus smiled.

"At my age, one isn't easily surprised by something so human. I understand that the unexpected message has shocked you. But now you shouldn't hang your head and cry over something that can't be changed. Try to see it from another point of view, be less egotistical, and think of your father. Try to be happy for him! He's been leading a very lonely life all these years."

"But I was with him and so were you, and we were so happy and content."

"Just because you were, you think your father must've been, too."

"So I didn't mean anything to him."

The old lady shook her head with indignation.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Ruth, for saying something like that! Do I have to remind you of all the times he called you his one true joy and his ray of sunshine?"

Ruth rested her head on Mrs. Grotthus' shoulder.

"And now all that must suddenly change. That's precisely what is so painful."

"Nothing will change at all in your relationship with the greatest of all fathers, if you don't want it to."

"Oh, you mean me! I would've never done to Father what he is doing to me."

Mrs. Grotthus stroked Ruth's head with a smile.

"My child, when the right man comes along, you'll follow him anywhere he wants to go. And see, then your father would be completely alone. You should be glad that he's found someone who can console him!"

"Oh dear, darling. You are so good and you're right about everything you're saying, of course. If only it wasn't so difficult not to suddenly feel superfluous. Nobody needs me and I so badly want to be needed by someone."

"Don't say that, Ruth!" the old lady replied solemnly. "Maybe your father needs you now even more."

The young girl looked up in surprise.

"How do you mean?"

"Never mind, child. That was just a silly, thoughtless comment!"

"I can tell that you don't want to tell me your opinion. That may be so. But you have to answer at least some of my questions. Where and how did Father meet his wife and who is she?"

"At a charity concert. Your stepmother was a singer and was introduced to your father, who belongs to the charity's committee. It was in March this year, when you had to stay home because of a cold."

"I've never heard of her."

"It seems that she was not famous. Her singing wasn't praised and, indeed, critical reviews of it were very harsh."

"Have you ever heard her sing?"

"How could I? She never performed again, in accordance with your father's wishes."

"Does she still have parents?"

"No, she's an orphan."

"Do you think that she's marrying Father out of love?"

The old lady looked off into the distance.

"Who can fathom that? Your father is still a handsome man, despite his age. Why should his young wife not love him?"

Ruth rested her chin on her hand pensively.

"And yet I still believe that she only married Father in a calculated move. He is twice her age, after all. Oh, Auntie Grothus, don't shake your head! At the end of the day you are thinking the same as I am."

"All right, and if it were so? Your father is happy. He loves her and believes himself to be loved. Be happy for him! Be strong, Ruth, control yourself, and don't cloud his happiness, but rather try to maintain it for him. Whether the marriage turns out to be good or bad is in God's hands, but if you want to prove your love to your father, wipe the shadow off your soul and write him a few nice lines!"

Mrs. Grothus did indeed know a bit about the - not exactly noble - past of the former singer. But it wasn't much either. If she had known more, she would have had serious doubts herself.

There was Heinrich Rehling, a young and talented pianist who tended to accompany the singer at recitals. He was in love with Erna and believed he was loved by her in return. How could he think differently, since she had been willing to be engaged to him in secret and live together?

Erna had justified the secrecy of their engagement with her work as a singer. An artiste could not be presented in public as tied to someone, she had said.

Heinrich Rehling had been satisfied with that.

Her flirtation with other men was only to enhance her reputation as an artiste, she assured him.

"Especially these circles, darling," she tended to say, "are important for us. The personal contact boosts my reputation. There is talk of me in high society - and of course also of you, because everyone knows that I would be nothing without you."

"I'll kill you if I find out that you're cheating on me," he responded furiously when she came home late one night and even told him that she'd been to the opera with the Consul Waldeck.

"I won't cheat on you, darling," she sang in response. "But you'll have to resign yourself to the fact that our ways will part."

"Is that so?" he scoffed.

"You can't expect me to keep leading this poverty-stricken lifestyle," she answered his exclamation. Meanwhile, she was playing with a ring she was wearing, which the Consul had obviously given her that same evening.

"And that we're engaged doesn't count? It's meaningless, is it?"

"Nobody knows that we're engaged, darling."

She realized that she would have to break this union with cleverness and skill. She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him to the sofa.

"You have to be reasonable, Heinrich. What good will it do if we both languish in poverty! Once I'm the Lady Consul, I will promote you and get you connections that we could never make alone. You will continue to accompany me. Your name will be mentioned in connection to mine, with that of the Lady Consul Waldeck. Just imagine how much that will promote you!"

This was Erna Setten through and through. As much as Heinrich Rehling resisted his bride's demands, he had to

conclude that nothing he did could stop her. So he agreed to a secret engagement.

The Villa Waldeck in Berchtesgaden was one of the grandest and most beautiful in town, offering a picturesque view over its fine terrace garden.

Mr. Waldeck and his daughter spent a few months each summer in this lovely residence. He would roam the mountainside with her, passing the time with fishing and hunting, returning to Berlin at the beginning of each October. This year, Ruth came alone with Mrs. Grotthus. Her father had stayed behind in Berlin, citing business dealings as a pretext.

Now she knew why he had sent her away.

After dinner, when both ladies were sitting on the large terrace and dwelling on their own thoughts for awhile, Ruth suddenly asked: "What will we do now all alone here for all this time? You can't accompany me on big mountain tours and it's boring to constantly stroll along promenade walkways."

"I definitely won't climb the wild Watzmann peak anymore. But I know what to do about this problem, too, if you can remain patient for a little while longer."

"And what will it be?"

"Your dear father has taken care of everything. My son has received an invitation from him to spend his holidays here, and I think we can expect to welcome him soon."

Ruth's face became animated. A pale rosiness flushed her cheeks.

"And you're only telling me this now?"

"Are you looking forward to his arrival?"

Ruth became a little embarrassed.

"Of course I am - I'm happy for you, as well. You're always walking on air when Fred is nearby."

The old lady's face lit up.

"Well, he is my one and only!"

"Yes, and you love him more than anything. You definitely wouldn't have given him a stepfather."

"Well, now we've reached the delicate subject again. Think about it, child: When my husband died twelve years ago, I was almost an old woman. My boy's face was showing the first signs of beard growth already. One doesn't think of oneself anymore, of course. You see, my pension was very small and my Fred wanted to grow up to become something more, something better. It was therefore my only life's mission to create this possibility for him. I was so happy when your father offered me the opportunity to take over his household, you can't even imagine. My wages from this have put me in a position to provide Fred with a decent education. Your father's goodness has been so generous that I haven't had to skimp on anything."

From the nearby church tower, the bell announced the eleventh hour.

Shocked, Mrs. Grotthus arose.

"Child, hurry to bed, it's so late already! We have forgotten the time by chatting all night. Come on, I'll take you to bed and sit with you."

They walked up to Ruth's bedroom and soon after, the young girl was lying in her lace-trimmed bedding.

"Good night, dear Auntie, and thank you so very much for everything!"

"Sleep well, my darling. May God protect you!"

Fred Grotthus hadn't yet replied to the invitation of the Consul. On the one hand, the invitation had filled him with glee as he would have the opportunity to spend time in the company of the lovely Ruth Waldeck; on the other, his pride revolted against this feeling of happiness, since he

interpreted the invitation as a patronizing gesture, almost like charity that was to be given to him, the penniless student.

Ruth Waldeck, for whom he harbored a deep affection in a corner of his heart, had indicated to him not once, but several times, that she didn't care for him. Yes, indeed, he had the impression that she looked upon him with pity and disdain.

Tonight, he had nevertheless made a decision about the invitation extended to him by the Consul Waldeck. He was reinforced in his decision by a letter from his mother that arrived in the following days, from which he could gather that Ruth was also looking forward to his arrival. Since her father's marriage, she had been feeling a little lost and unhappy.

Consul Waldeck had arrived in Berchtesgaden with his young wife. Ruth and Mrs. Grotthus had gone to meet the arrivals at the train station. The excited young girl was watching the approaching train with burning eyes.

And then in the throng of people, a well-known figure appeared: a slim, handsome man with short, graying hair. Ruth flew towards him and threw herself at his chest, unconcerned by her surroundings.

"Father, my dear Father!"

He looked down at her with moist eyes.

"My dear little Ruth, my darling child!"

They hugged and kissed as if they never wanted to let each other go.

The old lady had meanwhile turned to the young, blonde woman, who was watching their reception with a mocking smile and then turned away with a derisive shrug.

When Mrs. Grotthus came up to her, she looked at her with a condescending smile.

"Presumably Mrs. Grotthus, am I right? We have to introduce ourselves since my husband is otherwise too engaged."

Before she could reply, Waldeck turned around to them.

"Forgive me, dear Erna, for making you wait! Here is my little Ruth. This is your mother, child."

Ruth curtseyed silently. But Lady Erna stretched out both hands towards her.

"I'm too young to be able to replace your mother, dear Ruth, but we will become good friends, yes?"

Placing her hands hesitantly into those of her stepmother, the young girl looked at her solemnly and quietly said: "I will try my best, Madame."

"Don't be silly, child, you may call me 'mother'. Why all this formality?"

Her tone was very patronizing. After all, she really was Ruth's mother now, even if only her stepmother.

Ruth had felt the condescension in this woman's voice and hidden behind these laconic words. Everything in her heart bristled at the idea of calling her mother. She would have loved to have simply run away, leaving her father and Aunt Grotthus and this unlikable woman behind, to sob her heart out somewhere in peace and quiet.

Sulking, she pressed her lips together. Her gaze met the serious, accusatory eyes of the old lady. She composed herself and forced herself to speak.

"You must have patience with me. I will have to get used to using this name once more."

She spoke quietly and didn't look at her father's wife.

Erna Waldeck, however, was thinking: Look how submissive the girl is! She said condescendingly: "Of course, that will subside. But I think we will go now. People are scoffing at the scene our family is making."

Once they reached home, Lady Erna immediately retreated to her chambers, followed by her snippy maid, to groom herself.

Later on, Lady Erna addressed Consul Waldeck impertinently: "Your daughter seems to perceive me as some kind of menace. This is less than flattering for me."

That is when Mrs. Grotthus took heart and spoke up in a gentle, but firm tone: "Allow me to remark, Madame, that Ruth does not even know you. Her dolefulness is down to that fact, not the person, so it's not possible that she has offended you. I'm of the firm conviction that once the child comes to know you, she won't be able to resist your charms."

This diplomatic speech had the desired effect. Lady Erna smiled benevolently and nodded at her husband.

"I think we'll follow the advice Mrs. Grotthus has given us and allow the young girl to calm down."

Filled with affectionate fervor, Waldeck kissed her hands.

"You're an angel, Erna!"

Mrs. Grotthus silently slipped out the door.

Poor little Ruth! she thought. She was compelled to go looking for the young girl.

She was sitting in her room, a solemn expression on her face. When the old lady entered, she nodded at her with a tired smile.

"Don't say anything, Auntie Grotthus. Don't ask me anything; first I'll have to learn how to contain myself."

The old lady placed her arm around the girl's shoulder and leaned down to her. She felt so sorry for Ruth! What else would she have to endure from now on! She decided at this very moment to not only watch Ruth very carefully, but also to prevent a possible rift between the two ladies.

She stroked the young girl's hair and said softly: "Come down to the garden with me, tea will be served in the pavilion! Your parents will join us, too, and your father will be glad to find you there."

Ruth arose, splashed some Eau de Cologne onto her forehead, and fixed her hair. Then she followed the old lady.

Ruth and Mrs. Grotthus had to wait a long time until the couple appeared.

Finally they approached along the shady path, tenderly snuggled against each other. The young girl shot them dark looks, but then valiantly subdued her feelings and managed to calmly take part in the ensuing conversation.

She lovingly smiled at her father, served him and her stepmother tea, and then sat down next to them.

"Have you made any major excursions so far, sweetheart?" Waldeck asked.

"Yes, with Auntie Grotthus, Father."

"Do you already know that Fred Grotthus is coming to keep you company?"

"Yes, and I'm looking forward to it. Maybe he'll join me in hiking up the Watzmann."

"Of course, if you'd like him to. You'll have to come up there with us next year, Erna."

"Oh heavens, no, Herbert! I prefer looking at the mountains from down here. I think it's horrid to scramble around up there, sweat pouring down one's face. I beg of you, dear Ruth, how can you take pleasure in it? A lady should not get into this kind of thing. One is completely disheveled following one of these hiking tours!"

Ruth smiled.

"Oh, that's not really the case. One simply has to fasten one's hair tightly and wear a practical outfit with solid boots, then it's not as hard as you think."

"You'll still have to do it without my participation. And I'm happy to leave accompanying your father on tours like that to you."

Ruth's eyes lit up. She turned to her father with a gleeful look on her face. It moved him.

"Already excited about it, little one? Well, this year Fred Grotthus will have to replace me."

Erna laughed.

"I think you can allow this replacement. Mr. Grotthus is a nice man and one would always prefer him to a father in this case."

To Erna's amusement, Ruth's face colored, but she said calmly: "One cannot argue with your taste."

Erna turned to Mrs. Grotthus.

"That is to say that I have the advantage of knowing your son. He is a charming young man, just a little too serious for me."

She had spoken this lie with a mocking smirk because in reality she didn't know Fred Grotthus, at least not in a way that would've enabled her to judge him. Her knowledge of him merely came from a conversation with her husband. With this compliment, she wanted to make the impression of being sympathetic both towards him and Mrs. Grotthus. Furthermore, she was trying to find out in what manner Ruth already felt connected to the young man.

The old lady bowed her thanks with a smile.

"He can be funny too, Mrs. Consul, depending on the atmosphere and the company. For all intents and purposes though, he is a serious character."

"But I am completely sympathetic towards him exactly how he is, Mrs. Grotthus," Waldeck interjected warmly. "I believe that he's very similar to his father in character, and that can only be advantageous."

The old lady looked at him with gratitude.

"I'm glad you find him sympathetic, Mr. Consul. I will openly admit that I am proud of my boy."

"And with reason," he said, giving her his hand. "He is a magnificent person."

Ruth listened on to all this in silence.

She was unaware that her stepmother was closely watching her throughout the conversation. However, her facial expression did not belie her thoughts.

Outside, a group of tourists was passing by the garden fence and one of them, a lady, was looking quite disheveled.

Erna laughed out loud.

"Well, look at that scarecrow! There, this perfectly illustrates the words I spoke earlier. My God, I would rather die than be seen in front of people in that state!"

Mrs. Grotthus smiled.

"That is indeed a particularly sad-looking case, Mrs. Consul. You couldn't even look like that if you tried."

Erna felt flattered.

"Do you enjoy hiking?"

"Well, it doesn't have to be the highest peaks. Those days are over for me, but I like to scale smaller peaks and enjoy a nice view of beautiful landscape. Once you get to know the region a little better, you'll yearn for an excursion into the mountains every once in a while."

"I'm not so sure about that, Mrs. Grotthus! I'm truly very lazy. I'd be happy to take a trip with the carriage later on, though. Do you fancy that, Herbert?"

"Certainly, my darling, if there's something you enjoy doing, I'll naturally take part. We can ride into Ramsau or to Lake Königsee. Whatever you like. Ruth, you'll join us, won't you?"

"Gladly, father."

"And once we're back, you'll both sing me a few songs, yes?"

Erna looked up in surprise.

"Both? Ruth sings, too?"

"Haven't I told you about Ruth's beautiful alto voice? She's been taking singing lessons for a few years now."

"Well, that's very interesting. I'm truly very curious, dear Ruth. You'll definitely have to sing for me this evening. You know, this is my trade. Or hasn't anyone told you that I was a professional singer?"

"Yes, mother, I know."

Erna smiled smugly. "Here we go," she thought, "we've already come this far. The little one is calling me mother!"

"Do you enjoy singing?" she asked with feigned interest.

"I enjoy it very much."

"Then you can understand how much I love your father, whom I gave up my art for. I gave up fame and fortune for a life at his side."

"You shan't regret it, my darling," Waldeck interjected. "For it, I will carry you on my hands and will try to replace all that you have given up for me."

Erna looked at her husband, filled with sweet melancholy. "I gladly made this sacrifice for you, Herbert."

Ruth blushed. Her stepmother's character seemed overly dramatic and unnatural to her; she didn't understand how her father could be so blind to it. As he now covered Erna's hand with kisses, she turned away and busied herself with the tea set.

Lady Erna then threw herself back into her seat.

"It's really an injustice that my fellow human beings aren't allowed to benefit from the talent that fate has bestowed upon me," she said mournfully.

Waldeck looked at her tenderly. "But you give me pleasure with your singing."

She slapped him jokingly.

"That's not the real thing, Herbert. An artiste needs an audience to fully flourish."

"You won't miss that either at our festive soirees."

"That's at least a small consolation for me. Are you looking forward to the winter, Ruth? We are planning grand festivities, your father and I, and this will serve you well, too. I have heard that despite your eighteen years of age, you haven't been formally introduced into society?"

"No, so far we haven't found it necessary. Also, it was always so lovely at home. I didn't long for society."

"But that must change now; I owe that to the countless young men. A beautiful goldfish like you is a rarity. I insist that I may take you out. You'll see, we'll be showstoppers the two of us! A young mother with a rich daughter of marriageable age - it'll be the event of the season."

If she succeeded in winning over Ruth, her thinking went, it would be easy for her to procure a man for Ruth whom she approved of. Of course, the only ones to come into consideration would be those not dependent on her husband's money: Not only affluent, he would have to be downright rich. She was convinced that she could have a hand in the girl's fate. Ruth was surely just a stupid little thing. She would easily fall victim to a few love-struck gazes and a couple of hidden caresses.

A friendly smile was hiding all these thoughts now - one designed to make Ruth believe how good her intentions were.

For a few moments, Ruth managed to return her smile. But then she pressed her lips together and looked through the open door of the pavilion into the distance with big, somber eyes. The picture Erna had painted didn't look inviting to her in the least.

The large parlor on the first floor of the villa had been furnished into a music room. A beautiful grand piano stood inside, a few pages of sheet music on the stand next to it, which Lady Erna had just taken out of the closet.

"You've got a very large selection here, child, and there are even some very difficult pieces amongst them. Unfortunately, all of them are a little too low in tone for me. I have brought some of my own sheet music. It's a shame that I won't have an accompaniment. I've previously been pretty spoiled that way since a young musician always took over accompanying while I was singing in concert. He expertly adapted to my style."

"Maybe you can try singing with me, mother."

"Look at my sheet music; can you accompany me from this?"

Ruth flipped through the books Erna handed her. A quiet smile flitted over her features.

"I think I will manage," she said calmly.

She sat down at the grand piano and began the introduction.

Lady Erna joined in with a loud, strong voice. In mid-range, her voice was full and clear; in the lower range, it sounded hazy, and in the high range, it became painfully sharp and hard. It was a soulless, imposing performance, lacking the refined melting of inner emotions, and it didn't manage to enter the hearts of the listeners. Ruth accompanied her flawlessly. The sounds that poured out of her fingers nestled into the singing and softened some of its harshness.

Lady Erna received the two listeners' applause with a gracious smile and said to Ruth approvingly: "Your accompanying is great - I will be asking for your help now quite regularly when I practice new pieces."

"I'm happily at your service if I live up to your standards."

"Absolutely! One can tell that you sing by the way you accompany me. And now, let's hear you, Ruth. I'm really very curious to hear your performance!"

She slid down into an armchair next to her husband and while he kissed her hand, she said quietly: "We should only criticize her very mildly, so the poor child doesn't lose faith."

Waldeck looked at her with tenderness.

"You're an angel, my sweet wife," he whispered.

Ruth tested out a couple of chords, let them fade, and then began to sing.

Erna suddenly sat up as straight as an arrow and stared at Ruth. Full and soft, like the low, clear sound of a bell, the young girl's sweet, soulful alto voice rang out and filled the room with a wonderful melody. The beautiful sound gently spun a web of magic around the listeners.

Mrs. Grotthus' eyes glistened with tears, and Waldeck, too, was looking at his child as if through a veil. He was so deeply moved, it seemed to him that Ruth had never sung this beautifully - as if the emotions expressed in her songs had never possessed this much depth.

The person most stunned, however, was Erna. She had expected to hear a cute little voice, and had prepared herself to be charitable in her praise for her. But what she could hear now was of such accomplishment that her heart filled with jealousy and resentment.

She was smart enough to know that Ruth was a greater artiste than she had ever been. With that kind of voice and skill, a woman like her could conquer the world. And here was this incredible talent hidden away in the close quarters of domesticity! How different her future could be with a voice like that!

Bitter envy filled her heart. The fact that she had become the wife of a millionaire and had risen from poverty and destitution to such elegant, wealthy heights suddenly seemed worthless to her. Artistic envy welled up inside her and made a hated creature of her stepdaughter.

An evil, malicious stare shot from her eyes.

Mrs. Grotthus caught this stare and it terrified her. She had seen into the mean soul of the Consul's wife.

Once Ruth had finished, Waldeck jumped up and embraced his daughter.

"Thank you so much, my child, you've sung beautifully! I'm proud of you."

He turned to Erna with a radiant expression.

"What did you think of Ruth's singing, darling? Don't you think it was delightful?"

He too could now see the malicious sparkle in his wife's eyes. It had robbed the rosy face of all its beauty and turned it into a frightening one. Waldeck gazed at her in wide-eyed horror. He felt as if he had looked into an abyss that was normally covered with flowers.

Erna composed herself.

"Forgive me, that stupid nervous headache just overcame me again. Ruth's singing was very pretty, but I have to retreat to my chambers now. I need rest."

With that, she left the parlor.

The three of them looked on silently for a little while before a cumbersome conversation began.

Mrs. Grotthus and Ruth had both noticed the little scene and interpreted it correctly.

But Waldeck was mulling it over. For a brief moment, the scales had fallen from the blind man's eyes. Even though he quickly reattached them, deceiving himself and trying to forget what he had seen, a deep-seated emotional displeasure remained.

It was very difficult for Ruth to say goodbye to her father. Still, she breathed a sigh of relief when he and his wife took leave again.

She attached herself even more closely to her motherly friend.

A few short weeks had made a serious, pensive girl out of the happy child. She had started thinking about life and had firmly resolved to do everything in her power to maintain the illusion of happiness for her beloved father.

A few days had passed since the Consul's departure. It was a beautiful summer's morning, the sun shined over the mountains and valley.

Ruth stepped out of the door to go into the garden. Butterflies fluttered around the flowers and busy bees buzzed around the blossoming bushes.

Ruth walked to the rosebushes to select a few beautiful buds for the vases in her room.

She was wearing a white dress, and a wide-brimmed straw hat sat on her voluminous hair.

It made a beautiful picture, the way she stood there in the sunlight, her young, solemn eyes lowered to the flowers. With calm, graceful movements she cut the roses and made them into a bouquet.

She didn't suspect one man's eyes were watching her across the garden fence.

The pretty view must've pleased them, since they didn't stray from it for one second.

The young lady held out the bouquet to examine it. A crisp voice now called over the fence: "Good day, Miss Ruth!"

Surprised, she looked up and right into a smiling man's face.

She quickly bounced over to the gate and opened it. A young, tall man now stood facing her. Two dark eyes sparkled in the bold, energetic face, and looked straight into the solemn girl's eyes that were filled with affectionate glee.

"Good day, Fred, where have you come from? You're not meant to be here until tomorrow. Quick, come in, Mrs. Grotthus will have such a happy surprise! She has no idea."

Lake Königssee lay silent and mysterious between the mountains.

It was a cool, late summer's day. The high season for tourism was over. There were only a couple of rowboats floating on the water's flat surface. A strong, brawny fisherman was rowing one of them.

With his white-blond hair and piercing blue eyes, the man looked like a bronze statue.

He rowed along silently, and the other occupants of the boat sat across from one another and let their gaze travel over the spectacular view.

Mrs. Grotthus, wrapped in a thick, plaid fabric, was sitting with Ruth and opposite her son. It was cool on the water. The sun had hidden behind the clouds, and only pale rays of sunlight were projected onto the surface of the water.

Mount Watzmann was wearing a gray hood of fog, and clouds were approaching from the Steinernes Meer plateau, as well.

Ruth let her hands glide along the water. Her eyes looked dreamy. Fred was watching her intently.

The past weeks of constant togetherness had brought them closer. Once or twice, he had been able to see deeply into her being. To him, it seemed to be filled with delightful treasures.

If her lovely exterior was already very pleasing to him, then her whole way of interacting with the world captured his full attention and interest. The depths of her character – pervaded by a lively, fresh, and joyful streak, touched upon the same features in him. The more he got to know her, the higher she rose in his estimation. Tactfully and with grace, she eased the fears that had kept him away all these years. She kindly cared for his comfort and made sure that his mother could enjoy every hour of their togetherness fully.

And she acted wonderfully naturally and humbly! There was no trace of the kind of haughtiness that rich and spoiled young ladies often considered par for the course.

He sighed a little. It was a shame that she was so unattainable for him! This girl would have otherwise taken hold of his heart. But he mustn't think about it like this. She would, despite her humility, simply laugh at him if he were to approach her and say: "I love you, do you want to be mine?" He, the poverty-stricken apprentice! And her father! What would he say to such a presumption!

Was he really already in love with Ruth? He glanced sideways at her lovely profile. Her lips were closed tightly. A longing shimmer clouded her eyes, which gazed up over

the water towards the mountains. Once back on solid ground, Mrs. Grotthus went into the house, and Ruth and Fred found a sunny place to sit under some trees.

Fred looked up at the wild, rigid rock face of Mount Watzmann.

"Three weeks ago today we were up there together," he said to Ruth. She nodded.

"Yes, it was a splendid tour. It's a shame that's over now for this year. Once you're gone, I'll only have the peaceful walks and rides with your mother."

"I'm reassured that you regret the fact that I'm leaving at least a little bit. Otherwise you might've even been happy to be rid of me, your grumpy companion."

"It is now that you are cranky. You shouldn't speak of yourself like that to prompt me to come to your defense."

"Although that isn't my intention, it still feels wonderful to be able to stir your wrath with these attacks on myself. You see, Miss Ruth, I still fall back into my old bad habits, despite your efforts to free me of them. Please, don't lose patience with me. Give me a good scolding! You can't imagine how good it feels when you tell me off this insistently."

"Then I will do it quite often in these last few days, and when we come to Berlin in a few weeks, you'll have to collect your punishment. I won't go easy on you."

He looked at her with shining eyes.

"You don't know how much I look forward to it! To be able to be your knight and cavalier for a whole winter is such a great honor that many will envy. Let's hope that no one will try to challenge me for this position!"

"Who should do so?"

He shrugged.

Had he revealed his heart to himself and her with these words? Did a feeling resembling fear just take hold of his being at the thought that somebody else would begrudge him his happiness by her side?

He laughed briefly. Then he said hoarsely: "Your father, your stepmother, or whoever else has the right to do so."

He spoke the latter part inquiringly, with a tortured look on his face. She sat up as if in sudden defense.

"The only possibility would be Father and he will be happy about it. Otherwise, I don't give anyone else permission to challenge your company."

He reached for her hand with a firm, painful grip and pressed it to his lips. Then he let go just as quickly and jumped up to compose himself.

Ruth had fallen silent, but lost in thought, her gaze followed his large, moving figure.

It was a few days later. The garden was bathed in morning sunshine, moist with dew.

The mountain range stretched out in front of Ruth's eyes, outlined in gold, in quiet majesty. She was standing in front of the door, waiting. Fred had wanted to take one last morning walk with her while his mother made his travel arrangements.

He now approached and they started walking beside each other in silence. The first part of the path was tree-lined. The whole town was quiet because of the holidays.

Once they'd left the town behind them, they continued on to the alpine meadows. The vista became wider and more open, and once they'd climbed the Sepertinenweg path, they reached a bench that stood beneath a large fir tree.

They took a break here and silently looked down into the valley.

A mysterious web seemed to surround them. At this moment, they felt perfectly happy. Then a force within them drove them to look at one another.