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The king was in his counting house

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The first chapter

Wherein the king merrily awaits the arrival of a new giant

Friedrich Wilhelm the First, seven and twenty years old, King of Prussia and Margrave of Brandenburg, Arch-Chamberlain and Prince-Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, was sitting in his bed in the town palace of Potsdam feeling excited.

A new giant had been announced for that afternoon – a Saxon from the environs of Wittenberg.

Wittenberg was in truth but a short distance away, mused the king; two days' journey, three at the very most. How had his people overlooked this giant for so long? Did he not pay them handsomely to find all the tall men of this world and bring them to him? After all, he had not a mind to search for mice, which could escape through any crack – he was searching for giants. And had indeed been doing so for some time now.

Already, the rage was rising in Friedrich Wilhelm, and with it the question of who he should be moved to take it out on. Yet the prospect of shortly being able to welcome a new titan quickly dispelled his melancholy humour and caused a smile to light up his roundly countenance.

He cast aside the coverlet, rose from his bed and strode over to the wash basin, which had been filled with icy water from the well; he removed his undershirt, wet his face, arms and chest, took from an enamel soap dish a fragrant ball of Venetian soap made with lily oil, ambergris and civet and washed himself thoroughly.

He signalled to his manservant, Eversmann, who had been waiting at a proper distance and now stepped forward, offering him a towel of fine, pristine white, bleached linen. Friedrich Wilhelm took it, dried himself and dressed item by item in his officer's uniform. He set aside his coat; he was in the habit of beginning his day working at his

writing desk in waistcoat and shirt, over which he now slipped sleeve covers made of canvas. He had created them especially after having to dispose of many an ink-stained shirt. Finally, further to protect his clothing, he pulled on a white smock.

Naturally, Friedrich Wilhelm could have purchased one hundred new shirts every day. He was the king. But his father, Friedrich the First, had impressively demonstrated whither such inclinations could lead, by bequeathing to his son debts of twenty million Reichsthaler. These he had accumulated through the upkeep of twenty-four palaces, where endless operas, masquerades, ballets and concerts took place, and a multitude of servants, pages, lackeys and chamberlains scurried around; in short, through representation of the kind that was customary, but ruinous. So no sooner had Friedrich Wilhelm become king than he sold all but six of these palaces, had all of the silverware melted down to make coins and mercilessly set about slashing the budget of the court. He ruled as he had always lived: distinctly frugally. And yet he did so not for reasons of prudence or even for the good of the people; rather, it was for the sake of the army alone, which he granted all available means.

Whistling a cheerful tune, the king proceeded across the creaking parquet floor and into his study, from which the smell of the coffee that Eversmann had also seen to it to provide was emanating.

“A good morning to you, Your Royal Majesty,” greeted Ehrenreich Bogislaw von Creutz, Friedrich Wilhelm’s privy secretary, standing ready to present the business of the day. Although in the king’s mind there was but one item of business today.

“Morning, Creutz. Pray tell, how tall then is this Saxon that Schmidt brings today?”

“Greatly tall, Your Majesty,” replied Creutz, himself a tall man, which fact had brought him into the service of Friedrich Wilhelm when he was still Crown Prince.

“How tall precisely?” asked Friedrich Wilhelm excitedly, availing himself of the coffee cup to take a hurried gulp. “Taller than the new Venetian?”

The Venetian, Bernardo Petroni, was enormous: a touch over six foot and seven inches. He had been measured precisely, time and again – oftentimes in the middle of the night, moreover, as the king would suddenly awake with a start and have a mind to know his height for certain.

“Possibly, Your Majesty,” replied Creutz, who knew by heart the formidable sizes of the soldiers in the *Red Life Battalion*, as he did the state finances. “According to the latest intelligence from Schmidt, we are dealing with a nigh on seven-footer.”

“A seven-footer!” Friedrich Wilhelm snapped his light blue eyes wide open.

“Nigh on seven foot, Your Majesty, nigh on – according to Schmidt,” reassured Creutz.

“Nigh on seven foot,” whispered Friedrich Wilhelm enthralled. He set down the cup and stepped to the window, before which this twenty-first day of April of the year seventeen hundred and sixteen could not resolve whether to be thundery or fair.

Creutz discreetly rustled his papers to precipitate the discourse.

Friedrich Wilhelm turned to face him and enquired anxiously: “But ... ’tis certain? Nigh on *seven Rhenish foot*?”

“Schmidt has hitherto failed us on but one occasion, and Your Majesty verily recalls what did befall him,” replied Creutz.

Friedrich Wilhelm smiled and nodded. He did indeed recall how his bamboo cane had come down over and over again on Schmidt, the purveyor to the court, once it had emerged that the giant he had caught with his band was a whole five inches shorter than announced.

Hereafter, there had never been any grievances about the reliability of Schmidt’s estimates.

The second chapter

Wherein a Saxon farm boy travels to Prussia enslaved

Gerlach had heard of the bands of men that would roam around the neighbouring lands on the orders of the Prussian king in chase of tall men.

Even here, in the electorate of Saxony, which was in fact an ally of Prussia, people were alleged to have already been taken from coaches and taverns. And each time Gerlach had travelled to Wittenberg with his father to take the harvested grain to the mill, people would shout out laughing: “Hark ye, the Prussian king likes tall fellows as you!”

But when the tall child grew into a veritable giant who, even when sitting, would tower above many a person standing, they laughed no more; instead, they looked on him as a man with a fatal malady who might pass away at any time.

The landowner, on the other hand – to whom Gerlach's parents were beholden as tenants – had one day demanded that they pay higher levies because, as he had stated whilst pointing gleefully at Gerlach, someone labouring with the strength of two people reaped double the yield.

Gerlach had turned fifteen, sixteen and seventeen, and still he grew taller and broader, and nothing had come to pass. No one had dragged him from the field, no one had pulled him down from the cart; and his parents, who also had three daughters, all of whom had gone to work as farm girls on other farms, had ended up wondering whether there was any truth at all to the tales about the Prussian king collecting giants for his army.

But now that Gerlach was sat, hands tied, in the saddle of a dappled Holsteiner, headed north towards the Fläming Heath, which marked the border between Saxony and Prussia, he no longer harboured any doubts about the purpose of Friedrich Wilhelm's endeavours.

And if he had still harboured doubts, Schmidt's bandits had expelled them once and for all when they brutally assailed him one hour previously as he was milking the cattle. "How are you looking forward to the drills, big boy?" shouted one of the seven bandits. He had a remarkably high-pitched voice. "And running the gauntlet!" jeered one of the others next to him, removing the stopper from his canteen.

Far ahead on the dirt road – the only mark of human activity in a scene dominated by forests, hills, meadows, hedges and streams – a rider approached at a gentle canter. "Speak amiss and you will fare badly," said Schmidt, a slim man with curly black hair and a constant mocking expression in his cheerless brown eyes. He had already given Gerlach to understand that any attempt to flee would result in the use of the cavalry pistol he carried on his belt. He would of course refrain – the giant was worth a great deal of money. But the threat of being shot worked every time.

The horseman, an elderly gentleman with a flowing white beard, rode past them, two fingers lifted nonchalantly to the rim of his hat. Gerlach did not look up. "Good boy," Schmidt praised him, once the sound of hooves had abated behind them. "You have no right to seize me," said Gerlach angrily.

These were the first words he had spoken since he had found himself at the mercy of Schmidt and his brigands – aside from the terrified curses that had accompanied his capture.

“That is so,” Schmidt attested. “But we are doing so all the same.”

“You’re bandits!” cried Gerlach as he wrenched at his bands, but to no avail. He would never be able to loosen the adroitly tied knots, even if they were to let him try.

“That is also true,” said Schmidt, “it is in fact our trade.”

The men laughed.

“Brutes who never wash and who do anything for a handful of Thaler!” the man with the high-pitched voice added gleefully.

“I will wring your necks, you wretches!” cried Gerlach.

Again, they all laughed.

“Now that, by contrast, is not true,” countered Schmidt in a fatherly tone, while pulling a chunk of bread from his bag. “On the contrary, as of tomorrow you will be wearing a uniform and serving the King of Prussia.”

“Never!”

“Oh, but you will. All of the men we bring to him do. And the others, well ...” said Schmidt, taking a bite of his bread. “They’re dead.”

“Broken on the wheel,” stated the villain beside Gerlach casually.

“Hanged before breakfast,” said the bandit in front of him as he turned and spat for the second time.

“Now, my good fellow,” said Schmidt, his mouth full, “I know not how you see your predicament, but it appears to me to be rather hopeless.”

Gerlach had to agree.

The third chapter

Wherein the people of Potsdam flee from their king

“What think you, Creutz ...?” asked Friedrich Wilhelm, feigning consternation as he sharpened his quill, “... are we to receive post again from Electoral Saxony?”

The king regularly received post from the electorate of Saxony. And from Hesse, Hanover, Mecklenburg and Silesia.

They were entreaties to end the abduction of tall men in the event that – and they hoped this were not the case and did not actually believe it to be so – these were the responsibility of Friedrich Wilhelm, his most Esteemed, most Gracious, most Invincible, most Serene Highness, the King of Prussia.

Thereafter followed demands and finally threats of war, which Friedrich Wilhelm took every time to be a personal affront.

“Quite possibly, Your Majesty,” said Creutz.

He always had to read out the letters in the evening before the members of the Tobacco Society, and the king and his guests would laugh heartily over the words of his counterparts and think up humorous replies. Friedrich Wilhelm was hence already eagerly awaiting the next missive.

In the hope that it may have already arrived, he pointed to the documents that Creutz had laid on the table, among them an envelope, and asked, lifting his chin slightly: “What have you there?”

“A letter from Professor von Gundling, Your Majesty.”

“What business has that quill driver?” enquired the king.

Creutz broke the seal, unfolded the letter and read.

“He bids you to open the Berlin Knight Academy again and to engage him anew as chairman,” he said finally, folding the letter again.

“But is he not away in Pomerania as State Visitor?”

“No longer. He returned last week.”

“And he has sent no dispatch?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

The king pondered.

“Answer him that We shall grant his request,” he then said, shifting to the plural, as was always the case when he made official pronouncements.

“Majesty?”

“Do as I bid you! Tell him thus and order him to come hither the evening after next!”

“Naturally, Your Majesty.”

“We shall now inspect the troops.”

“Very good.”

Friedrich Wilhelm went into his chamber, washed his hands, removed the sleeve covers and swapped the smock for his blue officer's coat of the best cloth, after allowing Eversmann to drape a black and silver sash around his corpulent middle. He then took the small wig that his manservant had freshly powdered early that morning, with its plait of women's black hair wrapped in taffeta, and placed it on his own short, reddish-blond hair; to top it off, he put on his officer's tricorne hat trimmed with gold braid. Standing before the large oval mirror in which he inspected his habit, he observed not for the first time that he still possessed that white, soft skin that simply would not assume a more soldierly appearance in spite of all the oil-soaked sunbathing. He still looked like a powdered Frenchy.

Yet this thought would not succeed in lowering his spirits today. Because today would see the arrival of a new giant, nigh on seven foot tall, *seven foot!* A rarity, left unearthed for years, and who was now set to enter into the honourable service of the Prussian army.

And as though the sky too wanted to manifest its joy at this occasion, the sun now thrust through the clouds and cast its light over Potsdam.

Once the king had inspected the mustered grenadiers – a process in which he would examine the cleanliness of their hands and necks, ask them how old they were, how long they had served and whether they were receiving their dues in wages and bread – he spent two hours instructing the men in the six regular tempos in which the ramrod was to be inserted into the barrel of the musket and removed again.

Hereafter, he returned to the palace, washed his hands, stepped into his knee-high riding boots and, after having washed his hands once again, embarked upon his morning ride in the company of an aide-de-camp.

As their two horses trotted along leisurely beside one another and, now and again, wiggled one ear, Friedrich Wilhelm noted that Potsdam had changed a very great deal since he had marched three years previously into the small fishing village on the Havel at the head of his life battalion and taken up quarters in the town palace. The six hundred and forty giants of the battalion were billeted in the half-timbered houses of those townfolk whose station or wealth was not enough to spare them from such a measure.

Forthwith, the king had begun to turn Potsdam into a garrison town. He had the oldest of the reeded houses torn down and built anew, and all around he put up oil lamps that had been taken down in Berlin. And because he desired to have a parade ground before the palace, he ordered the flattening of the pleasure garden that his grandfather, Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg, had once had laid out there, entertaining the notion that it would be able to compete with the garden of Versailles. The bosquets and broderies were uprooted and the statues were melted down and cast into cannon.

The king and his aide-de-camp passed one of the many building sites, amid hammering and sawing, trowelling and sanding, cursing and bawdy talk, while a cart in front of the ribbon factory over the way was being loaded with crates full of hair ribbons for the army. Things were clearly advancing in Potsdam.

And yet something was vexing Friedrich Wilhelm.

He felt as though the people were shunning him.

The people who came his way would suddenly disappear into the side streets.

Others turned around on the spot.

Or hurried into a tavern.

And that crying child over there – was she not pointing at him?

When finally a hunched little old man came shuffling by and, catching sight of the king's horse, gave a start and made a dash for the nearest alleyway, Friedrich Wilhelm had a mind to know for certain.

“Fetch that man and bring him hither,” he said to the aide-de-camp.

The aide-de-camp nodded, spurred on his horse, tore round the corner and soon returned, holding the plane blade of his sword from above against the old man's back and thus pushing him forward.

“Why do you run away from Us?” enquired the king after dismounting from the saddle.

The little man had removed his hat and was staring at the ground, which was covered in excrement, kitchen waste and other filth. He stood there so crooked, as though he would soon bend over completely and want to pick up something repugnant from the mud.

“Give your answer!” boomed Friedrich Wilhelm.

“Because ...” whispered the little man; he was hardly audible, as a pig was crossing the street behind him, grunting.

“Yes? Pray tell!”

“Because I am afraid, Your Royal Majesty.”

“Of what?”

“Of You ... Your Royal Majesty,” mumbled the little man, holding on tightly to his hat.

“Afraid? But ... why?”

The king’s interest was unfeigned. But the little man gave no reply. He simply stood there, stooping and cowering.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then the king cried: “You should not be afraid of Us, you should love Us!”

The little man seemed to find no way to promptly meet this demand; he bent over further still and now looked like a rickety little table.

“Upon my soul, say something!” bellowed the king.

The little man was quite numbed now; he was not even trembling any longer.

The king raised his cane, which he had carried in his saddlebag, and began to strike the little man. He screamed, but remained in his cowering stance as the king proceeded to beat down on his small back, again and again; he cried out that he wanted to be loved, not feared, there was no reason whatsoever! None!

The aide-de-camp watched this all calmly from atop his horse, his left hand resting casually on his thigh.

Eventually, the little man’s back and the king’s arm were both burning.

“Your Royal Majesty, I will love You, I will truly love You,” the little man spoke down to the dirt at his feet.

“Good,” said the king.

Being loved was precious to him.

He mounted his horse and started on his way back to the palace instead of completing his normal route. Perhaps the new giant would already be waiting for him.

The fourth chapter

Wherein a tall confectioner’s daughter manages not to drop anything for a change

Twenty warm doughnuts floated swiftly through the bakehouse.

Betje Jacobs, who was carrying the baking tray upon which they lay, endeavoured to place her feet one in front of the other in such a way that they would not get in each other's way or – something that happened even more frequently – get caught somewhere.

But everything was fine, and even the step by the door leading to the shop floor, normally one of her greatest adversaries, granted her free passage today.

Betje set down the baking tray on the counter, where it caught a shaft of sunlight.

“Are they all still on it?” asked her father kindly, the confectioner Gerd Jacobs, son of a Dutch immigrant.

“Yes, *vader*,” said Betje proudly.

Her mother was in the next room, chattering loudly as she placed a large slice of bee sting cake into the basket of a fat young man, who stared at Betje.

Many men stared at Betje. One reason for this was her size: Betje was a giant.

Another was her charm. Betje was an exceptionally beautiful giant.

And a sad one.

If a man mustered up the courage to act gallantly towards her and contrive to ask her out for a walk, the two of them would look like mother and son, which is why such excursions always ended up being short and were not repeated.

And so Betje Jacobs, twenty years old, six foot and two inches tall, as warm-hearted and pretty as she was ungainly, with vermillion curls, upon which sat a white linen bonnet, and long eyebrows, perching like the wings of a soaring bird of prey above her apple-green eyes, passed her days in her parents' bakehouse. She hauled sacks of sugar and flour, kneaded dough, rolled it out, slid trays into the stove, lifted them out again, carried them – if she managed not to stumble – over to her parents and wondered whether there was a man for her anywhere in this world; a man who was as tall as she was, or preferably even a little taller.

The giants of the life battalion in the garrison in Potsdam did verily fulfil this requirement with ease.

But firstly, many of the *Long Fellows*, as they were known to the people of Potsdam, came from afar and spoke languages that were perfectly foreign to Betje.

Secondly, they were soldiers. They needed permission for everything and could not just approach a woman and take her out.

And thirdly, the Jacobs family belonged to the Mennonite confession of faith. Betje and her parents were thus bound both by the peace testimony and by non-violence. Betje on the arm of a soldier was about as likely as an alliance between Austria and France.

Betje carried the empty tray back and let out a deep sigh.

The fifth chapter

Wherein the king retires to bed disappointed

Friedrich Wilhelm the First, King of Prussia and Margrave of Brandenburg, was sitting in his bed in the town palace of Potsdam feeling grieved.

The giant had not come.

“How do you suppose to explain it, Creutz?” he asked for the third time.

“Schmidt had of course to await the opportune moment, Your Majesty,” replied the questioner anew, standing beside the king’s bed with a chamberstick. “In all likelihood the wanted man had company. That makes the enterprise more troublesome.”

“Schmidt did say today,” the king said mulishly.

“He is sure to come tomorrow,” Creutz consoled his ruler.

“But I desire to have my Saxon now!”

“I am certain, Your Majesty will receive him tomorrow.”

Friedrich Wilhelm looked about his bedchamber as though he were musing whither to best place his Saxon.

There was ample space as he liked empty rooms, bare floors and white walls, which he adorned exclusively with portraits of the regiment commanders and a few tall grenadiers, as well as the works of Dutch masters.

“Why does everything always happen so slowly, Creutz?” asked the king wearily as he laid his head down on the pillow.

“Even God needed six days to create the world, Your Majesty.”

“Everything always happens so slowly, Creutz,” whispered Friedrich Wilhelm, his eyes shut.

“Yes,” said Creutz.

Come on, I want something to eat now, he thought.

“Everything so slowly,” said Friedrich Wilhelm slowly.

“Yes,” said Creutz.

He waited until the king began to snore and then took his leave from the bedchamber.

Outside the door, he pressed the chamberstick into Eversmann’s hand and made straight for the kitchen.

The sixth chapter

Wherein the hearts of Betje and Gerlach begin to beat for one another

The next day, shortly after the church bells had struck the eleventh hour, the sentry at the tollhouse before the Long Bridge espied seven horsemen who were approaching on the country road from Drewitz and had just passed the dairy.

“Who goes there? What are ye gentlemen?” shouted the corporal, once the group had come within hailing distance.

The soldier on duty with him placed an outstretched finger on the trigger of his loaded musket and held his thumb ready to pull the lock to full cock.

“Schmidt, Prussian, from Berlin,” replied Schmidt from quite some distance. “I have an urgent delivery for the king.”

The corporal waved him over and examined the papers. Gerlach had none. The corporal asked why.

“He is the delivery,” stated Schmidt.

His men laughed.

The corporal, a gaunt young man with bad skin and a scant chin, remained unmoved and demanded to know whether Schmidt contrived to stay the night in the town and where he would lodge.

Schmidt answered everything. Beneath him, his horse began to urinate loudly.

The corporal returned the papers and nodded to the soldier, whereupon the latter gave them passage and once again assumed his position next to the sentry box.

The horsemen began to move and soon took their place alongside the countless horses and carts that travelled along the streets of Potsdam, wheels clattering. One was loaded with baskets of fish from the nearby waters – pike, carp, perch, roach and zander – another carried crates of new flintlock muskets into the town from the Prince-Bishopric of Liège, escorted by a brigade already bearing such arms, their sparkling bayonets fixed. They were a remarkable sight in their close-fitting coats of *Prussian blue*, with the scarlet-red cuffs and back detailing, the red camisoles worn open above the chest, and the knee-high white gaiters with their brass buttons. The people made way for the advancing convoy with deference.

Marketeers called out their wares; there were onions, lard, cheese, eggs and sauerkraut for sale, and animals at varying stages of life. An untold squawking resounded from the direction of a bird-dealer, who stood amidst a veritable mountain of cages, while a butcher slammed half a pig onto a jacked-up wooden board, rubbed his bloody hands on his breeches and cried “Fresh sow!”

An exuberant young gypsy spoke quickly and dramatically as she read the palm of an older woman. The woman stared entranced at her hand.

A tooth puller waited languidly for customers, one foot resting on his footstool as he rid an instrument of the traces of his latest handiwork.

A man stood before a shop and compared the actions of two pince-nez, while the optician beside him held out a third, talking insistently at him.

A sedan chair was carried past, wherein an elderly aristocrat slept, his wobbling head making him appear dead.

From all over, all kinds of sights, sounds and smells contended for Gerlach’s attention. But when he caught sight far ahead of the tall young woman with the golden-red hair pinned up beneath a bonnet coming towards him in her white smock, blue jacket and green skirt, clearly towering above all those around her, all other enticements admitted defeat.

Gerlach felt as though the Maker had now set down on Earth his finest creation, which he had held onto for thousands of years, because the people were not yet prepared for such a beauty. He had set this creature down right before him and had placed a basket full of doughnuts in her arms. An aching radiance filled his mighty chest.

At the same moment, as though someone had called out to her, Betje lifted her eyes and saw the handsome, contoured face, framed by a flaxen beard, belonging to a tall horseman whose nutmeg eyes beheld her tenderly. Her body reacted in a secret but manifold manner.

She lowered her basket and stood still, while Gerlach – who could not take his eyes from her – slowly rode his horse through the crowd, moving closer.

For both of them, the overwhelming intimacy, arising between them from nothing, was almost painful.

As he passed her, Betje noticed that the stranger had his hands bound and one of his companions was holding the horse's reins.

He could not be a malefactor or a deserter, she mused, for he would have been escorted by soldiers. Yet because the men with whom he was travelling looked themselves like miscreants, Betje knew that this man, like many before him, had been kidnapped to serve as an ornament for the king. The tales people told each other in Saxony could be heard in Potsdam too, and indeed observed – that the king was having giants snatched from all over to incorporate them into his battalion.

So were Betje ever to see this stranger again, he would be in a soldier's uniform; he would be a man who was soon to learn how to handle a musket and sword, how to man the cannons, storm citadels, stab enemies, and other offices that were not compatible with her religion. Or rather: with her father's religion. He would never give her leave to be acquainted with such a man.

And although Betje desired a world without muskets and cannons and cripples and ravaged lands, she did have to admit to herself that the stranger moving away from her with his head still turned in her direction would surely look very smart in a Prussian uniform.

Brooding on such gay and gloomy thoughts, she took her baked goods to an inn and returned to the confectionery, almost falling over twice; she relieved her father, who enquired as to why she was so cheerful, of a tray half full of raw doughnuts, filled it up, laid them in hot clarified butter, rubbed her hands on her smock and pictured herself with the tall, handsome man walking along the banks of the Havel; she imagined herself kissing him beneath the cover of one of the many willows, submissively letting her head

fall back rather than having to bend down to the grotesquely pouting lips of her admirer, as was usual on such occasions.

A wonderful vision.

So wonderful, that the doughnuts turned black and bitter.