

SISI

by KAREN DUVE

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



[pp. 7–58]

Literary Fiction/Historical Fiction, 304 pages

Publication date: April 2022

Foreign rights with: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG Contact information:

<https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/verlag/rights>

ALTHORP

These are the halcyon days of the English fox hunt. The meet is set for one o'clock. It is twelve now, and onlookers are flocking to Althorp, the slate-grey estate of the fifth Earl Spencer.

The house has its charms. The façade is not one of them. A wayward ancestor of the Spencers had the once cheerful red Tudor house faced with grey bricks and put mock Corinthian columns to the right and left of the entrance. But the March sun is shining, even if it is still wintry cold, and in this light, with the gleaming horses and the riders in their colourful jackets and black top hats out front, the estate looks noble. The grey façade calls for the exuberant colours of a hunt. The bleak landscape demands it. The English winter demands it. The cold months drag on in Britain. Rain, fog, uneventfulness. A fox hunt brings splendour and sensation.

Chatting, the hunters, including some ladies, ride up and down in front of the building. The horses live up to all expectations. They chew on the bit, stamp and foam and trample the manicured lawns. They are large, noble hunters with shaved manes and precisely trimmed tails. Servants in livery walk between them. They balance glasses on silver trays, port for the gentlemen, sherry for the ladies. Brandy for all. The hunters could not have dressed more carefully if they had been going to an exclusive ball – only here it is the ladies who wear black. At most, their riding dresses are dark blue or green. Without exception the gentlemen wear pink. Of course their jackets are not actually pink. They are bright red, as befits a hunting jacket. But you are not allowed to say that. In England you cannot say 'He rides in red'. Never, ever, under any circumstances. You can't even think 'red' if you don't want to be considered uncouth.

On an unofficial hunt day like the one Lord Spencer has arranged at short notice as master of the Pytchley pack, it is not usual to wear pink, but since the Empress of Austria will be riding along, one can hardly turn up in an old tweed jacket.

The Earl has done his utmost not to let the public know of Her Majesty's participation. She is travelling incognito under one of her many additional, but entirely unusual, titles, that of 'Countess Hohenembs'. She wishes to be left alone. However, this has not stopped Elisabeth of Austria from bringing her Lord Chamberlain, her lady-in-waiting, her hairstylist, her personal physician, her stud master and her English riding instructor to Althorp. She is also accompanied by seven cavaliers from home – all of them excellent horsemen and all of them strikingly handsome.

So it is not that easy to hide the presence of the Empress. Especially as Lord Spencer's talent for keeping things to himself is rather limited. And now three hundred riders have gathered, and the place is teeming with nosy teachers, women, horse traders, clergymen, peddlers and worse; their dog carts and breaks along with their third-rate horses are blocking the way. A few gawkers have already travelled down from London the day before to be there, with a bit of luck, when supposedly the most beautiful woman in Europe lands in a muddy Pytchley ditch.

That is outside the house.

Inside the walls of Althorp, in the large entrance hall and the adjoining salon with its walnut staircase, refined society is streaming in and out, to fortify themselves with a bite to eat before the carnage. There is a smell of punch, of smoke and freshly greased leather and also a little of horse, for some of those present have taken it upon themselves to ride their horses over in person. The ladies and gentlemen push their way between the tables, which are everywhere, covered with white linen on which are crowded bubbling cauldrons, sandwich platters and gleaming silver dishes full of roast beef, mutton and every imaginable delicacy. In between, there are pyramids of brightly polished apples and oranges. Flowers, flowers are everywhere. The drinks tables are literally overrun with blossoms. The large quantities of alcohol that the hunt participants are downing here testifies to the respect they have for what lies ahead. There are two almost life-sized slave statues, whose marble torsos were once salvaged from the Tiber and which now – supplemented by lacquer-black limbs and heads – stand out from the bustle, keeping watch on their pedestals by the entrance.

Suddenly the babble of voices dies down.

'Her Majesty ... the Empress' the whispers say, and everyone rushes into the salon, and gazes fly up the stairs, on the top step of which the Empress of Austria has appeared. She is wearing a dark blue riding habit and she is very tall. Nevertheless, she appears delicate because she is unusually slim. Her hair has the famous Titian shimmer. She comes down the stairs slowly. She has to walk a little sideways because her skirt hugs her hips so tightly. It looks very elegant – majesty personified. Everyone falls silent and bows down. Only those further back crane their necks. The Empress's beauty is legendary. Yet she is already thirty-eight years old. Her husband, the Austrian Emperor, has commissioned one painting of her after another, none of which has been able to capture her magic. A viewer of these paintings might say: yes, yes, she is extremely pretty, but I actually prefer a bit more plumpness, lighter hair, and do I see the beginnings of a double chin? But when that person then sees her in the flesh, these preferences suddenly no longer matter. It is more than the pretty face and the stunning figure – her beauty is intangible, it seems to float a metre ahead of her. Is it her posture? Her grace? The way she tilts her head and smiles with closed lips? All you know is that you want to stare at her forever.

Behind Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary walks her sister, the former Queen of Naples. But nobody looks at the ex-queen or her husband, the somewhat dodderly King Francesco, or at the lady-in-waiting or Prince Ruffano or whoever else is coming down the steps with the empress. They simply pale into insignificance alongside her.

Her cavaliers and the master of the house await at the foot of the stairs. Earl Spencer introduces her to Captain Middleton, whom he has chosen to accompany her and be her companion during the hunt, to guide her safely over any obstacles and, in an emergency, to clear the way for her with a small axe. Middleton is not a handsome man. He is red-haired and of rather stocky stature. He can just about be considered of medium height. And yet he appears elegant. His hunting coat is high-necked with just a few buttons and it is cut like a tailcoat. He wears the usual white leather breeches and boots with light brown tops and bootstraps – tied, not buckled. The Empress's cavaliers scowl at him. Baron Orczy has put on his uniform for the hunt, which is not uncommon in Austria-Hungary, and has realised to his annoyance that the light blue fabric with all its gold braid and lacing makes him look like a stuffed parrot. The other cavaliers have already acquired English hunting jackets but resent Middleton's casual elegance.

'Your Majesty,' says Middleton, kissing the white-gloved hand being held out to him and then reassuming the upright posture of a cavalry captain.

He too, of course, has heard that the Empress is supposed to be unusually beautiful. Nevertheless, it catches him off guard. Even before his gaze can take in any detail, can properly perceive her flawless skin and brown-gold eyes, or, say, notice the breathtaking abundance of hair on which her top hat is perched at a teasing angle, even before his gaze can follow the lines of her blue riding dress and linger on the narrow shoulders or tiny waist, he is completely entranced.

The Empress says something that Middleton doesn't understand. He blames it on the fact that he has been hard of hearing since a riding accident. In fact, no one has understood the Empress's mumbled whisper. She speaks without moving her lips so that her teeth cannot be seen. The discoloured, slightly transparent teeth are her only flaw.

Middleton nods politely and smiles with that indefinable charm that only the English upper classes can produce. But Middleton does not belong to any of the big families even though he looks like one of the Earl's brothers with his red hair, red eyebrows and red trimmed moustache. Middleton is not even particularly well off. And Lord Spencer's beard, which curls under his chin like a prize Shropshire sheep's dewlap, glows in a much bolder and more fiery red. Even Middleton's eyes are paler, blueish pale; the March sun has burnt his nose and cheekbones.

'The Captain is the best man I can possibly give your Majesty,' Lord Spencer says as they walk into the entrance hall, where he wants to show the Empress the huge hunting

scenes from the early 18th century, custom-made and set into the wall, and point out in passing the tiny little hunting horn in one of the paintings because, funnily enough, it is the same one that will be used today.

'Middleton was my adjutant during my time as Viceroy in Dublin,' Spencer says. 'They didn't want to allow me to take part in any hunts. Because of the assassinations. I'm easy to spot in the field.'

He raises his beard with the back of his hand.

'The protection guard couldn't cope with my pace or the obstacles. Fortunately, I then found Captain Middleton with the Twelfth Lancers. He jumped alongside me, gun in hand.'

Lady Spencer, wearing an elf-like green riding habit, smiles.

'I doubt that having Captain Middleton as an escort increased my husband's safety. They both go out of their way to break their necks in a hunt. An assassin would have his work cut out if he wanted to beat them to the punch.'

'The best horseman,' Lord Spencer repeats, while Middleton remains straight-faced, 'the best horseman far and wide. If he has any weakness, then at most it is that he is a little too aware of the fact.'

Someone coughs. Lord Spencer looks somewhat embarrassed all of a sudden and his right hand fumbles in his beard searching for his chin. Lady Spencer is looking at the brown and blue tiles of her hall floor with as much care as if she were seeing them for the first time, and ex-King Francesco ambles over to one of the large slave statues at the entrance and picks nervously at the marble toes with his index finger. Only Middleton and the Empress remain calm.

What no one was supposed to know, but all those present including the servants know, is that Middleton was not as enthusiastic as he should have been about the honourable assignment of accompanying the Empress. In fact, at first he flatly refused it.

'What does an Empress matter to me?' he is reported to have said to his lordship, 'she will only hinder me.'

Lord Spencer assured him that the Elisabeth of Austria was an excellent horsewoman. In fact, he said, she was so good that no one but Middleton could do this honourable job.

And Middleton had continued: 'You know that I must ride my own way. What if she doesn't manage the fences? Or I have to wait for her every time? I'll end up having to trot down the road with her.'

And Lord Spencer has said: 'No, no, that won't happen. I saw the Empress ride myself last year. Frank Beers was also impressed. Do me this favour, Bay.'

Lord Spencer had almost pleaded, and finally Middleton, remembering that he is, after all, something like his stable master among other things, relented: 'But just this once.'

It is essential to say a few words about the relationship between the 5th Earl Spencer and Captain Middleton. Otherwise it would be difficult to understand why a man as conscious of his high descent as the Earl should allow a lowly adjutant to walk all over him. For this is what Middleton was when Lord Spencer first met him: an adjutant detached for fox hunting with minimal duties. But besides the worship of status and class, there is another cult in the English upper classes: the worship of muscles, moustaches, toughness, courage and contempt for death. Officers shower the War Office with requests for transfer to active service, and they really mean it. But there aren't enough bloody campaigns for everyone in the Empire. So they put their physical integrity on the line in the anterooms of officers' messes or in the smoking rooms of family mansions, where they tussle with each other after dinner. It's called bear fighting, when you give your best friend a bloody nose and break his ribs. This is where Middleton excels; he knows no boundaries at all. On the battlefield that is the hunt he is the best anyway. As warriors without war, Lord Spencer and Middleton are filled with mutual respect and inseparable. Bay is the friend the Lord never had.

Of course Lord Spencer wanted to prevent Middleton's petulance from coming to the attention of the Empress. What an affront! That was why he only shared it with the Queen of Naples, whom he considered to be a model of discretion. After all, she is the Empress's sister. He might as well have posted it in public. First the Queen of Naples told her imperial sister personally, and then the seven handsome cavaliers. And then she told Lady Dudley, who immediately passed it on to Lord Langford that morning, and with that, everyone who hadn't already heard it from Middleton personally then heard it.

The Empress does not let on; at most her disgruntlement is expressed in the particular perfection of her riding habit. The dark blue velvet costume with small sable trim and gold buttons fits as if it were painted on. This time it took more than two hours for her to be satisfied with the results of being sewn into it – a tedious job for the poor seamstress in any case, as etiquette forbids her from touching the Empress's body while sewing.

'How kind of you to assist me,' Elisabeth says. This time she is easier to understand. Her English is excellent and her accent delightful. She gives him a smile, this arrogant little Captain Middleton, her famous closed-lipped smile, and registers with satisfaction the way his pale blue eyes open wide and look befuddled.

'Well, then we should head off,' Lord Spencer says.

A liveried servant appears out of nowhere and hands over gloves, velvet cap and whip. The lady-in-waiting, who has been standing silently next to the Empress all this time, almost starts to cry as she holds out her mistress's riding gloves.

'Oh Festi,' the Empress says, slipping off the white gloves and putting on the buckskins, 'don't worry so much.'

'Don't be afraid,' Prince Ruffano, a man with dark curly hair, intervenes, seeking the gaze of the pretty little lady-in-waiting, 'I have hunted on this estate many times and so far everyone has always come back safely.'

A kind, if somewhat clumsy, lie. English fox hunting is the most reckless of all unnecessary sporting activities. One rides at a pace similar to that of a horse race, except that it is cross-country and over hedges and ditches. All it takes is a rabbit hole, an invisible wire, the wet ground or a clumsy fellow rider falling right in front of you, and you too will fall and break your back or your neck. Everyone knows that. The House of Lords is full of wheelchairs – all hunting accidents. Hunt riders with irreparable brain damage vegetate in the posh sanatoriums.

II

Chasing the Hounds

The horses for the Empress and her escorts wait in front of the mock Corinthian columns. Middleton watches as Elisabeth places her laced boot in her stablemaster's intertwined hands and allows herself to be lifted into the side saddle. She has been given a magnificent chestnut to ride. With a smooth movement, she wraps her legs around the saddle horns, tugs two loops around her feet and smooths down her riding habit. A few drops of blood drip from the stablemaster's hand where she has scratched him with her tiny spur. Middleton turns away.

His mare is still in the stables. He has to make his way through the horses and the hunt participants, who now appear to all be present. He recognises Lord Otho Fitzgerald among them and acknowledges him. Fitzgerald taps the brim of his top hat with a contemptuous expression. His eyes are like daggers. Middleton is out of favour with him. Last year Fitzgerald hosted a ball and made the mistake of inviting Middleton, who then repaid him with one of his most despicable jests, one that went too far. It should be noted that Otho Fitzgerald is enormously proud of his membership of one of the most exclusive sailing clubs, The Royal Yacht Squadron. On the occasion of the ball, he had hoisted the Royal Yacht Squadron's flag on the tower of Oakley Court, his recently acquired estate. During the course of the evening, Middleton, together with the guest of honour - the French crown prince – both of whom were roaring drunk, sneaked up the crenellated tower, retrieved the lofty emblem and hoisted a bath towel in its place. The following morning,

everyone had seen this hideous rag fluttering in the wind and by the evening all of London knew about it.

Fitzgerald indulges in colourful revenge fantasies. He wishes Middleton scabies and that he might fall off his horse – preferably several times. And if he should suffer a complicated fracture or a dislocated jaw, it would serve him right. It would be even better, however, if Middleton would lose contact with the pack. That would make him suffer far more than any physical pain.

Middleton suspects what is going on in Fitzgerald's head. The place is teeming with gentleman riders who begrudge him his skill and good fortune, who would like nothing more than to see him way behind at the end of the hunt. Now they have the upper hand, for it is not to be expected that the beautiful Empress will be able to keep up with such a hunt on her first outing – however much Lord Spencer has praised her abilities. Not with the pace that Middleton usually sets. And then there are the infamous Pytchley oxers, massive fences that stand a metre in front of the hedges and force the horses to jump enormously high and wide. He can already picture himself crawling through a hedge with a small axe, beating a passage for the Empress while Fitzgerald flies past him, laughing. It is especially difficult when a second fence – or a ditch - lurks behind the hedges. It is impossible to jump some of these obstacles. Not unless your name is Middleton – and sometimes not even then.

A lad brings him his horse. Middleton swings himself into the saddle and trots off to where he suspects Her Majesty to be.

The hounds arrive. All the riders make way for the approaching pack, large spotted dogs directed by Goodall, the huntsman, with short instructions – 'Rose, wait!' 'Trooper, don't dawdle' – so that the two whippers can ride almost idly behind. As hunting servants, Goodall and the whippers don't wear top hats but simple black velvet caps – just like Lord Spencer. He has assigned them the very best horses, real winners that are also entered in races. These horses jump without hesitation over a four-metre wide and fearsomely deep ditch, playfully leap over the highest hedges or break through them if necessary. The best of them is 'Bay Colonel', which Goodall rides. Not even the big bay that Lord Spencer has chosen for himself is better. After all, he and the guests are allowed to choose each time whether they take an obstacle or prefer to ride around it, while the pack leaders have to jump just about everything in order not to lose contact with the dogs.

Middleton spots the Empress riding towards him. The way she sits in the saddle is accomplished, her hand position perfect. Her waist is out of this world. To ride a hunt while constricted in this way requires super-human self-control. He doffs his top hat. The Empress halts her horse alongside him.

'Captain Middleton, might I ask something of you?'

'Whatever Your Majesty wishes.'

The Empress places her hand, in which she also holds her whip, on the crest of his horse's mane.

'Promise me to ride as you always do. Promise me not to make any allowances for me!'

'I had no intention of doing so, Your Majesty.'

He puts his hat back on and fastens the strap with a pin under the collar of his frock coat.

Is Elisabeth at all afraid? Not in the slightest.

As a child she impressed everyone with her fearlessness when riding, even her father, Duke Max, who otherwise showed little interest in his family. Because of him, she rode even more recklessly than her brothers and sisters, galloped faster and jumped higher and did not hesitate, never hesitated, to follow her father over an obstacle – even if she did not know what lay behind it.

'Oh Sisi, you are just like me,' he once said, 'if we were not dukes, we would have been circus riders.'

However, that didn't change the fact that she hardly ever saw her father. Duke Max was always travelling. Travelling with beautiful ladies. Or he led his bachelor life at Unterwittelsbach Palace, which he had acquired for himself for this very purpose and to which his wife and children had no access. He practically never came to Possenhofen, and he was only at home in the Munich residence during the winter and rarely at that. His apartment in the residence had its own entrance to the street, so that it was possible for him to live with his family under one roof for days on end without having to meet his wife or children. If they wanted to see him, they had to announce themselves to his servants. He did not even eat lunch with his family but preferred to eat with his illegitimate daughters, who did not have to announce themselves. During this time, the legitimate children were strictly forbidden from interrupting.

Elisabeth had spent a whole year preparing for the English hunt. And this petty Captain Middleton feels inconvenienced by having to ride by her side! After the hunt, she wants him to beg to be allowed to ride with her again!

Lord Spencer makes a short speech, welcoming everyone, then the hounds and the horses with their riders wind their way through the spectators and past the carriages at walking pace. Lord Spencer has brought the Empress and Middleton up alongside him. The cavaliers from her homeland follow close behind, together with the Queen of Naples. The Queen is a copy of her imperial sister. Not only does she wear the same blue riding habit with sable trim, she is also riding a chestnut. Marie of Naples is tall and slender and has the same wonderful hair. The Queen's eyes are even more beautiful than her sister's because

she has such a melancholy gaze. But her nose is pointed and there is a bitter tug around her mouth – she cannot compete with the Empress’s majestic grace. Nevertheless, she is a very beautiful woman. She chats with Rudolf Liechtenstein, who is pleased with the attention. Prince von und zu Liechtenstein is a determined, very imposing man who already has a few wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Malicious gossips in Vienna would like to have spotted signs of a liaison between the handsome Rudi and the Empress.

Playfully, the Queen of Naples slaps her loose gloves on Liechtenstein’s forearm and alternately implores him and Chief Steward Count Larisch von Moennich, who rides on her other side, to find an appropriate hunting jacket in pink for the blue-uniformed Baron Orczy.

‘Not that the hounds end up chasing him,’ she says, which no one understands because the Queen of Naples also mumbles with her mouth closed.

They ride to a sprawling grove. Hundreds of spectators have already gathered here and spread out at a respectful distance on the surrounding small hills. Initially it does not look like it will be a successful hunt. The dogs scamper through the bushes from one side to the other, constantly changing tracks without settling on a scent, while the riders roam in groups along the edge of the thicket. This goes on for half an hour, the dogs already slackening in their zeal.

More and more riders join Lord Spencer, Middleton and the Empress, ostensibly to ask the Lord for his assessment of the situation or to suggest moving to another covert. But then they just stare at the Empress. A journalist from the regional press in a flat cap and brown leisure suit has set up just a few metres away from Elisabeth and is busily taking notes in a small book. Elisabeth is getting paler and paler. She takes a fan that is always in her saddle and holds it in front of her face as if to ward off the sun.

Captain Middleton turns his horse, ensures that the Empress is following suit, and gallops down the valley to the other side. The foxes rarely break out here, but there are hardly any other riders. Almost at the same moment as he arrives there with the Empress, a dog barks hysterically and a fox runs out of the grove. Typical Middletonian luck. Immediately, the entire howling pack shoots out of the bushes. Middleton and the Empress are in the middle of it. Behind them all hell breaks loose. Everyone wants to catch up with the dogs and they gallop all over the place, coming from all directions. The many horses get in each other’s way. There is jostling, swearing, yanking on the reins and at the same time spurs are being drilled into the horses. Wet clods of earth fly through the air. Within seconds, the noble scenery is destroyed, the light trousers splattered with soil, the gleaming horses covered in mud, the hunting jackets spotted like ladybirds.

Meanwhile, the dogs have jumped several ditches and reach the first oxer. Elisabeth bites her slightly discoloured incisor into her lower lip. She practised jumping wide fences at a fast gallop on the racecourse in Vienna. Mr Allen, her English riding instructor, had said

that the obstacles there resembled the natural fences in England. But there were no hedges like this one in Freudenuau, and now there is also a fence in front of it. Is she finally scared?

Oh yes!

Fear is the best thing about a hunt.

Middleton has promised not to spare the Empress, and he doesn't. Without slowing down, he looks for a suitable spot and smoothly negotiates fence and hedge. He looks around to see if she makes it over the fence in one piece. She does. Her face beams with wild joy. She pushes back over to his side. Of the following horses, some break away sideways in front of the fence, two fall behind the hedge. The dense field of riders begins to stretch out. Middleton and the Empress race across green fields. Always straight ahead. The grass blurs below them in their speed. Fences and hedges appear and then they are gone again. Further ahead, the spotted dogs chase across an empty field. There are no roads to break up the terrain, no ploughed fields whose deep soil would tire the horses. When industrialisation led to the collapse of agriculture, more than half of the land here that once grew grain was converted to pasture and farm workers' wages have dropped to three shillings. Ideal conditions. Now there is only springy grass, the horses, the fox, the yapping pack and the most beautiful hedges and ditches.

The hounds gather at some distance in front of a gate, climb over or force their way through. Middleton reins in his horse so roughly that it tears open its mouth and tosses its head back and forth. The Empress tugs at the reins, opens and closes her fingers, but her hunter's neck seems to be made of steel. Now the horse finally listens and is perhaps even ready to slow down. But it no longer has to. The dogs have made their way through the gate in time. Elisabeth simply moves past Middleton. She wants to be fast, impossible to catch, to escape her dark thoughts and the gawkers who seem to think that by marrying the Austrian Emperor she has forfeited any right to privacy. When she gallops, a fire burns within her. Her brain is detached from her body that is driven by the fire, searching for the perfect point from which to jump. As soon as the obstacle is overcome, body and mind are one again and filled with deep satisfaction. Here comes the gate. Middleton has caught up and they jump it together.

For a quarter of an hour, the Captain and the Empress gallop along like this, taking the obstacles as they come. The wind rushes by and makes their eyes water. Three gates, close together, hard to gauge. Middleton flies over them, and the Empress follows close by, keeping just enough distance to avoid crowding him. He now realises that she is an excellent rider. More than that. Never before has Middleton encountered a woman in such perfect command of her horse. Apart from them, only four riders have been able to follow the pack as far as this. Of course Lord Spencer is one of them. His red beard blows over his left shoulder. He catches up with them and gallops alongside Middleton. A deep wide ditch

gapes in the ground. Now Elisabeth also pulls ahead and the three of them clear the obstacle together. However, the Empress has to use her whip. Her horse seems to be exhausted.

The next ditch approaches. Again the whip swishes through the air. The Empress's horse still jumps too short. It hits the ground behind the ditch with tremendous force and continues to slide for several metres. Its front legs cut furrows through the turf.

Middleton is by her side instantly and lifts her out of the saddle. No one saw him halt his horse. No one saw him leap out of the saddle. He is simply there. He gently places the Empress on the ground in front of him. Her horse struggles to its feet. It stands trembling with its legs splayed. The saddle has slipped and the upper horn is broken. The fan lies tattered in the grass. The horse lowers its head. Its breath hisses through its wide-open nostrils.

'Bay,' Lord Spencer shouts, white as a sheet under his glowing red beard, and jumps off his horse as well. 'Bay, are you alright?'

'Yes,' exclaims Middleton. Only then does he look the Empress in the face. His arm is still around her waist. Tiny it is, that waist. Elisabeth has lost her top hat but does not seem hurt. She gives a ladylike gasp, beaming with excitement, not worrying about whether her teeth can be seen.

'Bay? Is that your name – Bay?'

He removes his hand from her waist.

'That is what my friends call me, Your Majesty.'

'I thank you, Bay.'

She looks at him with a dark, yearning softness and places her hand on his arm.

'Quick, lift me into the saddle! We can still catch up with the hounds.'

III

The Emperor in the Morning

The Emperor begins his day in darkness. He lies in an iron bed, looks into the impenetrable darkness and hears the splashing next door; hears his valet dress, cough, blow his nose. A window is opened. Then the door to the servant's quarters opens, his valet brings light into the darkness and enters. It is exactly 3.30 am.

'At your service, Your Majesty, good morning.'

'Good morning. Well, Pachmeier, what's the weather looking like today?'

‘Cold, Your Majesty, quite cold, and the air is damp.’

The Emperor pushes his blankets aside, swings his slender bare legs over the edge of the bed and stands up without any hesitation or reluctance.

To get to his commode, Franz Joseph has to walk through three rooms. A servant kneels on the floor in the second, piling up logs, and pretends not to see the Emperor wafting past him in his nightgown. Those are his instructions: don’t notice the Emperor on his way to his commode. There is no bathroom. Sisi is desperate to have one. A bathroom of her own! What for? Is she an amphibian? Sisi always has the strangest ideas.

Back in his bedroom, Franz Joseph kneels down for morning prayers. He speaks to the Lord who has appointed him ruler of this great empire, which is now steadily shrinking. He asks him for the strength and wisdom to be able to rule the kingdom according to his heavenly will. He casts a glance at the Piloty painting, which depicts his wife when she was his fifteen-year-old fiancée on a horse in front of the palace in Possenhofen. Then his bather is let in. He is His Majesty’s First Bath Master, but no one calls him that.

‘At your service, Your Majesty, wishing you a lovely morning.’

The bath rug has already been spread out in the bedroom the evening before, and now the rubber tub is placed on top of it. The bather lacks the Emperor’s discipline. For the Emperor, getting up early is military self-chastisement and an expression of his superiority. No one – apart from his closest servants – gets up as early as he does. And has done day after day, for years and decades. The regularity of the way of life is – since he has chosen it of his own free will – just as much a sign of his superiority. His bather can’t do it – the early rising. So he stays awake all night. The hours after midnight are the worst. You’re all alone in the world and you are not allowed to sleep. So he goes to the tavern, where there are others on their own and he can drink with them. When he enters His Majesty’s bedroom, his hair is in disarray, his eyes are red, and he smells of schnapps.

The valet pulls the Emperor’s gown over his head. The naked Emperor gets into the rubber tub. The washer squares his shoulders, dips his little sponge into the wash bowl, which stands on a fold-out wooden piece of furniture, and rubs the Emperor with lukewarm water. Then he massages His Majesty’s body from head to toe. He sways a little with fatigue, almost having to hold onto the naked Emperor. That would be quite something. The Emperor must have noticed, but he says nothing. He is always indulgent with his servants, however badly they carry out their duties. Besides, it fills him with satisfaction when someone can’t tolerate getting up early as well as he can.

The bather showers him with cold water and rubs him down with a towel. Then, walking backwards, he drags the tub out of the room. Now the valet dresses the Emperor in a shirt of simple cotton and the plain uniform trousers of an infantry lieutenant. Men of his generation don’t wear underpants.

Then the barber appears, who will have more to do with the magnificent whiskers than with the rosy baldness on the Emperor's head. The residents of the Hofburg palace begin to awaken. Clattering hooves and rattling wheels, hurried footsteps and clanging buckets.

The Emperor throws on his Bonjour coat, a pike-grey garment with red piping that combines the snappy look of a general's overcoat with the soft comfort of a dressing gown, and walks into his study, which has been wallpapered in deep-red and has thick, dark carpets. Already waiting on his desk is a mountain of unfinished files, letters and extracts from domestic and foreign newspapers, cut out and pasted onto cardboard. On top is the police report. The police minister has finally succeeded in taking into custody the entire impudent bunch who called for a demonstration against the Empress. Even the last two troublemakers have been arrested. It is no longer only the court that is outraged by Elisabeth's disinterest in any kind of social participation. The common people now also resent the fact that she would rather amuse herself with horses than with being applauded for laying foundation stones or unveiling monuments. Yet they would so like to love their beautiful Empress. How they cheered her when she entered Vienna that first time! An empress belongs to the people. And if you push the people back, they behave like an offended lover. Her trip to England was the last straw. People wanted to gather at the station, wait for the Empress and insult her as she boarded the Royal Train. The leaflets had already been printed. Fortunately, the secret service got a tip-off in time and had made multiple arrests beforehand. Otherwise respectable petits bourgeois are implicated, a baker even and the owner of a tobacco shop.

Franz Joseph sighs and looks at the picture hanging on the wall opposite his desk. It is his favourite picture of Sisi. She is wearing only a white shirt and her long hair is loose and entwined in front of her breasts. A very private, almost frivolous picture.

Elisabeth is his only irrationality, the only intoxication in his austere and sober life. Even his mistresses are tamer and duller than his wedded wife. He did not tell Elisabeth about the conspiracy. It would only have upset her. After all, from a state political perspective nothing spoke against her stay in England. It was still better than if she had travelled to France again, that nest of anarchists, where she had that terrible riding accident, and he had not even been allowed to go to her bedside. They wouldn't allow it. An Emperor's visit always has a diplomatic significance too. They would have been furious in Berlin if they had heard about it. There was nothing to be said against a trip to England on the other hand. Franz Joseph had only set two conditions. Firstly, Langyi, their doctor, must always be nearby. He must have a carriage at his disposal which he should drive around in at all times whenever the Empress goes hunting, so that he can be at her side as quickly as

possible in the event of a fall. Secondly, stud master Bayzand must accompany the Empress on every hunt so that he can immediately assist her.

The Emperor considers whether a special allowance might not be in order for those agents who took the troublemakers off the street. But that would also refresh the memory of the delicate matter. Probably best to leave it alone.

He slides the police report to the right-hand side of his desk, next to his simple, almost basic inkwell and turns to the first written request. Four Viennese carriage builders are complaining that the Hofburg has ordered two new carriages in Paris instead of relying on Viennese quality. Over to the right. The next request is from Anna Heuduck. Her name, written in spidery handwriting on the letterhead, triggers a mix of emotion and displeasure in him. Little Anna. He is immediately reminded of the last time she made a fuss in the park when he unhooked her dress. How she had blushed. The mist had been so thick around that bench that it dripped from the branches. Anna fulfils his more earthly desires, the straightforward longings of a busy, unimaginative man. But she shouldn't be writing to him. What does she want? Everyone always wants something from him. Mostly money. The letter is confused and makes no clear demands. She writes that she wants a divorce, Good God, isn't she Catholic? He doesn't know. Maybe she isn't Catholic, in which case a divorce should be approved. Her husband is a drunkard who gambles away his money. If she is divorced, a flat could be arranged for her and they wouldn't have to meet in the park anymore. On the other hand, to be already thinking about divorce at the age of fifteen – patience doesn't seem to be her strong point. She writes that her monkey has died. Little Anna has a house full of animals – dogs, a parrot, fish and this monkey. Almost like Sisi. Maybe he should just send her the macaque that Elisabeth bought for Valerie. They can't keep the animal anyway. It had made an indecent show of itself in front of the ladies of the court. If they wait any longer, the monkey will possibly shock little Valerie. Relieved at his good idea, Franz Joseph writes a note on a piece of paper, adds Anna's letter with the address and pushes both to the edge of the table.

At five, the valet serves breakfast, which consists of coffee, butter and milk rolls. The ham is missing because it is Lent. Then the Emperor rings for his duty adjutant. Adjutant Gemmingen is sitting slumped in the duty room in front of the Emperor's apartment, his hands on the desk in front of him, his forehead on his hands and his eyes closed. He has been sitting here since half past two and is in a fuzzy stupor that differs little from real sleep. A briefcase lies on the desk in front of him. Now the wing adjutant wakes with a start, sweeps his hair back with both hands, snatches the briefcase and brings his Emperor the letter from the war ministry that arrived last night. In return, he takes the already completed papers for the ministry.

Shortly afterwards, Doctor Widerhofer appears before the Emperor, announces that he is at His Majesty's service, and wishes him a good morning. He wears only a frock coat although one is only allowed to visit the Emperor in his private quarters wearing tailcoats but the Emperor is more lenient in the mornings. In fact, the Emperor is particularly kind. His instructions are polite requests. But behind each of these requests is the inexorable power of supreme command. They smoke cigars together, cheap Virginians like the hackney carriage drivers smoke, talk about the weather, the Emperor's digestion – impeccable – and the latest gossip from Vienna. Then the personal physician leaves, and Franz Joseph pulls out the feather duster from behind the large standing calendar on his desk, waves the cigar ash off his desk and returns to his pile of files.

Then a telegram arrives. It is from London, from the ambassador. Beust is desperate: Queen Victoria wants to invite Elisabeth to Windsor Castle, but Ambassador Beust is having considerable difficulty making an appointment with the Empress's Lord Chamberlain. Nopcsa refuses even to inform the Empress of the matter. He is apparently under orders to refuse any invitation – even if it comes from the Queen of England – indeed, especially if it comes from the Queen of England – and not to bother her with it. In Queen Victoria's eyes, there is only one excuse for not attending one of her dinners: sudden death. Franz Joseph agrees. Especially now that the oriental issue has assumed worrying proportions, unity with England must not be strained. Elisabeth's behaviour is intolerable. He must put his foot down and order her to visit – even if it means antagonising her.

IV

Slave to Hair

Middleton is keen to be allowed to accompany the Empress again. But unfortunately, the coming days are already scheduled. The next morning, Elisabeth rides out with the Graftons, and a Colonel Pennant is already assigned to her. The day after, a Colonel Hunt is taking on this task.

Not wanting to be separated from him for too long, Elisabeth hosts an intimate dinner party at Easton Neston, the old English manor house she has rented for the season; just the cavaliers, her sister and brother-in-law along with their court and of course Lord and Lady Spencer. And Middleton.

The gentlemen appear in simple but elegant formal suits. Even Baron Orczy. He has taken advice and allowed himself to be advised by the Queen of Naples. No one in England would appear at such an occasion in uniform. Elisabeth herself wears a tight-fitting dress of ivory velvet. Her only jewellery is a pearl necklace and she wears camellias in her hair. Of course, she is the centre of attention here too; she is, after all, the hostess. And a beauty. And an outstanding horsewoman. The conversations are mostly about horses and the recent hunts. And about horses. Perhaps the fact that she is the Empress of Austria also plays a very small role, but no one here would think of waiting for her to address them. Instead, Colonel Hunt immediately tells the gathering how the Empress fell off her horse that morning.

'I wanted to recommend my golden chestnut to Her Majesty, you all know him, you know how reliable he is. I gave him to Her Majesty to try out for the hunt. And what can I say – the golden one falls right at the first jump. Falls over his own legs like the dumbest plough horse. Her Majesty wanted to get straight back on, but of course I didn't allow that. And what do you think Her Majesty said?'

He looks at the Empress questioningly as if she were one of his cronies. Elisabeth laughs.

'I wanted to buy the golden chestnut all the same. My offer still stands, by the way.'

'Oh no, Ma'am,' the Colonel exclaims, 'I wouldn't sell you the stupid animal for all of Austria.'

And so the evening continues. Captain Middleton is told to explain where his nickname 'Bay' comes from, and he claims the name comes from his hair, which shimmers in the evening like a bay, a bay at sunset. 'Ooooh,' the cavaliers groan, and Middleton smiles pensively to himself. Lord Spencer claims that Middleton's nickname comes from a particularly ugly racehorse and tells the story of how Bay once nailed cricket ace Sir Chandos Leigh's coat-tails to the ground.

'The poor chap,' Lord Spencer wipes tears of laughter from the corners of his eyes, 'he'd knelt down to have a medal hung round his neck, the whole thing was really important to him, and there's Bay sneaking up behind him and nailing his coat-tails to the ground.'

They compete in laying their pranks and scandalous deeds before the Empress, wild and sometimes quite ingenious pranks, a little cruel and occasionally violent. Elisabeth is delighted. Even the Austro-Hungarian cavaliers laugh, a little apprehensively at first, but it is not long before they too are behaving like the English. Bottles of brandy and red wine are emptied as quickly as they are served.

'Can you imagine that Viennese court protocol even dictates how much wine may be drunk by each guest at banquets?' Elisabeth says to Middleton.

Lord Spencer bursts into raucous laughter.

'It must be awful to live like that,' Middleton replies quietly, 'I'm sure the prescribed amount of wine isn't the worst of it.'

Elisabeth shrugs her shoulders.

'As Empress, I have ascended to a level where acting like a normal human being is no longer possible for me. At least in Austria. That is why my time here in England is so precious to me.'

Prince Ruffano, who is part of the entourage of the King of Naples, moves unobtrusively away from the table and goes to the sofa where Marie Festetics, the Empress's lady-in-waiting, is sitting a little apart.

'May I?'

She nods. He sits down next to her.

'Please tell me if I am being too impertinent, but I couldn't help noticing how sad you look. Wouldn't you like to join us at the table?'

'Oh, it is nothing.' She turns her head aside.

'Yes, indeed, the English climate is such that it can make one sad,' the Prince says, sighing.

'I can imagine – you, as a Neapolitan, must suffer from this wet and cold weather even more than we do.'

At that moment, there is a roar of laughter from the Empress's table.

Don Gerardo 5th Principe Ruffano is quite handsome. He has very dark curls and a gentle, unobtrusive manner. Almost casually he mentions that he lost his young wife two years ago. He is still young himself, young enough anyway. Certainly not yet forty years old. Lady-in-waiting Festetics is full of compassion. Both are silent. There is more laughter from the Empress's table.

'Maybe you will take me into your confidence and tell me what it is that is troubling you,' the Prince asks.

'Oh, it really is nothing. Compared to your sorrow, it is so utterly ridiculous, and I am ashamed that you could notice my troubles.'

Ruffano doesn't enquire any further, and that's when she goes ahead and tells him: that a ghastly book came out in Vienna, a roman à clef about Baron Leopold Edelsheim-Gyulai. About his vices and affairs with women. It was written by someone who was seduced and abandoned by him. 'Fata Morgana' is the name of this quite questionable book, and it was published only a few weeks ago. But then strong criticism started appearing in Viennese newspapers about the author of the shameful book, and with it the assertion that the author could be none other than Her Majesty's Hungarian lady-in-waiting, the well-known little Countess M.F.

'How distressing,' Prince Ruffano said.

Lady-in-waiting Festetics dabs the corner of her right eye with a handkerchief.

‘Absolutely. It is only in Vienna that you can be wronged like this.’

‘Did the court not do anything about it?’

‘Baron Braun – our Head of Cabinet – issued stiff denials in the newspapers. Naming the true author, Eleonora Bais, a lady-in-waiting to the Duchess Clementine. Bais is quite mad, it must be said in her defence, but evil talk like that sticks.’

‘Oh, you poor thing,’ Prince Ruffano consoles. ‘That is truly a reason to be so crestfallen. I can’t believe anyone would think you would do such a thing, though.’

‘That is because you don’t know the Viennese court. There is a purpose behind it. Someone has spread this rumour intentionally. The Empress has many enemies. And those who stand by her are also a target. Whenever I have been away from court for a while, I find that there has been intrigue against me.’

‘Come,’ says Prince Ruffano, holding out his hand and leading her to the Empress’s table, ‘you are among friends here.’

Lord Spencer is still going on about Middleton’s heroics.

‘When Bay resigned his commission and joined me, his colonel wasn’t exactly upset. Bay had the annoying habit of blowing his hunting horn after lunch. They even promoted him so that he would finally go and they could all have their nap again.’

From then on, there is one hunt after another. And Middleton is always at the Empress’s side.

‘It is not getting a bit too much, riding every day, Your Majesty?’ her lady-in-waiting Festetics asks. ‘Even the English gentlemen ride no more than four times a week.’

‘I am not tired, Festi, not at all,’ the Empress says and drinks a cup of consommé while the dressmaker sews the skirt to the top of her riding habit. The consommé is made every day from beef, chicken, venison and partridge, and is strained so that it does not contain a single shred of meat. Just the clear broth.

‘I have never felt more fresh and alive, and I don’t plan on missing a single day.’

Festetics has to admit that her mistress hasn’t looked as blooming as this for a long time. The excitement of the hunt and the ruthlessness with which Middleton demands the utmost from the Empress and repeatedly puts her in dangerous situations seems to suit her well. Headaches and backaches, which she constantly complained about in Vienna, have disappeared completely. No more tendency to melancholia, no more crying for hours on end, no more fits of rage, no more slaps for the hairdresser Feifalik. Her shyness has also improved.

'You can't understand, Countess,' says the Empress, 'because you do not ride. Galloping at full speed over English grass, clearing these fantastic jumps – it just does not compare to the terrain in Gödöllö.'

She has the cup of broth removed and waves for a cup of wine with her finger. Lady-in-waiting Meissl passes it to her and she downs it like medicine. The glass is filled a second time.

'Don't you think that the English are similar to the Hungarians in many ways? Such good horsemen! The elegance and abandon. Frankly, I am already dreading Sunday when hunting is not allowed.'

The telegram from Vienna affects Elisabeth's mood like a ton of bricks. Franz Joseph demands that she accept the English Queen's invitation immediately and that the visit take place within five days. Elisabeth sends for her sister Marie. It is six in the morning, but the ex-Queen of Naples, whose hunting seat is nearby, immediately jumps onto her fastest horse and gallops off. A grey mastiff accompanies her. She causes quite a stir in Towcester, as they mistake her for the Empress, who has brought a very similar mastiff to England. Shortly afterwards, horse, dog and ex-Queen turn into the park of Easton Neston and just a moment later, Marie of Naples gathers up her riding habit and hurries up one of England's most remarkable staircases. She herself recommended Easton Neston as a hunting residence for Elisabeth. Secretary Linger would never have found something so exquisite without her. A miniature palace with a restrained elegant façade, but crammed full of valuable paintings, furniture and tapestries from the last two centuries. The park is huge and the stables are particularly beautiful – after all, horses are always the most important thing to Sisi. And then there is the catchment area – four renowned hunts: Pytchley, Bicester, Grafton and Cottesmere.

Marie finds her sister in the dressing room, as expected. The mastiff also bounds into the room along with the Queen. The Empress is sitting at a table that has been moved to the middle of the room and covered with a white table cloth. She is also wearing a white peignoir. Her incredibly long and thick hair cascades down both sides of it. When you see it loose, it shimmers reddish-blond. It is a pity, actually, that Elisabeth has her hair pomaded dark. It reaches down to the floor and forms a sort of puddle around the chair. Next to the puddle of hair lies Elisabeth's mastiff Morphy, identical to Marie's dog; even the two collars are embroidered with the same pattern. Delighted, the mastiffs pounce on each other and disappear into the remarkable stairwell.

Behind the Empress's chair stands the hairdresser, wearing a light blue court dress with a white lace apron, celebrating the ritual of daily hairdressing. Feifalik is a pretty but somewhat ordinary-looking woman. With a pompous expression and theatrical movements,

she feels her way over the hair, lifting thick strands into the air like a sorceress and wrapping them around her arms. She wears white glacé gloves, because Elisabeth had heard from the French Empress Eugenie that her court hairdresser Leroi always wears such gloves.

'You are a slave to your hair,' Marie says and kisses Elisabeth on the cheek. 'Why don't you just cut a metre off? You can only wear it up all the time anyway. No-one would notice.'

Elisabeth looks at her sister disconcertedly. Her hair is the third greatest passion in the Empress's life: horses, her youngest daughter Valerie and her extremely long hair. With a martyred expression, Elisabeth points to the table on which the telegram is lying. Marie allows a chambermaid to hand it to her, slumps into a rococo armchair and reads. When she looks up again, she has a broad smile on her face. Fate is working in her favour.

'I don't know what Victoria wants,' Elisabeth exclaims. 'I wanted to pay her a visit when we were in London. So that I could get it over and done with and she could no longer disturb me while I was hunting. And then they said she couldn't see me, she was too busy. She did that on purpose. To torture me. To spoil everything for me. I would never dare to do something so rude! And now Franz wants to force me.'

Feifelik puts on an expression of extreme concentration, takes a comb of golden amber and divides a strand of hair into several strands. She separates each of these strands into countless smaller strands, gently pulls them apart with comb and fingers, and places them over the imperial shoulders, where they shine golden in the morning light.

'Oh, Sisi,' her sister says, 'the rejection in London was just revenge for last year, when you turned down two of her dinner invitations. But now Victoria wants to make it up with you. She doesn't have the faintest idea how much a hunt means to you. You must go there, or else there will be huge bother, and the ambassadors won't concern themselves with anything else.'

'I know,' Elisabeth shouts with tears in her eyes, snatches the comb from Feifelik's hand and hurls it to the ground. Feifelik freezes. There is hair caught in the comb.

'Why not just visit Victoria on a Sunday?' Marie says 'You are not allowed to hunt here then anyway.'

Mollification settles over Elisabeth like a cool cloth. Her sister is so clever. Marie is the only one who really understands her.

'But the Saturday. I still lose the Saturday. That's when I was going to hunt in Thorpe Mandeville. I won't be able to make it to London afterwards. Or I set off on Sunday morning and arrive in Windsor so late that I might have to stay the night and miss the hunt on Monday ... what is the matter, Festi? Is something wrong?'

Lady-in-waiting Festetics shifts in her chair. She is only allowed to speak when the Empress addresses her directly.

'Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I understand that Queen Victoria and her court do not appreciate Sunday visits at all.'

'I don't care about that. Why should I take any notice of it? Does she show consideration for me? It is bad enough that I am missing the hunt just to eat scones with that fat woman and her court mummies.'

Feifalik picks up the comb, cleans it with a cloth though it doesn't need to be cleaned, and approaches the sacred hair with the utmost caution. Marie of Naples laughs in amusement. Festetics thinks it is a false laugh. Pointed nose, pointed chin, the devil sits in there, Festetics thinks. She can't stand the Queen of Naples, fears her ideas and the desires they arouse in her imperial sister. Wishes that are not suited to an Empress and which make her uneasy. And Her Majesty is constantly expected to do favours for her sister. It's about to happen, the sister is about to say what she is really concerned about. The Queen of Naples shifts her chair closer to the Empress.

'But who says that you have to miss out on the hunt? We will just ask the organiser to bring the meet forward. You can take all your luggage with you and afterwards you can take the Great Western to London. On Sunday you will have lunch in Windsor and in the evening we will continue on to Leighton House to Ferdinand Rothschild's.'

Festetics leans back in her chair. So that's what it's all about. The English Rothschilds crave social recognition. They have enough money, but they are not yet really considered fashionable. That's why they collect kings and queens. Marie von Neapel may only be an ex-Queen, but Ferdinand Rothschild still bought the 'Park View' hunting lodge on the south side of Towcester for her. The Empress's sister could never have afforded a hunting stable with twelve horses and all the required servants, grooms and attendants. Even now, this standard of living eats up a lot of money, which is why she has to keep Ferdinand Rothschild happy. She has probably offered him the prospect of a visit from the Empress of Austria. This would be very useful to the Rothschilds. If the Empress of Austria is not too posh to socialise with the Rothschilds, then the invitations will start pouring in.

'To the Rothschilds?' Elisabeth says. 'Are you going to bother me with your bloody Rothschilds now? As if I wasn't troubled enough. I am here to hunt, why can't anyone understand that?'

Hair artist Feifalik reassembles the tangles into strands and weaves them into elaborate plaits.

'But of course you must hunt,' Marie replies. 'We will spend the night at Leighton House, Ferdinand will be thrilled to put you up. And the next day you can hunt. With Mr Selby-Lowndes' pack! Well, what do you say now?'

'Mr Selby's pack? Well, yes, that would work. But I am not going to stay with the Rothschild's. I am staying at Claridges. We will do without lunch at Windsor Castle, then we can make it to Leighton House and back to London that same evening.'

'But why don't you want to stay at the Rothschilds?'

exclaimed Marie. 'Ferdinand is such a charming person. And he wants to show you Mentmore, his stud farm.'

This goes back and forth, while Feifalik, the master of the hair, twists her mistress's braids into two heavy snakes, threading them through with silk threads and twisting them into a sophisticated crown. One of the chambermaids has to support the crown, for which she also wears white gloves, while Feifalik pulls a silver-tipped comb made of transparent tortoiseshell from her apron. It is a miracle comb that prevents hair loss. She uses it to build a nest from the hair that she has left hanging loosely at the back of the Empress's head, a pad of hair so dense and firm that it can support the heavy braid crown.

Elisabeth keeps her sister on tenterhooks a while longer and pretends to think about whether she really wants to go and see the Rothschilds, when all along she has agreed. After all, family is the most important thing. Elisabeth would do anything for her brothers and sisters. Besides, the possibility of getting the tiresome visits to Queen Victoria and Baron Rothschild over in one go cheers her up.

'All right,' she finally says, and Marie beams and kisses her on the cheek again.

'You won't regret it. Ferdinand is so nice.'

Feifalik has almost completed her work of art. She walks around the Empress, steps back, then steps closer again and pulls a few short loops and swirls out of the front of the wreath of hair. They now cover the Empress's forehead like a fine veil and curl over her ears. Finished. Feifalik steps back with a triumphant look, only to step in front of her mistress again immediately afterwards with a silver bowl. The Empress looks inside. Eight hairs, each over a metre and a half long, curl at the bottom of the bowl. These are the hairs that got caught in the comb that day. Elisabeth looks reproachfully at her servant, Feifalik lowers her eyes. What the Empress does not know, however, is that Feifalik has sewn a wide strip of cloth under her apron, which she covers with glue before every hairdressing session. There are at least twenty more hairs stuck there that have fallen out and been gathered up unnoticed. Pure self-protection on Feifalik's part. If the Empress finds too many of her sacred hairs in the bowl, Feifalik gets slapped in the face. Elisabeth has been accustomed to dealing robustly with the household staff since childhood. Feifalik sets the bowl down on the table and takes the white lace peignoir from the Empress's shoulders. Elisabeth bows her head graciously and Feifalik makes a low bow and whispers: 'At your service, Your Majesty.'

V

A Railway Adventure

Everything goes according to her sister's plan. On Saturday 11th March 1876, Elisabeth hunts in Thorpe Mandeville in the morning and then takes the Great Western Railway to London, where she again stays at Claridges. Some of her entourage have travelled directly to Ferdinand Rothschild's after the hunt. Elisabeth makes her way to Paddington Station with the rest on Sunday morning, where a special train to Windsor awaits, to which the Empress's carriage has been attached. They are met at the station by Mr Tyrell, the superintendent of the train line and Alfred Higgins, divisional superintendent.

'We will travel with you and personally ensure that everything is to your satisfaction, Your Majesty.'

While Mr Tyrell is speaking, a few snowflakes fall from the sky. The Empress wants to be alone in her carriage. Lady-in-waiting Festetics asks the Lord Chamberlain where she should sit.

'Wherever you can find a space,' Nopcsa grouches. He doesn't much like Festetics. She is so terribly correct and reserved. She would never flirt with anyone. So the dull woman can go and find her own seat. Festetics gets into the first-class carriage together with the Larisches, Rudi Liechtenstein, Auersperg and Nopsca. Johann Larisch asks her to join him and Rudi Liechtenstein. He whispers to her that he has arranged for her to be introduced to the Queen of England as well. Festetics is all aflutter. She's only been in England for one week and she's already moving in the highest circles! Larisch truly is a good man!

'But that's how it should be: the future Princessa Ruffano,' Liechtenstein teases. Festetics doesn't hold it against him. Liechtenstein is very loyal to the Empress – and therefore also to her. He is one of the most discreet people imaginable.

She looks out of the window. The snow is falling more and more heavily. Even before they reach Windsor, it has turned into a veritable snowstorm – so bad that neither a reception committee nor the usual onlookers are gathered at the station. Standing outside the station there are only two carriages and a few mounted attendants with snow on their epaulettes.

The service at Windsor Castle is scheduled for noon. Queen Victoria has instructed the Bishop of Peterborough not to preach a long sermon. The Empress of Austria will probably not arrive until around two o'clock, but it hasn't been possible to make much sense of the various and contradictory messages that came from Easton Neston. In the first, Elisabeth had announced that she would arrive on Sunday, but that she would not stay overnight. The

second telegram said that the Empress of Austria would not be able to stay for dinner either; the third, that with a bit of luck; the Empress of Austria-Hungary would probably stay for dinner and therefore come a bit earlier, and the fourth, that it was unlikely that the Empress of Austria would be able to have luncheon with Queen Victoria. They needed to be prepared for all possibilities. They wouldn't put it past Elisabeth of Austria to arrive at one o'clock.

Around twelve, the Bishop ascends to the pulpit. He has not spoken three sentences before a side door creaks open and a page slips in and whispers to Victoria that the Empress is about to pull up. This is somewhat confusing.

It can't be helped. Queen Victoria gets up and, with her, the ladies-in-waiting, the inner circle, accompanied by scraping, shuffling and rustling. The Bishop of Peterborough is indignant: the head of the Anglican Church is leaving the service early. When the Queen steps outside, snowflakes swirl around her black satin dress. It's a real blizzard, and her small mantilla and white tulle bonnet don't give her the protection she needs. The carriage rolls in. Her guest is also dressed in black, but what a difference: Elisabeth's silhouette resembles a calligraphic stroke in the landscape, while Victoria, with all her flesh and the wide skirt that completely covers her rubber shoes, glides across the snow like an inkwell on wheels. Their majesties stop in front of each other, greet and examine each other. Their respective entourages do the same at an appropriate distance.

'How nice, Your Majesty, that you were able to make it happen after all,' Victoria says sourly.

'I am sorry, truly sorry, Your Majesty, but in this weather there is no way I will be able to stay for luncheon,' is the first thing that Elisabeth says.

The Queen of England can't believe it. She must have misheard. It is simply not possible that the Empress of Austria would want to snub her like this. The world has not come to that yet, surely. And why does she speak so quietly, and why can't she open her mouth properly?

Victoria leads her guests into a room where the patterns of the curtains and wall coverings fight for supremacy with the patterns of the carpets and furniture upholstery. What follows is a seemingly endless succession of introductions, of ladies on bended knee and gentlemen with bowed heads, expressions of reverence and submission, names and titles. Their majesties graciously extend their hands towards the pursed lips. Then a little small talk. Whether the Prince of Wales has already returned from India – no, because he intends to stay for eight months. Whether there was any news of dear Bertie – oh, yes. Good news? Good news! Elisabeth recounts that she has been hunting every single day since she arrived, and how courteously she has been received everywhere. Victoria finds it decidedly inappropriate for an Empress to visit England solely for sporting pleasure, which of course she does not say. Instead she asks if the Queen of Naples is in Northamptonshire for the

same purpose – yes, she is. Riding has always been a passion in her family, the Empress says, in every form, even circus riding.

Circus? Victoria juts her chin out and mentions that she has forbidden her female subjects from training predators ever since a British lion tamer was killed while doing that.

‘The poor thing was only seventeen and even called herself ‘The Lion Queen’. Though it was actually a tiger who ripped her throat open.’

Now the Queen of England once more asks the Empress of Austria to stay for lunch. Elisabeth is growing impatient. Food, food and more food. Victoria is almost obsessed with it. No wonder she is so fat. Despite all Victoria’s efforts and the hungry looks given by Festetics, Nopcsa and the Larisches, the Empress refuses.

‘The train is leaving at two o’clock sharp, it has all been arranged.’

And off she goes again. The visit has taken precisely three-quarters of an hour.

‘God, Festi, don’t look so sour,’ says the Empress as they stamp their feet on the platform to get rid of the snow. The storm has picked up again, the white flakes circle thickly and get caught in the beards of the cavaliers.

‘Excuse me, Your Majesty,’ Marie Festetic says, rustling up a smile.

‘That’s better. You know I hate all the ceremony. You can all thank me for sparing you the meal with the Queen and her ossified courtiers.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ says Heinrich Larisch. He is a tall young man, a giant almost, with an active metabolism. Will there be anything to eat on the train? The Master of the Household, Nopcsa, muses to himself. The Empress has insulted the Queen of England even more with her casualness than if she had not come at all. Frighteningly rude behaviour. It could strain relations between the two ruling houses.

‘Do not forget that the Queen refused to receive me in London, Nopcsa,’ the Empress said at that moment. ‘So it serves her right.’

‘Very well, Your Majesty,’ Nopcsa replies.

At last everyone has climbed into the railway carriages - this time Lady-in-waiting Festetics is allowed into the Empress’s carriage – and the black locomotive train sets off, hissing and steaming. Nopcsa, Auersperg, Liechtenstein and old Larisch are already drifting off. Puddles form around their feet. Young Larisch stares hungrily out of the window. The weather, it is like what polar bears have at the North Pole.

In the royal carriage, a servant brings the Empress and her ladies-in-waiting tea.

The carriage was only completed two years ago by Ringhoffers and can be used on its own or as a touring carriage with the accompanying sleeping car. The décor is stylish, but without the earlier overload of gold baroque scrollwork and garish wallpaper. The walls are now covered in green silk damask, the plush fauteuils are the same colour with plenty of

tassels. Suddenly there is a jolt, the hot drink spills over the rim of the cup and the train comes to a halt with a long-drawn-out screech. They can't have gone far yet. In fact, they have only just set off. Festetics looks out of the window: snow. After a while, Mr Higgins and Mr Tyrell, Nopcsa and a fourth man with a face blue with cold and ice in his moustache. They all bow deeply, the blue with-cold one fidgets a little with his right arm. An ailment or just the excitement, it is hard to tell. Mr Tyrell apologises to Her Majesty for the delay. This is Mr Albert Hart, stationmaster of Slough Station, who has brought the train to a halt by standing on the track and waving a lantern. Mr Hart bows once more. This time without fidgeting. Several telegraph poles have fallen on the tracks between Slough and West Drayton, Mr Tyrell continues, so for the moment they cannot continue. But Her Majesty need not worry, Mr Higgins and Mr Tyrell have already devised a plan to clear the line themselves. Mr Tyrell has ordered workmen to the station with saws and ropes. He will uncouple the locomotive and make his way to London with it. The workers will accompany him, and wherever there is a telegraph pole on the tracks, they will jump out and move it aside or, if necessary, cut it up. And then on to the next one. Mr Higgins, in turn, has ordered a single carriage, which will be arriving at any minute, in which he will cover the eight kilometres to West Drayton by road, and from there he will work his way back towards Slough in the same way with another locomotive. The gentlemen take their leave, and the Empress wishes them well. Mr Tyrell is wondering where else to find workers on a Sunday. So far he has found only two. Perhaps more can be picked up along the way.

The firewood for the First Class is collected and brought over to the Empress's carriage. Who knows how long they will have to wait here?

Nopcsa and the two Larisches sit with growling stomachs in their increasingly cold first-class carriage, look out into the storm and think about all the fine canapés and warm soups that would have been served to them in Windsor Castle. Perhaps it is not by chance that the Empress has so many enemies in Vienna.

It gets colder and colder.

Then they see Lady-in-waiting Festetics and chambermaid Meissl struggling through the snow under their window. Lord Chamberlain Nopcsa throws on his coat, gets out and joins them. Festetics tells him that the Empress has expressed a desire to have some refreshment. The train has come to a halt about a hundred yards from Slough Station. Bowed low, they trudge across the tracks. Three shadowy figures in the white inferno. The wind howls viciously, flinging needle-sharp pieces of ice into their faces. They head for a house which, judging by its size, could be the stationmaster's house, especially as it is right next to the tracks. Mr Hart is there right away and assures them that it is an honour for him to cook for the Empress. He believes there is some left-over roast beef, but he does not know how the food can be transported to the carriage without it getting cold.

'We'll take care of that,' Nopcsa assures him and all three return with the good news and with two railway employees who were just about to sit down and eat with the stationmaster and his wife. The railway employees unhitch the luggage van, and after one of them has climbed in with a lantern and pushed and stacked the luggage to one side, the chambermaid, Meissl, climbs in with a tray and the ceremonial dishes. The railway employees, the two Larisches, Rudolf Liechtenstein and Duke Auersperg push the luggage carriage with the maid inside to the station. The maid disappears with the ceremonial dishes into the stationmaster's warm cottage, where the plates are filled with roast beef and side dishes and then wrapped in two thick blankets together with the tray. The gentlemen wait outside, folding their arms around their bodies and stamping their feet. They are still freezing. Finally Meissl comes back out. She has a bottle of wine clamped under her arm. Mr Hart appears behind her and speaks the words of salvation: he invites everyone present into his modest home for tea and scones.

'God bless you,' young Larisch shouts. Beforehand, of course, Meissl is rolled back in the luggage cart with the roast beef so that she can serve the Empress the steaming hot meal in her carriage. Then everyone runs back to Mr Hart's hospitable home. Only Lord Chamberlain Nopcsa and Rudi Liechtenstein stay with the railway wagons for safety. Through the obscured windows of their freezing first-class carriage, they see the servants trudging past below, together with the cavaliers, to warm up in the stationmaster's house. Their gazes follow wistfully. In the royal carriage, a servant pours wine for the Empress with a sullen expression. Festetics feels a little dizzy. I should have eaten more this morning, she thinks, or at least drunk more.

'What's the matter with you, Festi?' says the Empress, cutting a tiny piece of roast beef and dividing it up again into four equally sized miniature bites, 'You are quite pale. Are you still fretting over that awful book?'

She dips the tip of her fork into a blob of sauce and uses it to spear one of the miniature morsels.

'Thank you, Your Majesty, it is too kind of you to notice,' Festetics replies and blushes with pleasure. 'I am quite well, it is nothing.'

What a wonderful woman the ruler of Austria is. There she sits in a train without a locomotive, all alone on the tracks, a terrible snowstorm raging around her, no-one knows how long the fuel for the stove will last, and at any moment another train could steam into them and cause a terrible disaster. And Her Majesty still has eyes for how her lady-in-waiting is doing. It is an honour to work for such a person.

At ten past four Mr Tyrrell knocks on the carriage door and announces to the Lord Chamberlain that the line is now clear. The rest of the household, excited, returns from the

stationmaster's cottage. The carriages are coupled back on to the locomotive. The second locomotive, with which Mr Higgins has made his way to them, is told to reverse in front of them as a pilot.

'It could be that some lines are still blocked,' Mr Tyrell explains. 'The Royal Railway alternates between the Up and the Down. If we're unlucky, we'll have to switch to the track that hasn't been cleared yet. But that would only be a short stretch and there are workers on the other locomotive.'

Nopcsa doesn't understand a word, goes to the carriage and tells the Empress that everything is in order now, but that the second locomotive is leading the way just in case. The Empress smiles graciously and they arrive in London shortly before five.

The next day they go to see Ferdinand de Rothschild. Rothschild turns out to be a kindly man in his thirties with a high forehead, little hair and large sad eyes, who strangely does not share his relatives' interest in banking. Instead, he uses his time and money to complete his collection of Sevres porcelain and 18th century furniture and to build and extend a house in the style of a French Renaissance chateau to adequately house the collection. And for hunting. Rothschild shows his guests Crafton Stables, where some of the best horses in England are kept. The Empress likes it all – the horses, the man himself – so much that she stays until the evening, and the Queen of Naples grins like a badger because she has finally delivered and can thus expect further allowances. Lord Chamberlain Nopcsa is at his wits' end. Less than an hour for the English Queen and a whole day for a Jewish baron – the English newspapers will pounce on it and draw their unpleasant conclusions. As if he wasn't tested enough, the Queen of Naples also tries to persuade the Empress to spend the night at the Rothschilds'.

'We are all doing it. It will probably clear up in the morning and then we can all hunt together. Ferdy would be so happy.' Nopcsa grabs his neck and gasps for breath. Fortunately, the Empress declines and stays the night in London, at Claridges again, before setting off for the hunt the next morning.

The hunt is a great success too: they gallop over a patchwork of fields with lots of elm trees, there are two long runs, three dead foxes, and Count Wolkenstein falls into a swampy stream with his grey – what more could you want?

VI

The New Hairdo

The Empress is not a woman who forgives in a hurry. Even days later, when she has long since returned to Easton Neston, she still resents her husband, the Emperor of Austria-Hungary, for having forced her to visit the Queen of England.

‘Your horses are all useless, slow and dull, here you need a much better standard,’ she writes in her next letter, so that he should be quite offended. The unfortunate man has spent thousands of guilders to get her the best thoroughbred horses in Europe. But Elisabeth is telling the truth. Most of her horses are not up to the demands of England; they stumble, fall or can’t keep up towards the end. She has asked Mr Elliott, her sister’s guide, to look at the animals. He has come to the conclusion that of the ten horses she has brought with her, only four are capable of keeping up at the very front, and the others should rather be made available to less demanding riders.

A buyer named McDonald is immediately sent to Lincolnshire to buy more suitable horses. Middleton also offers her one of his own. He owns twenty hunters. Four of them are taken to Easton Neston. The first one that Middleton puts the Empress on is a dark thoroughbred gelding, Merry Andrew.

‘You will like him, Your Majesty,’ he says, ‘Merry is as good and clever as a dog.’

On Merry Andrew, Elisabeth now flies through the Pytchley countryside at Middleton’s side. Hunt follows hunt. Finally a proper hunter. Merry Andrew jumps as if he shares his rider’s enthusiasm for life-threatening sport. The Empress’s seat is soft and supple, she can hold the reins quite loosely on this horse. Perfect harmony. Middleton still bosses her around anyway and rebukes her when she doesn’t jump exactly where he has shown her. He is the only one who is allowed to take this liberty. She doesn’t even answer back. The Captain is the bravest rider she has ever met. She admires him limitlessly. When she falls, he pulls her out of the ditch again, lifts her onto her horse and at the next obstacle he spurs her on to an even more dangerous jump. He never tries to slow her down. On the contrary, he points to the most difficult spot in a hedge, and she obediently steers Merry Andrew there, and Merry Andrew obediently flies over, as if they were all three guided by one and the same will. And yet Elisabeth has never felt so free. Concentrating on the horse and the frantically changing situations overrides every other thought. Only during the long runs – once they galloped thirty minutes from Barring Gooise to Pytchley – do her eyes seek those of Middleton. He, too, seeks her gaze. Hunts are made for flirtations and secret love affairs. There is the shared passion for the sport, there is the tight and elegant hunt clothing in which even

average people look attractive – and the physical excitement does the rest. With a fast gallop you can leave the annoying chaperones behind.

‘Bay,’ whispers the Empress when they finally stop, ‘Bay.’

Of course, it is completely unthinkable that the Empress of Austria should have an affair. Especially with an insignificant captain like Middleton. No-one can imagine that. At least no-one from Austria. Besides, the Empress and Middleton are almost always there at the kill. The kill is the climax of a fox hunt; it is the moment when the fox is literally torn to pieces by the hounds. You don’t have time to disappear into the bushes when you want to be there for the kill. You are busy enough trying not to lose sight of the hounds and getting over all the obstacles.

On the way home from the hunt, Elisabeth and Middleton meet the Queen of Naples and her guide Elliott. The Queen is riding her favourite horse, Pickles.

‘You should wear a veil when you ride,’ she tells her sister. ‘You are already full of freckles and brown as a bunny.’

‘No veil,’ Middleton replies unasked, ‘I won’t allow it. It is far too dangerous. Your Majesty might get caught on a hedge. And besides ...’

He breaks off mid-sentence and looks at Elisabeth. The Queen of Naples turns her chestnut hunter around and trots off irritably. Her guide struggles to keep up.

[END OF SAMPLE]