



The New Melusina, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The New Melusina

Honored gentlemen! I am fully aware of the fact that you do not like forewords or introductions; therefore I hasten to assure you that this time I intend to pass with flying colors. I know that quite a few of the true stories I have told turned out to everyone's satisfaction, but today I am going to tell you one that far surpasses all the others. Although it happened several years ago, it still disturbs me whenever I recall it and I hope that someday there may be further developments. I think it would be hard to find its equal.

First, let me confess that I have not always lived in a way that could insure my immediate future—frankly, not even the next day! In my youth, I was not a good manager and often found myself in quite embarrassing straits. Once I undertook a journey that was intended to be profitable, but I aimed too high, and after having begun the trip in a private coach, had to continue by ordinary diligence and finally found myself traveling on foot.

I was a bright young man and it was a custom of mine, whenever I arrived at an inn, to look around for the landlady or the cook and to ingratiate myself with them, a practice that usually helped to reduce my bill.

One evening, as I walked into the stagecoach inn of a small town and was about to proceed in my usual fashion, a beautiful carriage, a two-seater drawn by four horses, rattled up to the entrance behind me. Turning, I saw a woman, alone—no maid, no footman. I hurried forward to open the door for her and assure her that I was her servant. As she descended, I could see that she was beautifully built and, on looking more closely, that her lovely face betrayed a hint of sadness.

Again I asked if there was anything I could do for her. “Yes,” she replied, “would you take out the casket on the seat for me? But be careful, please, and carry it upstairs. I must beg you, though, to be sure to hold it level and not to move or shake it in any way.” I picked up the casket carefully; she closed the door of the carriage and told the domestic that she intended to stay the night.

Soon we were alone in her room. She asked me to put the casket on a table that stood against the wall, and since I could gather from her behavior that she wished to be alone, I withdrew after kissing her hand respectfully and fervently, whereupon she said, “Order dinner for both of us.” You can imagine how delighted I was to carry out her orders. In my exuberance, I scarcely gave landlady and cook a nod! I awaited the moment that would bring us together again with the greatest impatience. The dinner was served, we sat down opposite each other, I enjoyed my first good meal in a long time, and with it—what a delectable sight! I must say, she seemed to grow more and more beautiful by the minute!

She was most gracious, but she rejected any efforts on my part to be more intimate. The dishes were removed. I lingered on, racking my brains for a ruse that might bring me closer to her—in vain. A certain dignity on her part held me back. I could not overcome it and had to take my leave early, quite against my will.

After a wakeful night filled with restless dreaming, I was up early and inquired whether she had ordered fresh horses. I was told no, and walked out into the garden. From there, I could see her at the window of her room, fully dressed, and hurried up to her. When I found her to be just as beautiful—nay, more beautiful than the day before, I was overwhelmed by a wicked audacity. Rushing up to her, I took her in my arms.

“Angelic, irresistible creature!” I cried. “Forgive me, but I cannot help myself.”

She extricated herself from my embrace with unbelievable dexterity. I wasn’t even able to kiss her cheek. “You will have to curb such

outbursts,” she said, “or you will forfeit a happiness that lies within your reach. But you shall not take possession of it until you have passed several tests.”

“Ask of me what you will, angelic spirit,” I cried. “Only do not drive me to despair!”

Smiling, she said, “If you want to serve me, hear my conditions. I have come here to visit a friend with whom I intend to stay a few days. During that time I would like my carriage and this casket to travel on ahead. Would you undertake the assignment? All you have to do is place the casket in the carriage and lift it out again, sit beside it when it is in the carriage and take good care of it. Whenever you arrive at an inn, place it on a table in a room all by itself where you are not to live or step. You must lock this room every time with this key, which can open all locks. It has a special power that prevents anyone else from opening them in the meantime.”

I stared at her and suddenly I began to feel quite strange, but I promised to do everything she said, if only I could hope to see her again soon and she would seal my hopes with a kiss. She did, and from that moment on I was hers, body and soul. Now, she said, I was please to go and order fresh horses. We discussed what route I was to take and the places where I was to stop and wait for her. Finally, she gave me a purse full of gold, and I kissed her hand. As we parted, she seemed touched, and I—I didn’t know what I was doing!

When I came back after having ordered the horses, I found the door of her room locked. I tried the passkey at once, and it stood the test perfectly. The door opened. I found the room empty, only the casket was standing on the table where I had placed it.

Meanwhile the carriage had been brought to the front entrance. I carried the casket down carefully and placed it on the seat beside me. The landlady asked, “Where is the lady?” A child replied, “She went into town.” I bade them farewell and left them triumphantly—I, who had arrived the night before with dusty leggings. You can readily imagine

that, with nothing else to do, I began to give the whole business a lot of thought.

I counted the money, made a few plans of my own, and every now and then gave the casket a sidelong glance. I drove straight on, didn't tarry at quite a few stops and didn't rest until I had arrived at one of the larger towns she had specified. I obeyed her instructions meticulously and placed the box in a room by itself with candles on either side, as she had ordered. I locked the room, moved into my own, and made myself comfortable.

For a time I was able to pass the hours thinking of her, but after a while I became bored. I was not used to living alone, and I soon found the sort of company I liked at inns and public places, in the pursuit of which my money began to dwindle away.

One evening, after having carelessly indulged in a wild game of chance, I found my purse empty. When I got back to my room, I was beside myself. I looked like a rich man and could expect a stiff bill next morning; I had no idea when my beautiful lady would turn up again, if ever; in short, I could not have found myself in a more embarrassing situation. I longed for her doubly and felt I couldn't live a moment longer without her and her money.

After supper, which I couldn't enjoy because, for the first time, I had to dine alone, I paced my room, up and down, spoke loudly to myself, cursed myself, threw myself on the floor, tore my hair, altogether behaved abominably. Suddenly I heard a slight movement in the next room, which I had locked, and after that, a knocking. I pulled myself together, and took my passkey, but I did not need it. The double door opened all by itself, and my lovely lady was coming toward me by the light of the candles. I threw myself at her feet, kissed the hem of her dress, her hands. She helped me to my feet. I didn't dare to embrace her. I scarcely dared to look at her, but I confessed my sins honestly and remorsefully.

“I forgive you,” she said, “but unfortunately you are delaying your happiness and mine. Now you must travel another stretch out into the world before we may meet again. Here is more gold, enough if you know how to manage at all. Since wine and women brought you to this pass, avoid them in the future, and let us hope to meet again happily.”

She stepped back into the room, and the doors closed. I knocked, I pleaded, but I could hear nothing more. Next morning when I asked for the bill, the waiter smiled and said, “Now we know why you lock your doors in such a puzzling fashion, so that no passkey can open them. We thought you must be the bearer of a great treasure and much money, and when we saw your treasure coming downstairs, we had to admit that you are right to secure her so carefully.”

I had nothing to say to that, but paid my bill and got into the carriage with the casket. This time I drove out into the world firmly determined to heed my mysterious lady’s warning, but I had scarcely reached the next big town when I found myself surrounded by attractive women from whom I simply could not tear myself away. They seemed determined to make me pay dearly for their favors, for they managed to keep me at a distance yet plunge me into one expenditure after the other, and since I had nothing on my mind but to keep them amused, I again gave no thought to what I was spending, but paid and played host whenever the opportunity arose. You can imagine my astonishment and delight when I discovered a few weeks later that my sack of gold was as round and full as ever.

I had to assure myself of this wonderful characteristic of my purse, so I sat down and counted the money, then memorized the sum total carefully, and went on living as merrily and sociably as ever. I didn’t miss an excursion into the country or a boat trip, singing, dancing or any other pleasures. But it soon became quite evident that now my purse was growing smaller, as if with my accursed counting, I had robbed it of its virtue of being countless! By now though, my pursuit of pleasure was in full swing again, and there seemed to be no way back, although I was again almost at the end of my resources. I cursed the situation I found myself in; I ranted against the beautiful creature who

had led me into this temptation and was offended because she did not put in an appearance again.

Angrily I renounced all my obligations to her and decided to open the casket and see if I couldn't find some assistance in it. For, although it was not heavy enough to contain money, there could have been jewels in it, and they would have been most welcome too. I was about to carry out my intention, then decided to wait for the night in order to be able to do so undisturbed, and hurried off to a banquet that was being held.

There was the usual carousing, and all of us were wildly excited by wine and trumpet blast, when something very unpleasant happened. The meal was almost over when an older friend of my favorite beauty at table entered the hall quite unexpectedly, having returned from a journey. He sat down beside her without much ado and tried to assert his old rights. The result was bad feeling, dispute, and strife. We drew swords, and I was carried home more dead than alive.

A surgeon bound my wounds and left me. It was already past midnight and my attendant was asleep, when the door to the next room opened, and my mysterious lady walked into my room and sat down at my bedside. She asked me how I felt. I didn't reply because I was too weak and miserable. She went on speaking to me with much compassion and rubbed my temples with a certain balm that made me feel stronger at once—so strong, in fact, that I could become angry and upbraid her.

In a violent speech, I laid all the blame for my misfortune at her feet, railed against the passion with which she filled me, against her appearing and disappearing, and the boredom and longing that had to be the result. I became more and more vehement, as if attacked by a fever. Finally I swore that if she still refused to be mine and would not submit to me, I no longer wished to live; and I demanded an immediate reply. When she hesitated with some sort of excuse, I was beside myself and tore off my bandages with the intention of bleeding to death. Imagine my astonishment when I found my wounds healed, my body in as fine condition as ever, and her in my arms!

Now we were the happiest couple in the world. Alternately we begged each other's forgiveness without really knowing what for. She promised to travel with me from now on, and soon we were sitting side by side in the carriage, the casket opposite us like a third person. I had never spoken of it in her presence, and it didn't occur to me to do so now, although there it was before our eyes. In a tacit understanding, both of us looked after it whenever necessary, but I was the one who put it in the carriage and lifted it out again, and I was also the one who attended to the locking of the doors.

As long as there was still something in the purse, I paid, and when all the money was gone, I said so. "We can soon remedy that," she said, pointing to two small bags hanging on either side of the carriage. I had noticed them before, but we had never made any use of them. She put her hand into one and drew out a few pieces of gold, out of the other some silver, thus demonstrating to me how it would be possible for us to continue to live as we pleased.

And so we traveled from city to city, from country to country, were gay whether we were alone or with others, and it never occurred to me that she might leave me again, especially since she had been pregnant for some time now, a circumstance that only served to increase our joy and love for each other. But alas, one morning I could not find her, and since I didn't like the idea of remaining without her, I proceeded on my way, with the casket. I tried both moneybags and found them full.

The trip was a pleasant one, and although I had no desire to reflect on my recent fantastic adventures—I expected them to come to a quite natural end somehow—something happened now that amazed and worried me. Yes, I would go so far as to say that it frightened me. Since, to get away from a place, I was accustomed to traveling by day and night, I quite often found myself driving in the dark.

Then, if the lanterns happened to fail, it was black as night in the carriage. Once, on such a dark night, I had fallen asleep. When I awoke, I saw a ray of light above me on the hood of the carriage. I followed its course down and discovered that it came from the casket, which

evidently had a crack, as if it had split a little in the hot, dry summer weather that had just set in. I thought again of jewels—a diamond might be in the casket—I had to find out if I was right.

I moved so as to bring my eye down to the crack and was overwhelmed with astonishment when I found myself looking into a brilliantly lit room that was richly furnished in excellent taste. It was as if I were looking through an archway into a palatial hall. Of course, I could see only a part of the room, but I could guess what the rest must look like. A fire was burning on the hearth; an armchair was standing beside it. I held my breath and went on looking. Now a woman came from another side of the room, a book in her hand, and I immediately recognized my beautiful lady, although she was minute.

She sat down in the armchair beside the fire to read, first fixing some branches that were burning with the prettiest little fire tongs, in the course of which I could see quite clearly that this darling little creature was pregnant too. But now I simply had to move—my position was so cramped—and soon after that, when I wanted to look again and convince myself that I had not been dreaming, the light was gone, and I found myself staring into the dark.

You can imagine how shocked I was. I couldn't stop thinking about what I had discovered, yet couldn't think clearly about it at all. At last I fell asleep, and when I awoke, I was sure I had dreamed the whole thing, yet I also felt a little estranged from my lovely lady; and the more carefully I carried the casket, the less I could say whether I wanted her to reappear again full size or not.

One evening, some time later, she really did appear, dressed all in white. Since the room was twilit, she looked taller than usual, and I recalled having read that all water sprites and elves grew taller when night was falling. As usual, she flew into my arms, but I could not embrace her with my customary carefree fervor.

"My beloved," she said, "I can tell by your reception what, alas, I already know. You have seen me since last we met and know what

shape I must assume at certain times, and this knowledge has affected your happiness and mine. In fact, our happiness is in danger of being utterly destroyed. I must leave you, and I don't know if I shall ever see you again."

Her presence, and the graciousness with which she spoke, succeeded in almost completely eradicating from my memory that other shape of hers that had haunted me until now. I embraced her ardently and convinced her of my love; I assured her of my innocence, explaining how I had discovered everything quite by chance; in short, I did what I could to calm her, and she did the same for me.

"Think it over carefully," she said. "Has this discovery hurt your love for me? Can you forget that I live with you in two shapes? Doesn't the diminution of my form also diminish your love for me?"

I looked at her—she was more lovely than ever—and I thought to myself, "Is it such a misfortune to possess a woman who, from time to time, is so tiny that one can carry her in a casket? Wouldn't it be much worse if, instead of becoming a pixie, she were to become gigantic, and put her man in a casket?" By this time my good humor had been restored, and I would not have let her go for anything in the world.

"Dear heart," I said, "let all things remain as they are. Could two people be more blessed? Do whatever is best for yourself, and I promise you that all I shall do is carry the casket more carefully than ever. How could the prettiest little thing I have ever seen in my life make a bad impression on me? How happy all lovers would be if they could possess such a miniature of their beloved! For that's what it is, a miniature, a most artful deception. You may test and tease me, but you shall see how staunch I shall be!"

"The situation is more serious than you realize," she said, "but I am glad to see you take it so lightly, for things may still turn out happily for both of us. I am going to trust you and will do the best I can; only promise me never to think with reproach of what you have discovered. And I

want to add one more, most urgent request—be more cautious than ever of wine and anger.”

I promised everything she asked and would have gone on protesting, but she changed the subject, and all things were as they had been before. There was no reason for us to move from where we were staying—the town was large, the sociabilities were varied, and the season was favorable for picnics and garden parties.

At all such festivities my lady was very popular; in fact, she was in demand. Her ingratiating behavior, her refinement, accompanied by a certain natural dignity, drew everyone to her. Moreover, she could play the lute beautifully and sing to her own accompaniment, and she graced all our nocturnal outings with her talents.

I have to admit that I was never one to enjoy music; in fact, it always impressed me unfavorably. My beautiful beloved had noticed this and therefore never tried to entertain me with music when we were alone. But when we were among people, she seemed to make up for it, in the course of which she attracted many admirers.

And now, why shouldn't I admit that, despite my best intentions, our last conversation had not completely satisfied me? I could not throw the thing off; my reaction to it was strange without my actually being conscious of it, until one night, at a large gathering, my suppressed resentment burst forth with dreadful results for me.

As I look back, I must confess that I did love the charming creature much less after my unfortunate discovery, and now I was jealous of her, something that would never have occurred to me before. That evening at dinner, we were seated diagonally opposite each other and quite far apart. I was feeling very happy between two ladies whom I found most attractive. With jokes and foolish love-talk we were not sparing with the wine.

Meanwhile, two music-loving gentlemen had taken possession of my lady and were encouraging the others to sing—solos and in harmony—

which didn't suit me at all. I found the art-loving gentlemen forward, the singing irritated me, and when even I was asked to contribute a solo, I did nothing to hide my bad temper, but drained my glass and slammed it down again on the table, hard.

My neighbors' charms soon pacified me somewhat, but anger once aroused is a pernicious thing. It continued to rage within me, although my surroundings should have kept me amused and had a conciliatory effect. But I only felt more vicious when someone brought my beautiful lady a lute, and she sang to her own accompaniment and to everyone's delight. Unfortunately someone asked for absolute silence. So I wasn't even to be allowed to talk! Her singing grated on my nerves. No wonder only a small spark was needed to set off an explosion!

She had just finished a song, the applause was tremendous, and she looked across at me with true affection in her eyes. Unfortunately, her glance failed to touch me. She could see me draining my glass and hear me demand that it be refilled. She shook a warning finger at me lovingly. "Don't forget that it is wine," she said, loudly enough for me to hear. "Water is for nixies!" I cried. She turned to the women sitting at my side and said, "Ladies, lace his goblet with your charms so that it isn't emptied so often."

"You're not going to let yourself be ruled by her, are you?" one of them hissed in my ear, and I cried aloud, "What does my dwarf want of me?" and accompanied my words with such a violent motion of my arm that I knocked over my glass.

"You have upset much," my beautiful lady said, and strummed her lute once, as if trying to attract the attention of those present from the disturbance back to herself. And she actually succeeded in doing so, especially when she stood up—which she did as if it were easier for her to play standing—and picked up the interrupted melody.

When I saw the red wine spill across the cloth, I came to my senses. Realizing what a terrible thing I had done, I was crushed. For the first time, music appealed to me. The first verse she sang was a friendly

farewell to the company, who still felt united; with the next they gradually began to disassociate themselves from one another—every man for himself, apart; no one felt present any more. And what can I tell you about the last verse? It was aimed at me alone, the voice of love wounded, bidding farewell to all bad temper and bravado.

Silently I took her home, expecting the worst, but we had scarcely reached our room when she became very friendly and behaved enchantingly—she was even quite mischievous—and made me the happiest of men.

Next morning I said cheerfully and lovingly, “You have often sung when asked to do so at a gathering, as for instance last night, that touching farewell ballad. Sing just once for me now, a happy welcome to this morning hour, so that we may feel as if met for the first time.”

“I cannot do that, my friend,” she said seriously. “The ballad I sang last night was our farewell, and we must part at once. All I can tell you is that your offense against promise and vow has had the most dreadful consequences for both of us. You have frivolously thrown away all your chances of happiness, and I too must deny myself everything I desire.”

I begged, I implored her to explain herself. “I can do so now,” she said, “since I cannot remain with you any longer. So, hear what I would have liked to keep hidden from you forever! The shape and form in which you saw me in the casket is the way I was born; it is my natural shape. For I am of the race of King Eckwald, mighty prince of all pixies. Authentic history has much to tell of him. My people are still as active as they were in days of old and are therefore easily ruled.

But I don't want you to think that they have remained backward in their activities. They used to be famed for making swords that pursued the enemy when hurled at him, invisible and secretly binding chains, impenetrable shields—things like that. But now they busy themselves mainly with objects that give man comfort and adorn him, and in this they surpass every race on earth. You would be amazed if you were to go through our workshops and storehouses. And all this would be well

and good, if a certain condition did not prevail among us—especially in the royal family.” She paused for a moment, and I begged her to go on revealing her miraculous secret.

“It is well-known fact,” she continued, “that when God created the world, and the earth was dry, and the mountains stood powerful in their glory, He created the pixies first, before all living things—this is what I believe—so that there might be sensible creatures to admire His miracles in the earth’s interior as well, in the caverns and crevasses. It is, moreover, common knowledge that these little people rose up and tried to grasp the dominion of the earth for themselves, and that is why God created the dragons, to subdue the pixies.

But since dragons also liked to settle in great caves and fissures, and many of them spat fire and perpetrated other outrages, the pixies were sorely afflicted. They didn’t know what to do. They turned to Almighty God and humbly and beseechingly implored Him to destroy this wicked race of dragons. He could not bring Himself to destroy creatures whom He had created according to His wisdom, but the despair of the pixies touched Him so deeply that He created the giants to fight the dragons—not to destroy them, but to at least decrease their number.

“But when the giants had more or less done away with the dragons, they too became haughty and presumptuous and began to persecute the pixies. Again the little people turned to God in their need, and He, in His omnipotence, created the knights to fight giants and dragons, and to live in harmony with the pixies. And with that, this aspect of God’s creation was completed, and it came to pass in times to come that giant and dragon always held together, as did knight and pixie. So, you see, my friend, we are one of the oldest races in the world, which is a greater honor but results in quite a few disadvantages.

For since on this earth nothing lasts forever, and all things that once were great must grow small, we too find ourselves diminishing constantly and growing smaller—especially the royal family, which is subject above all others to this fate because of its pure blood. Our sages therefore decided long ago that, from time to time, a princess

from the royal house should be sent out into the land to marry an honorable knight, so that the race of pixies might be renewed and not die out completely.”

My beautiful lady told me all this most sincerely, but I could not help watching her with some suspicion, for it occurred to me that she might be pulling my leg. I didn't doubt her story insofar as it concerned the fairylike quality of her origin, but that she had chosen me instead of a knight filled me with some distrust. I knew myself too well to believe that any of my ancestors might have been created directly by God. However, I hid my astonishment and doubt and asked amiably, “But tell me, dear child, how did you grow to be so tall and imposing? For I know few women who can equal your magnificent figure.”

“I shall tell you,” she said. “It was the policy of the pixie kings of old to beware of resorting to any extraordinary measures as long as possible, and I find this a quite natural and reasonable policy. And they might have hesitated much longer before sending a princess out into the land, if my little brother, who was born after me, had not turned out to be so tiny that his nurse lost him in his swaddling clothes, and no one ever found out what had become of him. Nothing like this unique case could be found in the whole annals of our kingdom. The wise men therefore held a conclave and...in short...it was decided to send me out into the world to find a husband.”

“It was decided!” I cried. “All well and good; things can be decided, but to give a pixie the form of a goddess...how did your wise men manage that?”

“That, too,” she said, “was ordained by our ancestors. In the royal treasure chest there was a huge gold ring. I speak of it now as it looked to me when I was shown it as a child. It is the ring I have on now, and this is how they set about it. I was carefully instructed in everything that was to take place, and told what I could and could not do.

“A magnificent palace was built after the pattern of my parents' favorite summer residence. It had a main building, two ells, everything one could wish for, and it stood in the entrance of a rocky crevasse,

embellishing it marvelously. On a certain day, the whole court repaired to it, and my parents with me. The army paraded, and twenty-four priests carried the miraculous ring on a precious litter, not without a great deal of effort. It was laid down on the threshold of the palace, just inside as you step over it. A ceremony followed; then, after bidding everyone a fond farewell, I set to work.

I walked up to the ring, laid my hands on it, and at once began to grow noticeably. In a few minutes, I had attained my present stature and I at once put on the ring. In no time at all, windows, doors, gate, and ells shrank into the main building, and in front of me, instead of the palace, stood a casket, which I immediately picked up and carried off, feeling quite pleased to be so big and strong even if I was still tiny compared to the trees and mountains, the rivers and vast plains. Still, beside grass and herbs, I was a giant, especially when compared to an ant. We pixies do not get along with the ants and are therefore often plagued by them.

“There would be much to tell of all the things that happened to me on my pilgrimage before I met you, but let it suffice to say that I tested many, and only you seemed to be worthy of renewing the wonderful line of Eckwald and perpetuating it.”

As she spoke, I could feel my head move every now and then, but I was careful not to shake it in negation. I asked a lot of questions, but did not receive very satisfactory answers to any of them. To my dismay, however, I heard that, after what had happened between us, she would have to return to her parents. She hoped to be able to come back to me, but at this moment there was no getting around her putting in an appearance at home or all would be lost for both of us. The sacks would soon cease to pay, and there would be other disastrous consequences. When I heard that there was a possibility of our running out of money, I asked no further questions. I shrugged and was silent, and she seemed to understand.

We packed and took our seats in the carriage, the casket opposite us. It didn't look like a palace to me. Thus we drove past several stations. The

moneybags provided simply and liberally for tips and the fare until we reached mountainous terrain. We stopped, my lovely lady got out and hurried on ahead, and I followed with the casket at her request. She led me up a steep path to a narrow valley where a clear spring bubbled and wound its way through a meadow. Pointing to a rise in the ground, she told me to put the casket down and said, "Farewell. You won't have any difficulty in finding your way back. I hope we shall meet again."

But I could not leave her. It was one of her most beautiful days or, if you like, her loveliest hour. To be alone with such a ravishing creature on a green sward, between grass and flowers, hemmed in by rock and rushing water—what heart could have remained unfeeling under such circumstances? I wanted to grasp her hand and embrace her, but she pushed me away and, in terms that still were loving, threatened me with great peril unless I left immediately. "Is there no possibility of my staying with you?" I cried. "Can't you keep me with you?" My words were spoken in such heartrending tones and accompanied by such desperate gestures that she seemed touched and after some deliberation finally admitted that a continuation of our life together was not entirely out of the question.

Not a man on earth could have been happier than I! I became more and more importunate and at last forced her to speak. She revealed the fact that if I was prepared to become as small as she had been when I had seen her in the casket, I could stay with her in her residence and kingdom and become a member of her family.

I can't say that the idea appealed to me, but at that moment it was quite impossible for me to part from her, and since I had become accustomed to the miraculous some time ago and was in a rash mood, I agreed and told her to do with me what she liked.

Immediately she asked me to stretch out the little finger of my right hand; she put hers against it and, with her left hand, gently slipped the golden ring from her finger onto mine. This had scarcely taken place when I felt a dreadful pain in that finger; the ring shrank and caused my agony. I screamed and reached out for my beautiful love, but she had disappeared. I simply cannot express what I felt at that moment, and

there really is nothing to tell except that I very soon found myself a shrunken, tiny figure, standing beside my beloved in a forest of grass. Our joy at finding each other again after such a brief yet strange separation or, if you like, a reunion without a parting, defies description. I threw my arms around her, she returned my embrace, and as a tiny couple we were just as happy as we had been when we were big.

We walked up a hill—which was not easy, because the grass meadow had become almost impenetrable forest for us—and finally managed to reach a clearing. To our astonishment, we found there an evenly constructed solid that we soon recognized as the casket. It was still in the condition in which I had set it down.

“Go up to it, my friend,” my beloved said. “Knock on it with your ring, and you will see marvelous things.”

I did as she told me, and had scarcely knocked when the marvels began to take place. Two ells shot out on either side, and parts of the box fell off like scales or shavings, revealing doors, windows, archways—everything that goes to make up a perfect palace.

Whoever may have seen a trick writing desk made by Röntgen,¹ with springs and secret drawers that can be set in motion, whereupon writing space, paper, letters, pigeonholes, and money compartment are revealed, all at once or one at a time, will have some idea of how this palace unfolded before our eyes. My sweet companion now drew me into it behind her. In the main hall I at once recognized the fireplace I had looked down on and the chair she had sat in, and when I looked up, I thought I could actually see traces of the crack in the dome through which I had peered. I will spare you a detailed description of the rest. Suffice it to say it was roomy, priceless, and in excellent taste. I had scarcely recovered from my amazement when I could hear martial music in the distance.

My beautiful lady jumped joyfully to her feet and announced that her father was approaching the palace. We stepped outside and could see a glittering procession emerge from an imposing crevasse in the rocks.

Soldiers, servants, household officials, and a whole brilliant court followed, one behind the other. Finally there came a golden multitude, and in its midst, the king himself. When everyone was assembled before the palace, the king stepped forward and approached it with his retinue. His loving daughter hurried to meet him, pulling me along with her; we threw ourselves at his feet, he raised me graciously, and I noticed only when I came to stand next to him that I was better built than anyone else in this little world. We walked up to the palace together, and in a studied speech, the king did me the honor of welcoming me before the entire court. He expressed his astonishment at finding us here, recognized me as his future son-in-law, and set the following day for the wedding.

I can't tell you how horrified I was suddenly to hear mention of a wedding, for I had always been almost more afraid of marriage than of music. Those who make music, I used to say, at least enjoy the illusion that they are in unison and that the overall effect is harmony, because after they have allowed themselves sufficient time to tune up and have massacred our eardrums with all sorts of discordant sounds, they think that now they are in tune and the various instruments are perfectly suited to one another. The conductor himself suffers from this delusion, and they're off, while the listener's ears are screaming!

But in marriage, not even this applies, because although it is nothing but a duet, and one would think that it should be possible to bring two voices—that is to say, two instruments—in harmony, still, it rarely happens. For, if the man gives the pitch, the woman usually wants it higher; then the man raises it again; and this goes on and on, from normal pitch to concert pitch, until in the end even the horns can't follow! And, since I couldn't bear harmonic music, you can't blame me for hating discord even more.

I don't want to speak of the festivities that took place next day; in fact, I can't speak of them because I paid them so little heed. The magnificent food, the priceless wine—nothing tasted right to me. I was considering what I should do. But there wasn't much to consider. I decided to escape and hide somewhere when night fell and actually succeeded in

finding my way to a fissure in the rocks and squeezing through it, concealing myself as best I could. My first efforts were bent toward getting that cursed ring off my finger, but I couldn't do it however hard I tried. On the contrary, I could feel it contracting the minute I tried to get it off, causing me great pain—which stopped immediately, however, as soon as I desisted in my efforts.

Early in the morning I awoke, the little that was left of me having slept very well, and wanted to move farther away, when something that felt like rain fell on me from above. It was falling through grass, leaves, and flowers, something akin to sand or grit, quantities of it, and I was horrified when everything around me suddenly came to life and a huge army of ants came hurtling down upon me. They saw me and at once attacked from all sides.

Although I put up a brave defense, in the end they succeeded in covering, pinching, and tormenting me until I was thankful when someone called out to me to surrender, which I did promptly, whereupon an impressive-looking ant approached me most courteously—I would go so far as to say reverently—and begged for my good will. I learned that the ants were now my father-in-law's allies, that he had called upon them to bring me back, and that they were in duty bound to do so. So there I was, small, in the hands of creatures even smaller than I. There was no escaping the wedding, and I could only thank God that my father-in-law was not angry with me, and my beautiful lady not vexed.

Let me remain silent about the ceremony; let it suffice to say that we were married. I was surrounded by gaiety and mirth, but in spite of this, there were lonely hours that were conducive to thought. And now something took place that had never happened to me before. Let me tell you about it.

Everything around me was perfectly matched to my present size and needs. Flacons and goblets were beautifully proportioned for a tiny drinker—as a matter of fact they were better proportioned than ours. Everything I ate tasted wonderful, my wife's kisses were adorable, and I

won't deny that the novelty of the situation made it very enjoyable. Unfortunately, I could not forget my former condition.

I discovered within myself the measure of my former size, and it made me restless and unhappy. For the first time, I could grasp what philosophers mean when they speak of the ideal that is supposed to cause mankind so much suffering. I had an ideal of myself and at times saw myself in my dreams as a giant. In short, wife, wedding ring, the shape of a pixie, and many other constrictions served only to make me utterly miserable, and I began to think seriously about extricating myself.

Since I was sure that the whole spell was contained in the ring, I decided to file it off. Toward this end I stole several files from the court jeweler. Fortunately I was left-handed, and had never done anything with my right hand in my life. I worked hard, but it was not easy, for the little gold band—although it looked thin—had grown thicker in proportion to the amount it had shrunk from its original size. I spent every spare hour on the project and was clever enough to step outdoors when the metal was almost split. And a good thing I did, for the golden band suddenly burst from my finger, and my figure shot up with such velocity that I was afraid it might reach heaven! At any rate, I certainly would have rammed through the dome of the palace and destroyed the whole building with my newborn clumsiness.

So there I stood, alone again, only much bigger and—it seemed to me—much more stupid and awkward, and when I had recovered from my stupor, I saw the casket standing at my side. I lifted it and found that it was heavy as I carried it down the footpath to the station, where I immediately ordered the horses harnessed and drove off. As we drove away, I tried the moneybags on either side.

The money seemed to be spent; instead, I found a small key. It belonged to the casket, which contained a considerable replenishment. As long as it lasted, I used the carriage, which I then sold and continued my journey by stagecoach. I rid myself of the casket last because I was always hoping that it might be filled again. And so I finally arrived,

although in a roundabout fashion, back in the kitchen where you first met me.

Notes

1 David R. Röntgen (1745–1807) was a fine cabinetmaker in Neuwied, whom Goethe probably met on his Rhine journey with Lavater.

The End