

Sowing and Reaping

A communication from the beyond
received and transcribed by

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Chapter I

The spirit of money, root of many evils!

The above truth, which regrettably I learned to evaluate too late, and only then through my own not very encouraging experiences, I would like to place as a motto before this account of the missteps, worries and struggles I once lived through, leading eventually to my aspiration to lead not only myself out of the debasement into which I had rushed, but also another person who suffered from it even more than I did.

How strange it is to look back at a past that lies so far behind me, and yet, it is a blessing to be able to do so; a past which I can let rest in its entirety in memories that have long since fallen into oblivion, but which are still able, at our leisure, to spring up once again in the raw glow of reality. Memories are so important, yet can also be so disturbing at times; for they are able still to produce a prolonged effect, like a terrible feeling in an oppressive dream out of which one would like to wake up screaming, but cannot.

Why then would I call again to these pale images that come back to me and, with frowned eyes, stare at me? Why would I do that?

I do not belong to those who willingly revel in their own misery. On the contrary, I am happy and grateful to have pushed them away from me. I do not wake them up either, no, but I would like them to serve other pilgrims of eternity as a warning and enlightenment.

As a punishment I have imposed upon myself, I shall now deliver these memories to those who will read these lines, no matter whether they abandon their reading with a contemptuous shrug or a blow to the heart.

My life was by no means a captivating novel; I will evoke only a few slices of it and a few features of the personality I once had, then you, the reader, can complete the sketch as you wish. I will lead you through the labyrinth of memories. Just remember that what you see has not happened

yesterday, but is more than a century between then and now¹.

We see before us an esteemed and well-to-do young man, the son of the owner of a business that has belonged to the family for several generations and who has grown in power and wealth. Wolfgang is to inherit from his father one day and perpetuate the traditions of his ancestors. He has enjoyed a good education and only recently returned from a long trip abroad where he lived as a celebrated guest due to his father's many business connections. He is now to take his rightful place as the owner's right-hand man and start up his own home in accordance with his father's wishes.

He has a cousin, the blonde Gerda with curly hair. She is two years his junior; a rose that has just bloomed. From her whole being emanates an irresistible charm of true womanhood. They both grew up together and they had naturally sworn to be faithful to each other. This promise still remained a secret for the time being.

And now he is back home. From the outside no one noticed any change in him, except perhaps a greater virility and a certain refinement. But Gerda no longer recognised her Wolfgang, for something had happened to him. She felt a deep inner tremor. He had not come to her as he would have done in the past; something forced had now taken place in their relationship.

Perhaps he had been seeing darker people in the last two years? Maybe he had been seeing someone else? Or had the mayor's daughter, the clever Gertrude with the curly black hair, the richest heiress in the city, made such a strong impression on him that he...? Or was it only a certain shyness that dominated him since his return, having found in her a grown woman and no longer the child he had once played with and shared so much with?

That day, she was seated in her little room, in that asylum that had been offered to her in her wealthy uncle's house, when the plague had taken her parents away. There she sat, busily sewing, when troubling thoughts and a strange foreboding began to stir within her. Her thoughts flew with the needle, between hope and fear. She was trying to fight her ideas, but could not succeed. Suddenly, she noticed the letter on the table in front of her that had arrived the day before, but that she had not as yet read. As she

¹ Remembering that this was written in 1906

opened it and read the few lines it contained, her heart almost stopped beating.

“He to whom you have given your heart is unfaithful to you, he loves another.” That is how the anonymous word read.

Wickedness and jealousy had certainly inspired these words. There was certainly no doubt about that. But who could have written them?

“It is not true!” She did not believe it. How could she believe it?

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. She slipped the letter into her belt and went to open it. “Ah, it is you Wolfgang.” A fleeting redness covered her cheeks. “Come in and take a seat. I thought you no longer found my refuge peaceful.”

“How can you talk like that?” was the somewhat evasive answer. “You know that I have had so much to do since my return! But, as you can see, I made the decision to set aside an hour or so to chat with my little cousin. Am I coming at a bad time?”

“Little cousin!” These words hit her like a dagger. She remained silent. Worriedly, he stirred on his chair and then, without diversion, he declared: “You know what we solemnly promised each other before my departure...”

“You do not have to remind me of my vow”, she interrupted him curtly.

“Yes, I know, but we also promised each other to keep it a secret, and I have kept that secret too.”

“Me too”, she replied delicately.

“Now my father would like me to get married and start my own home.”

“Maybe he has found you a woman too?” The needle surreptitiously flew over her work.

“Yes!”

“And what do you feel about her?”

He did not answer. An embarrassing silence enveloped the atmosphere. She grabbed the letter and handed it to him.

“Is this true, Wolfgang? Answer me frankly”, she asked, bursting into tears.

Her crying tightened her throat. “Who wrote this?” Wolfgang asked.

“I do not know. It arrived yesterday. But answer me! Is it true?”

“For the time being, it is not about that”, he replied, trying to duck the question. “I have always loved you like a sister. I had thought that one day... we would be... you know... but now the question is, what should I say to my father?”

“And you come to my house to ask me for advice! Poor Wolfgang!” Large tears streamed down her cheeks, but at the same time a hard grin formed at the corners of her lips. “Do you not see the lamentable attitude you have in front of me? You ask me if you should break the vow you once made to me. Your question alone contains the answer. Between us, it is all over. Go and be happy, if you can, with Gertrude... because she is the one, of course”, she added in a muffled voice.

He left, feeling sad and confused at the same time.

Chapter 2

Wolfgang's wedding

This was the first big mistake I made as Wolfgang, who is me, but it was not to be my last, as many more mistakes were made later.

A year later I was married to Gertrude; to that strange woman who dominated me so completely, to that black elf who had her claws so deeply into my soul. I had taken her as my wife, solely for her money, because she had never been able to awaken any tenderness in me. What little love my selfish nature was capable of, I had devoted to my poor cousin. In me the voice of the spirit of lucre was stronger than that of the heart. I walked like a miserable coward. I had left her, my luminous genius, the one who would have raised my soul, I the wretched one, just as surely as the other for whom I had left her attracted me ever more deeply downwards.

The marriage was sumptuous. All those who had any reputation in the old town of Hansa were invited. Only Gerda was missing. She was lying in bed with a high fever that had been chaining her to the bed for a long time and that forever mimicked her delicate health. She later left her foster father and earned her living as a seamstress.

In the beginning, everything went well. My father died in the meantime and I became an entrepreneur. We lived with opulence and filled the inner emptiness with noisy festivities; we could not bear the loneliness. Moreover, we rarely exchanged ideas with each other, but from time to time it was different. On one such an occasion when we were at the table, I came to talk about Gerda.

“Do not talk to me about that hypocrite”, she said. “She is not worth it.”

“You are being unjust”, I replied. “Gerda is a good woman.”

“Are you not ashamed to say that in front of me?” she countered. “Do you think I do not know what intrigue she set up to separate us? Do you think I did not know how she wanted to catch you with her tears and delicate hugs? In the beginning it worked for her — yes, I know you were secretly engaged — but I was smarter than her. I set a trap that broke the tender bond. Ah! ah! ah! ah!”

“So, it was you who wrote her the anonymous letter in which it was said that I loved another?”

“Yes, my little one, you must owe me for that, after all, it gave the case a different twist, when you were there like a madman and did not know where you stood. We should celebrate with a glass of our best burgundy!”

She called out to the concierge: “Hey!” As I got to my feet, a feeling of disgust came over me that I had never felt before. And yet I was too cowardly to intervene on my cousin’s behalf. I had so many defeats on my conscience, and after each new setback I felt weaker and weaker.

My mother had died when I was just a few years old, but I had a friend in old Dorchen, my former nanny. She was the only one who told me the truth and warned me about the life I was leading. The faithful soul! She was not afraid to speak to my conscience when she thought it necessary to do so. I do not believe I have ever had so much esteem and attachment to anyone as I had with Dorchen; she had a certain power over me, but Gertrude’s was even more powerful. Gertrude could not suffer Dorchen, and that is why Dorchen never came to the house; however, she would come to the office. In the beginning, she came often, but afterwards her visits became more and more infrequent.

“For once I would like to pray Mister...”, she had once said (she often spoke to me in the third person). I thought she wanted to ask me for a favour and I spontaneously replied: “Whatever you want, dear Dorchen, I shall gladly give it to you. That is a promise.”

“One should not make promises one is not quite sure one can keep”, she replied. “To be clear, I would like to advise Mister to take the reins of his house himself and not to hand them over to Miss Gertrude, because I fear she will lead you into the abyss.”

“Dorchen”, I replied a little curtly, “that is none of your business.”

“So, it is none of my business when Mister is headed for his doom! On

the contrary, I will tell Mister that it concerns me as much as the bliss of my own soul!”

“Sorry, dear Dorchen. I know you wish me well, but...”

“Mister was wrong when he pushed Miss Gerda away and took the other one. It hit me in the soul like the edge of a sword; but now he has to bear the consequences and try to become his own master. Let Mister be a man and a master in his own house, otherwise she will draw him into perdition. I have a bad presentiment, and I must warn Mister.”

The good Dorchen! She knew me better than I knew myself, but her friendly warning vanished without a trace. I only retained a certain fear of Dorchen, which I had not had before. However, the more Dorchen’s influence diminished, the more Gertrude’s increased. She was as intelligent and perceptive as she was strong, and she knew how to lead me so well.

We had no children. The house was empty apart from a few hangers-on and a few spa treatments, but I did not care about that. My wife as such was completely indifferent to me, so I compensated in other ways. However, I could not free myself from her hold.

Chapter 3

The murder of my father-in-law

Some marital annoyances were joined by reversals of fortune. Business was getting worse and worse. One of our largest ships, returning from India with a rich cargo, sank near Madagascar. Another one, a two-masted ship loaded with cereals, took so much water that it had to head for the nearest port. It barely managed to reach an English port. The cargo damaged by seawater was sold at a reduced price.

I made speculations in another commercial sector, a sector that had no connection with our company. Nothing was going right. In the hope of an assured profit, I let myself be influenced by a few Jews in a not very honourable affair. I was mystified and had to bear both the damage and the shame. My former prestige, as well as my credit, came to falter.

My wife, who always needed more and more money had even asked her father for some, but to no avail. She then encouraged me to try my luck at gambling. To begin with, I was lucky and won a lot of money. This fascinated me so much that I soon became a passionate gambler. I was now neglecting my business and spending much of my time in the company of unsavoury people. I ended up losing a lot of money. I borrowed from loan sharks and soon found myself on the verge of bankruptcy.

One night I left the gambling house half-drunk and desperate. I had lost a large sum, which I had borrowed just the night before to cover another debt. When I arrived home, there was light coming from the living room. I went inside. My wife was sitting and presiding over a gambling table. A few young dandies belonging to the aristocracy were sitting with a pile of money in front of them. My drunkenness inspired a courage I did not know I possessed.

“Gentlemen”, I told them, “I will not allow you to disgrace my house. I hope you will understand me if I wish each of you a good night.”

My wife turned pale with rage. She had never heard me use such a tone before. It surprised her so much that she was unable to say a word for some time; but suddenly the storm broke out with a horror of insulting words,

which I will not try to convey here. In the meantime, my wife's guests had got up and left one after the other without saying a word.

We were alone. The storm had subsided but was still stirring in our hearts. This time I had imposed myself, and it almost seemed as if it had imposed itself on my wife too, so that she used a completely different tone towards me. I did not know whether this was a subtle and deceptive manoeuvre or an expression of her mood.

"Sit down and let us talk frankly", she said in an almost friendly tone. I obeyed mechanically. That surprised me. How was I to explain this sudden change?

"You know that I need money", she continued. "You have not been able to give me anything lately and I am too proud to ask my father for it after he has already turned me down once. Bearing this in mind, you should not be surprised that I am looking around for help. I assure you that I am luckier than you are", she said with a scornful smile. "It could stop one day, but as soon as I win something, you lose more. You have to stop gambling, do you hear? You do not have enough composure."

"Yet it was you yourself who prompted me to do so", I objected.

"Yes, I know. But now I recognise that you are not the right man for the job."

Her words touched me in such a way that I suddenly felt ashamed in front of her. I found myself once again under her strong influence and felt inside that I would never again dare to play again.

"We have to look for help around us", she continued, "because the company's reputation must be maintained at all costs. Do you understand me? Do you not have anything to offer?"

I have to admit that I have never felt so scared as I did then. She pierced me with her gaze, and I think she was having fun inside seeing my inability to react and the power she had over me again.

"How is your balance sheet?" she asked. "I am not just thinking about tomorrow's obligations. Tell me the approximate amount of our assets."

I thought for a moment before telling her an impressive amount, but it was still not enough.

"That is a lot of money", she said coldly. For a long time, she sat there motionless and silent. I did not say a word either. It was a painful silence. I can still clearly remember how I sat and counted the ticks of the big clock.

"It is about the fortune my father will one day leave behind", she

continued in a low voice, as if she was talking to herself. “He is now of advanced age, an old man, and fragile. His asthma has been increasing lately. He does not have long to live. But I am not the only one who will inherit”, she whispers. “Only half of it will come back to me. Charles-George, that idiot, the last-born, is also still here to share with me. Ah! Would I be...” She raised her clenched fist into the air, only to relax it and let it fall gently back onto her knee again.

“Have you heard”, she continued, “that Charles-George aspires to travel the world? He is at that age when the whims of youth come into their own. What would you say to make him travel? Could you not — she whispered almost inaudibly — send him on a ship to the West Indies? Do you properly understand me?”

An evil thought that could only be born in a being like her! How was it possible for me to grasp what she was saying? Had I already fallen so low, or was I without will in front of this woman’s hold? With all that I went through when this disturbing memory awoke in me, it still pounds me in the temples with terrible force.

Thus, “Wotan”, a small, old and dilapidated three-masted ship, which had already sailed around the world a few years before, was again stowed for another circumnavigation, and a cabin was fitted out next to the captain’s cabin with a particular luxury. Charles-George went on board, but the rats made their way ashore. All sails out, the old West Indian courier slipped out of the harbour. As a farewell, a hat was waved on the eighth deck as the ship slowly moved away from us...

The news arrived a few weeks later that a capsized boat with the name “Wotan” on the bow had come ashore near Brest.

Very soon afterwards the old burgomaster died, distraught by the loss of his son, it was said. But vague rumours spread that he had died of violent stomach cramps and dreadful vomiting. What was underneath was never discovered. Nobody dared to express any suspicion. I had my own ideas, but kept quiet, very quiet.

So, now we were saved! But it had cost two people their lives.

The old house received a new shine. Nobody knew how much money the old authoritarian mayor had managed to hide, but everyone agreed that it must have been a large fortune. Now it had to come out into the open. In the middle of the customary festivities, the safe and all the boxes and cases were opened in the presence of my wife and myself. The mayor’s house was searched from top to bottom... A few coin purses and a few small securities were all that was found! It was never clarified whether he had kept

anything, or how his possessions had disappeared.

Chapter 4

Gertrude's runaway

A few days later, my wife disappeared without a trace of any kind. Since, for various reasons, I did not want her back, I spread the rumour that she had undertaken a long journey to ease the pain of the double mourning that occurred in her family.

I had locked myself in my room and was pacing around like a caged wild beast; a wild beast invaded by the most awful fear. I was ruined, disgraced; and the proud trading house which generations of ancestors had made prosperous, lay demolished at my feet; and all this was my work. It had not even cost me 15 years of my life to achieve it! Worse still, more than anything else, there was this voice inside me shouting at me: "Murderer!" I had not heard it before. As long as I was under the influence of darkness, I felt no repentance, no remorse. It was as if Gertrude had taken full responsibility for the latest events on her strong shoulders. But now I was free; now my soul too had the right to speak, and the accusations it made against me were ruthless. I wringed my hands, but in my eyes, there were no tears. I stopped, I pulled out my hair, but the anguish did not diminish.

One day there was a knock on the door; gently at first, then more determined. I held my breath. Who could it possibly be? I perceived a persistent cough through the door.

"Wolfgang! Wolfgang!", called out a sweet female voice.

I opened the door, a slim being in a miserable suit stepped forward on the threshold. "Do you not recognise your own cousin Gerda anymore?", she said dully. "Yes, I have changed a lot since we last saw each other. That was sixteen years ago at your father's funeral. Since then, tuberculosis has taken its toll on me so much that I do not have much time left to live."

"Is it really you, cousin Gerda, whose memory is still so precious to

me? Come, sit down here and tell me what brings you here today.”

“Thank you. It feels good to be able to sit down. The road to get here has been so long and hard for me! First the climb, then the stairs. What brings me here, you say? I sensed that you had a heavy heart, and that is why I wanted to reach out my hand and look you in the eye again.”

“How do you know what is going on inside me?”

“Wolfgang, I have been a lot closer to you all these years than you can imagine. Do you think you can ever completely forget the one you once enclosed in your heart? You ran away from me and caused me a wound that never stopped bleeding, but I have always been yours and will remain so for as long as I live.”

“Have you come to reproach me?”

“How little you know of true love if you dare to ask such a question. But you have never nourished or even given love, so you do not understand how painfully touched you are when you see your loved one lost in debauchery and mud.”

“Do you think that is where I am?”

“Do you not know it yourself? I know that you have gone down the wrong path, that you have violated your deepest self, that you were under an influence that gradually drew you into perversion and shame; a hold that still dominates you today and that you are not in a position to fight.”

“Enough! Enough!”, I cried out to myself. “What is all this? Do you want to accuse me? I want you to know that I accuse myself even more. Know that I carry within me the whole of hell.”

“That is why I came. You see Wolfgang, when you love, you are attracted as if by an indelible and indestructible cord to the object of one’s love. At certain moments one can dive into the heart, read the thoughts, feel the wounds, and endure the suffering. Each of the cries of anguish of a tormented soul cries out to us with all its strength! This is how you called out for days and nights. I know that you are going through difficult, painful moments... that is why I am here.”

Filled with anxiety, I paced back and forth within the room, but could not answer her.

“Do you not want to pour out your suffering heart?”, she asked with soothing sweetness. “It will make you feel better. I suffer with you. Accept the comfort I bring you.”

“There is no more consolation for me. You are too late. All hope is

lost.”

“I do not believe that. No man has ever sunk so low that he has not been able to rise again. Listen to me, Wolfgang, you are ruined, I know that, but look misfortune in the eye, like a man, and start a new life.”

“You do not know what you are saying. You do not know me. I am not a man. I am a miserable rascal.”

She sat there, mute, and watched me come and go with concern. Something so painful appeared on her emaciated features that I felt for a moment that she was the unhappy one, at whose feet I had to throw myself to cry with her and console her. But immediately the furies were unleashed in me again so horribly that I no longer had a thought for the angel sitting opposite me. I could hardly see her. She must have realised that there was nothing she could do. With her hands outstretched, she came to me and took hold of my hand.

“Wolfgang”, she said, as tears streamed down her thinned cheeks. “Promise me one thing, do not take your life, please wait! I must save you.”

There was such strength of will in the weakened being whose hand I was holding that I was almost hooked for a second. I felt a miraculous strength rising within me. Should I overcome myself? No, a thousand times no! The next minute all hell was inside me again. I pulled myself away from her and rushed out of the room without saying goodbye...

The next morning, I was unhooked from a beam of the roof... Wolfgang was dead...

Chapter 5

Life in the afterlife

That which happened to me immediately after my death, I can no longer make a clear picture of; it was a confusing mixture of thoughts and feelings that defies description. I had hoped that death would lead to complete dissolution, but I was bitterly mistaken — I continued to live; at least I felt that I was alive, but living only in a dreadful delirium and in terrible torment. When I first awoke in the beyond, my eyes were veiled, and everything around me was dark. I could neither gather my thoughts nor distinguish anything from my immediate surroundings. I still felt the pain of the rope around my neck, and continuously suffered the hard trials of suffocation, which were always relived. I wanted to call out for help, but my strangled throat would not allow any sound to pass through.

I have no idea how long this infernal martyrdom lasted; perhaps not much time at all, if I try to evaluate it according to earthly chronology, but as I could only evaluate time according to my unbearable suffering, it seemed like an eternity.

Finally, a charitable being arrived who took care of me. I later learned that he was one of the good spirits who had given himself the mission of assisting the unfortunate ones who had taken their own lives.

He took me to an establishment where there were still many unfortunate people like me. I do not know whether this should be compared to a hospital or an insane asylum or not, but what is certain is that all the miserable people were there.

At first, I did not understand anything that was happening to me. I felt that I was being treated with the utmost gentleness and that my pain was therefore being eased. Now I was able to see myself, but I could only see everything as if it were twilight.

My friendly nurse stood in front of me like a luminous form. It was as if all the light I could see emanated from him; however, I could not discern the features of his face. He was very frugal with words and only urged me

to keep quiet. As it was still painful for me to make a sound, there was very little said between us, but I will never forget with what delicate hand he washed the blood from around my neck, bandaged me and then refreshed my temples. When fear swept over me, and my being was shaken, all he had to do was place his hand on my heart and I instantly became calm. What good this man did me!

It was an enigma to me that there could be such men who willingly sacrificed themselves for others. This was a way of being I had never been interested in before; today, however, it gave me much to think about. It awakened in me that initial impulse to want to become better.

I spent most of my time in a state similar to anaesthesia, interrupted from time to time by anxious memories of my past life. However, even then my state of consciousness had not quite returned, for I could not get a clear picture of how my own self was made up. Worrisome past memories passed by and disappeared, only for them to reappear unexpectedly. However, the images of my earthly life gradually became clearer, and that made me calmer but no less unhappy.

Despite everything I did not want to pay any attention to the past. When memories came to the fore, I tried to run away from them. I hoped I could forget and never find those oppressive memories again. Crazy that I was! How poorly I understood what the development of the soul requires. None of the traces we leave in life can be erased. Everything has to come into the light of day to be examined and studied, before finally being grouped as experiences which finally crystallise into lived wisdom; experiences which the mind then retains as its own inalienable property.

By attempting to efface the past, this practice only then becomes possible through suffering, which is even all the more painful when we strive to oppose the benevolent divine guidance that lovingly tries to guide us.

I did not understand this at the time. My mind was indignant at the suffering, and I thought I could hide from it in a similar way to the ostrich who buries its head in the sand when faced with danger.

I was soon recovered and had to leave this place of mutual help. I tried by all means to talk to my faithful and kind nurse so that he would allow me to stay there, but all in vain. He gave care to other unfortunate people who were waiting at the reception desk. I had to leave. But where was I to go? I did not know anyone and no one was there to welcome me.

“You have to go and look,” said my taciturn friend.

“Who should I look for?” I asked.

“You have to search in order to find yourself.”

I did not understand what he meant and looked at him in amazement. He gently caressed my head and continued:

“You must search within yourself, even on your knees, until you understand what your being is, your deepest self. You must heal it and ennoble it; you must find the Light. Then you will be happy.”

“But you said that I had to go and look.”

“Yes, but only on solitary walks; for alone with yourself, you will find yourself.”

“So, no one will come with me? Do you not want to keep me company, you who are so good? Please!”

“My friend, I cannot. My duty keeps me here. Besides, I would disrupt your search if I went with you, but I will give you a tonic that will help you on your journey, so that you will at least know you are not going alone in action. Someone is following you every step of the way, even if you cannot see him yet. However, when you are in deepest misery, he will come forward and show himself to you, and then you will receive all the help you need. Go in peace now! May God bless you!”

“At least tell me your name, so that I can think about it and pronounce it in my solitude.”

“Call me Chad.”

With gentle power he freed himself from my embrace and led me a few steps along the path. We stood there for a long time before waving each other goodbye.

Now I was alone again. Where should I turn? I could not go back to my friend, I knew and felt that, but why did I have to go somewhere else? Could I not just sit by the side of the road and wait until someone came along and took me with them?

With that thought, I made the decision to wait. I waited... nobody came, but what came back to me then were memories of the past, and, at the same time, a growing anxiety that soon became an unbearable fear. I could not sit still any longer. I stood up and began to walk; without knowing the way, without a goal, without any apparent reason.

How should I describe what I continued to feel? The earthly language does not contain all the words to define what is hidden in the spirit world,

and the earthly man cannot grasp what lies outside his sphere of understanding. However, I must use your concepts to communicate my impressions to you. Even for that part of the spirit world which is very close to the Earth, it is already a world which is imperceptible to you. This astral world, as it is called, is not so very different from that of the physical world as the people of the Earth usually imagine it to be.

On the contrary, the two worlds resemble each other outwardly, and to such an extent, that one could claim that everything in the material world has its reflection here. However, they are made of different materials. It could be expressed as follows: that the astral world is the original and the material world is only an imperfect reproduction of it. Thus, the physical body of man is also an imperfect, and often distorted, reproduction of the astral body which, here in our world, is the outer form; a body exactly as true as the physical body was formerly. The inhabitants of the astral world are, therefore, not only externally, but also internally similar to the men of the Earth, although they are clothed in a body of much lighter matter. Therefore, our world is as objective as yours, and also as solid, or concrete, as that of the Earth.

Everything looks so much alike, and yet there is an element here that imprints such a personalised impression upon all things that I would like to characterise it as a subjective view of each individual's perceptions. It is easier to conceive if we consider, for example, how differently the same landscape or the same work of art is perceived on Earth by a cultured man, and how it is perceived by an uncultured man, and what different impressions they make on them, although the landscape and the work of art both have the same objective reality. Here this impression is infinitely greater. The disembodied being creates an image of what he sees in accordance with his evolution or the maturity of his soul, and this image is so vivid that it acts quite objectively. For one whose maturity is different, the same object may look quite different. In a way, we can say that everyone creates their environment according to the values they carry within them. My works provide the material and God's self-active and immutable Laws weave the environment in which I will evolve after my earthly death.

This is what, according to earthly concepts, is so difficult to explain clearly.

But I wanted to tell you about myself...

I continued to walk, first across a wide plain, then through an uncultivated desert. The road became progressively narrower until it eventually took the form of an insignificant little path that meandered itself over rocky ridges, and marshy ground covered with thickets. There was no human habitation where I could have entered and sought asylum. No one, anywhere, to show me the way or advise me about this strange region.

The twilight became more and more intense and darkness spread over the rocks and bushes, covering the area with an almost opaque mantle. This was unpleasant and I began to run. Quite soon, I reached a cultivated area where I suddenly stumbled from exhaustion. I lay there for a long time, unable to move. Finally, I found the strength to get up again, but only little by little, and with a great deal of effort. I eventually managed to sit myself down upon a stone, but I was literally exhausted. I could not take another step.

As I was sitting there in this desert, lonely and feeling abandoned, a terrible oppression suddenly seized me. Was it my imagination or were ghostly shadows hovering around me? I thought I recognised them... and then a terrible fear suddenly seized upon me. What did these unpleasant shapes that appeared before me and stared at me, want? Some threatened me with their fists while others wrung their hands in despair. Where did they come from and what did they have to do with me? I tried to frighten them off, but they would soon come back. I begged them to leave me alone, but to no avail. In the end, I had to admit, albeit with some difficulty, that I recognised them all. They were shopkeepers I had deceived, lenders I had never repaid, gamblers I had ruined, young girls I had made unhappy. Woe betide me! What bitter memories were emerging and taking shape in front of me! Their silent accusations burned me like lashes of the whip. I reached a point whereby I could no longer bear to see them. Taking my head in both hands I began to cry. That relieved me a little...

Suddenly, I heard a voice beside me: "Ask them for forgiveness!" I had to ask them for forgiveness? But I was not the only evildoer. What I had done was no worse than what thousands of others had done before me. I raised my head and told myself that I was going to bravely look each one straight in the face, and that this would make them back away from me. I looked up, but now they were all gone. I remained alone without any idea where I was or what I should do. Sadly, I stared ahead.

In the faint daylight I could discern something bright, far off in the distance, moving about in a grove. I had the impression it was someone moving briskly between the trees and heading in my direction, getting

closer and closer. I could now make out it was a man who, perhaps like me, had lost his way. I shouted out “hello” to him, but he did not answer, but came towards me with a quickened step, faster than I expected. Suddenly, he was standing right in front of me. He was wrapped in a wide coat, and wore a wide-brimmed hat pressed against his forehead. He was not a shadow but a real man. How luminous he looked! It was almost as if a light emanated from him...

“Can you tell me where we are and where I have to go to find a refuge?”, I asked.

“You are looking for yourself”, he replied, “and when you have found yourself, the path will lead you to your home through the valley of self-effort.”

“Do you know me to speak to me like this?” I asked.

“Yes, I am your friend who has come to help you. Do you want to come with me? I will take you there. I know the way.”

“Who are you?”

Then the stranger opened his coat and took off his hat.

And then! To my shock, I realised it was Charles-George!

I fell, as if struck by lightning, face down on the ground. He stroked my hair lightly. I pushed his hand away.

“What do you want of me?” I cried out. “It is not me who had you... it was your sister. Get away from me. Have I not suffered enough? Are you also coming to torture me?”

“Alright then, I shall leave, since you refuse my help, but call me when you are in distress and I shall try to come”, he said in a very delicate tone.

When I looked up, he was gone.

How long did I lie there helpless, helpless in my dismay? I do not know. Time is long to the sufferer, and I was in terrible pain. He was the only one who wanted to help me, and I had pushed him away. But how could I have dared to follow him? I was his murderer, even though I had not taken his life with my own hands. Yes, facing myself I could recognise him, but should I have been able to do the same in his place? He knew nothing about it! Would he ever forgive me? He said I was looking for myself. Chad said that, too. What did they mean? Once again, I heard this voice inside me: “Go into yourself, discover in your soul the most hidden corners, not only before you, but also before all those you have deceived.”

Where did the voice come from? No one was in my neighbourhood. I sat down again to think upon these words. I had the feeling that I was facing an unavoidable and most painful operation. Was it really inevitable? And who was going to use the iron? Should I do it myself? I trembled with fear as I tried to get it out of my mind and think about something else.

Then I perceived a slight movement around me. The mysterious shadows appeared again and sneered, at first individually, and then they danced around me a witch's dance so abominable that I thought I was going mad.

"Enough! Enough!" I cried out to them. "Forgive me! I have failed you all. I am a wretch who has done much harm. I was too weak and did not resist. I have been subjected to all the wrong temptations and, as a result, I have done so much evil, but I myself am the most unhappy of all. Forgive me! Pardon me! And you, Charles-George!" I shouted out his name so loudly that it resounded in the mountains. "Forgive me, you too. I did it while she was suggesting the idea, the demonic idea. Forgive me and forgive her too. We have sinned against you and against many others. And it was not only against you, but against the whole crew... It was quite clear that the old ship "Wotan" could not stand any more storms. Oh, all of you who sank with the old ship, how could I ever make up for what I did to you all? And you, you who loved me, my only Gerda, I have done you so much harm, so much harm! Out of greed, I repudiated you and made you unhappy all your life. I, the wretched one, how can I atone for everything?"

I had been lying face down for a long time and been crying bitterly in my distress when I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder. I slowly got back onto my feet. Miraculously, a radiant form stood beside me. I had not foreseen its coming and had never seen it before. He smiled in such a friendly manner to me!

"Who are you?" I asked in amazement.

"I am your friend, Akab, who followed you all the time in the desert and has been with you for a long time", he said. "But you have never been able to see me. Only a few times have you been able to hear my voice. Get up, we will go together to a more luxuriant region."

"How can you be so good to me, a despicable being?"

"No one has gone down so deep that they cannot be rescued. You have now found yourself and gone through the test of effort on and by yourself. You will eventually receive forgiveness from all those to whom you have failed and you will be able, in due time, to do all good to them, as soon as you receive the strength to do so. You ask me how I can be so good to you.

Ah, dear friend, my kindness is but a faint reflection of love that has eternal pity. Will you, like me, kneel here in the desert to give thanks to God, that His spark was strong enough in the depths of your soul that it left you no rest until you had fought the battle with yourself and found rest?"

Chapter 6

Gerda found

We had just stood up and immediately started our walk when Charles-George, with quick footsteps, hurried over to greet us. He pressed me in his arms and showed his joy. He said that he had always thought well of me, but he had seen with sorrow how his sister had drawn me ever more deeply down.

“You thought”, he said, “that I was only a child and, what is more, an original, but I lived an inner life and understood much more than you thought.”

He had so much to tell as we followed the path leading through ever more beautiful lands that climbed to brighter heights. Charles-George was not only leading me, he was almost carrying me. He was so strong! On the other hand, I was quite weak. It was a superb journey, so full of new impressions that I cannot describe them. We often met groups of travellers going in the same direction as us. It was easy to join with them without feeling obliged to engage in conversation, as we had too much to talk about ourselves.

Upon reaching the heights a magnificent panorama unfolded in front of us; the view was superb, splendid. My guide stopped, and with his hand laid upon the back of my neck he pointed to a beautiful valley full of majestic trees.

“There”, he said, “is the hut that will be your home for the next few days. It belongs to another friend of yours. Charles-George will take you there and stay with you. I am leaving you now, as I have other duties to fulfil, but I will come back to see you soon.”

As he shook my hand before leaving, he said, “I will not hesitate to come soon. May God bless you.”

He gave me a friendly wave of his hand and then disappeared off in another direction as fast as if borne along by wings.

As we reached the goal of our journey, which for the moment was to be my new temporary home, I had, beyond all measure, a wonderful surprise. On the doorstep stood Gerda, with arms wide open, welcoming me. Not the crushed and prematurely aged Gerda that I left in my despair at my last goodbye, but a radiant and beautiful soul standing there with the soft blue eyes and curly blonde hair of her youth, which I still remembered so well.

“At last, you are here”, she said. “I have waited for you for so long, so very long, while Charles-George was looking for you...”

She now recounted how she had left earthly life behind her shortly after I, a true coward, had escaped from it. She had joined with Charles-George and they had decided to assist me and offer me a community home until I became strong enough to fend for myself. They both belonged to a slightly higher sphere, where I naturally had no right to live, but instead of them remaining there, they had made the decision to come down to my sphere to help me.

I understood how good it was for me to have these two friends by my side. To tell the truth, I had frequent and painful fits of despair that were directly linked to my suicide. They started with a strange feeling of belonging to my decaying physical body. I felt somehow strongly drawn to the envelope of dust I had left behind; to that which I had left hanging above the ground from a beam in the roof space. I felt on some occasions that I was still so well connected to it that I was undergoing some of the tortures of agony.

I saw only doom and gloom in those moments and cried convulsively. At the time of these outbursts, Gerda treated me with magnetic passes. It was the only remedy that calmed me down. Then she would sit next to me and hold my hand until the seizure subsided. In the beginning these attacks were painful and long-lasting, and would repeat quite often. No one knew how much I was suffering except the one who shared my suffering and, inevitably, no one could have assisted me as well as she did. I had the impression that she bore half of my anguish and that no one else could have done that. How lovingly she cared for me during this long period of my convalescence I cannot describe, but I thank her with all my heart and soul for everything she did for me at that time. Charles-George, too, was tireless in his testimonies of delicacy towards me. Gradually, the outbursts occurred very rarely, and also lessened in their intensity to become much lighter.

On one of Akab's visits, I asked him what was the cause of my

condition and whether he thought I was still going to suffer from these symptoms.

“No”, he replied. “Come the moment when you should have died, had you not been ahead of nature, this suffering will stop completely. Until then, you are still bound to a very fine thread of sensations; not to your physical body, whose transformation into dust already took place, but to the etheric model of it, which continues to live the life of a soulless plant.

This thread that nature itself has woven, no one can tear it completely, but it tears itself when the determined time of life is consumed. As long as there is a feeling in this thread one is attracted to this body, and one then feels either more or lesser pain at its contact. When one has given death to oneself, this bond can cause painful suffering, just as it also gives rise to unpleasant memories; however, if you have died suddenly from other causes, then you do not really suffer as a consequence from it.”

During this time, I was still worried about another problem and did not know how I could have endured if left to my own devices. Akab suggested that I should bring the story of my life back to life, line by line, from beginning to end.

“It is the best way”, he says, “to learn from what you have been through. Experiences are often expensive to acquire, so they need to be carefully analysed. You do not willingly make a mistake again when you remember exactly what the consequences were. Therefore, write down everything, the dark and the light sides, as a valuable reminder that you can use in the future, as well as others.”

“Do others have to read it too?” I ventured to ask.

He smiled amicably while answering me: “There are no secrets here, and this exhorts us to live in such a way that we have nothing to hide.”

It was not an easy duty that was asked of me, but I could not reject it on the pretext that I could not remember the past. On the contrary, my entire earthly life unfolded in images before me, and so faithfully, that before their eyes I relived every day, and every hour, with a reality that was truly painful. To observe oneself and to think of rigorously checking all the bad thoughts, all the harsh and insensitive words, all the dishonest, vile, ignoble and shameful actions and to write them down line after line, page after page... is something quite appalling. If sometimes a pleasant memory came to me, something good that I had done, it had the effect of a soothing balm. However, images like this were rather rare.

After writing about a darker event in my past life, I tried to cross out

that black spot. Suddenly, I was so anxious that I realised that I could not, under any circumstances, dither any longer with the story of my past life. I realised that I had to go deep into the depths of my soul. It was not enough just to objectively recount what had happened and what I had done, for I also had to understand and write down, for each case separately, everything that concerned my responsibility.

How many times did I zealously search for anything that could excuse me, but all to no avail? No, the truth had to come out. The Light had to illuminate everything. I had no rest, for I had to fully realise beforehand how much responsibility I truly bore in each of the events. It was nothing more and nothing less than purgatory.

Comfortingly, whilst I was suffering under the weight of my memories, my two friends were dispensing light and warmth around me. They worked tirelessly to comfort and console me; and thanks to their care, I was quite happy. As soon as I could, even for just a few moments, free myself from my work, I sought out their company. But these hours of happiness were short and I had to return to my commitments.

My task, therefore, took some time, which I am unable to evaluate. For me it was like a whole earthly life. Akab sometimes came to visit me and check on my work. One day he put his hand on my head and said: "That is good, I am happy with you and your progress." From time to time he had such words of encouragement.

At last, my work was coming to an end. The last part seemed to me to be a huge strain, but when it was finished it was as if a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

Akab came to carefully check the fruit of my work and expressed his satisfaction. I could not have wished for a better reward. It was a day of satisfaction and joy in our little circle. The four of us sat on the terrace in front of the house and enjoyed the coolness of the evening and the splendour of the sunset.

"You have completed a difficult task", Akab tells me, "now you must know joy! How rich it will be in blessings for your own development! From now on, you will have to undertake some work outside your home. Do you have a desire or an idea? What would you like to do?"

"Dear Akab", replied Gerda, "after the hard and demanding work you assigned him, does he not deserve some time off? You were not around him very often, so you could not see how bravely he struggled with himself. We have barely tasted the pleasure of being together, due to his having taken his work so much to heart."

“Indeed, it would not be too much to ask”, confirmed Charles-George, “if he could now have a free moment. We have just planned some nice excursions in the region. He has not been able to see anything around him yet and has sat, hidden away like a hermit in his cave, cut off from the rest of the world.”

“Good! Let him rest then, if he needs it”, Akab replied. “I would not wish to spoil the joy you three have been longing for, but I would like to know what work he would like to do next.”

“I do have a plan”, I replied, “but I also feel that I am still not very well prepared to carry it out.”

“What is it?” asked Gerda, curious.

“I have such admiration for the one who first welcomed me when I suddenly came into this world; that is to say, for Chad! I have often thought of how happy he must be to be able to do so much good. And one day I would like to be one of his assistants.”

“It takes a great deal of strength that you do not yet possess, but you could always try to become a small assistant in his difficult job. After you have enjoyed your freedom with your friends, I will try to get you a place in the big hospital.”

“I have yet another desire”, I said, “the aspiration to acquire knowledge. I learned from Charles-George that there is a good school not too far from here. I know so little about world history. It would be both wonderful and enriching to discover the most important events in the history of peoples.”

“Yes, that is a good idea”, says Charles-George. “Give up the idea of the hospital and join with me in my studies.”

“I think he should not be so quick to stifle his desire to do good”, Akab replied. “If after some time in the hospital he is not strong enough, he could always join you at the school.”

Then followed an exceptional period that I will not try to describe. We travelled together in different directions, and I enjoyed all the novelties and beauties that I saw and experienced. How rich and diverse life is!

I met many valuable people who were all good to me; yet the more I came into contact with others, the more my own inadequacy oppressed me.

I thought that all of them were superior to me, not only in knowledge but also spiritually.

Eventually I discovered that this easy life I was leading could not suit a person like me who stood so far behind others. It was time for me to move on, and so I thanked my good friends for all they had done for me, and for all the joys they had given me, and we decided it was a good time for us to separate for a while. Gerda left for her homeland and Charles-George stayed at the school of learning for some time. As for me, I went to the hospital where Akab had found a placement for me with my friend Chad.

I had a difficult job waiting for me here at the hospital. I could never have imagined how demanding it would be. I was tasked with welcoming the unfortunate people of the world, especially those who, like me, had thrown themselves into the shadow of death, without the belief that there could be, after death, a continuation of life.

It was heart-breaking to see the despair that gripped these poor beings and to hear their cries of lament and anguish as soon as they regained consciousness. Some were furious and weighed down, others cried and moaned. How I recognised myself in these poor souls.

They awakened my memories, and I came quite close to joining in with their crying and wailing; however, this did not happen. Above all, my duty was to console and comfort those who were relatively calm, to stimulate their weak forces and give them hope, while telling them how I, who had been in the same condition as them, had myself been rescued.

I was much more suitable for this than Chad, because the unfortunate ones generally understood more easily what I was telling them because of my degree of development, which was closer to theirs. Moreover, my body was of a density equivalent to theirs. In Chad, on the other hand, it was generally very difficult to make his luminous body more perceptible, and his voice more clearly audible to these souls who were so firmly chained to matter. However, when it was a question of really curing these unfortunate people, of alleviating their suffering or calming their fury, which my weak forces could not do, then Chad hastened to intervene. Sometimes there were real fights between him and his patients, and it was curious to see how surprised they were to be overpowered by someone they could not see. Dear Chad, how strong and good he was!

The duty I was taking on was a painful ordeal, and more than once my strength declined so much so, that many times I had the intention of giving up my work, but each time I thought this way, I would feel so ashamed in Chad's company, that I resisted the temptation to say anything.

Chapter 7

Gertrude's death

One day Chad came up to me and said: "You must come with me to the Earth. There is someone calling for you." Soon, I was ready and we set off on our journey. I had never made a journey so quickly before. Chad held me in his strong arms and we sped as fast as lightning through space.

It was the first time I had been back to Earth again. How marvellous it seemed to me! I could see and perceive everything very clearly, but in my present form it turned out that the material world was not as real as it used to be.

We arrived at the bedside of a sick man. There lay an old woman, visibly at the point of death. She was very thin and had a hard, hollow cough. She had obviously lost her senses. She was delirious, whispering in her midst something against the wicked people who had wanted to harm her. Suddenly she cried out: "Wolfgang! Wolfgang! Come here and help me! It is all your fault. Give me something to drink... I am dying of thirst... but do not come with water, it must be good burgundy. Hurry up, I am dying..."

"Do you recognise her?" asked Chad.

"Yes, it must be Gertrude", I replied. "But she is so changed and so miserable!"

"She has also gone through a lot since your separation. Just look around you and you will be able to read part of her story."

It was a large room with precious old furniture, but everything showed a pitiful decadence. Dirty rags lay here and there, thrown in the corners; empty bottles were lying under the bed, and the astral atmosphere was so disgusting that it was a torture to be there.

I sat silently for a while, listening to her restless breathing. Then I saw images of the aura of her life appear which had been reproduced in the astral light. I recognised binge drinking where there was unrestrained fun, games

where large sums of money were involved, orgies where passions flared up in unbridled ardour and, everywhere, she was the central point around which everything else revolved. Today, she was lying there, lonely, abandoned, poor and in mortal languor. The unfortunate one! What pity she made me feel!

“She does not have long to live”, said Chad. “We have to wait until the end.”

I knew I had to stay with her, but I sensed how much Chad was suffering in this terrible environment, and I suggested to him that maybe he should return home.

“Dear friend”, he said, “a debt binds you to her, and you will have to pay it in some way. Therefore, I would like us to take her to our hospital. In the beginning we can do her some good, but you cannot do it alone.”

I reflected: this was the same Gertrude who had fascinated me so much in her youth and who had subsequently chained me up so tightly that I carried out her every wish like a slave. Why had she exerted such an influence on me? Why did I choose her and not Gerda? Was my greed the cause? Or was there some other reason deep inside me? The wonderful, dark mystery of life; when will I have the last word?

The patient had calmed down. She was sleeping, her breathing was short and she was moaning. An older woman came into the room and tidied up a bit. She stared at the sick woman with a scornful look and then left.

Then came another coughing fit, violent and continuous. The bond of life was being broken; the soul was beginning to free itself. This was apparently linked to violent pain, but Chad came to her aid and soon she was free. How dark and disheartening she seemed!

Chad wrapped her in a coat and we carried her between us to take her to the hospital. It was painful. Chad was right, I could not have managed on my own.

We laid her on a bed in the hospital. She had not yet become conscious and was, therefore, still unaware of our presence. I was placed at her bedside to look after her.

I will never forget her surprise when she finally opened her eyes and saw me. Curiously enough, she recognised me immediately.

“Is it really you?” she said. “You have finally decided to visit me. They had told me that you committed suicide. So, it was not true after all. How heartless of you not to have come earlier, leaving me for all this time in terrible loneliness. I suffer so much. I have an awful cough and I am thirsty.

Give me something strong to drink so that I can regain my strength, otherwise I will die.”

“You are already dead”, I said.

“What are you saying? Are you being unreasonable? Are you drunk?”

“Look around you. Do you recognise yourself here?”

“It is so dark in here. Light a lamp so I can see something.” Chad had now come in. He placed his hands over her eyes several times. Now it was as if she could see a little better. She looked around in amazement, but she could still not see Chad.

“What does that mean? Have I been taken somewhere else? Why could I not have stayed at home? Where am I now? Answer me! Did you bring me here?”

“You yourself left the Earth and came to the spirit world. Your physical body is long dead and buried, but your soul lives on. It lies here, sick, in the hospital.”

“Are you crazy? Go away, and send me a sensible man I can talk to.”

Suddenly she shouted out: “Help! Help! Help! All of this is making my head turn.”

She became agitated and began to flail her arms around. Chad took hold of her hands until she calmed down; then she fell into a deep sleep. She remained motionless for a long time.

I wondered why I had to witness these sad memories. She was so often caught up in fits of rage and furious madness that it was only Chad who could calm her down. This lasted for a long time, many earthly years, until she finally understood that she was now in another world. However, when she finally had to admit that this was the case, she became almost mad with despair and shouted that she wanted to return to Earth, that she wanted to find her pleasures and her friends again. Chad would then make a few magnetic passes over her. She would then calm down and look around in wonder. One day, she was finally able to see her benefactor.

“Who are you?” she asked, frightened. Have you come to judge me?”

“No, I only want to help you”, Chad replied. However, she could still not hear his voice. She twisted herself as she crawled and tried to hide from the light that emanated from him. We would then go out and leave her alone.

She has reached such a point of understanding”, said Chad, “that I

cannot help her any longer. She has to leave the hospital and go to a place where she can learn for herself. You are to accompany her for as long as you can.”

“Where should I take her? I do not know where she must go and live.”

“She will lead you well.”

“Will I have to stay with her? I think you are being quite severe, Chad.”

“No, you are only to follow her for as long as you are able to; then you are allowed to return here.”

“But what if she does not want to leave here?”

“Do not worry, she will leave.”

A moment later, I came back to her.

“How do you feel now, Gertrude?”

“Good, very good, but from now on I do not want to stay in this establishment any longer. I do not like it here. I did not like the bright man. He looks too severe. Come on, let us go. Naturally, you will follow me. I do not care about you; you seem so hypocritical, but you must follow me and help me. Do you understand?”

With that, she and I left together. But it was not easy to follow her, because she was running along the way. And what a path! It led downwards. The slope became steeper and steeper, and everything was getting darker and darker around us. She turned around: “Can you not follow and keep up with me?” she said. “You are weak!”

I followed her for a long time. There were chasms and rock faces so steep that I shuddered. She always preceded me. Finally, she stopped in front of a dark pit that looked like the entrance to a mine.

“Now take my hand”, she said, “and we will jump into the hole together... That is where I shall settle down. I cannot stand the light out here. It hurts my eyes so much.”

“It is dreadful how dark it is in there. No, I will not follow you”, I replied.

“Are you afraid? Coward! Come now, you must follow me, do you understand?”

She grabbed me tightly by the wrist and wanted to pull me down with her, but I defended myself and finally managed to free myself of her grip. She disappeared into the depths with a sarcastic laugh.

Of all the disturbing things I have experienced, this was the gloomiest moment. I sat for a long time, scanning the depths behind her, until an indescribable feeling of powerlessness gripped me. What could I do to help her? Was there no salvation for such a soul? And the most astonishing thing of all was that she herself wanted to jump into the abyss.

Unable to make any sense of it, I joined my hands together and prayed to God to have mercy on her. This was to be my first prayer for this unfortunate woman — and it was not to be my last.

I got up and headed for home. As difficult as the descent had been, the ascent was made so much easier. It was as if I had been lent wings, and I was soon once again with my friend Chad.

While I was away, a message from Akab had arrived. I had to finish my time of serving at the hospital and go to Charles-George to start my studies. With tears in my eyes, I said goodbye to Chad; but how much less painful was it than the first time! He offered that I may come and visit him as often as I had the time and the desire, and then we parted with a cordial handshake.

I do not have much to report about my school time, not because it had not been of great significance for my development, but because it offers no particular interest to others; and I have to try to keep it short so that my story does not drag on. I will only mention that it was a blessed time, full of the most pleasant impressions; and how good we were together Charles-George and I! I had a lot of consideration for him, and he was of great help to me. If I had any problems, he was usually the one to solve them. He had an easier time than I did in philosophy, whilst I, on the other hand, enjoyed applied sciences and history.

We spent our holidays at Gerda's house, and what a paradise she lived in! However, I will not try to describe this wonderful region. She lived there with some friends she had known for a long time during her earlier stages of development. They had formed a small colony which was partly concerned with self-study, partly with art and music, and partly also with visiting people who lived in wrongfulness on Earth. They worked for their salvation. It was truly a feast to come to these friends. They always welcomed us with such great joy.

One day we were allowed to accompany them to a great festival that was celebrated in an even higher sphere. I had never seen anything so

splendid before. We were celebrating a religious festival. There were crowds of people here from different spheres. Lectures were given, but not the monotonous and tiresome sermons which usually mark the celebrations of earthly churches. No, here they were invigorating and refreshing lectures. And the music! I never thought that a choir could resound in such a beautiful way. Everything was so beautiful that I could not bear to stay here for too long; for it was so bright that I was almost blinded by it. I was happy to go back to my school. Spontaneously I thought of poor Gertrude, who could not stand even the dim light of my surroundings, but longed for the obscurity of darkness. Light and darkness are very relative concepts.

Thus, many years passed according to the earthly chronology. Akab came to visit with us from time to time. On one such occasion he told us that he had gone to see Gertrude. He described her heart-breaking situation to us. "She is still very stubborn", he said, "but she has mellowed somewhat after all she has had to endure. It is wonderful that there is a way to bend the stiffest knee and that it is not any more severe than it needs to be. It is simply the natural continuation of what we do."

"Is there nothing that can be done for her?" I asked. "Now that I am well, I often think of her and feel great pain at not being able to help her."

"It would still be too early. You would not attain anything good from it. If you got closer to her, on the contrary, you would only reinforce her stubbornness. But the day will come, and it may not be so far away, when you will have to reach out to her again. Charles-George must also be ready to help her. I think he will have to go to her for you. As soon as the time is right, I will let you know."

"How good you are, Akab, to have accepted her too!"

"I took care of both of you", he replied, weighing firmly on those last words, "because you are part of the same whole, however strange that may seem. In any case, you have a debt to pay to her and that is why it is your duty, above all, to save her."

At these words, I felt an uncomfortable horror. Was I not yet free? Should she continue to dominate me? And how could I, the weakest among us, save her, who was incredibly strong? It was an overwhelming duty that tortured me. And what had I made myself responsible to her for? Had she not in truth led me to the abyss of perdition? All these questions crossed my mind and I could not help but ask Akab: "What did I do to Gertrude to make me owe her such a debt of gratitude?"

"I cannot yet tell you", he replied, "but perhaps you will find the answer to your question when you least expect it."

Again, one of those obscure observations that I neither understood nor wished to be explained either!

I must here relate an important episode from my school period, for I had been given an assignment that gave me serious difficulties.

Based on the lectures I had heard, I had to write a dissertation on the culture of Ancient Egypt during the time of Hermes. However, my notes on these lectures were somewhat incomplete and I had no other source of reference at my disposal. Charles-George had not attended this series of lectures and therefore could not help me either. I was sitting there most perplexed, and not knowing which way to turn for the necessary clarification.

Suddenly, in front of me stood a feminine form, entirely covered with a dazzling white garment made of the finest fabric. In perfect silence she had entered my room. I could not be sure whether she had entered through the door or had floated down from the roof. I had only noticed her presence just as she was standing there in front of me. She pulled back her veil to reveal a beautiful face of a more southern appearance. Her beautiful brown eyes had something wonderfully enchanting about them, and her delicate features were framed by dark curls, falling down around her neck and shoulders.

It would have happened on Earth that I would have called her a ghost from another world, but now I found myself in that other world. Were there ghosts here too?

She smiled at my surprise, which could probably be read on my face.

“Peace be with you, Wolfgang”, she said, in a voice almost as enchanting as her eyes. “Do you not recognise me?”

“No, who are you and where do you come from? Your body is so transparent that I can see right through it. Are you a being from a higher world than this one?”

Without answering, she lowered a veil in front of her face and remained, for a moment, completely calm. When she revealed her features again, they were transformed. I could now see an elderly woman with grief-stricken features, but the look was the same, warm and friendly.

“Oh”, I cried, “it is you, old Dorchen, my dear old friend. But what does all this mean? Can you transform your face as you wish?”

“Listen, Wolfgang”, she said as she drew the veil back over her face, “I am your old friend Dorchen, who breast-fed you and therefore loves you like her own child. But now, as you rightly guessed, I have my home in a higher world that is as invisible to you, as yours is to the people of the Earth. In order to make myself visible, I had to take matter from your atmosphere to condense my body. My will is the organising force there and I can, therefore, show myself either as I live up there today, or in a form I had during one of my earthly lives. It strains me to show myself in a form which I once had, so you will have to be content to see the old Dorchen in her new form for the time being.

She concentrated for a moment and then showed me again the same beautiful features that had amazed me earlier. I was so astonished that I could hardly utter a word.

“But... why?” I stammered.

“Why is old Dorchen so high up in this world?” she added. “I am an old spirit who has lived a long series of earthly lives. As I had successfully completed this one, I thus completed my Earth school and was allowed to pass into the world nearest to the spirits of the spiritual realm. I no longer have need to descend, but if required to do so, it would be as a missionary.”

“Among the heathen”, I asked.

“There are far too many pagans among the so-called Christians, who need our help”, she replied.

“But tell me, Dorchen, why did you, who stand so close to perfection, have to go through these painful earthly lives in order to overcome all kinds of trials?”

“First of all, I will tell you that I am still infinitely far from perfection and, moreover, it often happens that the last proof that one must give on Earth is particularly difficult. I myself have asked to be allowed to take upon myself an arduous duty, so arduous that thanks to it I will not have to return to Earth again. I had, you understand, to atone for more than one thing in my many lives and that is why I had to act as the humblest of servants. Whilst there, I also got to know you, my child, who caused me much worry as well as joy. I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you again as you are sitting before me. I have followed you through all your struggles and efforts and I have implored for you all the good I can through my prayers and thoughts. I have waited a long time for a favourable occasion to be able to come close to you. Today, it was as if you yourself had called on me; that is why it was easier for me to cross the border between my world and yours.

“Did I call to you?” I asked in amazement. “I must confess that I had not thought about you for many years.”

“You wanted to get help from someone with knowledge of the cultural history of the ancient Egyptians?”

“Yes, that is true, but not...”

“It is not Dorchen, you think, who possesses such wisdom? But why should it not be? I lived in Egypt at the time you want to depict and I once had a prominent social position. I am thus able to talk about my experience whilst living there and give you explanations of great importance for your theme. If you like, we can start right away. I cannot stay here for very long.”

She sat down beside me. She dictated and I wrote. As soon as she finished, she stood up, kissed me on the forehead and disappeared as mysteriously as she had come.

My teacher was astonished. “It is truly a masterful description”, he said, “and here are details that I never mentioned in my lectures; yes, some I did not even know about. Where did you get them from?”

I told him how it happened.

“You are very privileged to have such collaborators”, he said.

Chapter 8

My encounter with Gertrude in the planes of the beyond

Then news came to us. Charles-George and I had to go to Gertrude. Akab was to meet us there. I knew the way.

I do not think I have ever been so afraid of a duty to perform as I was of this one. Not only was it going to be particularly hard, but the torment of staying down there in the darkness was immense, but we had to go there. Always enthusiastic and joyful, Charles-George now became silent and serious, but did not hesitate for a moment, and we headed further down the road.

Akab met us at the entrance to the mine shaft where Gertrude had disappeared.

“Courage, my friends”, he said. Now, stand on either side of me and each take hold of one of my hands. Get ready, we are heading down, and we shall see some dreadful scenes.”

We descended into the depths of the mountain with extreme caution. It was dark and cold, but Akab had taken with him a small lamp and some warm clothes. We walked through long dark corridors where the water was dripping from the walls and the arches were covered with stalactites. On either side, caves were scattered throughout the mountain. Some of them were closed by large metal doors and locked with coarse locks. From these implacable and barbaric cells came terrifying cries of distress and complaints of all kinds, and from others, profanities and curses.

In the distance we saw someone who looked surprisingly bright. As he came closer, we realised he was an elevated spirit. He was spreading a comforting light around him, and made a friendly sign to Akab.

“He is one of the prison guards, if you can call them that”, said Akab. “They watch over the unhappy ones, and are always ready to help and comfort them. As soon as the unhappy souls are capable of receiving this

help and are done with the work they had to do on themselves, these helpers are then able to receive them, and take them out of here. It is a work of charity that requires unshakeable trust and fervent ardour. They are true heroes who humbly devote part of their lives to these unfortunate people.”

We had now arrived. In a small hole, on one side of the gallery, Gertrude was there, crouching. She had not noticed us. Akab motioned for me to stay outside, and he entered with Charles-George. I could hear everything they were saying. At first, she looked at Akab, whom she recognised.

“What more do you want”, she said, “if you cannot get me out of here!”

“No one else can do this but you alone. Full and repentant gratitude for all that you have done wrong is the only thing that can free you from this darkness.”

“I have recognised everything. It was me who caused my father to die; it was me who stole his fortune; it was me who led my husband to gambling; it was me who...”

At this she fell silent.

“You are still hiding something that is eating away at your conscience, I can see it”, said Akab. “You have to open your heart completely so that the divine Light can flow through it and warm your cold, dying spirit. Perhaps you wish to confide in an old friend whom I have brought with me today! Do you recognize him?”

She uttered a cry of fear as she recognised her brother, and a deep silence, even a heavy one, settled for a good while in this place of abandonment and dismay.

When she had recovered from the fright caused by this unexpected encounter, a long conversation began between the brother and the sister. Calm and relaxed, Akab made every possible attempt to encourage her, so that she would speak without hiding anything about her whole life. She contorted herself visibly, like a worm, under the secret awareness of her guilt towards her brother, while trying to use a candid, ingenuous tone to make them believe in her innocence. In the meantime, she became more and more agitated, and finally begged them both to go away and leave her alone, for she had nothing more to confess.

Charles-George was very sad and discouraged. Akab’s features were marked by a deep seriousness.

“Now you must stand guard over her”, Akab told me. “We are on our way back up, but we shall come back if you call us. Be patient with her, and

do not tire her out with long conversations. Let her freely express her confession, otherwise it has no value. You will understand what still oppresses her. May God be with you!”

They shook my hand and disappeared.

I sat alone by the bed where poor Gertrude was lying. She had not seen me enter. She lay there sobbing, her head covered over with rags. It was a sad sight to see this woman, so surrounded and desired in the past, lying so miserably and unhappily in the cold and darkness. I put my hands together and prayed to God to warm her heart, so that she could no longer resist His immense Love. The sobs grew weaker and weepier, and I think she fell asleep.

I must confess that it was very unpleasant for me to sit there, staring at myself in the darkness, alone among so many unfortunate people, in this house of torment. The silence was broken by sighs, groans and cries of distress coming from the holes on all sides. My eyes had by now gradually become accustomed to the darkness and I could make out the nearest objects. The furnishings, if one can call them so, were the most rudimentary that one could imagine. Gertrude was lying on a sort of pallet with a small crate under her head, and she was wrapped in an old-fashioned blanket. The floor was covered with flat stones; the walls and ceiling were cold and bare. There was only one seat in the room, made of a large flat stone. How long did I sit there waiting? I have no idea.

When she finally woke up, she sat herself upright and stared at me:

“Ah, it is you”, she says. “Have you come to take me away from here? In any case, it is not too soon!”

“Yes, I have come to get you, but I am afraid it is still difficult for you to leave.”

“Yes, it will be difficult for me to move around, I am so heavy, you see. It is as if my body is made of lead. Maybe you will be able to carry me?”

“I do not think I will be able to. It would be much better if you took everything that oppresses you from out of yourself.”

“Yes, yes, you are right about that and I want that too, but as you can see, it is so difficult. I still do not need to tell everything to this Akab who was here, but I have told him the worst things. Was that not enough?”

“No, it is not enough. Remember one of David’s psalms that went something like: ‘as I wanted to pass it over in silence, I lost the use of my legs’. This is why your legs cannot carry you, because you want to hide something, something that you do not want to admit to; for when we do

not confess our sins but remain in complete denial, the health of body and soul deteriorates, hence we languish in the present situation without the ability to move forward to the next step. And that is the reason why you cannot get out of here.”

“But, you see, it will be difficult for me. You know how it is. You were there yourself with me, because you put it into action. You alone are responsible for it. Why do you want to blame me for it?”

“I understand what you are saying and I admit that I too am responsible for the death of your brother that we knowingly provoked.”

“He will never be able to forgive you for that.”

“He has already forgiven me and wants nothing more than to be able to forgive you too.”

“He was here not long ago. I was very surprised when I saw him, but he did not know that I had participated in his death. How could I confess this to him? It was beyond my strength.”

“Ah, he knows our crime perfectly well and he has no animosity against us. He is such a good person, your brother!”

“What are you saying? He knows it and does not hate me? That’s wonderful!”

“When you have reached the place where he is, then you cannot hate. He wishes with all his heart that, out of love for yourself, you will ask him for forgiveness, and with this lightened heart, you will be able to leave this dark place and find both the brightness of the sun and a deep joy.”

“For me there is no joy.”

“Do not say that. I know that roses will also bloom on your path, if you only want them yourself.”

“How can you know this?”

“Because God is good. He created us for joy and not for suffering. And when we turn away from Him, He sends us the help we need to free ourselves from the harmful bonds we have often unconsciously prepared for ourselves. It is up to each one of us to choose either good or evil, darkness or Light. We alone must make this final decision.”

“This is quite an original point of view. You have never spoken to me like this on Earth.”

“No, we both strayed from the right path, but since I have been up here, I have learned a lot. You too, once you have left this place, must

receive this teaching.”

“I ask nothing concerning this subject. I do not believe in the legends of god and a heaven. If he is there and is capable of something, then he should reduce me to dust rather than let me suffer like this. It is either that he never was or that he is powerless.”

“It is precisely through your suffering that He proves to you that He lives and is powerful. For in the depths of your soul, He has placed a spark of His will that carries the nostalgia of your origin. You wanted to stifle this spark in you. Just listen to your pain. You will have no peace of mind until you turn to Him. He has a powerful voice; you have experienced that.”

She did not answer. Crouched in her corner she took her head in her hands. Then she lay down on her bed and threw the blanket over her. She lay completely still, but I do not think she was sleeping.

Once again, I was left sitting there all alone with my thoughts, but now I no longer felt that unpleasant heaviness that made me uncomfortable. I hoped that my efforts would be rewarded and this filled me with joy. However, the hours were long in the darkness. I had no idea what time it would be.

Suddenly, it was as if the mountain walls were opening up. I saw an image, or rather a whole series of images that followed one after the other with the warm colours of life. I will try to describe all that I saw while Gertrude was lying motionless beside me.

I saw in a meadow, in front of a big city, a camp of gypsies. It was a sunny day, under a warm southern sky. There was a celebration at the camp and a large crowd had come from the city to attend. On a beautiful, fairy-coloured carpet, a young gypsy girl danced to the languorous sounds of a violin. She was ravishingly beautiful, with big dreamy eyes and black spiral loops that moved to the rhythm of her dance. She had a defiant smile that suited her well. She wore a light silk blouse with a small green velvet jacket over it, trimmed with sequins and gold embroidery. A short, beautifully embroidered skirt reaching just above the knees, and a gold woven belt completed her costume. Her arms and legs were bare. And how she danced! Every movement evoked passion.

A young man among the spectators, a gentleman judging by his clothing, seemed fascinated by the young dancer. He went to her after the dance and offered her a precious pin that he took from out of his frill.

The scenes changed rapidly. I now saw them on horseback. She was sat in front of him, on the pommel of his saddle. His steed galloped hastily

in spite of the double load. They were racing away at full speed. Not far behind them came two Gypsies, also on fast horses. Will he manage to escape with his precious burden? If not, it will mean death for him.

Suddenly a castle with high battlements appeared. The path led up to it. The distance between the pursuers and the chasers became shorter and shorter. The rider's horse blew noisily under the effort. But he was once again hit so hard by the spurs in the flanks that he continued to gallop in a crazy race. He arrived on the drawbridge, which was immediately lifted by attentive hands. The two chasers came behind them so quickly that they barely managed to prevent their horses from jumping into the moat of the castle. They were forced to turn back.

Then I saw the following scenes less and less distinctly, perhaps as a result of my growing emotion. I did not know why, but it all seized me deeply.

I saw great agitation in the castle. Drunkenness, abductions of women, and I saw the repudiated gypsy woman in a room in the tower where, if she was not a prisoner, she was certainly closely guarded. Finally, I saw her leaving the castle, alone and abandoned, with a child in her arms.

A shiver shook my whole being. What did these images mean? What did I have to do with them?

A voice inside me replied: "It was you, and it was her."

I was petrified. So that was my fault towards Gertrude! I had taken her out of the circle in which she was happy and where she might have become a good person. I had poisoned her life and then repudiated her. I had sown the weed of bitterness in her soul. It was my fault that she was here today...

I fell to my knees at the foot of her bed and held out my arms to her. She turned around slowly and looked at me in amazement.

"Gertrude", I said, "you have suffered unspeakably. I have hurt you terribly. It is all my fault. Can you forgive me?" She stared at me in astonishment. "I have seduced you. I threw you into the darkness. I should be here where you are now, and you should go free."

"What are you saying?" she asked.

I told her what I had read in the pictures I had seen. She sat there in silence and listened to me with great attention.

"Yes, Wolfgang", she said, when I had finished, "it was you; and the woman was me. I felt it right here." She touched her plexus. "Now I understand all the bitterness that I have carried inside me."

“Forgive me”, I whispered. She stroked my hair lightly.

“Wolfgang”, she said in a soft voice I had never heard before, “we have both wronged each other, but I for the most part. I took advantage of your weakness and dragged you into the mud. You have risen from your degradation, but I am still stuck in mine. Help me! Help me! Help me! Wolfgang! I am a despicable being.”

She threw herself at my neck and cried bitterly.

“Ah! if Charles-George were here and I could tell him how badly I had acted towards him. Would he be able to forgive me?”

At my call, Akab and Charles-George arrived, and a touching scene followed between the brother and the sister.

Akab then wrapped her in a coat and we carried her out of the hole, through the long galleries and the well, into the clear sunlight. From the higher spheres a hymn sounded towards us: “There is joy in heaven when a sinner does penance.”

The period that followed is of less interest to third parties, but for me it was of indescribable importance. I experienced all the joy I was able to appreciate. And I did such a beneficial and restorative work for my spiritual forces that I will always remember these precious moments with gratitude.

Gertrude now had to be placed in the care of some good friends, but because I had helped her, I now received from Akab news I had longed to hear. Now I was mature enough to move to the next, higher sphere, where I would eventually receive permission to share a home with Gerda. First, however, I had to complete my courses and pass a few more exams.

At the agreed time, Gerda came herself and took me to her home, which I was now permitted to share. Here we lived together for a long time in the happiest way possible, in a natural environment which, as I felt at the time, was a real paradise. Attempting to describe this life in the imperfect language of the Earth would only destroy all impressions of it, without being able to give a true picture of it. I will therefore not even try, even though I would gladly communicate some details that could then awaken a burning desire in the children of the Earth.

Would I have been a poet that I would have written an ode to love, for this feeling has been the source of all our joys. It was this divine force that drew me upwards from out of the debasement where I had once fallen.

Gerda had succeeded. She had now realised the encouraging words she had once spoken to me in my extreme distress, when she herself was a physically broken being: “I have to save you”.

On the other hand, no one should imagine that this existence was but a renunciation, an abandonment of all things... it was, on the contrary, a real delight. It was a very full and demanding life, in the service of the good. Once you come so far in developing the desire to do well — for the sake of goodness — it will never be boring work. We then act under the guidance of high-ranking guides who offer us missions suitable to our strengths. And when you have brought your work to a successful conclusion in this way, you can experience no greater joy than when you receive a word of thanks or a look of gratitude from your spiritual “leaders”.

What do these missions consist of? They are quite diversified. Just think of the countless bands of travellers from eternity needing assistance at every possible stage of their evolution. Think of those who shackle themselves in the chains they have forged for themselves; of all those who rush blindly into their own perdition and wound themselves to the point of blood at the obstacles they encounter along their way; of all those who stumble in the darkness; of all those who suffer in their bodies or in the distress of their souls. They all need assistance. They are now moving either on the physical plane or in the planes of the afterlife. Misery and distress are as great on Earth as they are in the hereafter. The only concern here is to be able to help a little.

But during this time of uninterrupted work, which Gerda and I have often done together, how glorious it was to return home to rest and acquire further knowledge; also, to be able to make study trips to other, more advanced worlds! Yes, existence is infinitely rich in possibilities.

One day we were to accompany Akab on such a journey. We sped at dizzying speed through cosmic space to another planet. This planet was much older than the Earth and that is why the beings there had achieved a different stage of development, much higher than that of the Earth.

We have therefore much to learn from them, not only on the mechanical and technological aids, but also on social and ethical conditions. Our stay there was, however, very short, because when Akab was finished with his task, we had to return home together with him. However, it was a most agreeable and instructive journey, and one that I shall never forget. What particularly struck me by surprise, was how easily people wore their physical shackles; they are burdened not nearly as much thereof as the Earth’s humanity. Alas, that we would be there!

Even though the chains of the Earth are so heavy, one may be seized by the desire — even in the midst of all the splendour that free life offers — of a certain nostalgia towards the Earth, although nostalgia may not be

the right word for this strange feeling. At first, it is perceived as an inner exhortation that is frightening at first, but it comes back stronger and stronger each time, until it finally becomes so overpowering that one seeks permission to return to the Earth again. It does happen that the inner inadequacy or weakness of our being reveals itself more and more, the longer we stay here in contact with evolved spirits. We also feel that the path for the improvement or correction of this insufficiency only passes through the school of matter, strange as this may seem, where one gathers substance for the edification of the nature of one's soul. It is only in the world of dense matter that the spirit, thus blindfolded, reveals the imperfections of its inner nature, which then come to light; and it is only there that one makes one's most precious experiences. When the substance of those experiences that one gathers in this way is, so-to-speak, used up, one is obliged to go down again to gather more. Gerda was at first deeply disturbed to learn that this hunger for the Earth had seized me. She refused to believe it and begged me to put it out of my mind; and she would not allow herself be silenced. I also felt how painful my separation from Gerda would be, but nothing could shake my determination.

One day, when Akab came to visit with us, I presented him with my request. At first, he did not say anything, but simply looked at me with a look so full of tenderness and melancholy that I was almost scared. Was the life I was heading towards so full of trials?

"You, dear Wolfgang! I am glad that you yourself made this resolution without the intervention of another. I have been waiting for this, because I believe that the time has come for you. Be as steadfast and firm as you are courageous. The life ahead of you will not be easy, as you can well understand.

"You have to go through a hard school to strengthen your character. You will also have the opportunity to make amends for the harm you have done to others", he added in a low voice.

With tears in her eyes, Gerda intervened: "Dear Akab, do not encourage him to take this step. I do not think he has strength enough to overcome the hardships that this step will bring. I think he has to stay here for a while longer. I cannot let him get away from me", she whispered.

"Maybe you will follow him and look out for him", replied Akab with a friendly smile, "but for now, you must not discourage him. He must take the path he considers to be right."

"Akab, do you have any information or details about the living conditions I am going to live in?", I asked.

“Nothing for sure”, he replied. “I only know that what you will have to endure is no more painful than what you can bear, and that I will always stand by you to protect you. I will now pass on your desire to the higher masters who rule over life and death. Do you have a special wish?”

“Just ask them that I can unburden myself as much as possible from that which oppresses me. I long to be free of it.”

“Do not take too much on your shoulders, for the path itself can be difficult enough. In my opinion, it is better to spread over several earthly lives all that you must atone for.”

Gerda had been sitting quietly for a moment, but she now stood up and walked over to Akab. She laid her hand upon his shoulder. Big tears now slid down her cheeks as she firmly asked him: “Let me accompany Wolfgang down to the Earth. Ask permission for me at the same time; I must follow him.”

“You are such a generous heart”, replied Akab, “you are always great and strong, but you must not go down to Earth unless you receive an indication from within. Wait, maybe it will happen soon. You must not precede nature, neither for birth nor for death.

Akab then left us, but not long afterwards I was told to be ready. It was a strange period that followed. It was like being under an anaesthetic, becoming less and less conscious; it seemed as if I was enveloped by an ever-denser cloud. While I was still in this occasional conscious state, I was taken to the Earth to see my mother-to-be. She was so bright and so good! However, the obstacles and experiences I would have to overcome in my future life were such that, had I seen them earlier, I would have been afraid of them, but I was now already so strongly connected to my mother by this fluid bond that I no longer could think of a return.

The last thing I remember from this wonderful time of preparation was Gerda’s loving care; she never left me during this time.

Her last words were like a balm for my weakened senses: “Be in good spirits, I will join you...”

Chapter 9

My return to Earth

I found myself back on Earth. I was born in a small hut in a remote village, away from the busy roads. My father was a simple peasant who barely managed to support his family on this small piece of land that he owned. My mother was of bourgeois origin, and had received a good education. To have become the wife of a peasant in a village on the edge of the forest was of itself something worthy of a love story. She had fallen in love with my father when, as a young girl, he acted as her guide on a hike through the forest. This caused great tension in her family when she decided to marry him, but she was strong of character, robust and good at the same time, and she loved her husband; consequently, everything went better than was first thought. My father was a simple, humble man, with no other education than what primary school and an intimate relationship with nature had given him. Together they lived happily.

For a long period of time, I was the only child, until, a few years later, a girl was born. At her baptism she was given the name Maria. My name was John. Our family name does not matter, nor does the village where we lived.

I had to learn how to live very early on, with all kinds of hardships. Quite often, we ate only bread and water in the little hut near the forest. I also had to learn how to work very early on, first at odd jobs near my mother, in the kitchen, then with my father in the fields and in the stable. The school was far from home and it was not the least of things for a little boy like me to go there in all weathers. Knowledge was rudimentary, very limited, almost insufficient. That aside, I learned well and the teacher complimented me on how easy it was for me to learn.

One day I borrowed a storybook from a schoolfriend; it was to become my dearest treasure. I slipped into the forest to read and was not so easily found. I heard my mother calling me, but did not answer her, for I was in the middle of an adventure and I could not tear myself away from it. However, the most painful part was when I had to acknowledge what I had done. I had to admit that I heard my mother calling out to me and that I failed to obey. Although my mother was understanding, my father was strict and spared me no punishment.

My childhood was a lonely one, for I had no real friends. I had to wait for the birth of my little sister whom I loved very much. Nothing was more beautiful than hearing her talk, and playing with her. Most of the time I had the pleasant task of looking after Maria.

My happiest hours were under the big fir tree behind the stable, where I would sit Maria on my lap and tell her stories about giants, dwarves and little princesses. I would enjoy seeing her little eyes twinkle with fear or wonder, and then feel a shiver of fear rise up inside her when the little elves would make their big, unpleasant voices heard. She was nice, my little sister, and we were good friends.

When she was five years old, I taught her to read. She had a precocious intelligence and because I was eight years older than her, I could teach her more than one thing I had learned in school. When Maria went to school, she succeeded with incredible ease.

The years went by. I was now a young man and I had to go out into the world in search of work, for there was not enough work for two at home; the farm was too small for that. With heavy heart I said goodbye to my mum and dad, and also to Maria. I shouldered my backpack and set off into the wider world. It was strange to start with, and I felt a bit down as I walked along the monotonous country roads in the blazing sun, but the further I journeyed away from home, the greater my confidence would grow and my courage return. It is a great feeling, when you are eighteen, to be free and feel responsible for yourself!

I intended to look for a job on one of the large farms in the more cultivated areas. I eventually managed to do this by first getting a job as a farmhand and later as a supervisor on a large farm. I had to use all my strength and work hard, but all in all I had a good life. In my free time I used to read, because I had such an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. My employer was good to me and would lend me many expensive books, especially on agriculture and cattle breeding. I saved everything I could out of my salary. Finally, when I managed to put aside what was needed to live

for a year, I took a leave of absence from my employer and enrolled as a student in a rural economics school.

I had not seen my family since the day I left, but Maria and I wrote to each other often; indeed, it was my greatest joy to receive a letter from her. She was now a 17-year-old girl. We hoped to see each other again, but at the time I could not afford to make such a long journey home.

Everything was going well for me. When I eventually passed my exams, I was able to rent, through a relative of mine, a profitable farm near a large provincial town. Now I wanted for Maria to join with me, and to look after my home. She would have come willingly, but mum had recently died and she could not leave dad alone on the farm.

I thought I would soon have to find myself a prospective wife and get married. However, as I did not really wish to get married, I remained undecided for a long period of time. Also, at that particular time I had no deep feelings for any young girl.

Chapter 10

My marriage with Laura

One day, an event took place that profoundly marked my destiny. A theatre troupe arrived in the city and I went there to see a play that had been praised in the newspapers. However, it was not so much the play that captivated me, but one of the actresses. She was a young dark-haired girl with extraordinary eyes and something particularly charming that radiated from her whole being. I decided to stay in the city for a number of days, and watched her performance night after night, until I could no longer dominate myself, nor suppress my feelings. I made her acquaintance and asked for her hand in marriage. I was dizzy and had fallen in love. I did not ask who she was or where she came from, or whether she could accept the way of life I could offer her. I only wanted for her to be mine, just as she was.

However, she coldly refused my request and left with the troupe. I felt as if I had been transformed and had no strength left to work. Wherever I went and whatever I did, the fascinating image of Laura was in front of me, charming and paralysing me. I lived as if in a dream and neglected my work. Finally, I decided to follow her.

The theatre troupe were now performing in another city... not too far from my home. As she entered the stage, she was astonished to see me. I think it probably made a strong impression on her, for she now realised how serious I was, and how much I cared about her. When we met up later, I asked her for her hand once again. She said she needed a few days to think over my proposal before giving me an answer. To my joy, she finally gave her consent to our union.

Six months later, Laura had become my wife. It was only then that I thought of writing to Maria to tell her about my marriage. I told her how it had happened. She sent me a long letter that testified to her worries; I was touched by a deep sense of anguish. The tone of her letter shook me; it was filled with anxiety for me and seemed to come across more as a wakeup call. The fool that I was, what had I done?

It did not take long before the 'love-mist' began to evaporate. I was soon to discover the difference in our characters. Laura was capricious and authoritarian, whereas I was more sensitive and accommodating. The exhilaration, not to say the exaltation I had lived in until then, quickly disappeared. I could now see the naked reality squarely in front of me. However, it was now a matter of making good heart against bad judgement, and bearing the consequences of my foolish impetuosity like a man. Only now was I beginning to realise the true cost of being too accommodating towards her. If I did not want to lose control of my house, then I had to commit to our relationship with determination from the very beginning, even though I knew now just how difficult it would be and what obstacles and struggles it would cost.

Everything went reasonably well for a time, even though Laura did not have the slightest interest in the farm or the household. However, she was often cheerful and in good mood. On occasion she would tease me because of my peasant habits and manners, but for the most part, she was generally pleasant and friendly. However, this situation was not to last, for it did not take long for conflicts to appear. Naturally, she did not like this monotonous and quiet life. She was used to travelling, to constantly seeing new people, to being applauded, to feeling celebrated and cheered. What did she care about the cattle and the dairy, the pigs and the poultry! All this was an outrage to her! She became irritable and touchy, and if I dared to respond in kind, things became even worse. I should have foreseen all of this from the outset, but it was now too late. Ah, with hindsight, it would not have taken much for me to send her back.

One day she came into my farm office and sat down beside me. Then, with her most conciliatory smile, she said to me: "You know, Jonathan (usually, she could not take it upon herself to call me John, it was too common), the world is so beautiful! You have to go out and look around. I shall be your guide, because I know the way." Saying all of this to me with a gleam in her eye. I was vehemently opposed to this idea, because I had

neither the time nor the means. I did not even want to think about it, but it was as if she could not hear me. She just moved closer to me, leaned her head on my shoulder and whispered: “We will travel far, far away from here to the south, where the sun is warmer. Here it is so cold, your Laura is freezing! We will go where the sky is dark blue, where the orange trees blossom; where life springs forth in all nature. I once made the journey there, and I long to return. Follow me, Jonathan, we would be so happy there.”

“Are you really serious that I should give up my lease, my only means of existence, and rush into such an adventure?” I replied.

“We could go for a while at least, then you can go back to your horses and oxen”, she countered.

“I cannot afford to do so; you have to understand that.”

She tried for a long time to seduce me with all the beauty I would see there, and assured me that it would not be difficult for me to borrow the necessary sum against the guarantee of my assets. However, as I remained unshakeable, she then became angry and stamped her feet, called me a hard head and mumbled something that under these conditions she would have to go alone. She slammed the door and walked out.

Over the next few days, she kept quiet, and even became more friendly than before. This led me to believe that she was planning something in secret. She often went to the city under the pretext she had to visit a seamstress. With each visit she stayed there longer and longer. One day she stayed longer than usual. I waited until the evening meal, but still she had not returned. Although I did not know it at the time, I was not to hear from her again. I paced back and forth in the room, listening out for the slightest noise. I was seized by an anxiety that little by little turned into fear. Where could she be? Had something bad happened to her? I went to the front door and listened. A carriage could be heard in the distance getting closer and closer, but my hope was dashed, it was not Laura. I left the farm and walked along the road towards the city. I walked for a long time before stopping, thinking I had heard a noise. Holding my breath to catch the slightest sound, I looked all around me, but could neither see nor hear anything. I even put my ear to the ground to listen, but in vain; for nothing was heard, and no one was coming. During those painful hours of waiting, on that clear spring night, it became clear to me that I was clinging to this woman by stronger ties than I first thought.

Early the next morning, I scoured the city looking for her, but no one could give me any information about her whereabouts. At the hotel we

frequented, no one had seen her except on the day before, around 4 o'clock in the afternoon. She had given the driver some money to buy himself dinner and told him to wait for her, even if it was going to be a long wait. He had gotten drunk, and by the time I arrived he was lying down, fast asleep. She had not been to the dressmaker either, as her dress had already been finished a week ago. Only a salesman from a shop where she regularly passed by thought he had seen her with an older man on the way to the station, but he was not really sure if it was her. She had disappeared without a trace...

I came home with the darkest of thoughts. She had gone off with another, that was obvious, but where? How could I find her? Where should I look? She was now my only aspiration; I wanted her back. I would be so good to her; I would do anything to make her feel happy, if I could only get her back! Inside me, it cried out: Laura! Laura! But no one answered.

Chapter 11

My reunion with my sister Maria

In the meantime, a letter had arrived from Maria telling me that father was dying. I immediately set off for my little home village, and the childhood home I left behind left 15 years earlier at age 18, with the courage to make my own way in life. sadly, my father had already died by the time I arrived, and Maria was feeling devastated following all the nights of vigil and care. However, her joy at seeing me again was greater than I had dared to hope. Following my marriage, I had only written her a few letters. Her letters to me, as affectionate as ever, often remained unanswered for a long time. I had not breathed a word about Laura's disappearance, for I was ashamed that in her premonition Maria had been right. My marriage had evidently gone wrong. When I finally did tell her, she did not reproach me; indeed, on the contrary, she opened up a heart for me whereby I could then open my own heart with confidence. She was so good, and understood me so well. I knew that I had not only a sister in her but also the most faithful friend.

Following my father's funeral and the sale of the family property, I returned home. Maria was so happy to be able to accompany me. With her a ray of sunshine came into my house and it seemed to me that peace and harmony must now return to my life again.

We had an uncle, from my mother's side, living in the city; an old bachelor, who was a very wealthy grain merchant. In the early days, he had been well disposed towards me; for it was he who had helped to provide me with the favourable lease on a tenant farm, and then lent me the money I needed to buy furnishings and cattle. However, he could not stand Laura and, from the day she returned home with me, he never crossed the

threshold again.

We had visited him several times, but he had remained cold and hostile. Laura had, from the very first hour, developed a strong antipathy towards him. She was even afraid of him.

On the other hand, towards Maria, he was immediately very friendly. Laura's departure allowed he and I to improve our relations for the better, although they were never as beautiful as they once had been. He was known as a strong-willed and capable man, who had earned himself a great reputation in the city and elsewhere. He was energetic and skilled in business, and enjoyed great consideration; a consideration that was carried over to me in many respects because of his kinship; but ever since my uncle had withdrawn his favours from me, many other people had turned their backs on me as well. My credit was seriously shaken. At first, I just managed to get by, but after a few years this caused me serious financial problems.

Maria was tireless. She had taken care of the cattle and the dairy. She managed to make a good profit from these operations. At the same time, she looked after our small household with circumspection and wisdom. I would never have been able to get by without her during these difficult years I had to go through. It was an orderly and exhausting life that we led, but we were happy together.

One evening, when we were sitting outside on the veranda, Maria turned to me and asked: "Have you ever thought about the possibility that Laura might one day come back and assert her rights?"

"It is unlikely, but should it happen..."

"You would not take her back though?" Maria interjected.

"I cannot answer that, Maria. I do have this feeling that I owe her something and, therefore, have a certain obligation towards her. I would have to act as best I could in such circumstances, depending on how she would be. After all, it was me who uprooted her, essentially snatching her away from the limelight and applause of the crowds, so as to transplant her back here to my humble and modest home. Mind you, I imagine she is not very happy where she is today."

"But think about all that she did to you. You do not have to take her back! I shudder when I think of all the suffering it would cause you again."

"Let time do its work", I replied.

In the evenings we liked to take a walk on the lakeside, not far from our farm. On one such occasion we came upon a painter who had set up his easel on an overhang. He was painting a beautiful sunset scene of the lake with some big pine trees in the foreground. We stopped to look at the painting and chatted with him for quite some time. I invited him to return to our home as our guest for the evening; an invitation which he happily accepted. Such was the chemistry between the three of us, however, he became our permanent guest for a long time to come.

I had never met such a nice young man before. He was so friendly, so cheerful and so good at the same time! Maria, who was also very fearful of men, had an astonishing confidence in him from the very first meeting. And Axel — that was his name — was very happy in our company, and also pleasantly surprised by our modest way of life. He had come to our region with the aim of painting several pictures. We suggested that we set up an improvised studio for him in the garden pavilion. He welcomed our proposal with great joy. He worked there with enthusiasm and love. He was such wonderful company to be around.

Indeed, his very way of being spontaneously won people's hearts. Even our uncle, who was so aggressive, enjoyed his company. He even bought several paintings from him. Axel was delighted and asked us for permission to stay on a while longer. He wanted to continue to paint subjects from our part of the country.

It was the most enjoyable summer I have ever had in my life. Everyone was totally dedicated to their work. In the evenings we would either sit in the garden, or in Axel's studio when the weather was bad. We would discuss different subjects, and sometimes Axel would read to us. It was so beautiful. During those unforgettable moments I felt really happy. Occasionally, even my uncle would join our little circle of friends. Axel had certainly built a bridge between my uncle and me.

Chapter 12

Laura's return and Maria's departure

Unfortunately, joyful hours are short. One late summer evening a letter arrived in the post which struck like a thunderbolt amidst our peaceful little circle. It stated very laconically: "John! I am poor and sick. Do not close the door on your "Laura." I passed the letter to Maria. She became quite pale and said nothing. Axel asked if something bad had happened. I told him my sad story.

"Do you think she really intends to come back?" Maria asked.

"She probably will. Why else would she have written?"

"But you are not thinking of taking her back, are you?"

"I do not yet know what I will or will not do."

"She will destroy your whole life. I beg you, do not take her back." As I did not answer, she then turned to Axel and asked him to persuade me to follow her advice. He sat there, silent and serious, for a long time.

"It is difficult for an outsider, a man who is single", he said, "to give advice in such a complex and critical case. I think John should consult his own good heart; for if this is about forgiveness and helping another, John will also need all the love and support he can get. By acting in this way, John will be better placed to advise himself and do what he believes is right for both himself and Laura, even if harmony in the home were to suffer as a result.

Two days later she arrived, physically and morally broken. She was so helpless and miserable that it would have been perfectly impossible for me to close my door to her.

She did not expect anything else. She moved freely into her old room,

as if she had never left it, and immediately went to bed. She gave no explanation whatsoever. When I asked her what had happened, she replied only with sighs and complaints that she had a terrible headache. She did not want to see a doctor. She thought it would soon pass. And it did. I think her illness was nothing more than a clever ruse to evade having to answer any awkward questioning when she first arrived here.

After a while she became the centre around which all thoughts and help gravitated. Maria, so determined at first not to accept her, had become the most attentive and affectionate nurse. Axel, who had also used an indifferent tone with her, gradually became interested in her and paid so much attention to her that it was touching. I myself was prey to opposing feelings, which cost me real effort to overcome. At times I felt strongly attracted to her. There was something in this strange being that bewitched me. When I surrendered to her charms, I was almost no longer myself. I felt the hold she had inside of me, and I could easily have become her spineless slave. I had to assert myself with all the power of my independence. Because of this duality, an almost insurmountable tension overcame me to the point that I reacted with force, so that the next hour I had a real repugnance for her, and wanted to throw her out.

This inner struggle was terribly exhausting. I was always trying to be patient and kind. It was very easy for her to win people's hearts because she had this amazing ability to display an apparent childlikeness and helplessness. She was so good at manipulating people, and everyone wanted to protect her. She never lifted a finger to help around the house. She recognised in others the ease with which they were able to do domestic work. She was able to quickly win their devotion, so that everyone obeyed her every whim; but as soon as she recognised her ascendancy, especially over Maria, she did not hesitate to abuse it. It did not take her long to become a tyrant to us all. I cannot describe how much I suffered from the yoke she placed on the whole house. I was perhaps the one who could most readily escape her influence, but what an effort it cost me! I shall not address this any further. However, she never managed to win my uncle's heart. When he learned that she was back, he stopped coming to see us and showed me the same coldness as before. Only Maria remained in his good graces.

Laura had some favourites, including the coachman Lars; the same one who had brought her to the city six years earlier, when she first ran away. He was a good groom, but he could never stay sober. One day I had to fire him. A year later, when he came back, hungry and miserable, I took him back. Soon after, he fell back into his old vice again, and I wanted to fire

him again. He cried, apologised to me, and promised not to do it again. Laura defended him, calling me ruthless, hard-hearted, insensitive; one who does not want to understand the pain of others. “To chase him away”, she says, “is tantamount to allowing him to drown.” As she was obviously showing a kindness of heart, which was rare in her case, I decided to please her and I took the repeat offender back. It was touching to see how much she appreciated it. It was indeed a gesture of kindness that this strange woman had expressed, but her good nature remained buried under so much harshness and incomprehension that I remained surprised by this sudden gesture.

It was now late autumn and to our great sorrow, Axel had to leave. He had taken up so much space in our hearts that we said goodbye to him only with great sadness.

I was sitting next to Laura, a few days after Axel’s departure, and she said to me, as if relieved: “I am happy that he is no longer here.”

“How curious”, I said. “He was so kind to you and you seemed to take such an interest in him!”

“Yes, he always did have a certain affinity with me, but I was somehow afraid of him — I do not know why. I could not bear to have him around me for too long. And do note that Maria could also leave the house too; she bothers me with her simplicity.”

“Are you not ashamed”, I replied angrily, “to speak of her in this way, when she has always shown you so much sympathy and affection, even when you have only shown stubbornness and rudeness towards her. She is really too good to let herself be bullied like that. I would not be surprised if she tired of helping you one day.”

“If she does not like it, she can leave”, she replied coldly.

That is exactly what happened. Deeply troubled, Maria came to me one day and said: “I cannot stand being here any longer; not so much because of Laura’s attitude towards me, but because I am unable to see you suffer.”

She moved to the city where our uncle helped her to start a small paper mill to support herself.

I found myself alone again with this enigmatic sphinx, that was so deeply rooted in my life that I could not free myself from its embrace. How

gladly I would have let her go, that I could have kept my dear sister; but to send her away after accepting her back as my wife again, I could not do that. She had the legal right to stay, and there was nothing else I could do.

My life had become a real mess! My good guardian spirit had gone, and once again the financial difficulties were piling up. Times were hard, the dairy was running at a loss and the crops were not producing the expected profits. People I dealt with proved unwieldy and unwilling. Even the staff were becoming less and less interested. Everything was rapidly going downhill by leaps and bounds. Sometimes I was so incredibly tired that I just wanted to end it all by shooting myself in the head. I would then go to see Maria who comforted me and gave me the strength to carry on.

“It will get better”, she said, “patience! Have confidence and help will come. Remember that help is given to those who strive to become better. Strengths are given to us when we apply ourselves and try to overcome our difficulties. We are never alone; invisible helpers assist us.” I left her, filled with renewed courage, ready to face all the pitfalls that were to come my way.

Year after year, I dragged an empty existence along with me. Laura became more and more nervous and irritable, especially towards me. She had a facility for manipulating the servants, and could make them do whatever she wanted, although she always managed to try their patience. We led a secluded life. I knew that I was considered a weak individual, especially because I had not demanded explanations for my wife’s elopement and had not repudiated her for her actions, but no one dared tell me to my face. Sometimes I tried to find out what had happened, but it always ended with a scene, without any follow-up, except that she would then be overcome by a fit of terrible headaches. Then she became even more taciturn and irritable. The charm and fascination she had formerly exercised over me in the past, had completely dissipated. She had now become a burden to herself and others.

She no longer left her room. There she stayed, in self-imposed captivity, and let herself be waited on. This indolent and aimless life she was leading was finally to take its toll on her health. A cancer gnawed at her and nailed her to the sick bed from which she was never to rise from again. For a full year the disease gnawed away at her. Time passed by so incredibly slowly; the longest year I have ever lived. She stayed in bed until the day of her deliverance. Every day I asked God to deign to touch and soften her heart before calling her back to Him. I hoped so much to be answered and would check on her moods each new day.

When the pain became too much, she would ask for me to come and sit with her and take hold of her hand. “It is such a comfort”, she would say. On one such an occasion she gently caressed my hand and spoke in a low and feeble voice: “John, you have all suffered such a lot for my sake, have you not?” She would then close her eyes and turn around. I could see that even now she had still not made peace with herself yet.

When I saw that her life’s end was nearing, and I could see that the torments overwhelming her were not just from her physical pains, I asked her if she did not wish to abandon herself to me and open up her heart.

“It is so difficult. I wish I could talk to you, but I cannot. I simply cannot. And yet I want to talk to you.”

“Speak frankly, ease your heart and tell me what oppresses your soul. Have no fear, for whatever you may say to me, I will not reproach you for it, I promise you.”

“Do you not understand? In the past, when you took me away from my triumph and transplanted me here, far away from my home, I felt as if I had been uprooted. The further removed I was from my aspirations, the more I felt as if I was withering away. Here it was so suffocating, so narrow, so exasperating, so unbearable... You were always good to me, but we were so different. How foolish I was to let myself get caught in your net, because as soon as I felt caught, everything in me revolted. You could not understand this, for you are so calm, so peaceful, so confident and always so accommodating; but me, I had something wild in my blood. I could not stay tied to one place for too long. I could bear it even less when I was younger. That is why I broke my chains and fled far away to a foreign country.

“It was not difficult to organise the practical side of my life. All I had to do was make a sign and someone would throw himself at my feet and offer me his money. I sold myself. What did I care... as long as the waves of life carried me high into the sky, and the salty foam of drunkenness caressed my face! I loved life with all its joys and sorrows, and, believe me, I experienced both sides. I continued to get drunk on the dark ways of frivolity and recklessness, until one day I came up against a rock that I could not break. I lay there, exhausted, dismayed, broken, annihilated... aimless, hopeless. I lay there, lost. I suffered many wounds. I was deeply unhappy.

“It was then that in the depths of my distress, the desire to see you again rose within me; not a noble and pure feeling, but a desire born of my despair and desolation. I can say that I crawled towards you, you whom I

had left. But how was I to cross the threshold? Understand me, John, if I tell you that it was an incredible humiliation for me to come back, and also understand that it would have been beyond my strength to ask for your forgiveness. I had to suppress any feelings of guilt. It cost me years of struggle, pain and suffering to get to this moment where I can finally talk to you. I fought bravely; although it seems that I behaved like a hard and cold being, without compassion or consideration for anyone.

“Many a time I wanted to throw myself into your arms, but I could not bring myself to do it. Without realising it, I became irritable and petty.

“But you have to know one thing, John, I never gave my heart to anyone. Maybe I did not have anything to give, or maybe... maybe it was because I had stayed here with you”, she added softly. “For strange as it may seem, your image followed me everywhere. It stood in front of me like an ideal that did not yet belong to me, but an ideal which I had to try to achieve. Can you understand me if I tell you that I had to leave you... to find you? That I had to give free rein to all my passions so that I could come back to you and die by your side?”

“Now it is almost the end. The once raging fire has all but died out, but not before it scattered ashes all around; only ashes... in all directions. You, poor John! I have done you so much harm. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Laura, I understand you today more so than ever, and I also understand how wrong I was in asking you to become mine. I only felt the selfish thought of possessing you. I did not try to understand whether or not we were really made for each other, if our love was pure and noble. In this I failed you.”

She lay there for a long time, my hand in hers, and looked at me once again with the charming gaze that had fascinated me so much in the past, and which was gleaming for the last time. She was now a moving and sincere person, and I felt how much this brief hour gave me rich compensation for the worries and sufferings of many years.

She asked me to fetch Maria, but when my sister arrived her strength was already exhausted, she could no longer speak. She only took hold of her hand, and then the torch of life was extinguished.

Chapter 13

The last years of my present earthly life

Regarding the remaining years of life I still had left to me, I can explain myself in a few words. I had chosen to be able to redeem myself from the fault I had taken on during my previous earthly life, and my wish was essentially fulfilled, but as I had no awareness of the past, it often felt as if fate had burdened me too heavily and for no apparent reason.

I could no longer maintain my credit any further. I was ruined and had to leave everything I owned. At first, I found sanctuary at Maria's, and I helped her a little in her business, but when I realised how difficult it was becoming for her, I elected to return to my home village where I had been able to acquire a small farm; although it barely provided me with enough to live on.

However, the sun was still to shine on the last years of my life. My uncle had since died, and as Maria and I were his only heirs, we were both quickly transplanted to completely different living conditions. We did not have to worry financially any more. The purchase of a small estate allowed us to live together once again, pleasantly and without any worries.

Axel, who had by now become a famous painter and had lived abroad for a long time, was now back. He hastened to visit us. He had written to us several times and had expressed his desire to join us. He finally did so and became our guest and friend as before. It was a joy to be together again.

Unfortunately, our joy was but brief. In the fall I caught pneumonia which then took a serious turn. Maria sat by my side and cooled my fever-ridden temples. I felt my end coming and I thanked Maria for all she had ever been to me. The last thing I kept in mind as I died was her faithful gaze.

Chapter 14

My return to the afterlife and my meeting with Gertrude

What a feeling of joy one feels when one is in the other world and looks back upon that life spent on Earth in sorrow and heavy trials, yet knowing that one had nevertheless endeavoured to live and act with dignity! No one who stays there on Earth with a blindfold over his eyes can grasp it. He has no idea of the kingdom of the afterlife, of the land of summer with all its magnificence and all its joys; even less of the kingdom of hell with its horrible tortures.

I woke up and looked around me. Where was I? Where had I been led? I was lying outside in a meadow. All I could see around me were flowers and tall grass. I became aware of birds singing; and the wonderful fragrance of the flowers filled my being. I felt a light breeze gently caress my hair. I breathed so easily, but I was very tired. I closed my eyes and fell into a light slumber.

How long did I lie in this pleasant sleep? I do not know. I had the feeling that I was cured of a serious illness and that my strength would soon return. I felt a deep inner sense of well-being, and such peace of mind. It was so beautiful. I lay there contemplating a beautiful landscape, and whenever I closed my eyes, I felt a pleasant feeling of drowsiness in all my limbs. I felt like I was dreaming in my sleep. However, I felt completely conscious. In fact, I was no longer lying on my bed, sick and feverish. I was no longer in pain. I did not dare to move because I was afraid that this wonderful and indescribable magical scene would disappear. I had never known such a state of well-being.

I then felt a warm hand gently caressing my forehead. I turned my head and saw a luminous figure sitting on the grass behind me, smiling so kindly at me!

“How are you feeling now?” the luminous figure inquired.

“Perfectly well”, I replied, “just a little tired. But who are you?”

“Do you not recognise your good friend Akab anymore?”

“Akab... Akab?” What wonderful memories were awakened in me when I heard this name! “Are you Akab, my old teacher and friend? But where am I, and how did I get here?”

“I went to look for you on Earth where you left your physical body behind, and I put you here in the grass so you could rest for a while. You were sleeping so deeply at times... I sat here and watched over you.”

“Am I dead, tell me?”

“Yes, that is what it is called on Earth, but in reality, you are more alive than ever. Do you not feel how much new life is flowing through you?”

“Yes, it is so pleasant; I feel full of energy!”

“Yes, you have earned it, and you shall have a wonderful time when you are strong enough to follow me. I shall come and get you soon, but first I will leave you under the protection of an old acquaintance who asks to say hello. She lives nearby. Look, here she comes. Farewell, we will see each other again soon.”

I waved my hand in farewell and looked in the direction of the woman who wanted to meet with me. An elegant woman with impeccable features came towards me, with light and silent steps. How beautiful she was! Dark and dreamy brown eyes, silky black hair falling down over her shoulders, a complexion burnished by the sun... she appeared so pleasant and friendly. But where had I seen this face that seemed so familiar?

“Welcome John!” she said as she knelt in the grass beside me. “You look so surprised. Do you not recognise me anymore?”

“Is it really you, Laura? How beautiful you have become!”

“Yes, we do tend to become prettier when we arrive here in the land of summer”, she answered with a teasing smile, and I am pleased you came all the way here. I asked Akab to allow me to receive you in my home. If you would care to lean on me, I think you now have the strength and energy to follow me there.”

We walked slowly back to her house, where she had already prepared a charming little room for me. I spent a period of total recovery with her. For a period of time I had to recover from my earthly life, which had been a painful burden. My greatest joy was to see the remarkable transformation that had taken place in Laura. She was so kind and gentle with me. She did everything she could to please me.

One day we were sitting down like two old friends and talking about

our memories and past experiences, when she added: “Just as you can now look back and review our last earthly life with all its worries and trials, if you wish you can go even further back to the time when you were Wolfgang and I was Gertrude?”

“Wolfgang? Wolfgang?”, I murmured to myself. Strange images pass before my inner eye! “Gertrude! You are waking up bad memories here. Were we like this, you and I?”

“Yes, take a closer look at them now, so that you may recognize them well.”

She placed a kind of mirror in front of me and rubbed its surface several times. Suddenly, as if on a screen, living, animated images of our penultimate earthly life appeared.

“No, take away those ugly images”, I asked. “Why do you now awaken these painful memories when I am feeling so well?”

“To thank you for the transformation we have both undergone”, she says. “It is not to worry you that I want to remind you of the time that has passed. I sat here while I waited for you and read in these ‘pictorial writings’ that Akab lent me the lives we have spent together on Earth; our last life together, and two previous lives where fate and destiny intervened. I hoped to be able to show them to you so that we could interpret them together. I have here another mirror that recreates the images of an even older life.”

She rubbed the mirror, and in the same way as before, living scenes appeared with the warm colours of life. They depicted the time when I was sitting in the chasm of the mountain and watching over Gertrude.

“Can you not understand how painful it is for me to see all this again? I have to confess that I was also that knight, but why remind myself of all this?”

“I used these images so that we could learn from them. I would so much like to review our past experiences with you.”

“Maybe you are right. It will be nice to hear what you think of our curious destiny.”

“Well”, she began, “when I was a simple child of nature, you one day pulled me out of the circle to which I belonged. You took me partly against my will and brought me to your castle. What did I know of the fate that awaited me when Luigi, that valiant knight, offered me all his splendour and encouraged me to jump on the saddle of his brave horse? The adventure excited me, and I willingly accepted the knight’s offer. However, the excitement was not to last, and before too long bitterness awoke in my

heart. You see, I was the child of a free people who recognised no master. Freedom was the breath of life that had animated me since my birth. Freedom was dearer to me than life. When I saw how intently I was being watched, I began to feel like a prisoner in this castle that I had once dreamed of owning. Then hatred arose inside poor Zenia. Yes, I believe that it was the loss of freedom, more than the abuse I was subjected to, that caused the bitterness in my soul that later on was to cost me so much suffering. She has now become a distant memory, and I can, sitting here quietly, turn my back on the past and gladly welcome you to my home. Today I have learnt to value you as my best friend.

“I thank you for your kind words, but please continue with your story. How did you manage to plan your escape?”

“I bribed the guard on the drawbridge with a few jugs of wine, and before anyone had woken up, I was already gone. It was a greyish autumn morning. I was fleeing into the wide world with a few gold coins in my pocket and a small child in my arms. I was poor, and I had to beg to survive. What did it matter to me? I was free and I had my little boy, my little Angelo whom I loved dearly.

“I did not dare to look for my own family, I preferred to join another group of Gypsies. I lived a nomadic life with these children of nature. I danced to earn my bread and that of my child; and when I could no longer dance, I told people’s fortunes, both highs and lows, in the cards. This paid off more. Although I had many marriage proposals, I refused them all. I had no desire to get married. *Free from all ties* was my motto.

“Moreover, in the depths of my soul there was a growing hatred against all men. My whole inner self rebelled when I thought of how much they despised and trampled on women. I had experienced this, and in my old age I could still shudder with anger when these thoughts came back to me.”

“And it was all my fault”, I interrupted. “It is so terrible all that I have on my conscience.”

“My dear friend! You must not think I am telling all you all of this to reproach you! No, my soul is now free of all those ties and of the slightest feeling of revenge. What is more, I have to thank you for what you have done for me recently and I am only showing you these images today to make it more understandable to you.”

“Please continue. Did you feel joy with your son... our son?”

“As long as he was a child, he was the great consolation of my life and

the most precious treasure. He was a ray of sunshine on my thorny road. All my thoughts revolved around him. I wanted him to be happy and have a bright future. But he was a bastard child, torn between the pomp of the halls of knighthood and the rags of the gipsy tents. He did not really belong to either world; moreover, he felt rejected by both, yet at the same time, strangely drawn by both, and that is how he became a dreamer. One day he received a drawing pencil and when he could get a piece of paper, his greatest joy was to draw. He could fall in admiration in front of the branch of a tree or in front of a flower; he would spend hours in full contemplation. He was like neither one of us. His limbs were frail, his hair blonde, and the colour of his skin was pale. He was my pride and joy, but his behaviour aroused dark feelings in me. I feared that one day he would leave me. One fine morning he simply disappeared. He had run away without even saying goodbye. He was about 18 years old. My poor Angelo! He knew that I would have preferred to stab him in the heart rather than let him go.”

“How did you cope with this loss?”

“I was confused. I searched in vain around our camp for him, and even shouted out his name in the thickets of the forest until my voice eventually failed me. Nothing! Not even the faintest murmur. I was downhearted, bewildered... saddened almost to death. A new bitterness was now added to the old one. I closed myself off. I became taciturn and grumpy. The people of my tribe considered me deranged. I let them believe it, but I had my full understanding. I wanted revenge with all my might. Revenge against all men; for they were the root of all the evils of the world.

“Yes, that is how I used to be, and that is how I went to the hereafter, where I led a miserable life for a very long time, and one which seemed never to end. I still remember so well the cold temperature and the heavy, grey atmosphere... the twilight climate, without a ray of sunshine and without an hour of joy. I was intoxicated with thoughts of hatred and revenge towards the two men who had pushed me into these shadows.

“Finally, a good spirit came. He took care of me with dedication and gave me all the care I needed. He melted the ice around my heart, and I soon received, through him, a brighter home. I was now relatively happy because I could forget, and, from time to time, I could also forgive. It was he who brought you here, this faithful and generous Akab who once helped me, as he has often done since then. He enrolled me in a good school where I learned much. I came to realise how little I had evolved, and so I worked tirelessly to acquire knowledge and to strengthen my spiritual forces.”

“Did you see your son again during this period?”

“Yes, be patient a little longer. I will soon reach this stage of my life.”

“Go on, I beg you. Your words touch me so much. I cannot wait to hear what happens next. Did you stay long in the planes of the afterlife before returning to Earth again?”

“I do not know exactly, but according to the earthly assessment, it could have lasted a few centuries. Finally, a homesickness drew me to the Earth again, and I came down with the most beautiful resolutions. I wanted to be good, kind and helpful. Ah! What are resolutions? Bubbles that burst at the first touch. Resolutions must be soaked in the fire of trials; only then do they imprint themselves on us and become one with our being.”

“Do you remember your penultimate earthly life?”

“I was there as Gertrude and had been born into good material conditions. For a long time, as the only child of a rich and powerful burgomaster, I was a spoiled girl, and used to seeing the slightest of my whims fulfilled. I, who in my other lives had experienced poverty, could hardly wait to take advantage of the richness of my new environment.

“Was it an unconscious memory from my previous life that made me want to take full advantage of all the pleasures of money? Or was it a bad seed that had been lying deep inside me for a long time? Without realising it, I was driven to maintain and cultivate this seed. It was growing at an alarming rate. I became pretentious, conceited and arrogant. I tried by all means to satisfy my passion.

“I was looking for someone rich and powerful who could increase my wealth. I found that someone in you, the rich but weak-willed heir; and therefore, someone whom I could easily control. Only one thing bothered me: my inheritance! I had a brother who would gain an equal share in our father’s Will. He was a thorn in my side, and yet, on the other hand, I nurtured an almost maternal tenderness for him. Was it because being older than him, I had to raise him as my own son since our mother had died at birth? Or was it due to unconscious memories that I felt, because Charles-George, as I know now, was my Angelo of the gypsy period. He had followed me into this present earthly life in order to be a help and support to me. How badly I welcomed his love!”

“Was Charles-George our son? How wonderful! I am now beginning to understand!”

“What do you mean?”

“Why I felt so attracted to him... Why I have always felt a certain sense of responsibility towards him... Not only because I unconsciously felt

responsible for the crime committed against him when I sent him to a shipwreck, but because of an even deeper feeling. A feeling of a different kind. Do you know where he went afterwards?"

"Wait, we will join him soon. I cannot get through our life together when dominated by so many ugly passions. I lured you to perdition. We both know this. I also prepared a bitter potion for myself which I had to drink right down to the dregs. You know how low I fell. I finally managed to kill my father in order to steal his money and squander it as I pleased, which I did in unbridled freedom.

"I was for a time, in a foreign country, a famous beauty. I pretended to be the widow of a great and famous merchant.

"But, mistake after mistake, the path eventually led down. You saw for yourself what misery I had fallen into when I arrived here and you first welcomed me."

"Yes, poor Gertrude, what you had to suffer before you arrived here is terrible."

"What was that compared to what I had to endure in that mountain hole, alone with myself? However, those torments of hell were necessary to bend such a stubborn inclination as mine."

"But now you are up here, so good and humble, I said."

"I know. So how do you think I could have fallen so low in the next life? Yes, on this point you may be surprised. It was also a real puzzle for me, but it turns out that resolutions are not foolproof. You have to experience them, there in the dense matter, where you have to start all over again each time. Where inclinations, as many as we have, find a soil to germinate. They grow to such a point that one is obliged to suffer them to the point of disgust, and that, finally, if one wants to progress, one must pull them up with their roots. Then, a healthier and more productive soil is prepared with the help of invisible aids.

"Once again, I headed towards the Earth with good intentions and firm resolutions. Do you remember how much I remained as my former self? The need for freedom and the taste for adventure overwhelmed me so much that I could not become the hard-working and peaceful being that suits the wife of a small farmer with no ambition. My life as an artist in an itinerant theatre company tempted me more. There was something of gypsy life in this profession. It still had such deep roots in me that I felt at home there. That is why I turned down your first marriage proposal. When you followed me and I saw the attraction I had for you, which could possibly

lead me to another adventure, then I decided to follow you, although I had no particular feelings for you at the time.

“I believe that we were brought together by the influence of higher forces. We had to be together again in order to untie the harmful bonds we ourselves had forged through our previous actions.

“I believe also, however, that when I was Gertrude, we would have acted more intelligently by not binding ourselves to each other. We only hurt each other; I with my need to dominate, you with your weakness; both with our harshness to gain. We were not yet mature enough to overcome the obstacles we faced. The higher forces had foreseen, I believe, that you would marry Gerda, and I had to keep within reach of your influence. Then, as with everything else, it could have all turned out differently! Imagine what a wife she would have been for you, as you would have grown up by her side. Never mind! We have both had an experience that was to leave a lasting impression on us; even though it was a hard and painful experience. Yet, everything could have been so different.

“Finally, we come to our last earthly life. We were much better equipped to resolve the conflicts we had with each other this time. Thanks to your patience, your indulgence and your good heart, they were resolved.”

“Why do you think that the higher spirits of the beyond wished for us to be united?”

“I have a very special reason for believing this, because the one you really belong to was born as your sister.”

“Was it Maria?”

“Yes, Maria was Gerda, your good angel who always followed you.”

“Is it not marvellous to see how the threads of destiny act according to the self-active and immutable laws of the Almighty?”

“Yes, you can say that. It seems that there is a law that those who have harmed, injured or hurt one another in any way, will, sooner or later, have to find themselves there, physically, to undo the harmful ties that bind them together. Gerda and I are not the only old acquaintances you have met lately. You were inquiring about Charles-George. He met you as Axel in order to shed some light on your life. Even towards me he showed only kindness, and a kindness that I really did not deserve, but which, in my opinion, helped to soften my heart and break my stubbornness. He is so good. I will surely find the opportunity one day to return all the good he did for me, and to show him all the affection I have for him.

“The one who hardly forgave me was my father whom I robbed and

killed. He too was not very far from us during our last earthly life. He was the uncle.”

“Really! When you came to sit here and talk to me, I had a hunch that it would be about the rigid and inflexible being that the old burgomaster was. The only person to whom he showed any attachment to was Maria, and also Axel, who had of course been his son in a previous life. He could not stand you. Was it the result of unconscious bonds from a previous earthly life then?”

“Why not? I find that very natural.”

“Have you met him since he has been here?”

“I went to meet with him and did my utmost to be friendly, but he recognised me and became even more rigid towards me. However, the time will come when we will have to accept and forgive each other. When Maria is called back here, in the planes of the afterlife, I hope to succeed in winning his heart. She has a certain aversion towards me, which I can easily understand. However, she has a heart of gold and will be able to reconcile easily. I thought that we would then be able to come to the uncle’s aid. He is not very happy. He is still suffering from the memories of the past.”

“These are extremely interesting facts you have brought up about our previous earthly lives. What fills me with admiration is the precision with which the higher forces, as you call them, I wish I could say God, help us on our journey through the various planes of Creation. Thus, we can, if we sincerely wish to, take advantage of the experiences we go through in order to develop ourselves, and to repair the evil we have done to others.

“That we can participate in the evolution of the whole Creation is unspeakable and unimaginable. My only desire is to be able to continue my evolution into the brightest spheres of Creation, where in all worship are the completed and fulfilled spirits who, like us, have come into God’s wonderful Creation to evolve and perfect themselves. Do you still have something to tell me about our past?”

“Only that in our last life we met a former creditor, our coachman Lars. He belonged to the crew with whom the ship Wotan sank. It was indeed an unconscious feeling of guilt that led me to intercede on his behalf, so warmly with you. And by satisfying my desire, you did not have to repent! In the end, he became a more decent man, and he has had a relatively good life since being here.

“Thus, we are allowed to make reparation for the harm we do to our fellow men. All that remains is to conclude now. I have a deep feeling of

admiration for you and I owe you my sincere thanks. In our last earthly life, you accepted me when I came back to you, miserable and destroyed. You could have refused me your door. Had you done so; I would have tried to kill myself. I was powerless, disillusioned, and you were my only hope. My heart was full of hatred, and my mind was out of control. Then I would have ended up here, in a darkness even more sinister than the one Gertrude experienced. But you did not push me away. You took me in and healed my wounds while I was fighting a hard and difficult inner battle, sparked by an overly proud self. I was physically repulsive and cold, but you were always good and patient.

“Finally, my heart softened, so that I could, before taking my leave of life, thank you and ask you for forgiveness. My entry into the world beyond was therefore an ineffable rapture. I still have much to redeem, I understand this, but I now carry within me a firm will to do only good. Do you now understand the extreme importance you have had on my evolution? Without your great understanding, your kindness of heart, your deep desire to help me, I would not be here.”

She grasped my hands and held them tightly and lovingly, while her beautiful eyes filled with tears.

“You too were an aid to my development”, I said. “What would have become of my weak and limp nature if everything had been made easier for me? No, trials and struggles are what strengthen our will, and what strengthens our character.

“I thank you for everything, and especially for this unforgettable hour of reconciliation with the past.”

“Yes, we made ourselves suffer voluntarily, and created bonds with which our passions held us prisoner. However, as we were able to overcome ourselves, and as we were able to free ourselves from these harmful bonds, as compensation for the past, we now find ourselves as faithful friends.”

She shook my hand again, but with such tenderness that I will never forget this precious moment. After a moment of silence, she said to me with an affectionate smile: “We have just relived together an important part of our past. Would you not like to look to the future?”

“Do you also know something about it?”

“I do not know much, but I just want to tell you that Akab promised me a favour.”

“And what does the favour consist of?”

“That I may be your mother in my next earthly life...”

Here I end my story by warmly thanking our Almighty Father for His immense Love and for His wonderful Creation, where we are able, through our mistakes, to find the way to our splendid and luminous homeland.

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