

St IDDA of TOGGENBURG

Translated by: L. W. Targett

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
ST IDDA OF TOGGENBURG.....	1
THE GREAT QUESTION.....	9
LEAVING HOME	20
VISIT TO THE CONVENT	22
THE PILGRIMAGE	25
ENTRY TO THE TOGGENBURG	27
THE WEDDING	30
THE LADY OF THE TOGGENBURG.....	32
STORM CLOUDS ARISE	35
THE ENEMY IS AROUND	39
WHERE IS THE WEDDING RING ?.....	43
THE ENEMY PROBES DEEPER.....	46
LIFE IN SOLITUDE	50
WHAT IS HAPPENING BACK AT TOGGENBURG WITH COUNT HEINRICH?.....	53
THE WATCHFULNESS OF PROVIDENCE	58
FINAL HOME IN THE WORLD.....	66
RECEIVE THE CROWN	70

INTRODUCTION

Toggenburg lies on the eastern side of Switzerland, adjoining the principality of Liechtenstein. Back in the twelfth century, the time of St Idda, this was all part of the Black Forest.

St Idda is listed in the Acta Sanctorum, the official list of saints recognised by the Catholic Church. The first written account of her life was composed by Dean Bonstetten in 1481. The following story is a romanticised version of this and other legends about her. However the main facts of her life are generally accepted as historically true. In 1480 the Brotherhood of St Idda was founded and then in 1724 after vigorous investigation, the Church permitted her solemn veneration as a saint. There is a long history of miracles at her tomb. I was first introduced to the saint by a holy old Swiss lady with whom I was living in 1943 in Wil, Canton St Gallen. She took me to Fischingen to visit the saint's tomb and from there I climbed up to the site of the old Toggenburg castle, nothing of which remains today. I went again just recently, in 1991 and was again impressed by the deep spirit of prayer and peace at her tomb. This, maybe, is what has stimulated the following work of translation.

* * * * *

ST IDDA OF TOGGENBURG

High above the valley, alone on the proud cliffs, defiant and impregnable, stood the old Toggenburg castle. For many hundreds of years fir trees have rustled round it, the first rays of the sun have fallen on its towers and storms have swept over its battlements. Various generations of the noble family have added to it: a watchtower, servants quarters and even a prison, but the old Toggenburg, in spite of the changing generations has remained basically the same. In the valley and on the hills lived people who looked up to the castle with a sort of respectful awe. Many of these were ordinary soldiers who were more at home handling weapons than working as farmers. It would happen from time to time that a gentler Countess would soften somewhat the harshness of the then Count, but people went up to the castle only when forced by need. Silently and with bitter looks the farmers climbed up the mountain to pay their taxes, a sack of corn, a cream cheese, things that had cost them many a drop of sweat. The burden was very heavy since, as subjects of the Count they had to offer him the fruits of their hard work. It made life hard and they complained both aloud and silently. "They have it good up there, they can eat with no worries or cares. They can hunt in their great forest or go out riding on the big feast days just as they wish". The women said, "I wonder what the young Count Heinrich has in mind, perhaps he'll find a Countess for himself". Secretly they looked at him when he rode through the valley on his steed accompanied by his attendants. "A fine man is the Count but proud" they said to one another. "But woe to the man who makes him lose his temper. If only he had not brought back that foreign groom from abroad, No honest woman would want to look him in the eyes". So

judged the Count's subjects, but even the old castle chaplain often bowed his head with concern when he looked at the young Count whom he had helped to bring up. It looked to him as though the Tempter himself rode at his side. Heinrich however laughed at the concern of the old man and comforted him with his youthful cheerfulness. It was a wonderful spring morning; the wind sighed through the fir trees and fondled the towers of the old castle. Far away in the hazy distance was the glitter of rivers and lakes. In the east the sky was shining. Behind the rugged Alpen peaks the sun was already rising. The chapel bell rang out in the morning stillness and the reverend old Chaplain stepped up to the altar. He offered there the ineffable sacrifice which binds heaven to earth. The same mysterious words which the priest still utters today, came from his lips. The first ray of sunshine penetrated the darkness of the castle chapel as the little silver bell announced the arrival of the Count. Heinrich knelt silently in the pew. Was this the same man who daily rode proudly on his horse to the hunt? It seemed like some other kneeling here. Heinrich was no better or worse than most of the knights of his time: warlike, lordly, passionate but yet believing as a child. He lived in his happy twelfth century when saints sprouted like flowers and the faith was not yet shattered. Some attendants also knelt in the chapel, Kunigunde, the castle nurse and three young maids. Kunigunde had come to the Toggenburg as a young woman when Heinrich's mother was Countess. She knew every stone up there, every fir tree, every corner however dark. When the Mass came to an end and the chaplain raised his trembling hand in blessing, the young Count stood up and went outside. He shielded his eyes with his hand and searched the distance for the lake of Constance and the unknown land, Swabia beyond.

A great longing to ride out into the wide world overcame the young man. He had heard of a great noble family, the Count of Kirchberg near Ulm who was powerful and rich. There in that distant land was where he would ride. It might even be true that the Count there had a beautiful daughter. Perhaps she would come to the old Toggenburg, perhaps. Truly Count Heinrich was not poor. Down there at his feet where the forest ended, lay the valley; the hills stretched away into the distance with their fertile slopes, all was his. Out there in the brightness of the morning was the monastery of Fischingen where the pious monks sang their psalms; he was their protector and for far around all called him 'Lord'. So, would a noble young lady not want to come and share all this with him?

Whilst the young count dreamed of riding and roaming and of a young countess the door of the chapel creaked open and the old chaplain came out into the morning light. The sun gleamed on his white head and made him feel well. He laid a hand on Heinrich's shoulder and looked with him over the far distant eastern country, his lips meanwhile whispering, "You forests and hills, praise the Lord, you rivers and seas, praise the Lord, everything that has breath, praise the Lord". Silently he stood there; it seemed to him as though, looking out from here, he saw a reflection of his life: the wide roads of youth, the woods of his maturity and the hard road up to the height. Yes, yes, everything was good now; he would remain up here until he died. The valleys were behind him. Here above, in the wonderful solitude he had peace and he thanked God for every hour. Both of them remained thus for a while, immersed in their thoughts, the young count and the old priest. Heinrich broke the silence, "Father, I want to go on a journey; I cannot sit still up here in this spring weather". "What are you thinking of doing, my son? Do you want to ride abroad again"? A line of worry appeared on his aged forehead with these words. "No father, don't be worried, you see, I want to go right out there over the lake of Constance into Swabia. I want to go to a tournament in Cologne; I've heard of proud castles and rich cities and I'd like to get to know them. Did you know there's a noble near Ulm? I'm going to search for that because, you see Oh you don't

need to know about that yet".

"But my Lord, it's a very long way to Ulm and even further to Cologne". "It's not too far for me" Heinrich replied; indeed what would be too far for a young man searching for a precious treasure? "My Lord, what is it then that you seek, that draws you to the far distance, are you seeking a countess for the Toggenburg"?

"Yes Father, you have guessed my innermost thoughts and yearning, do give me your blessing for my plan. I cannot wait any longer, I must go".

Then the Count knelt down before the old priest; with trembling hand he blessed the young man and his plans - such is life, so it must be.

Generations pass, new ones arise and journey on to eternity. May almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Heinrich got up and stretched his limbs, his strong young arms which yearned to conquer a whole world. "Father, don't be concerned about me, look after yourself and stay well".

"God look after you, my son and grant you the fulfilment of your desires" said the priest softly. His eyes filled as he watched Heinrich stride through the knights hall, and he turned back to his lonely chamber thinking over the past; earthly fortune and glorious youth. He certainly wouldn't want to start his life over again or ride out into the wide unknown world. He sought now only the homeland above, so near yet so far, the eternal homeland.

In the castle everything had sprung to life. The horses stamped impatiently waiting for their riders. Heinrich's black stallion stood there ready and saddled, Gonzala waiting beside it. He is looking forwardly gladly to accompanying his master on their great journey. He has been wanting to get away from the old castle for a long time. He knows that he cannot return to his own country because of things done there in the past.

The door opened and Heinrich appeared in rich shining armour. The drawbridge rumbled down and the riders swung into saddle. They go out through the cool forest to the valley. Above in the Toggenburg all has become silent. Two faithful old eyes follow the riders on their way.

Heinrich rode for several days with his retinue. Through valleys, over hills and along rivers to the blue lake of Constance. They rode through wide plains and dark forests. One evening as the sun gilded the beautiful spring landscape, Heinrich looked down from a hilltop on to the city of Ulm with its gables and towers. It seemed to reach up to the blue sky. Behind it, over the Danube, stood a proud castle. Blinded, Heinrich shaded his eyes with his hand; could that be the castle of Kirchberg? Hope, curiosity and a longing for adventure struggled in his heart. His followers were making rough jokes as they looked down, but the young count only half heard them. He felt drawn to that castle. He didn't want to hear about anything else. His youthfulness, unruly, passionate and wild nature, yet dreamt of a noble woman who would make a home for him and bring peace and serenity into his life. A slight melancholy filled his heart and he longed for someone who would understand him. For the first time he found Gonzala annoying. It seemed to him as though those eagle eyes were boring into him and tearing away the veil that covered his deep thoughts. He stretched himself and dug his spurs into his horse. The sun was already sinking behind the hills of this unfamiliar country. They

must ride quickly to get to the town gate before it was closed for the night. The last half hour was quickly put behind them and Heinrich called in a strong voice to the gate keeper; "Can you tell me the whereabouts of the nearest inn"?

"Not far from this gate, my Lord" said the man deferentially as he squinted up at the young nobleman, "is a hostel for yourself, your horse and men".

"Can you also tell me where the castle of Kirchberg is and how far from here?"

"Lord, it is up there, you can see it there on the hill if you have good eyes. You have only a half an hour to ride and you'll be there".

"Good, we'll go to the hostel" said Heinrich and rode through the gate into the narrow road beyond. Balcony windows opened as they rode by and curious women looked down on the riders. By a well, young women were standing and chatting and as the riders came by, they gazed astounded. The sound of the horses hooves echoed in the narrow streets, then, rising above the confusion of houses, streets and horses, rose the sound of the Angelus bells. The riders came to a halt and folded their hands in prayer as the young women also prayed the Hail Marys, even the mayor in front of his richly decorated house, rose from a bench and bowed his head. It was as though angels of peace were hovering over the town. This was the time when men composed the most beautiful love songs to the holy Virgin. It was the time when men were children in their faith and not ashamed to show it.

The cool May night mellowed into dawn. In the east the sky began to glow. Soon the sunlight will inundate the town, the fields, the forest and the blue river. A jubilant song from the throats of thousands of birds flowed through the air. Up in the castle of Kirchberg maids and serving men began preparing for their daily work. All around the hill lay meadows; the early seed was already showing green shoots; rye, wheat, flax and hemp bending in the morning breeze. Beyond the sown fields stretched the pasture lands. There is enough work for all hands. The Count wants all his people to work and earn their bread in the sweat of their brows. How else would a man live through the winter? Where would the flax and hemp come from to spin and weave? And where would the alms come from for his daughter to distribute to the poor if every trunk and chest were not filled during the summer? He knew this was not the custom in every castle: the work, the sowing, the harvesting, spinning and weaving.

In many places men reached more easily for weapons than for spades. But then, would that please God? Would that bring a blessing on the land? From his castle the Count looked out over his property, glanced at the maids and serving men and a satisfied smile spread over his fatherly face. A window opened above and a joyful greeting came to him. The noble young lady who bent down over the sill was his daughter, Idda von Kirchberg. "Oh Father" she called, "How beautiful God has made the world". "Yes child and its yours to be won, it lies at your feet". The words were scarcely out of his mouth when his daughter came down and embraced her beloved father. Her eyes shone and a smile came to her lips; her forehead was uncreased and an almost supernatural charm seemed to flow from an inner beauty. The good father loved this child like a precious treasure; she was the most beautiful gift left him by his wife when she went to her eternal reward. His sons, yes they were good too and were attached to their father, but the minds of the young men reached out for life before they had even saddled a horse. The daughter is always there, always ready for him, his sunshine in the morning and enlightenment in the long winter evenings. He thanked God for her every day

that she stayed at his side. One day things would change. Idda would perhaps become the lady of another castle, unless indeed her piety led her to the cloister - he didn't know and it seemed to him as though the child had never considered the matter; in her simplicity she had simply surrendered herself to her heavenly Father. Often Idda knelt in the castle chapel sunk in silence. Her favourite pastime was to decorate the holy place, but of her future she spoke not at all.

Father and daughter together looked down on the town their eyes followed a rider who looked at first no more than a tiny speck following the road up to the castle. "Who might that be Father? A messenger bringing us news, will be good or bad?". "Or someone who wants to take my Idda away" her Father said this with a smile but his eyes remained serious. The rider came nearer but no matter how clearly they saw him, they did not recognise him. He was well caparisoned on a good steed. Not, obviously someone looking for alms. Soon the drawbridge rattled down and the gate opened; the rider came towards the Count. Both eyes and mouth of father and daughter were questioning the newcomer - "What brings you here, what is your errand". "My Lord, you must be the Count of Kirchberg. I give you greeting and a message from my Lord the Count of Toggenburg. He has ridden here to Swabia on his way to Ulm and has been staying since yesterday in the inn near the town gate. He sent me to ask you if he may visit you and when it would be convenient". "I have often heard of the great family of Toggenburg, but I have never known personally any member of the family. It will therefore be a great honour for me. Go swiftly and take that message to your lord; but wait, you must have something to eat and drink".

As the father spoke the daughter immediately set about serving the messenger.

Soon horse and rider were on their way down the hill toward the town gate. In the castle arrangements were being made to receive their guest worthily. Below in the guest chamber of the inn, Heinrich paced to and fro waiting impatiently for the messenger to return. At last he heard the jingle and tramp of the horse, He pulled open the door and asked, "What is it, good news?"

"Very good my Lord, you are to come as quickly as possible and stay as guest at the castle".

"Has the Count any sons?"

"I don't know Sir, I only saw a beautiful young woman with him; it must have been his daughter".

Heinrich knew enough, he must go up to the castle, but he must be alone. He wants no-one to accompany him. The others will have things to attend to, he doesn't want them with him. The sun was riding higher and higher in the sky as a rider again charged up the hill. How his bright apparel gleamed as also did his black steed as they climbed. The blue band of the Danube glittered in the valley and the whole world, it seemed was full of sunshine. Heinrich thought that riding had never been so wonderful.

Up there, the castle of his dreams towered into the sky. Is it true that it concealed his future, or was it all an illusion? He didn't know yet whether the young countess was already engaged as was the case with most young noblewomen. Whether her father had committed her from childhood. Surely it couldn't be? A feeling deep in his heart repeated unceasingly that up

there he would find his happiness. Sunk in these thoughts he guided his horse over the drawbridge. The gate stood open and a youth waited in the courtyard for the guest. He helped him from his horse and led it away. Heinrich looked about him: the yard was wide and the castle looked to him to be bigger than his old Toggenburg. His eyes turned to the south where it stood, pine clad, high, alone. He was led into the knights hall. The Count of Kirchberg welcomed him like a son. It seemed that here, all was light, friendliness, sunshine and goodness.

"My Lord, you must be the Count of Kirchberg. You must excuse me for coming to you uninvited. My journey takes me to Ulm and I did not want to miss the opportunity of paying you a visit". "Dear young friend, it is a pleasure to see you here as a guest. I will do everything I can to make your stay here as pleasant as possible. It is a pity that my sons have gone to the Emperor's palace; they would have been pleasant company for you, but my daughter and I will do the best that an old man and a young maiden can".

"An old man, you say sir", answered Heinrich smiling as he looked at the great stature of the count, sturdy and upright before him, "I doubt if I would be a match for you in combat or with the sword even today".

Whilst the two men were talking, Idda came in to greet the guest. A smile appeared on the father's face as he saw his daughter. She was the pride and joy of his heart. She was wearing a festive gown in honour of the guest. Heinrich bowed low before the young noblewoman. He had never seen anyone so beautiful.

"Young friend, my daughter, the Countess Idda" said the father, his voice trembling a little with pride as he spoke.

The eyes of the two young people met and it was as though some secret passed between them. God alone knows - there are moments in life when a beam of light shines out and suddenly illuminates a whole life, it was like that. Time passed quickly at the pleasant meal which followed. Already the sun was slowly sinking in the West. The Count of Kirchberg wants to show his guest round his property. Idda will accompany them on her white horse, The little group rode round the castle hill. Heinrich looked to the south where blue forests and hills stretched to the horizon.

"I came here my Lord" he said, "From wild surroundings where the mountains are proud and steep and the ground does not give its fruit so easily. My castle is old and weatherbeaten. Fierce storms sweep through it's turrets and bend the pine trees this way and that. And yet, it is beautiful in my land".

Idda listened with close attention and then asked, "Have you a chapel in your castle, are there sisters who weave the linen and sew the Mass vestments?"

"Certainly noble lady, I have a chapel, but no devout hands to adorn it since my mother died. But our good old chaplain prays there for the wild youths who ride out away from him. He is certainly thinking of me now and calling down blessings on me.

The Countess Idda rode beside him dreaming of a distant wild castle where there was no gentle lady at the head, no hand to adorn the chapel, no lady to give alms or motherly love, no

one to teach the maids. But an old chaplain is on that rugged mountain and the Saviour lives there, and thinking of this, a seed was sown in her heart.

Her father too looked to the distant south, He had already ridden far through foreign lands and he heard of that distant place and the mountain folk.

"Then your castle will not be far from that holy place in the Black Forest where our dear Lady is so revered".

"Yes Lord, I am not far from that holy place and every year on the feast of the holy Angels I ride to the Black Forest where the great monastery stands".

"You speak of the feast of the holy Angels, Lord Heinrich, tell me, what is this? I have heard pilgrims speak of angels singing in that sacred place but I put it down to pious legend" said the Count of Kirchberg, and his daughter looked at him enquiringly. She had often longed to travel to the dark forest where the great shrine of Our Lady stood. Heinrich glowed with pride for the sacred place, for his home, the mountains and the dark forest. "No my Lord, that is no pious legend as you seem to think, it is the simple truth and if you wish I will tell you about it".

"I'd like nothing better my young friend, and my daughter is interested too" said the father with a glance at the young woman rider at his side.

So the young Toggenburger set himself to tell the story which had been passed down to him by his grandparents. "You will have heard that a holy hermit once lived in the Black Forest, his name was Meinrad. He dedicated his life to God in solitude and served our Blessed Lady: He deeply venerated her image which always stood in the sanctuary of his cell and it was there that Meinrad was murdered. But a great Minster was built over the cell, built by master craftsmen and was due to be consecrated on 14th September in the year 948 by Bishop Konrad who was coming from Constance for the ceremony. Bishop Ulrich of Augsburg and other church dignitaries and nobles had also made their way to the celebrations. The holy Bishop Konrad was praying in the night in the sanctuary of the Abbey church. There were many people there in the small hours, so the miracle which followed was observed by many witnesses. Christ himself appeared surrounded by a host of angels and proceeded to dedicate this holy place to his dear Mother as a throne of grace whilst angels sang a heavenly song. In the morning, crowds of pilgrims arrived to take part in the dedication. Bishop Konrad delayed; finally with great hesitation he began the ceremony. But then, there came a clear voice from heaven heard by everyone present - 'Cease brother, it is consecrated from heaven'".

Both father and daughter listened with devout attention to the wonderful story. "Is it really true that there actually exists such a holy place on this earth"? asked the Count of Kirchberg thoughtfully, "My child we must seek out this place some time, what do you think"?

What did she think? Her eyes shone blissfully; how good is this father of hers. She rode close at his side and looking gratefully into his eyes answered softly and joyfully, "Father, dearest Father... it seemed that in this daughter there was to be found all the goodness of the Count himself, as in a precious shrine. The piety of his ancestors who had once founded a monastery for the monks of St Benedict, the courage that drove one of her to the holy land and a gentle

feminine disposition that the mother had once silently fostered, now possessed by both. The sun was now high in the heavens and Heinrich grew more and more silent. He was increasingly captivated by the young woman who rode at her father's side. She, in her innocent beauty, had no suspicion of this. Nevertheless Idda was experiencing a kind of unrest in her heart; she couldn't tell whether it was happiness or sorrow. It must be both. The dawn of love was beginning to attract her to this proud man. Her father is feeling happy in this evening ride; he points out the meadows and hills, admires the upstanding fields of corn, praises the weather and smiles at his daughter. This year, before the winter storms approach, he will make the pilgrimage with her to the Black Forest, to the shrine of the Mother of God. In this evening hour, he vows it to Our Lady. His sons may ride off to palaces or to their battles, they may fence at prestigious tournaments or hunt in the woods. Such things no longer attract him. His knighthood had long since been dedicated to Mary, the virgin Mother, the supreme Queen of heaven and earth. The sun was sinking behind the blue hills in the distant dusk. An unspeakable peace spread over town and country. A shepherd's flute sounded an evensong; nothing disturbed the peace, the only sound being that of the horses' hooves. Heinrich rode to the town gate. Again and again his eyes turned back to where the castle of Kirchberg towered in the golden evening sunlight. Wasn't that a bright dress that he could see on a balcony, or did he deceive himself? What a lovely world it was to be sure, and tomorrow it would be lovely again.

* * *

THE GREAT QUESTION

The beautiful days passed like a dream, one even more perfect than the other. Heinrich can no longer conceive life without the beautiful, loveable Countess Idda. It did not escape him how she poured out her love on all her father's subjects. Often as she rode through the fields she steered her horse towards the women working there. Why did she have to go to these miserable huts here and there? Why did their shy little children smile as she rode by? Such a lady would be worthy to make her home on the Toggenburg. Heinrich frequently believed his happiness to be assured, but then, when he thought of putting the question to the Count of Kirchberg - please give me your daughter to be my wife, then his courage sank again; but the words would have to be spoken some time since the days of his stay in Ulm were numbered. It became pressing for him to depart. His destination was Cologne. There was to be a great tournament there and the cream of the knights would come together for the fighting and games. The Emperor Barbarossa himself with all his court would be there.

Sunday dawned; from the castle rode the Count and his daughter with the servants following. The stillness of the Lord's day lay over the world and peace reigned far and wide. The bells rang out from the church and all the people made their way there, the gentry on horseback, the townspeople on foot. The Countess Idda wore a white cloak of costly material adorned with the coat of arms of Kirchberg. Her hair hung loose over her shoulders and was held together by a crown of fresh flowers, as was the custom among the ladies. On her breast she wore a precious cross that sparkled in the morning sunlight. The gate of the town stood open. The people weaved in and out like a coloured stream, rich and poor, gentry and commoners, the townspeople too. The Count of Kirchberg and his daughter forced their way through the crowd to the church. They left their horses behind at the town gate. In the carved wooden kneeler showing the Kirchberg coat of arms, they knelt. Very close to them knelt the Count of Toggenburg. Today he will, he must put the great question. He prayed that Our Lady, whose likeness was enthroned before him in the choir, would be with him and would guide the hearts of Idda and her father. He looked at her as she knelt there in her innocent beauty and he was gripped by a resolve to protect her from anything hostile, everything harmful; to swear to be true to her before God and all his saints, To fulfil her every wish if she would be his wife. Idda looked steadily at the altar; a certain gravity which was never there when she was with people, now showed on her face. She was now aware of the presence of God and totally absorbed in him, the obedient, docile child of his grace. Her eyes shone. How lovely it was here, she was lost to the world. The chanting of the choir sounded through the huge church. The smoke of the incense climbed slowly on high - 'as this incense mounts up to you, Lord, so may your mercy descend upon us', so prayed the priest at the altar and with him, the many pious people of the congregation. Countess Idda must pray today for the young Toggenburger, her heart pressed her to it. On him, yes especially on him may the divine mercy come down. He will ride away very soon and she cannot think of this without regret, but God who guides all men and their destinies will bring all to a good end. As this Sunday had begun in bright splendour so now it spread that brightness to the evening. Already the first roses were blooming on the castle hills and Idda smilingly plucked two buds as she rode by. Young people were playing and singing, joking and laughing - it is Sunday.

Heinrich of Toggenburg dressed in a festive robe had come to see her father. It seemed to her that he looked more serious and his brown cheeks paler than usual. Perhaps he has come to

take his leave. Whilst Idda looked out from the castle over the broad landscape she asked herself repeatedly what the Toggenburger wanted with her father and why she was not allowed to be present. Meanwhile, the two men so dear to her were speaking words heavy with destiny.

"My Lord, I come to ask a great favour; if you grant it, you will lay the foundations of my happiness; reject me and I shall ride away to a frustrated and unknown future". So spoke the Toggenburger with a trembling voice.

"Young friend, I can guess your request, does it not concern my daughter Idda"?

"Yes Lord, there you have read my heart and this makes my request easier. Give me your daughter to be my wife. This is the deepest desire of my heart".

Heinrich saw that the Count looked thoughtful and this gave him greater courage and with warmer voice he continued, "I request this jewel of you; she shall be the Lady of the Toggenburg. I will guard and defend her from every evil. I will be true to her and serve her with reverence, so speak the word that will gladden my life".

The father's eyes have filled with tears; he looks through the high window to the golden sunshine. His daughter is laughing there with an old serving woman. Just as she stands there, lovely, caressed by the sunshine, just so had she walked through life at his side until now. He had long feared that the day would come when another man would stand there and ask him for her and now, he was here. It was difficult for him to speak, his weatherbeaten face quivered strangely. As from a long distance the voice of the Toggenburger came to his ears. "Lord, I will lead her into a happy future; she will rule over all the lands around Toggenburg. We have never suffered want in my estate. I have many loyal subjects, large farms belong to me, and the Benedictine Monastery at Fischingen falls within my jurisdiction. One can ride for days through my forests. You see Lord that your daughter will be a rich and esteemed lady at my side".

Slowly and with difficulty the words came finally from Eberhard's lips. "That is all very well but it doesn't constitute happiness. Idda's character needs more than that, I know her".

"Whatever she wants I will give her Lord. She wants love and faithfulness, I love her more than anything in all the world. She wants lifelong faithfulness, I would rather die than be guilty of the slightest unfaithfulness. She is the noblest creature I have ever seen, no other comes even near to her. She outshines all the ladies I have seen in foreign lands and foreign palaces". Heinrich spoke with the exuberance of youth, his eyes glowed, his face shone. Eberhard felt that he was speaking the truth. "But do you know young friend whether Idda returns your love"?

"Do I know that? In the first moment that I saw her my heart gave me the answer and never for a moment have I doubted it, it calls out 'yes'".

"Such is youth, yet many have spoken such or similar words yet their love grows cold and the poor woman is left lonely in her castle. I would die of grief if my daughter suffered such a fate".

"How can you speak so, my Lord"?

"I have in my long life come to know many men, seen many broken marriages, travelled far and wide in military expeditions and battles. I have known many heroes and many cowards and all kinds of men who could have treated their women well yet left their lovely wives forgotten in their castles – “

"Lord Count".

"Be quiet my young friend. I'm not saying that you would do such a thing. But the wheel of life goes round. No matter how brave a man is against outward foes he will yet succumb if he does not strictly curb his own heart. You are going to Cologne for the Tournament? So go and bring me back the victor's trophy. If it truly means so much to you to take Idda home to your castle, then fight bravely so that this token will adorn your youth when you return. But perhaps you will see many beautiful young ladies at the tournament since the Emperor will be there with his entourage".

"My Lord, you hurt me with your last remark; there is only one Idda of Kirchberg and I can love only her. Regarding the other, the victor's trophy, that I hope to bring you".

"You please me with those words Count Heinrich".

"And now I must go and since I cannot yet call my well beloved my own, all my striving and my dearest wish will drive me to win her by knightly bravery. Goodbye Count Eberhard. I will either come back with the victor's trophy or never return again in which case I do not know how I shall pass my life. Without the sun, a man dies, I must have the sun, I cannot live without her",

She was out in the garden, the sun and desire of his life. He saw her lovely face lit by the evening sunshine. She bent over the flowers; busy serving maids were passing by, going to the courtyard and for each she had a word and a smile, yet he would have to wait and wait for the smallest kindly word, he must go and fight for it. Count Eberhard knew well the young man's pain and bliss; he stretched out his hand and said, "You're a brave knight, Count Heinrich, you have land and subjects; may God go with you so that you may win your strength, the treasure you love then she will show you that she is your true treasure. Heinrich grasped his hand, his eyes glowed, every fibre of his suntanned face was taught; again he said, "farewell Count Eberhard, the sun is already sinking over in the west; I want to have the town behind me today and ride North". He leaves; in the courtyard a youth saddles his horse. Countess Idda then approached the two Counts carrying a bunch of flowers none of which could match her beauty, her beaming eyes smiled but there was a question beneath the smile. Heinrich looked enchanted at the young woman, he bowed before her and she, blushing slightly, gave him her hand and, as he enfolded her hand in his it was as though her hand spoke that longed for word, yes.

The gate opened and then closed again. Up on the battlements Idda stood looking down into the valley. The evening sun engulfed the proud rider and horse in its glow. Again he raised his hand in farewell towards the castle, then spurred his horse. The distance grew rapidly until he disappeared from view of the castle. Heinrich came to the river Danube and rode along it, he could see the castle no more.

Idda turned back in the courtyard, a little sadness lurked in those previously clear eyes. Her father stood by the knights hall but she did not wish to speak with him yet. She passed by the well and went to the ladies apartments. Had her father noticed that she had avoided him, she wondered? For the first time in her life she had something to conceal from him, a disappointment, a secret grief.

Count Eberhard still stood by the entrance to the knights hall. He had sent some youths to Diethelm and was awaiting his coming. Servants passed him on their way to the stables and maids fetched water from the well, "Diethelm is true and faithful" mused Eberhard to himself, "and I need him now". At last the tall figure approached him, his candid blue eyes like the cloudless sky. Diethelm was trusted by his lord, he was with him in the war; he had ridden with him in foreign lands making pious pilgrimages. When the leaves in the forest took on their autumn colours he accompanied his Lord on the joyful hunts. Diethelm had accompanied Eberhard's sons on their first attempts at horse riding and even Idda he had taught. What could the Count be wanting of him today that he calls him away from his work?

"Diethelm, I must a talk with you, come inside", Eberhard went with heavy steps into the knights hall. From the walls pictures of his ancestors looked down at him. It was as though they had come to life in the bright evening sunshine and knew the anxiety that weighed upon him.

"Listen Diethelm" said the Count as he lowered himself onto a carved wooden stool, "You must prepare yourself for a journey". Diethelm laughed, a journey was no big problem for him. "I intend to give you a task that only a faithful servant could fulfil; I know that I can count on you".

Diethelm was not laughing now, his blue eyes looked earnest as he said "You can count on me, even if it costs my life Sir". "I believe that Diethelm, so listen. The Count of Toggenburg whom you have seen here wishes to marry my daughter. He has left Ulm today to go to Cologne to the great knights tournament. You, however during this time must go to his country south of the lake of Constance to find out how he stands with his people. You have good eyes and sharp ears. When you stay at inns overnight, enquire from the ordinary people. He'll certainly not be unknown at the world famous monastery of St Gall. He told me that at Fischingen there are monks who recognise him as their overlord; go there; visit the Toggenburg itself, take notice how they receive a stranger, take a good look round and listen to everything, and remember to keep silent as to your errand, nobody should discover the reason for your journey".

"My Lord, I promise to fulfil your wishes to the best of my ability".

"I would think that you could be back here by about St John's day or just a little later". He reached into his leather belt - "there are some silver coins for you, you'll need some money. Take a good horse from the stables and, from the cellar help yourself to meat and wine, but, be silent Diethelm".

"Lord, I'll be silent and I'll bring you the information you want as sure as I live".

"Now may God bless you and guide you in what you have to do. "Yes, my Lord, for the

Countess I would go through fire". "I know your faithfulness Diethelm", and, fatherlike, he laid a hand on the man's shoulder. A final sunbeam shone in the knight's hall and gilded the picture of the noble Countess of Kirchberg so that it seemed she smiled at her husband as she used to when alive. Eberhard put his hand over his eyes; Diethelm took his leave and as the Count opened his eyes again, it was twilight, he was alone.

At supper, both father and daughter were quieter than usual. As Idda lifted the pewter jug to fill her father's beaker she stole a glance at his face. In the light of the oil lamp, as he looked at her, he thought he saw signs of tears; had his usually joyful daughter some trouble that she was hiding from him? "Idda, why so quiet"? She blushed, "Is something wrong"? "Oh father ". "Tell me about it my daughter; is it something to do with the Toggenburger"? "Yes father". "Are you sad because he has gone"? "I don't know". "Do you love him my child"? For a moment there was a deep silence then Idda looked her father straight in the eyes and said slowly, "I love him" her heart seemed to beat loudly as she bent her head. Her father laid his hand on her hair. His voice expressed his deep feelings as he said, "God will make all things right".

The days passed very slowly. Idda often went up on to the battlements and looked far out into the distance; she hardly knew herself anymore, there was a certain sadness in her eyes. For Count Eberhard the days went quickly enough. When the sun sank once more behind the hills his heart became heavy and he could not dismiss the thought that soon his daughter would be leaving him if not with the Toggenburger, then with some other man; "But I'll give her only to the one who proves himself worthy" he said to himself. St John's day is already past and the cornfields are beginning to ripen. Diethelm is not yet back from his journey, and what about the Count of Toggenburg? From him, no news either. One evening a traveller knocked at the gate, a wandering singer who had come from Cologne and had much to tell of the magnificent Tournament. Until almost midnight Eberhard, Idda, the young squires, servants and maids sat under the linden tree in the courtyard and listened to the storyteller. They gazed in wide eyed astonishment as he told them he had actually seen the Emperor himself at the opening of the knights contests, dressed in purple and with a shining crown on his head. The proudest knights of the realm had surrounded him and his ladies even more noble and beautiful were countless in his following. The evening passed like a dream and left in Idda's heart only nagging doubts. Would he come back? Would some other lady capture his heart? Has he forgotten me, surrounded by the most beautiful ladies in the land. Such thoughts arose again and again as the stranger told about the happenings in Cologne.

At last it was harvest time. The Count looked out every evening for Diethelm and finally, one mild summer evening as young and old sat together under the linden tree in the courtyard, singing and joking, the gatekeeper let the drawbridge down with a rattle and Diethelm, tanned and covered with dust was home again. All cried out greetings to him and joked, "We thought you must have entered a monastery or been eaten by a bear". They gathered round him shaking his hand. "Neither the one nor the other; here I am safe and sound" he laughed; "But where is Count Eberhard"? "He has just gone to the manor house with the Countess". Diethelm went through the courtyard past the tree to the house. The Count already stood at the entrance since the joyful welcome in the courtyard had not escaped his ears. His daughter was busy with daily tasks in the rooms. "God be praised that you're back" he cried. "I have been thinking about you with great anxiety".

"You shouldn't have done that my Lord, although the journey was long and arduous, I have

come through it all quite well". "Come in Diethelm refresh yourself with a beaker of wine and tell me all".

"Yes sir, I would certainly like a mouthful of wine, it will be good for my parched throat".

Sitting down, Diethelm lifted the filled beaker to his lips, the day was sultry and his thirst was great after the long ride. "Have you found the land that belongs to the Toggenburger family"? "Yes I found it and visited the castle".

"I am all agog, please go on".

"First of all I went to St Gallen to the famous monastery. From there I thought it won't be all that much further to the Toggenburg estates. I wasn't disappointed. I was well received by the monks. I tell you my Lord, I have never in my life seen such a rich and vast monastery; it compares with Fulda which is known to you. The Abbot is a powerful prince. The cloister servants showed me stables and workshops. I also saw a large school with many young noblemen and I heard them chanting the psalms in the chapel. I asked about the Count of Toggenburg and was told that he often visited there to speak to the Abbot. I gathered from what was said that the Toggenburg family had not always been on friendly terms with the great monastery, but I felt that they were strong and respected and, as enemies were feared; it was clearly a family to be reckoned with.

Anyway, I went on from there and was soon on land that belonged to Count Heinrich. The estate is huge. Fruitful land, prosperous farms and rich villages belong to it. Here and there I put up at taverns and made enquiries from the ordinary people. There I heard many complaint against the Lord Toggenburg, you know what it's like with the idlers, they do no work and complain about the Lord, "Oh, he has it good, he doesn't need to lift a hand, just has a feast every day". He can ride and hunt just as he likes.....and suchlike nonsense".

"And what do the women say about Count Heinrich? I don't normally pay much attention to their chatter, but in matters like this they often understand better than the men". "The wife of the innkeeper defended him whilst her husband was filling his mouth". She said, "If all men were as straight as Count Heinrich nobody would be too badly off".

"Well, that's a good opinion".

"One old woman told me about the Count's mother, how she had been so good and charitable to the poor and she added that up there on the Toggenburg things would be much better if there were a good lady guiding things with a gentle hand. Count Heinrich, she said, was a bit impetuous; a noble lady would bring order into his military discipline, something he lacked at the moment.

Suchlike and other opinions I heard from both rude and more genteel people".

"And did you also get to the monks at Fischingen"?

"Yes sir, I spoke there quite openly to the Abbot and presented myself to him as your retainer".

"You did well; what did he have to say"?

"His opinion was much the same as that of the old woman. He praised the open, pleasant bearing of the Count, his uprightness and his bravery. He found fault with his impetuosity in business matters. He was of the opinion that a good wife would exercise a beneficial influence on the Count".

"And how did you get on at Toggenburg itself"?

"Well, I came riding through the valley on a hot day, then suddenly caught sight of the castle standing defiantly on its mountain, its towers looking far out over the land; there is forest all round it: black clouds suddenly appeared and then thunder pealed out; I urged my horse forward so that I might find shelter before the threatened storm broke. The path went steeply up and then heavy drops began to fall. Alpine crows circled all round me, I began to feel uncomfortable up there. The storm wind was howling through the fir trees and round the castle towers; at last I stood before the drawbridge; it was not yet raised for the night and I was able to reach the door; I hammered loudly on this and the wind seemed to add to my banging. At last I was heard and the gatekeeper opened for me. My horse was taken care of and I entered the servants hall. Young squires, servants and maids gathered round me. They wanted to hear about distant lands and all that I had seen on my journey. These people up on their rock were very lonely, they hardly took any notice of the violent storm that rolled about over our heads, only one old maid made a huge sign of the cross at every flash of lightening. I was well cared for. It seemed that they suffered no shortages on the Toggenburg. They told me that Count Heinrich was away on a long journey; they all spoke of him with respect, but I gathered from what they said that he had a groom in his employ that everybody hated. His name was Gonzala and he was a foreigner, His name struck a discordant note, something you could feel, but then, what significance had a groom? The following day I visited the castle chaplain, a noble priest, pious and friendly. He obviously loved Count Heinrich as a son and indeed looked after him like a father. I noticed here too his wish that the Count might settle down with a wife".

"And what does the castle look like"?

"Sir, it is strong, impregnable, although somewhat smaller than this one. I was taken round the workshops and stalls and all are in good order. In the Knights hall I saw many arms and there were rich carpets from the East hanging on the walls. Expensive pewter vessels were everywhere. Understandably, I was not shown the ladies rooms since I was there as a stranger, a passing traveller. All in all the castle made a good impression on me, one saw at first glance that neither poverty nor shortages were to be found there".

"Diethelm, I thank you for your report; I hope your judgement is correct. You've been far and wide, have seen many castles and knights who presented themselves as rich and powerful but within their own castle walls knew only bitter poverty". "I could swear to you, Sir, that this is not so with the Count of Toggenburg".

Meanwhile night had fallen. The Lady Idda came to her father bringing the oil lamp. Her hand shook slightly as she saw Diethelm standing there. Her father had revealed to her the purpose and reason of Diethelm's journey. He now stood up, bowed and greeted her, "God be with you, good and gracious Lady".

"And with you, Diethelm; so you have returned safely home". "I have seen and experienced many splendid things, but, yes, I am glad to be home again".

"He brings good news my daughter" said the Count, but neither of them noticed how Idda blushed. She filled the beakers again and smiled to herself. "Tomorrow my child, Diethelm will tell you about his many experiences and all the things he saw; for now, it's time for bed".

They rise, Soon all is still at the castle and all the lights extinguished except in the bedroom of the young Countess where the oil lamp still flickers. She has sent her maid Anne to bed, slowly loosened her hair, put off her gown and stands staring through the window into the distance. "Where are you Count Heinrich"? She sighs, "Have you forgotten me here at Ulm": in the moonlight, the Danube glitters like a silver ribbon. The town down there appears to sleep; she however has no desire to sleep; her heart is alert. A soft wind blows around the turrets and she hears the Kirchberg flag fluttering; she bends low over the windowsill and listens to the night. Is it possible that her inner being could hear and feel him for whom her heart was longing? Maybe the heart of that proud knight was also longing for her, maybe he was not far even now from Ulm. Idda knelt to pray and became calmer. She sensed over her, the presence of a Father who guides the destiny of all.

The next day as the Lady Idda was making her morning round of the castle, the gatekeeper gave a loud blast of the horn. She stood still her heart pounding. What could that be? Are guests arriving in the midst of harvest time? Could it mean war? One never knew what was going on in the country. She approached the great drawbridge and the gatekeeper came running breathlessly.

"What's the matter Siegfried? Why are you blowing the horn"? "There's a whole troop of knights coming over the castle hill; I don't know who they are. Where is the Count"? "I'll call him, I'm sure it's nothing bad".

Count Eberhard appeared and approached the gate. Siegfried called to him excitedly, "Come and see my Lord; many knights are approaching, what shall we do? All the servants are in the fields working on the harvest".

"They won't be enemies, old man" Eberhard answered "Let me have a look". They climbed up the watch tower, the two men and the Countess.

"There, look my Lord, there are many of them, horses and riders". The Count shielded his eyes with his hand as the sun blinded him. Idda stood at his side. "Who is it then father" she asked at last. "We shall soon see, they're getting closer now. When they've turned the next bend in the road we shall be able to recognise their coats of arms, the sun is shining so brightly on them".

"What will it be? Alarm or joy, friends or foe"?

"Quiet my child, I can't think who would want to attack me on such a bright and sunny day".

The three of them strained their eyes, then suddenly Siegfried cries out, "My Lord, I am sure they are your own sons; see, see, your own coat of arms on the first rider".

"You could be right Siegfried".

"Look father, the second rider is carrying a different coat of arms" said Idda. "My God, as sure as I live its the Toggenburger's; quick Siegfried lower the bridge, open the gate".

Idda was crimson with joy, she descended the narrow staircase as quickly as she could. Already the servants are arriving, having left their work in the fields at the sound of the horn. Excitement filled every heart. Idda hurried to her room and called Anne who appeared questioningly round the door.

"Quickly Anne, give me a festal gown out of the wardrobe, that one with the embroidered border, yes, that one. Help me quickly; that's right, fasten the silver brooch more firmly at the shoulder and put a flower in my hair".

Anne's nimble hands quickly adorned her mistress; everything was happening so quickly that she scarcely had time to ask what it was all about. At last she held the silver mirror before her mistress's face; Idda laughed and said "I've come upon you like a whirlwind haven't I? Anne, do you know my brothers are coming home with someone else, a visitor, soon they'll be at the gate, now I must go". She gracefully tucked up her long festal robe and skipped out of the room like a happy child. Anne looked after her, "She's beautiful, the Countess, young and excited, but so affectionate and kind". Soon she sees her gliding across the courtyard accompanied by two pages. The gate is opened; hornblasts and cheers come to her ears then she hears the horses neighing. The first knight arrives and springs from his horse; it is Friedrich the heir to Kirchberg, he greets his father and embraces his lovely sister; there is rejoicing, cries and the tramping of heavy footsteps. The others are now arriving, servants and squires. Finally in comes Heinrich of Toggenburg and is also warmly greeted by Count Eberhard and his daughter. The young Count bows deeply before Idda as another knight approaches, it is the younger brother, Count Otto. In the excitement of seeing his beautiful sister again he embraces her impetuously. Now began a great to-ing and fro-ing in kitchen and cellar. The riders handed their horses to the grooms; Count Eberhard then guided them all into the Knights Hall, he was beaming with joy. He looked proudly at the strength and knightly bearing of his sons and then with affection on the beauty of his daughter. Next to her stood Heinrich, a more fitting pair it would be difficult to imagine. He, manly, strong, suntanned and healthy, crowned with the victor's laurel from the tournament; she modest and noble, lively yet demure with a face that mirrored every movement of her heart. The Count can hardly tear his gaze away from her - she is going to be the Toggenburger's wife; in this moment he realises it.

They stood around in groups in the Knight's Hall, the young Counts of Kirchberg excitedly telling all their adventures; they had met Heinrich in Cologne in the great tournament and made friends. Whilst the maids serve and the servants refill the beakers the polite pages hand the wine to the knights. They joked and mixed together and toasted Heinrich as victor. Idda was here, there and everywhere. Now she is hanging on her father's arm and laughing at her brothers, now she stands next to Heinrich to hear more of his experiences in the wide world outside, about the Emperor's court and the great festivities. After all the storm of the first greetings had abated, Idda beckoned to the pages to guide the guests to the table. She did not notice at that moment that Heinrich was talking to her father alone; she didn't hear him say: "Today I have no further objections to your wish, we must ask her what her heart says".

"Dear Count, I thank you" said Heinrich delightedly. Just then, Idda was fixing them with shining eyes and red cheeks. Her father stopped her. "My child, a solemn moment for you has arrived" he said to her, "This, our friend has asked for your hand and wishes to take you to Toggenburg as his Lady Countess. Search your heart, ask God for guidance as to whether you can answer with acceptance".

Idda paled, she had been waiting for this moment earnestly and, with shining eyes, she answered her father: "My father, I believe it is God's will that I should go to Toggenburg if it is also your will dear father. I have been praying long for guidance and have seen this moment coming". She then turned to Count Heinrich and spoke the fateful words "You desire me for your wife, I will follow you, I will be subject to you and true. I hope for your protection far from my dear father and brothers, far from the home of my youth to live by your side.

"My father, please bless us" said Idda as she grasped the hand of the young Count. Emotion and pain mirrored themselves in the noble face of Count Eberhard as he blessed his children. Such is life, along with great happiness comes sorrow until that hour when joy and sorrow dissolve in perfect well being in God. It has to be so: a brave knight who has already defeated strong enemies, also knows his own violent impetuosity, the strongest enemy of all that has to be mastered in his own heart. The young couple at the father's side accepted good wishes of all.

What now has to be discussed until well into the evening is the future of the Lady Idda. The preparations for the long journey, the date of the wedding, the dowry. And her father has yet another surprise for his beloved child. In order to make the parting easier for both of them, he will go with her and take her to Our Lady's shrine in the Black Forest.

The evening star was shining in the sky and on the western horizon the hills stood out sharply in dark outline. Idda led Heinrich out into the evening. Mysterious and dark like the valleys which stretched out into the distance in the gloom below them, so lay her life before her, softly hidden all the days of the future by the hand of the good God. If only you know, dear young lady, what bitter sufferings were hidden there.

In the quietness of her room, Idda knelt down. In her imagination the doings of the day flowed by again. Now in the silence of the evening, when no human sound came to her ears, her heart rehearsed loudly the day's events. In the joy of the day there was also a mixture of anxiety and the pain of parting. Softly flickered the flame of the oil lamp and, in front of the crucifix, the roses of the day gave off their perfume. The Saviour on the cross looked down on his child for whom he had a special glance of love, and whom he will one day call to a special vocation when she has been strengthened by suffering and trials and stripped of earthly affairs. "Idda rejoice, but today I shall mix a bitter drop in the cup of rejoicing so that you will seek the deepest joy in me. I am a jealous God. I call you by your name. From all eternity I have chosen you. Take up your cross and follow me".

"Do you my Lord and God show me the way. I lay my destiny in your hands. In all the joys of life it is you I will rejoice in and I will thank you in every sorrow. You are my Father and you will guide me. I will be your child and your maid servant in the service of your poor whilst men call me Lady".

The oil lamp is now extinguished; Idda still kneels before the cross. She has so much to say to the Lord for His love is sweeter than any earthly love and in this she places all others that He might sanctify it and penetrate it with His purity. Morning comes again. In the early hours a horse carries its rider out of the town. It is Heinrich's messenger riding homewards to the south to bring the joyful news to Toggenburg - soon there is to be a Countess of Toggenburg - prepare yourselves for this splendid feast.

* * *

LEAVING HOME

Have the walls ears? or does the wind whisper round the turrets of the Castle of Kirchberg? One of the maids asks the others, "Have you heard that our Countess is going to marry the Count of Toggenburg"? Another says, "Then our young mistress will leave us forever, better that I should go with her". And it was not long before those down in the huts and farms also knew that the Lady Idda was to go with a foreign Count. So the news went all around and many an eye filled with tears. It's always true that only when one is about to lose a person that their true worth is realised. Her father, Count Eberhard, felt that more keenly than anyone. Although he smiled, his heart was bleeding. But he was always strengthened by the thought that he would find comfort at the Shrine of Our Lady in the Black Forest. Who else can comfort when one is so desolate? Certainly no one on earth. But the great Mother who is both his and his dear daughter's Mother, would have a remedy for a wounded heart. The child is so happy who would begrudge her happiness? In any case, is it not an honour for the whole family when an eminent member of a powerful noble family seeks Idda's hand in marriage?

The days fly by, Idda has more than enough to do. With her maids she aired the white linen, filled clothes chests with all sorts of precious things, with treasured articles of her youth and with keepsakes of her mother. All these things must make the long journey with her. So many things she couldn't bear to do without.

Will it always be so Lady Idda? If only you knew that a time is coming when you will have to abandon them all.

Heinrich has ridden off once again with his retainers out of Kirchberg to the North. In a couple of weeks he will turn homewards, but not alone, rather with a bride and a rich bridal train.

The sun has reached its highest point in the heavens. Harvest time is already over. Sheaf upon sheaf has been stored in the barns. It has been a good summer. One early morning before the sun had risen, a remarkable train snaked down the castle hill towards the Danube, knights and luggage horses and, in the midst of all, Count Eberhard and his daughter and the proud Toggenburger. One must start early when the journey is so long. The Lady turned again and again waving greetings to the maids up in the castle who stand and wave kerchiefs. The faithful Anne is in the train with her mistress. She will continue to serve as personal maid. How the morning dew glittered. A soft breeze fanned the burning eyes of the lovely young woman. Leaving her home was painful. She wondered whether the young man at her side was worth so many tears. It almost seems to her that he looks sadder than usual; can he who knows all about knightly chivalry and honour, and who should protect the poor and the weak also know that a heart flutters when it has to part from people who are dear to one? Part from the rooms of childhood, the gardens of youth and from ones dear fathers home? But just as these gloomy thoughts had come into Idda's mind, so she drives them out again as she thinks of the love that God has given her for this man and looks up at him as he rides so boldly through the valley at her side.

As they go further and further and her father's castle greets from afar the departing travellers

and they see new villages appear, other unknown men looking up astonished from their work, the smile came back to Idda's face, even if a slight trace of sorrow is not totally gone. Her father knows the territory and has something to tell about each village and he shows Count Heinrich the great forests in which there was plenty to hunt and Heinrich proudly told of his own forests. About mid-day they make a halt by a clear brook under shady oak trees. They have come a good distance and the servants make camp for the two Counts. Anne serves her mistress and the two men as well and soon everyone is happy with drink and good food. If only the weather stays like this says Count Eberhard then we'll have a goodly stretch of our journey behind us.

"Father look, there in the south clouds are coming up" says Idda pointing into the blue distance. Heinrich joked "Whenever a bride is on a journey, the heavens laugh". Further and further they go, they will have to stay overnight in strange inns, often without any comfort. At last the Alps emerge more and more clearly on the southern horizon. In Zurich they make their last stop; about evening they draw near to the town. Many townspeople stand astonished looking wonderingly at the stately travellers. One of them nudged another and said "By God it's the Toggenburger, is a bride being brought there"? The other answered "And what a one, look, she looks like an angel". At the Mayor's they dismounted.

* * *

VISIT TO THE CONVENT

Late that evening, the Lady Idda, accompanied by her maid, knocked at the door of the Convent of Notre Dame. In such convents ladies were always made welcome. The old portress Sister looked astonished into the glowing face of the distinguished young lady - her request is that she might speak with the reverent Abbess. Quickly the old nun limps away. "We're getting a wonderful novice here" she says to herself.

Idda waits in the tiny convent waiting room. Almost freezing she looks at the bare walls, the only thing that arrests her attention is the crucifix. The little chamber was narrow and gloomy, she longs for light and sunshine, great halls and a flower bedecked bedroom.

Just then she heard footsteps coming along the cloister; the old nun is here again. "The young lady can come now to Lady Abbess" she said submissively and clanked her bunch of keys. "The maid can wait here". The young Countess followed the portress through corridors and gloomy stairs until she stood still in front of a door and whispered to Idda "The gracious Lady Abbess will be pleased to receive such a distinguished lady into the ranks of her daughters." Idda smiled and a blush passed over her face, but the sister didn't see it in the darkness of the ante-room and hurriedly knocked on the door. The door opened quickly and Idda stood in the presence of an old motherly nun whose kindly smile quickly captivated her. She knelt down before the Lady Abbess to kiss her hand and said quietly "Great lady, I come from a very long journey from your own distant homeland. My name is Idda of Kirchberg. I have very often, dear lady, heard my mother speak of you and so I could not omit to pay my respects as I pass this way". A tear gleaned in the eye of the Abbess, she opened her arms wide to embrace the child of her own homeland, the daughter of an old friend. "Idda, my child, dear child, is it true that that is who you are"? she said with joy in her voice over and over again. "Yes yes it must be so you look exactly like your mother, and the voice too, it sounds like music out of my youth, and this fair face this is how the Countess of Kirchberg looked the last time I saw her". The venerable Lady Abbess seemed to have become youthful and animated. "But child, what brings you here so far from your home? What are you looking for? Is it perhaps the peace of a cell in the cloisters"? Once again, the blush came to Idda's face as she said, "No Reverend Mother, God has called me otherwise; I am the bride of the Count of Toggenburg and on my way there. My father and his train, and my bridegroom have sought lodgings in the town. If it is no inconvenience to you, Reverend Lady, I would like to ask shelter for the night for myself and my maid".

"So, the Countess of Toggenburg stands before me, God bless you my daughter. If I have fleetingly entertained the wish that I would number you among my spiritual daughters, yet nevertheless will I rejoice with all my heart on your destiny and by God to bless your future. I just thought that your modesty and unassuming ways, your whole character pointed to the peace and quiet of the cloister. Many young people have passed before me and my eyes seem to have become sharp enough to penetrate to the soul and read their secrets. But with you I have proved disappointingly wrong. But God's ways are wonderful and he calls his own and chooses them out of every state and every age".

The last words had the ring of prophesy. "Reverend Mother your words move me so deeply. What I had already thought you have now spoken out, but I am so certain of my way; I know

that I must be with the Count of Toggenburg as his wife, God wills it. But I am also certain that God is calling me to something great, something I know nothing about as yet. Bless me Reverend Lady and grant me a share of your motherly love just as though I were a daughter of yours".

"May God's Angel guide you dear daughter on all life's ways and protect you in every danger" said the Abbess with tears in her eyes. "I don't know why my heart has been so moved since you came in. I believe that God will guide you a quite special way. Follow him truly, just as a small child follows its mother, then your peace will never leave you".

Idda's face is bathed in the faint evening light. Her eyes shone with innocence and emotion; she had clasped her hands and listened with heartfelt attention. Never, she thought, had anyone seen so clearly into her heart as this reverend woman. Nobody had ever uncovered that deep secret that even she could not name. It was the secret of the king, the eternal king. People think her fortunate because she is the bride of the powerful Toggenburger. She, however, is happy, unspeakably happy because she knows that her life and whole being belong to the eternal king, Christ.

People think that when one has a man, a rich and handsome man, then the heart is satisfied, but Idda knows more. Who is it that told her? Was it the eternal king himself? Perhaps then, when she knelt alone in her room before the cross. Perhaps then, when he united himself completely to her in Holy Communion. Perhaps even earlier in the first awakening of her childish heart. The secret of the king; suddenly it was known by her. Just like a small obedient child obeys its mother, said the noble lady, like that must she follow him. She will never forget this word; the Abbess herself knows what that is, thought Idda.

"But child," Abbess breaks into the short silence and rises from her seat, "here I am making you wait whilst you, after your long journey, are longing for some peace and a quiet room".

She rings a bell and a nun appears. "Sister Martha", ordered the Reverend Mother, "Accompany this young lady to the best guest room and prepare another room for her maid". Idda knelt to kiss the Abbess' ring who embraced the humble daughter of her homeland and accompanied her out into the dark corridor. As she said goodnight, she also made a request. "Reverend Mother, would you permit me to come to your chapel when the sisters gather there for night prayer"? "If you are not too tired after your journey, then just follow the desire of your heart my daughter".

Any whilst the Abbess went her way through the passages she spoke half aloud to herself "A worldly bride with such a disposition is a rare and precious thing".

The cloister bell has rung. From here and there, from cells, work and recreation rooms, the sisters glide soundlessly to the chapel. They cross their hands over their breast and bow their heads as custom and order demand. The Reverend Abbess goes ahead of them, giving them the example. The great silence has begun. At the back of the church Idda kneels with her faithful Anne. She has laid aside her travelling cloak and her head covering and her hair falls over her shoulders; Also, her richly woven over garment has been set aside. In her hands she holds her Psalter, her constant companion ever since, as a young girl, she had learnt the art of reading from the Castle Chaplain. The costly thing was studded with precious stones; it had probably been written long ago in a monastery cell.

The choir begins night prayer; solemnly it rises through the dark of the church. Deep peace fills Idda's soul, a peace which, in truth, is tranquillity. She is like a child in her father's arms, a mighty and benevolent father who would never desert his children. The nuns pray the Magnificat and Idda sings along with them, even though she doesn't open her lips. At the words "The lord has done great things" her soul is wide open to receive grace. Then all is quiet in the church - may the Lord grant us a quiet night and a happy end.

* * *

THE PILGRIMAGE

In the morning, the Countess from Kirchberg and her maid leave the peace of the cloister. Heinrich was waiting impatiently for her and Count Eberhard saw with inner disquiet the wrinkles of anger in his forehead. The horses are already saddled and the train waited for the order to leave. The two young women come just in time. Idda greets her loving father and her dear bridegroom with such a sincere demonstration of love and affection that all becomes good humour and tranquillity once again.

They start off on the last stage of their journey; the noble company rides out of town. For a little distance more, Heinrich accompanies his bride but then their ways part. He must take his leave and ride off homewards with his squires to the Toggenburg to prepare a worthy place for its new Lady.

"God protect you, my Father. May your angels guide and accompany you and my dearest bride on your journey to the Mother of Mercy and then on to Toggenburg". These were the Count's last words as he kissed the father's hand and embraced his beloved bride. The Father said "Why should it go otherwise than well for us on the remainder of our journey? Hasn't God wonderfully protected us thus far? He will surely continue to do so to the end; you must know the old Pilgrim's proverb:

The sky is my hat
The earth my shoe
The cross is my sword
Jesus, my companion.

And now, God protect you - Auf Wiedersehen.

There was a flutter of a kerchief, a wave of a hand then the forest swallowed up the company of the Count of Kirchberg. It is a tiring journey through forest thickets and rough tracks. It is a blessing that Heinrich sent a pathfinder with them. The land is so hilly, up and down all the time. In the afternoon they ride through a pine wood.

"Father, surely we'll be in the Black Forest soon" said Idda.

"Yes" said her father, "I feel sure we must be very close to our journey's end".

Not long after, coming down from the wooded summit of a hill the gloom of the forest lightened and, wafted on the warm summer breeze, they heard singing and the sound of bells.

"They are the bells of Our Lady of the Black Forest" called Idda excitedly, "Father, Oh my Father we are truly at the holy place".

"God and Our Lady be praised" said Count Eberhard with moist eyes. And just as the pilgrims, when they come within sight of the holy city of Jerusalem, so they too all dismount and kneel down devoutly to greet the Queen of Heaven. They then rode on and soon came to the forest's end. Suddenly there below them surrounded by meadows and woods lay the

magnificent buildings of the monastery of Maria Einsiedeln and leaning against its walls like chicks around the hen, many huts and guesthouses. The bells for Vespers were still ringing as the mounted company approached the monastery. In those days the hospitality of the monastery was taken for granted, especially by the nobility. So it goes without saying that Count Eberhard and his people dismounted by the porch. The Brother porter opened the door and gazed in surprise at the Count and his daughter; he quickly perceived what they needed and hurried away. Soon they were guided into the courtyard. The horses were taken to the stables, the Count, his daughter and retainers to the guesthouse.

Later, the guests were introduced to Father Abbot Wernher, a relation of the Count of Toggenburg and made welcome by him. Idda was drawn to the sanctuary of the Queen of Heaven. In the soft twilight she saw the chapel of grace, the original cell of Meinrad; candles were burning and giving a soft radiance around the picture of Maria.

In the great Minster that arched overhead it was already dark. Here is a bit of heavenly homeland, the Mother is here and with the Mother one is surely at home?

The Count of Kirchberg and his daughter kneel a long time in the sanctuary. The tiredness of the long journey all forgotten. The exalted Lady rewards every sacrifice with sweet heavenly consolation. She sees into the father's heart wounded by his child's decision. Slowly, tenderly she touches his wound with healing balsam "My son, this child whom you must soon leave will one day be your crown of nobility in eternity. I shall comfort you whenever you call to me. I will carry your sacrifice to my Son, I know it will please him".

"Mother, oh my Mother, before you I am a child, white as my hair may be and old my body. Mother, exalted Lady I would like to dedicate to you a great act of chivalry. I have given my daughter in submission to the will of God; I wish to give also myself to you and your Son. I promise you my Mother, here in this sanctuary before your throne of grace in the presence of the holy Trinity and the angels, to commit my whole life to your service: I will go to the Holy Land if the Emperor Barbarossa leads a crusade there. Mother, bless my plan, my strength, my sword". Tears stream from his eyes, tears of deepest emotion. Heavenly joy and peace fill his heart as never before. His prayer was like the stammer of a child - the Mother understands it of course; she is so good, so endlessly good. Idda too feels the nearness of the heavenly Mother. She is just a small child before her. By her hand she is led to Jesus and a great joy fills her heart - the certainty that she is loved in heaven.

The monks now in choir, now sing Compline. As though from a great distance, slowly in festive mood the tones flow through the great church. Where is the world now? Far far behind in splendid castles. Here in this holy place they came to a halt. Here the Queen of heaven kept watch - Salve sancta parens (Hail holy parent).

At last the Count finished his long prayer; he arose and touched his daughter gently to lead her out into the starry night. Idda took hold of her precious necklace, "Father, may I give this to the holy Mother"? she asked softly.

"Child give her what you will" he said, and she laid the gift at the feet of the holy image of the Mother of Grace. There would come a time when she would give even more, all her earthly belongings yes, and even herself.

* * *

ENTRY TO THE TOGGENBURG

Around the entrance there were many farms and mills. At a place where a footpath branched off and climbed upwards to the Toggenburg, a mill wheel clattered. Kathri, the miller's wife was working outside the house. She heard the trample of horses and the sound of many voices. Who can that be now? She goes quickly round the house and shades her eyes with her hand as the sun is so bright - and then she sees. All the way along the road comes a grand festive train. "It must be a visit for the Count" she thinks and calls in to the mill, "Come out quickly, old one, come and see". The miller came out and both stand and stare. "It'll be a grand visit for the Count" said Kathri, "How I'd like to be there when they sit down to eat. They always have good things, guests, parties, more than enough".

The train approaches; the miller nudges his wife "Look there a lovely young woman in the middle of knights. Could it be the bride of the Count? and look there the rider next to her that looks like her father. Kathri just look at those fine horses and the retainers". His wife stood there dazzled "Yes, and the trunks and sacks they are carrying, Oh they're rich people, they've got more treasures in one of those boxes than I've ever seen in my life".

"Come on Kathri, let's go in" said the miller and tugged at her sleeve. "No no, I'm staying here, I want to see everything". The first horse draws near with its proud squire. He lifts a horn to his mouth and blows three blasts that echo back from the rocks and the raven inhabited woods.

It is not long before the answering call comes back from the Toggenburg, three long drawn out blasts from the heights. And now they are trotting past Kathri, the squires, attendants, the gleaming knights and then, on a white horse, the noble young woman. Not one, so far, had cast a glance at Kathri but she is used to that being a poor woman; but, is it possible? Before this can go through her mind the beautiful young woman nods to her, smiles and stretches out her hand offering her something. Kathri hardly dares to take the gift but everything happens so quickly and the young lady smiles in such friendly fashion as though she already knew Kathri. She goes into her home as in a dream and only then opens her hand, "A silver piece, Old one, come and look she has given me a silver piece" she laughs but also has to wipe the tears from her eyes. "Who was it then" asks the miller, "Oh you blockhead, the young lady on the white horse; if you had stayed outside you would have got something too - oh the angel". "Well Kathri if that's the Count's bride then we'll be well off. She obviously knows that the poor have hearts too".

Long before the bridal procession had reached the summit, word had gone from mouth to mouth in the valley "The Count's bride has arrived. She's beautiful and rich and has a good heart. The miller's wife Kathri got a silver piece from her" and so went the tale from one to another.

It was very tiring going up over the rough stony path but Idda was not put off, "Father how beautiful it must be up there" she called enchanted to her father, then pointed down into the valley, "Look Father how tiny the huts look down there, they look like the ones I played with as a child".

The castle is festively adorned. The gates stand wide open. The eastern drawbridge is lowered. High on the watchtower flutters the banner of the Toggenburgers. Count Heinrich and his followers were awaiting the bridal train in front of the inner gates of the courtyard; the old chaplain with joy and expectancy. And now the horn sounds again, nearer and nearer it comes; then one could hear horses neighing and the voices of men; the maids are whispering to each other, the squires stand to attention. The foreign servant Gonzala keeps to the rear behind the others. Count Heinrich strains his ears trying to distinguish the voice of his beloved bride. Had he been able, he would have heard the words, "Father, I shall sit up here on the throne of a king". Now surely she is there, the last bend in the path still hides her from him. His heart beats faster; proudly he sits up straight, here they come. The herald, the squires and knights and in the midst of these, the bride with her father. There was waving and cries of joy. The leaders dismount from their horses, hasty squires are there to help them. The bride however is welcomed by Count Heinrich himself; carefully he assists her in dismounting. All eyes are turned to her; they had feared that she might be proud and haughty but seeing her, all fear vanishes as she stands there on the arm of the Count smiling and greeting everyone with friendliness, all hearts open to her. The good Chaplain now steps up to her, blesses her and says: "May the Lord bless your coming and his angel enter with you". Thankfully the bride bows to the old man and takes his hand. Loud and clear for all to hear she says, "I thank you reverend Father for your blessing, may it strengthen me to be a faithful wife to my dear husband, an obedient daughter to you, Father, and a gentle Lady and good mother to all here". With such sentiments in her heart the young noble Lady wanders under flower bedecked gate arches into her new home. She compliments the busy hands of the maids who had contrived all these decorations. She smiles with childlike gratitude for every mark of attention. Count Heinrich guides his bride into the knights hall to the festive beladen table; on the Toggenburg also one knows how to feast.

Evening falls and the noise of the day subsides. Already the sun is sinking behind the mountains of her new home. Idda stand next to her bridegroom on the battlements of the Toggenburg - is it possible that she is here? - Is it reality that she has entered here as bride and mistress? It is no dream for beside her stands the one whom she loves more than all the world, for whose sake she has left father, brothers and home. It is indeed no dream, she feels his warm hand, she hears his voice "Idda, at last you are here and will be my wife".

"Heinrich, how happy I am you will be content with me: I will serve you, I shall always faithfully take care of you. No-one will ever take me from your side".

"I believe you my wife, my mistress, and I will protect you from all evil and from anyone who would harm you. See the heavens above will be witness to our promises". And now the stars, great and small appear above, a gentle breeze moves the fir trees and makes them rustle. On the far horizon the mountains stand in dark outline, a shy night bird utters its cry. Far below lies the valley; here and there appears a light in one of the huts. "Heinrich, how lovely indeed is your home" says Idda softly "I had never imagined it like this". Proudly Heinrich stood, head held high, "Yes, its beautiful here in our mountains even though we are rustic and more awkward than you people in the plains. You see the villages down there? My subjects live there; they don't smile so easily, they're made of hard wood, but perhaps now you've come my Lady, they might learn how to smile" - These last words he uttered with a slight bow. She blushed and asked in reply, "Heinrich, may I teach them how to smile, will you let me go to them in their huts? Oh yes, Heinrich, let me search out the sick and make the children and the poor happy. My dearest, please don't deny me this request". Idda looked him

in the face with beseeching eyes and her inner being reached out delicately to discern whether these words would be received well or ill. He was silent so Idda kissed his hand in childlike simplicity and asked again, "Heinrich that would be the most precious wedding gift you could give me". "But child", he replied, "You could send the maids with alms. You, the Mistress should not demean yourself, and just think, these horrible sick people". Idda's eyes moistened, her tender heart overflowed; "Heinrich, indulge me in this; I see no horrible sick people, I see our Saviour in them" and gently she pressed close to him. How could he refuse her? Basically he is good too even though hardened by many false judgements. Softly, as she had seldom heard him speak he said, "Child, go then to your sick and poor, but do take care that you keep healthy for me because you are my precious possession". They both fell silent, the blessed silence of love. They wandered along the battlements to and fro until the evening breeze became cool. Many a young pair have stood on this pavement on the eve of their nuptials: Toggenburgers of the past who have long since gone over to the eternal castle of life.

* * *

THE WEDDING

Everyone is busy on the Toggenburg, cleaning, tidying, decorating, adorning. All the great rooms are opened up and aired and the beds made up with snow white bed linen. Flowers had been brought up from the farms in the valley and from the mountain slopes. Tents were put up in the castle courtyard since the castle could not accommodate all the guests who were arriving every hour: Princes, both ecclesiastical and secular, knights, members of the nobility with their wives. Near the gate, tables and benches were erected for the ordinary folk. Below in the valley, news was passed from mouth to mouth that on the third of August the wedding would take place of the Count Heinrich of Toggenburg and the Countess Idda of Kirchberg and that all and sundry were invited to come on the second day of the feast. At this, many an old man took his own wedding clothes out of the chest and his wife her wedding dress to see whether they would still fit. Girls and boys looked forward to a jolly dance since a wedding up at the castle was rare happening. Only the very oldest in the valley could remember what it was like last time, Merry musicians there would be in plenty at such a celebration.

On the evening of the second of August Abbot Cuno from Fischingen arrived at the castle with his entourage. It is he who will celebrate the Nuptial Mass. After all the upheaval and chores, the day of the wedding finally dawned. Never before had the little bell of the castle chapel sounded so joyful; at least, that is how it seemed to Heinrich. He wore his most gorgeous clothes, appropriate for a rich nobleman. His bride truly beautifully adorned, but more beautiful than anything else is her lovely face beneath the wreath of flowers. Count Eberhard looked venerable; according to custom he escorted his child from the church door. Abbot Cuno in a richly ornate vestment awaited the bride. He received her with a blessing and asked in a loud voice, "Who gives the bride away"? At this, Count Eberhard stepped forward and answered in a trembling voice, "I, Count Eberhard of Kirchberg, father of the bride give this my daughter to you, reverend, gracious Lord that you may, with your blessing, give to her bridegroom, the illustrious and gracious Lord Heinrich of Toggenburg. Then the priest led the bride to the place where her bridegroom stood and gave her solemnly to him. At this, he produced a precious ring, asked for a blessing and placed it on the finger of his young wife. The gate of the chapel now opened and Bride and Bridegroom proceed over rich carpets into the sanctuary. Arrived in the middle they kneel and are blessed again by the Abbot before taking their places in the choir.

The chapel now fills up with guests. By the door, pages form a guard of honour. The Mass begins. Christ was a guest at the wedding feast of Cana and here also is present as guest. According to the custom of the time, the bridal pair are bound together with a veil at the sanctus. With Christ who descends from above at the consecration, they are truly one. The veil conceals them from the people as the Eucharist is ministered to them; the mystery of their love in Christ is not shared with any curious looks. After the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God), Abbot Cuno turns to the Bridegroom and gives him the kiss of peace on the right cheek; the Groom then passes it on to his wife. Blissful moment when supernatural grace and love flow in streams, shine through and sanctify the natural. The joyful guests can hardly wait for the Mass to be finished.

Already the bagpipes were to be heard amidst other sounds of jollity. With music and song, the couple are escorted across the courtyard to the festively decorated knights hall. Evening

came; the noise gradually subsided, the comings and goings were replaced by the stillness of the night. Count Eberhard was waiting by the bridal chamber. Heinrich would be coming soon with his bride. He heard the sound of voices that came to him from below. There was a voice with a foreign accent that said, "A fine wife he's got for himself, more like a nun, he'll soon convert her". Their words were followed by a knowing laugh. The father winced; "It was no decent man who said that, My Idda, my dearest treasure, I've had to give you away and there are some who would do you harm" so thought the father and his heart was heavy. Just then she appeared on the arm of her husband, the beautiful Countess of Toggenburg. Her dress rustled on the steps and her familiar voice was like balsam to his heart, her smile like sunshine on her features. "She is a darling of God and man" said the father to himself as he caught sight of her, "I wonder if Heinrich is aware of her true value"?

"Father dear, I'll see you again this evening" she cried and took him by the arm. "Child, I must bless you again today, you and my son".

"Well, come in father and bless us" said Heinrich. He opened the bridal chamber. Luxurious carpets covered the floor and walls of the apartment. An embroidered curtain was hung round the bed. A fragrance of fine spice filled the room. Above the head of the bed hung the Cross; yes, here too, the cross where, this evening, in the flickering light of the candles, everything seems to be coated with finest gold. On the balcony there are scented flowers. All three kneel down before the cross. Then the father blesses the young couple and wishes them God's strength for all the days of their lives. There is a hint of tears in Idda's eyes as she kisses her father's hands which seem to her to be like the anointed hands of a priest. In this moment she feels again the pain of parting. Had not Jesus himself taught her that he himself would mix a drop of bitterness in every earthly joy so that she would slowly learn to understand and appreciate heavenly joy. "From all eternity I have known you, even before your mother bore you I already called you". Idda led her father to the balcony. There grew a blue mountain flower. She gave this to her beloved father as a precious gift as though she said, "See how this flower gets its colour from heaven, so also will I let my soul be clothed in sunshine and rain" then she said, "Don't worry father, I remain what I am, even though I am far from you. I am always your daughter and will be true to you and to myself".

The night has got very dark with only a few stars to light the sky. The night breeze streamed in through the open balcony window. Count Eberhard leaned out. He had never seen anything quite like this; terrifyingly dark the depths stared up at him. The pine trees rustled down in the gorge and an owl called through the forest. Deep deep down in the valley a light still glimmered, then even this suddenly went out. The lights on the Toggenburg were also going out. Count Eberhard goes to his own room and the night covers every secret with her veil.

* * *

THE LADY OF THE TOGGENBURG

The November storms howl round the weather-proof castle. It's good that its walls are so thick, otherwise the stones would crumble away from each other and be hurled down to the depths. The pine trees bend this way and that and it was like the groaning of many voices. There was a loud banging on the gate. The watchman opened. "Who dares to go out in this stormy weather"? Perhaps a travelling knight? But no, an old woman; angrily the watchman makes to slam the door again, but the old woman wails, "let me enter in God's name, I must speak to the Countess, my husband is ill, she will help me".

"Alright, come in and stop that wailing old one" growled the watchman and he leads the way. He takes her to a small room and tells her to wait, grumbling to himself "I wouldn't send a dog out in this weather, never mind go out myself but if the Countess will have it that I must admit an old baggage like this then she must have her way" and he slammed the door shut. After a few moments Anna enters the room and asks the old woman what she wants.

"I'm Kathri, the miller's wife, the Countess knows me, my husband has a bad fever and there's nobody down there who can help him; then I thought that seeing the Countess is so good she'll certainly help". The old woman spoke hastily with a helpless expression. Anna is gentle with her and managed to calm her with friendly words; "Calm down now, the Countess will certainly be able to help and do so gladly". Then she hurried out to advise her Lady of the visitor. Lady Idda was concentrating on her hand work; now and then she lifted her eyes to look out through the balcony window. She had never experienced storms like this in her own country; she felt almost afraid as the howling wind became even stronger. There was a knock at the door and Anna entered, "What brings you here dear Anna"? she asks.

"A poor old woman has come and wishes to speak to you".

"Let her come in".

Kathri's heart beats faster as she enters the splendid chamber and almost chokes in her throat as bitterness rises in her so that she feels like saying, "So here we see how the gentry have it whilst our kind have nothing", Howsoever she quickly forgets her angry thoughts in the presence of the kindly Lady who asks with the friendliest of smiles "Oh Kathri, it's you and what brings you up here in this dreadful storm"?

"My Lady, please help my husband, he has a very bad fever and has been laid up in bed for a week, I just don't know what to do".

"Then I will give you something for him and as soon as the storm dies down I will come myself and have a look at him" answered Idda.

After much questioning as to the location of his pain, whether he was refusing his food and such like, Lady Idda asked her maid to pack a basket. Into it went healing herbs for making a cooling tea for the fever, a bottle of strengthening wine from the cellar, good meat from the larder and many other things. With all these remedies etc., Idda gave her friendliest smile straight from her heart. Kathri wiped her tears away and hurried out into the storm and down the mountain to the mill.

Towards evening the howling of the wind increased. The Lady Countess sat together with her maids in the servants hall. The spinning wheels whirred away in cheerful confusion. Happy songs rose above the sound of the pine trees outside rustling in the wind. Darkness fell quite early and the maids lit the oil lamps. "Dear Lady, tell us again about your homeland far away" begged a blond young thing; so the Countess began to tell them about her childhood mountain home, her funny childish quarrels with her brothers, about her gentle mother and good father. As she talked, she dreamt that she was back in the days of her youth and all listened intently. They were like children gathered around their mother; her goodness of heart enabled them to forget all about the storm, and old Kunigunde secretly wiped the tears from her eyes and said, "Praise and thank God for such a mistress, may it always go well with her".

And down in the valley, as the people spoke of her to each other, the same was said. "Thanksgiving and praise for such a Mistress" and when in some poor hut a new earthly citizen arrived, you could be sure that a maid from the castle would come bringing a parcel with linen for the little one and a basket of strengthening foodstuffs and other things for the mother. When the farm worker employed by the castle suffered a horrible wound and absolutely nothing, not even a fine spiders web seemed to help the Countess herself brought a cooling ointment and bandages, she washed the wound and bound it up. The people of the valley spoke of these things to one another and soon it was said that anything the Countess touched would heal. The miller is already a lot better and sits now in the little room next to the fire. "She's an angel" says his wife to her neighbours as she wipes a tear from her eye with the corner of her apron.

"She is an angel" says Heinrich her husband and leaves her unhindered in her self dedication to the poor. Since she has been here the old castle seems to smile, she spreads sunshine and joy. Her motherliness is not at all repugnant to the haughty warrior.

The old Chaplain felt especially encouraged since her arrival at the castle. All the church linen is carefully looked after. The Countess sewed and embroidered lovely new designs on the altar linen. The chapel itself is adorned like a bride with beautiful flowers until the autumn comes. When the Chaplain went up the stairs to his little room he would be sure to find some tasty morsel, sometimes a rare fruit sometimes even a beautifully painted picture from the monks down below. He knew, of course, who had brought these things. Before she came nobody thought of giving him such joyful surprises; since she has been here it is as though the sun was always shining on him. Even when the winter storms came, it was still like springtime to him and if the snow was lying meters deep in the courtyard he had no cause to fear, the Countess would see to it that he would not have to freeze in his little room. "A Mistress like this" he would say to himself, "is a blessing to everyone on the mountain and in the valley she is as humble as a servant and obedient as a child". He could see her in his memory as she had been not long since been in his chamber standing by the window full of respect for him, the priest, faintly blushing as a child who had a favour to ask but didn't know how to put it. "Reverend Father" she said, "I would like to open my heart to you, there is nobody else here to whom I could bare my soul. I see you as devout and quiet, wise and experienced". And in reply to his offer to stand always ready to help her as best he may, she said, "Father, you see me always happy, I am the wife of a rich nobleman, the mistress of servants and subjects but all this does not complete my happiness, I could say that it all makes me somewhat afraid. After all I am not here on earth just to enjoy everything; I find myself afraid of all the wealth and power. I want to do so much for God; you see, I give alms, I visit the poor, I instruct the maids but in spite of all this my heart still feels unfulfilled. God wants

something else. What do you think, Father I could give him"? Pleadingly she looked at him and listened to his simple words which were telling her much what her own heart was saying.

"My daughter, I believe that God loves you very specially since He gives you such desires in the full bloom of your youth and married happiness. So, what do you think, will he perhaps be wanting some personal offering, not only your almsgiving, your loving service to the poor but you yourself your very deepest being"?

Her clear eyes lit up as she replied "You are speaking to me, Father from your very soul, you are saying that which I secretly thought and could not put into words. Permit me, teach me in private to do penance. May I wear a hairshirt under my splendid dress, or shall I abstain from rich food or, when Count Heinrich is away may I rise at the hour of matins every night to praise God just as thousands are doing in the monasteries and convents as well as in the world, what do you say, Father"?

"My daughter" he said, "You ask so much and all at once, it is all good but in the spiritual life things go much the same as in ordinary life. If you eat too much all at once you lose your appetite for everything, so slowly does it. One thing at a time, and remember this, the slow death of one's own will and the growing into the divine will is the principle thing. So the first penance that I advise you to practise is obedience. Be obedient in the smallest things to your noble husband. Be obedient, if you will, to me; be obedient to every movement of grace".

"That will I do with all my heart. You should know Father that a powerful pride rises often in me; after all the blood of proud forbears runs in my veins. Nobody but myself knows this, but I will obey, I will follow the promptings of grace, I want to be holy. So permit me Father some practice of penance however small, my heart burns in longing for it".

"Your heart will learn to submit daughter; however since you yearn so greatly to do something special for God, I will allow you, when your husband is away to rise at midnight to pray the night office united with all those in the monasteries". So Idda kneels before the old priest. Tears shine in her eyes as she asks his blessing. He wonders whether perhaps he has given her too heavy a burden for her tender years, but no, he has not deceived himself, she has a great and powerful spirit that will conquer all weakness. God will enlighten and guide her to a greater holiness.

* * *

STORM CLOUDS ARISE

Time hurried by. After the winter storms the lovely spring days arrive. The hot summer gives way to golden autumn. Lady Idda now knows every dwelling on the hills, every hut in the valley; she knows where there is hunger and where illness is suffered. She knows the old people and already has seen many of them die. She has taken many a babe to baptism and is unswervingly kind and friendly and indeed her eyes have many times wept tears of sadness. She herself longs for children. How often has she poured out to God her desire for a little treasure. Bitter thoughts arose at times in her mind but Idda's heart, long since trained in self control, forced them down with the words, 'Thy will be done'.

Count Heinrich loved his wife with a strong affection but passionate hot blood coursed through his veins. Idda was deeply shocked when for the first time, without any attempt at self control, he allowed his rage free reign. Suddenly she saw him very differently, he appeared as a stranger to her. One stormy autumn evening he was homeward bound after a days hunting with his retainers. As always when she heard him coming, Idda went joyfully to meet him. But, what was the matter? Did he not see her? his brows were drawn down in a black frown and his eyes rolled angrily here and there. The servants along downcast. In the midst of them all like some criminal, hands tied behind his back went Antonius, the young huntsman. His almost childlike face held down, his hair hung over his forehead. Idda's heart convulsed in dread. What could have happened? Quietly she withdrew. Heinrich stomped up the stairs; everyone could hear his heavy footsteps. Idda felt like running away, far away, but she knew she must stay. God had put her here tied to her husband whom, in spite of all, she loved. From deep within her innermost being where her spirit was one with God, a voice came clearly to her, "You must save him, you must offer yourself for him, who else is there who could guide him to heaven? I have chosen you to do this".

Countess betook herself to the chapel and poured out her troubled heart to God. She then felt calmer; it was now getting dark. As she crossed the courtyard she met old Kunigunde: "Countess, young Antonius is in the prison cell. The servant Gonzala has brought complaints about him to the Count. When the maids will not converse with him he turns his anger on to the boys, dear Lady what can we do? Antonius is such a fine young man and he is helpful in so many ways. Oh the Count is so angry he will have no mercy on him" and the old maid wept bitterly.

The Lady Idda had grown paler as she listened but she said calmly "Everything will be alright Kunigunde, pray to our Lady and ask her to help us". That was a troubled evening and was followed by oppressive days. Idda waited patiently until her heart told her that Heinrich was more affectionately inclined toward her. It was an unusually beautiful evening; the sun, just sunken, had been golden red. The castle, rocks and trees had been inundated with gold. Heinrich came to his wife as she bent over her needlework; his had wandered tremblingly over her hair, "Idda what are you doing"? What she was doing he could see, what she was thinking he could guess.

"Heinrich, dearest husband I worry about you day and night" she said softly and kept his hand clasped in hers. "You have caused me such anxiety, Oh you know what I mean". She can no longer hold back her tears. His heart softened as he watched her; he is conquered.

"Beloved, you are right; I was hard, I am guilty. Help me to make good where I have failed".
"You are a good man Heinrich, I knew it" said Idda rejoicing inwardly. "May I release Antonius and will he be reinstated in his position with honour"?

"Yes" said Heinrich and like a happy child she embraced her husband. Then, however, she looked at him earnestly and asked, "Heinrich, I have a favour to ask from my heart, if you grant this I shall be grateful as long as I live".

"What is it precious that you so desire?"

"Heinrich, get rid of your servant Gonzala".

Heinrich was silent and after a few moments he asked, "Why"?

"He is false Heinrich, all the other servants hate him. I've had to listen to so many complaints about him, Not one maid feels safe in his presence, and now, he is the one who has complained about Antonius".

Whilst Idda was saying all this her husband was looking out of the balcony gazing out into the distance. His face is hard again, the soft voice, gone. "You do not understand me in these matters" he said at last, "Gonzala is a foreigner, he looks at life from a lighter side than we do, but he is clever and able, and hundreds of times I have profited from his ideas. As far as women are concerned, well, you just can't believe all they say. We men do not take such things seriously. You are too good for the reality of life in the rough. Let Gonzala alone to go his own way and don't worry yourself about him, that's the best way forward".

"The best it is not" said Idda quietly "but you are the Lord here and I must follow you".

Heinrich leaned out of the window and breathed the wonderful air from the pine forest into his lungs. "The forest is calling for the hunt, the weather is clear" it is calling to him. He laughs again strokes his wife's cheek and says, "Keep well dear wife, don't worry or trouble yourself about things that are not worth it otherwise you'll make me old".

Idda smiled at him again.

Since that evening many a storm has raged in her husband's heart. In her face very fine lines of worry have appeared. She knows now how many sacrifices, how much suffering and striving it needs to draw just one soul from the abyss, and Jesus saved the whole world from darkness, thousands and thousands of people. How unimaginable must his sufferings have been.

Heinrich has been away for a long time with the Emperor's army. Then one evening the gatekeeper announced the approach of a stranger - a messenger from Kirchberg in Swabia. Lady Idda listened attentively. Just like a beautiful far away dream, the days of her childhood and youth rise up in her memory. With a peaceful smile she greeted in vision, her dear departed mother; a sense of security, proper to a child with its mother swept over her. Then she thought of her father. What sort of news will this messenger bring? Greetings from her father or perhaps news of a forthcoming visit or even perhaps some sad event. All this goes through her mind as she awaits the arrival of the messenger. Soon she will know. A knock at the door - the messenger is here Idda's heart beats faster, her eyes almost brim over, it is her old faithful Diethelm. He is older now and silver threads are visible in his hair but his laugh is the same and his faithful old eyes look out at her just as of old as he begins to deliver his message.

"Lady Countess is it really you? You have become somewhat paler and, how shall I put it, more beautiful, more mature, but excuse my rather free manner of speech, after all I knew you as a child, but it does seem to me that you have experienced suffering, where otherwise do these dark shadows under your eyes come from, not to mention the lines around your mouth which were certainly not there when I last saw you".

"Oh Diethelm time, no, God smites us with many wounds and then heals them again. But what brings you from my dear old homeland"? "What will you say my Lady if I too have come to wound you".

"God's will be done, but please tell me Diethelm what has happened - my father, is he ill?"

"No, my Lady he is not ill he is probably well and happy, more so than we are".

"What are you saying Diethelm, my father is dead, is that it?"

"You have guessed it Countess" softly answered Diethelm. It has gradually become quiet.

Lady Idda wept silently, her heart was bleeding, her childlike affectionate heart that loved her father so dearly. She had always hope that he would come again to see her; she can see in her mind's eye his dear good face; she could feel his strong hand again as she had when a child.

"Oh father, now I shall never see you again on this earth". Sobbing, she forced the words out and in Diethelm's eyes too the tears are glistening. After a while she asked him, "How did my father die, can you tell me about it"?

"Yes dear Lady that is what I have come for, Your father himself sent me to bring you his last greeting and this is what your dear father said. "Tell her Diethelm that I dedicated myself to Mary that time in the Black Forest. I am happy, I am going home but I will not forget her in heaven. She is my darling and God's darling too, I bless her - tell her this Diethelm and then he raised his hand and, dying, made the sign of the cross, and that was for you, my Lady".

Idda wept quietly and knelt before the crucifix, "Lord, give my father eternal rest". It is quiet again in the room; only from below could one hear the birds calling, and the gentle sound of Idda's weeping. Soon she arose and asked, "Tell me about my sainted father".

The twilight has come and crept silently into every corner. He begins, "Noble Lady, your father was a hero, a saint. You know how consistently in his life he loved justice and hated evil. You know how he stood up for all the poor and oppressed". Idda humbly bowed her head. These words flow like balm into her ears.

He continues "In order to crown his life, your father wanted to do something even greater; do you know in what way he consecrated himself to Mary? He promised to go to the Holy Land with the Emperor's army to take it back from the Turks. I was to accompany him. So we took leave of Kirchberg, he from his sons, I from my wife. His heart was deeply committed. We rode day and night until we joined up with the other crusaders. Your father was in such good spirits, but I could see that all the effort and strain was just too great for a man of his age. I begged him to turn around but if you could only see how he looked at me. I shall never forget that look as long as I live. "Diethelm, he said, you expect THAT of me? You know that I consecrated my life to God and the Holy Mother, I stand by my word".

"We went on riding southwards, the heat of the sun beat down upon man and beast. We suffered hunger and gasped with thirst. Your father bore all the unpleasantness smilingly.

Then a great fever broke out among the troops and many a man withered and died from it. Your father was also affected, his strength was ebbing away. I watched him night and day but death was clearly coming. He looked death calmly in the face. The priest prepared him, do you know what he said to me then? Diethelm, I will not return home. I have seen heaven open and then he entrusted me with greetings for his sons and for you just as I have already said. On the seventh day he went peacefully to sleep in my arms. Oh yes, he died well, your father”.

Night has fallen, A maid lights the oil lamp. Diethelm has retired. Loneliness Idda as never before in her life. It is as though a blade pierces her heart. Until now she has always been her father's child and hoped to see him again. Now she knows that their next meeting will take place in the next life. 'The next life' how mysterious it appears to her now. A few years ago her father's death would have made a more modest wound in her heart. Then, she could still have looked to her husband for support. She had believed in him, he was her support and comfort but slowly, slowly, she had come to realise that he was neither of these. It was, at first, a painful discovery but now she thanked God for it. She is lonely, very lonely even in the midst of others; she knows now that no man on earth is worthy to be the recipient of the unreserved gift of oneself to him, and she knows now that she is here to be light and support for Heinrich. As though enlightened by a flash of light Idda looked back at her life. The sunny childhood, caring father, loving mother - the arena of life. Young love, carefree happy days at Toggenburg, then God's touches ever clearer, ever stronger; her gradual instruction in the cross. His gradual withdrawal of human support. Her lips quiver, "Dear God, your ways are good and even if you wound me I know it is a wound of love that will make my heart burn with ever greater love for you. I give myself completely to you".

Mysteriously the night seemed to climb out of the depths of darkness. Idda's eyes search for a small light in the valley. There it is; she sees a shining spot of light; it has to be the monastery of Fischingen. The monks are now praying their night prayer. Longingly Idda raised her hands and prayed, "My God, you know how I long to praise you and that I yearn to offer you prayer and praise in that holy place. Hungering for the house of God my soul is consumed". Idda then rises and stands by the balcony window. All lights in the valley are now extinguished. She unclasped her precious necklace and laid it down; it had been a wedding gift from her father. She stripped the valuable rings from her fingers including the one Heinrich had put there during wedding ceremony. A fresh wave of sadness swept over her at the remembrance of her father. "Such is life" she thought as she laid down the costly jewellery 'Everything gets set aside or else is taken by another'. At last she lies down to rest and even her wounded heart is overcome by sleep.

* * *

THE ENEMY IS AROUND

Everything is quiet these days in the castle. The Lady Countess is dressed in mourning as she goes to chapel, and she has become even paler. This grieves the menservants and maids who all love her dearly.

She sends Antonius to the monastery with a generous alms to ask the Abbot to celebrate a solemn Mass with his monks for the deceased Count of Kirchberg. Idda will attend this celebration with her servants. The evening before, all is prepared for the journey to the Abbey. Everyone retires earlier than usual, but Idda just cannot get to sleep. Outside, the wind howls round the castle walls as it often does these autumn nights. An owl calls eerily in the dark. Then there came a heavy and imperious knocking at the gate. 'Is it Heinrich?' Idda strained her ears. She heard the gatekeeper open up. Her heart beat loudly and violently; 'Heinrich please come and be in good humour'; I must have patience. I'm so lonely - if only you would come. Like a poor little child she longs for love, but oh how foolish she seems to herself. Her husband will not understand how deeply she has been moved. He loves her yes, but his love cannot comfort or console her, yet her poor human heart is so often hungry and in need of a loving word. Now she hears footsteps and voices from the courtyard. It's not Heinrich, she would have recognised him immediately. Surely it's not Gonzala? She clearly hears his voice say, "I must see the Lady Countess I have to give her a message from her husband". The gatekeeper growled, "The Countess has gone to bed and is not to be disturbed because tomorrow very early she will be going to Fischingen to attend Mass".

"What do your mumblings matter to me, old man, do you have some authority here"? and the gate clanged to.

Idda had risen and dressed hurriedly; she will wake Anna so that she will not have to be alone in the presence of this hateful man in the dark of night. There came a knock at the door of her chamber and just as though he were the Lord here, Gonzala strode in. Its a good thing Idda cannot see his evil smile.

"What do you want here?" she asked in an angry voice. He should not have been here alone at this time of night. Lady Idda stood there like an angel in the flickering light of the oil lamp. She cannot however see the hateful face of her adversary, otherwise she would have been deeply shocked. With wheedling voice and flattering gesture, Gonzala said, "Pardon me Noble Lady I come to you at this hour, the servants did not want to allow me in to you but I know that the news from your noble husband could not suffer a moments delay".

Ice cold and with an energy he would never have given her credit for, Idda ordered him, "Get out of my room at once". Gonzala gnashed his teeth but laughed his devilish laugh, falling to his knees he began again, "Lady....."

"Get out, out of my sight" she shouted imperiously, she had power, this woman, but where from, from whom? He was forced to retire. The devil take her, the maid has heard it all as well and stands now beside her mistress. Cursing, Gonzala goes out. "Cursed woman, you will feel my revenge, you really don't know what a fate you have chosen for yourself. As long as my name is Gonzala I will track you down" and the devil laughed at his own thoughts. Out of the castle he slunk, then came the sound of crashing from the pine trees as he fled in fear.

He then laughed again, "ME, running away from a woman. From a puff of wind, stupid ass that I am; if I had overpowered her then, by God, I would have had my way with her". She is so very beautiful, and the blood seemed to boil in his veins and the devil goaded him, 'Yes she is beautiful and you must seduce her, you coward; you should not have run away, the opportunity was there'.

Lady Idda still trembled in every limb "Anna, stay with me tonight and every night until my husband gets home again" she said and then continued weeping, just allowing it to happen whilst the faithful Anna stroked her hair and comforted her like a mother or a sister. At last she quietened down and Anna said "My Lady, go to sleep now, I will watch over you and nothing will happen to you". Just as a child she let Anna undress her and she whispered softly "Dear Anna don't tell anybody about this". Even this night went by just like any other. In the morning the sun rose behind the Alps and the mountains were as clear as ever. The horses were already saddled in the courtyard; the gates were opened and Lady Idda in mourning dress was mounted on her white horse. The party began the descent. The valley gleamed in the golden sunlight as though there was nothing but laughter and happiness on the earth. The Countess however smiled only sadly she hardly saw the beauty, hardly heard the birdsong. "She is grieving for the father" think the faithful servants. Only Anne is aware that something even heavier than a good death is on the Countess's mind. Far away in the distance down in the valley the Fischingen Monastery shines in the sunlight. Already one could hear the bells tolling. They approached it and entered. Lady Idda and her retinue knelt in the richly adorned benches of the Count of Toggenburg. The quiet singing flowed like balm through the soul of Idda. It is like another world, a world of peace.

"Better a day in thy courts than a thousand elsewhere" but the time of consolation passes. The Liturgy comes to an end and Lady Idda and her retinue must return to the Toggenburg. Deep anxiety filled her at this thought since she knows what a powerful enemy has found a way into the walls of her home. Who can she turn to, who will understand her situation? Perhaps the good Abbot. This thought filled her like a beam of light. After the Mass she waits for him; from him she has received nothing but goodness. The room into which she is shown, is very simple; the sun lights up every corner. The walls are bare of any adornment, only the cross hangs there. Lady Idda sits by the window. Where was it now that she was in a somewhat similar room? Oh yes, in the convent in Zurich. How far, far back was that time, so carefree so happy. She had been there as a bride and her father, her good father was her protector and travelling companion. Without the faintest idea that evil men existed she went then to her new life. And the Lady Abbess, what on earth had she thought? Idda would have liked to stay in the peace of her convent. Sadly she smiled. God had led her along a hard road. Just as her stately clothing concealed her rough penitential shirt and her smile shone through her wounded soul so also God concealed her cross from men. But there it was and she welcomed it and carried it behind Jesus her Lord. How had the Lady Abbess put it back then? "God's ways are wonderful and he calls his chosen ones out of every class and every age".

There came a knock at the door and there stood a priest in plain monastic habit. On his breast shone the golden cross of the Abbot. She knelt to receive his blessing. "Please get up noble Lady and be seated. It must be the death of your father that is filling your heart with sorrow". The words were said in a kindly voice.

"Noble sir, my sadness is mixed with hope and peace. It is another cross that is weighing me down, I come to you that you may lighten this burden and give me your wise counsel".

"What is it Lady that weighs so heavily upon you? I will gladly help you since I am heavily

indebted to your kind heart", "Please don't think about that reverend father; just listen to me as to a poor helpless soul" said Idda humbly.

"So, speak my daughter, what is it that weighs you down so heavily?"

"You know my husband, how his anger is so easily aroused and that he then does things which later, he bitterly regrets. Pardon me Father that I speak about this but it must be so; I am fearful of a great disaster. A sinister enemy stays in our castle, it is my husband's servant Gonzala; you will remember him. He lies in wait for me. His debauched desires are obvious, he is a friend of the devil. My husband is away for weeks at a time. Oh Father, what is going to happen"? Tears glistened in Idda's eyes. The Abbot feeling troubled looked at her; how could he help her? "Does this wicked man enjoy the trust of Count Heinrich"? he asked.

"That is exactly the problem. Gonzala is a hypocrite and will lie to his Lord without the slightest trouble to his conscience. I fear a terrible tragedy. Heinrich believes him in everything". "My daughter you have indeed a heavy cross to bear. But remember that nothing in life, even the heaviest cross comes without a purpose; everything happens subject to God's wise providence. That which appears to you now to be heavy and insoluble, God can untangle in a moment. You love God greatly, otherwise he would not test you so mightily. I will pray for you". Gently and kindly the Abbot said these and many other comforting things as a father speaking to a child. He then blessed her again and she went off to carry her cross yet further. No man can help her, but God will.

Gonzala is especially friendly with the servants ever since he had come back unexpectedly. He went slyly from Kunigunde to Antonius and acted the same with others; only Anna he left alone to go her own way. 'She is always with the Countess or else not far from her' he tells himself. Old Kunigunde is not happy with the way things are. When Gonzala is near her she grumbles, "Is Anne then a nursemaid to the Countess"? it always seems that she is not available to help me.

Gonzala laughs heartily and observes, "That's a witty remark of yours Kunigunde, the lady Countess needs a nursemaid, I'll have to tell that to Count Heinrich. He need not be anxious about his wife's fidelity, she is still a small child and needs a nursemaid, ha ha ha..."

"Be quiet you stupid fellow, don't shout so loud" scolded Kunigunde, but oh yes, she laughed too and is quite pleased with herself that this little gem escaped her lips. "The Lady Countess is straight and true as gold and always courteous with everybody" she retorts vigorously. "Oh you Kunigunde, tell me truthfully, is she really courteous with everyone" Gonzala asks mockingly as he danced around her, "I have never experienced her courtesy". "Well naturally, you old fox, if she isn't courteous with you then you're the one to blame" she said, scolding him.

"But please don't be so touchy, I'm not being all that serious. I really believe that the handsome young Antonius pleases the Countess better than Gonzala" then with his eyes closed almost to slits, he waits to see what effect his words will have.

"Ha ha" laughed Kunigunde "And no wonder, the same would go for me too".

And there he has it, Antonius and the Countess, what a story. He feels like dancing for joy. Oh the cursed pair they will just see what he can do, and no prayers or monks or chaplain will

be able to help, and Gonzala laughed his most devilish laugh, "This time Antonius, you won't escape me and you, nobly born highness beautiful and gracious Lady Countess of Toggenburg you will come to discover Gonzala, ha ha, the day will come, and it is not far away when you will bitterly regret not having yielded to my will".

* * *

WHERE IS THE WEDDING RING ?

A few days later on the Toggenburg a guest is awaited: a knight from the Rhine valley, his wife and retinue, relations of Heinrich. Lady Idda is busy with arrangements to receive the guests. It's a good thing she has to concentrate her attention on these things. At last all is ready, the guest rooms cleaned, fresh linen on all the beds, flowers on all the tables. In the knights hall, the table is laden with good things. Lady Idda retired to her room to change into a festive gown - she did not want her guests to perceive her sadness, it must be concealed from their eyes. She looked for her jewellery which she had not worn since the day Diethelm had brought her the news of her Father's death. There was the precious necklace and the bracelets, the sash, and now the rings; but where is Heinrich's ring? She searched; perhaps Anna had put it away somewhere or maybe during the cleaning of the room it fell to the floor and was lost. "Anna Anna" called Idda and Anna comes at once, "Do you know Anna where my wedding ring is? I put it here on this little table by the window".

"Lady, I haven't seen it, I leave your jewellery where you put it because I don't trust myself to touch it".

"Silly" smiled Idda, "Look for it for me please, the guests will be here soon, I must go".

Anna searched and searched, she lifted up carpets, took the covers off the bed, she opened chests and trunks but the ring was nowhere to be found. She stood again by the little window table and thought; then she remembered; Magpies, of course, they carry off bright things to their nests and it seems, the ring was lying here just by the window, surely it was just possible that a magpie had flown out of the forest, seen the ring and had taken it? She'd heard hunters telling such stories often enough and certainly there were enough of these birds hereabouts, one heard them especially in autumn with their never ending croaking. Anna would tell the young squires to search for the ring in the forest, then when the ring is found perhaps the Countess will laugh and be joyful again as she used to be. She hurried down the stairs to the servants room. Antonius was sitting there and joking with the other servants. "Listen" called Anna to them, "The Countess has lost a valuable ring. She put it by the window a few days ago. Do you think it could have been stolen by a magpie? We just have to have that ring back otherwise the Lady Countess will be very worried indeed". The young men listened and then one of them said, "Well Anna perhaps its been stolen by another kind of bird".

But Antonius said, "I think Anna's right, we must go to the woods and climb the trees and look into the birds' nests, Whoever finds the ring will get a nice drink from Anna". And out went all the boys happily chatting as they went to the forest.

Gonzala strolled through the gate, "Where are all you young scalliwags going" he wheedled. "What's it got to do with you, you old sneak" came back the reply. Then Gonzala heard one of them say, "Perhaps that's the rogue Magpie".

He cannot make out what exactly that means, but Kunigunde will know and be able to tell him.

The guests have arrived. The Countess is busy attending to them, listening to what they say about distant places, courtly titbits about the emperor's army and so on. But how lonely it is on the Toggenburg where so very seldom came news of the outside world. It wouldn't have

been too bad for her but for a dark and heavy presentiment weighing on her mind. If only Heinrich were here now.

The boys have not found the ring yet. They are saying quietly and also loudly that the old bird that had stolen the ring was called Gonzala. Only Antonius refused to give up searching and went daily further into the forest. The noble Lady had always been so good to him and he was determined, whatever the price, to relieve her of this worry, to see her smile again.

But what goes on at the Toggenburg? The guests were hardly on their way when the noise of trampling horses was again to be heard in the forest. Knights it is in fact, who, on their way home from duty with the Emperor's army are bringing news from Heinrich. He will be coming soon, they say and will delay a while at the monastery of St Gall to pay his respects to the royal staff staying there; so he'll be here in two or three days. Now Idda is smiling again. Heinrich will soon be here and she'll have his support again. Oh God, if only the devil and his assistant Gonzala would not meet him with lies. And, of course, she must have that ring again otherwise he would be angry.

On the evening of that day, Lady Idda went to the old Chaplain. Her heart was heavy; a strange darkness had come unexpectedly over her. She just has to tell someone, it can't go on like this any longer. She found him sitting, bent over a book in his lonely room. The evening sunshine fell across his white hair. Just outside the window on top of a pine tree a bird was singing. What a picture of peace. Idda's eyes were brimming; she too desired that peace but it was being disturbed by an enemy. At any price she must have that peace; God will surely have mercy on her and grant her desire.

"What do you seek dear daughter, why do you come to me?" asked the trembling voice of the Chaplain.

"Peace dear Father" answered Idda.

"Has your precious soul then lost its peace, you, so loved by God"?

"Father, I do not know what God wants of me; a great unrest and anguish will not leave me. From outside an enemy oppresses me and within I feel that oppression".

"My daughter, it is through no fault of yours that this loss of peace has come over you. It is surely a test of love, of trust. You must bear this as long as the Lord wishes, he will send you peace again, sweet peace for your troubled soul when you have stood the test that has been laid upon you. God is good, so very good, and will again make you happy. Have courage my child".

Idda is broken hearted and weeps like a child. He has never seen her like this before. Trembling, his tired old hand raises to bless the sorrowing Countess; she then rises and turns to go.

"Stay here until you feel quieter dear daughter" said the fatherly priest. So she stayed in that peaceful room and gazed at the gold of the sinking sun. The priest is like a father to her. Peace is at home with him because he is full of peace. How soothingly the comforting words come from his lips "My daughter, have you forgotten in your anxiety and fear to turn to the Mother of God? Have you forgotten the great graces she has already obtained for you? You consecrated yourself to her and in my hands you promised to be her child in a very special way. Do you think that this mother could forget you"? Idda now became calmer, the storm

passed by. Of course the Mother of God would help her. She clasped her hand again like a child. "Goodbye dear Father; I thank you for all you have done for me, Where would I be without your wise counsel? May God reward you".

"I am simply an old labourer working for a loving God, my child. He is the artist, you are his work of art. What he asks for, that I have to do, and you have been so obedient. It will all become clear to us in heaven".

"Yes dear Father" said Idda, and turned to go. It is already dark.

* * *

THE ENEMY PROBES DEEPER

The darkness envelopes a lone rider; he spurs on the horse since he wants to get as far as St Gall. Huge and forbidding is the forest through which he must ride. He shudders with fright as a night bird cries out at his approach. Sweat runs down his forehead, "Devil take it" he swears, "I'm not all that far from the monastery. Count Heinrich probably wants to learn from the monks how to sing psalms, ha ha ha, Then I'll teach him a new song which will leave no room for any other". His voice sounded hoarse and his laugh was devilish enough even to scare himself. Just then the sound of the bells of St Gall came to his ears and brought back a long vanished picture to his mind. The distant Normandy, the sound of the sea. Childhood days with his mother who had taught him to pray the Hail Mary, but the devil will not leave him for long and jeers at the soft voice he has been hearing" Come on my friend, brave Gonzala, you will convince the Count by your cleverness. Just think how far the haughty Countess and her lover Antonius will fall through you. You'll gloat over their fate".

And now he stands before the great gate of the monastery. Light shines through the cloister windows. Gonzala knows his way around here, he has been here many times with his master. He knocks at the gatekeeper's lodge and it is opened to him. "Is the Count of Toggenburg here? I am his servant and come with a message for him". Such is his demand. Soon he is standing in the great guest house before his master. The Count, sun tanned from his many travels and in first class condition and strength stood there before his servant.

"Now Gonzala do you bring me good news from Toggenburg and from my wife"? asked Heinrich.

"That depends my Lord, the Toggenburg stands as proud as ever there on the rocks, The Lady Countess is in good health, but....."

"But what, what have you to tell me, come on, out with it".

"I don't know my Lord whether I dare tell you. Your heart will be very heavy if I tell you the truth".

"What has my heart got to do with you? You old scoundrel, just tell me the truth and don't trouble yourself about anything else".

"Very well, I will tell you the truth if only you can bear it, So here it is, Your wife has been unfaithful to you. The young huntsman Antonius has wormed his way into your wife's favour and has become her lover".

"LIAR. SHUT UP, that is not the truth" shouted the Count, the veins on his forehead swelling up. He paces hurriedly to and fro, then sits down again burying his face in his hands and staring unseeing straight ahead. "No no you're lying, my Idda could not be unfaithful she is as true as gold. How could I otherwise go on. Where she is, there I am at home and I have long since been longing for her. Why are you still standing there in my sight you liar" he roared at the servant.

Gonzala bowed and said in an offended tone, "I will go my Lord, I just wanted to warn you, I seek only to serve". With these words he left the room. He had done what he wanted, to plant confusion, despair and mistrust. He knows the Count, he knows that he has him in his clutches and will never let go. Heinrich spent a sleepless night. Suppose it is true, suppose that in his long absence she has given herself to someone else. My god, I took her for an angel, has she failed me so miserably? Is she such a miserable hypocrite. Oh yes, I remember that time when I put Antonius in prison she came and stood up for him, persuaded me to let

him out. Is all this then really true? No no it cannot and must not be true. Thoughts such as these streamed through his storm-tossed soul and he called out into the night, "Idda, my Idda, just tell me it's all lies" but the devil is there and stoked up all the violent emotions, anger, hatred, pride. The dreadful night finally gave way to a grey morning.

Back on the Toggenburg the Countess had arisen as always at midnight to pray Matins, the night prayer of the church. She knelt in front of the cross and prayed, united in spirit with monks and nuns throughout the land. She doesn't know that this is her last night on the Toggenburg. She is only aware of darkness, something heavy and incomprehensible.

In the early light of morning, Count Heinrich rode out of the gates of St Gall towards the valley of Thuringia. Gonzala follows him, The Count's eyes are gloomy, silently he guides his horse; he does not see the autumn beauty around him, he hardly notices that the sun has risen. "Gonzala, what brought you to the conclusion that you passed on to me yesterday"? "Lord, you know that I am your devoted servant and only want what is best for you". "Just leave the long speech aside and tell me what you saw".

"Well it was evening when I got back to Toggenburg; all the servants were already in bed, I asked the Countess to receive me that I might bring her your news. I was refused. I continued waiting by her room and, do you know Lord who came out of her room? Antonius". So lied the hypocrite in a subservient voice. He saw the veins swelling up again on the Count's forehead. Heinrich's heart beat faster and faster until he thought it would burst. Is it possible that the world can go on? the stream still flow, the birds sing? No, no accursed is everything; nothing is left on earth that a man can trust; but punish, punish he most certainly will both of the so-called saints. He will avenge himself for this, that his wife had betrayed him so insolently. A gloomy uneasy joy took hold of him and confused him, intoxicated him. Revenge, revenge he murmured, and the devil rode with him and did not allow his heart to reflect or find peace. In the silence the wheedling voice of Gonzala came to him, "Lord, I believe that everyone up at the castle is against you and on the side of the Countess and the young man".

"So, has it gone that far" screamed Heinrich, "that it's being shouted from the treetops?".

"Unfortunately Lord, you should have come home much sooner "

"I come soon enough to judge you up there" he shouted to the heights where the proud Toggenburg could be seen. Ever nearer he came to his home, ever steeper became the road; sweat poured down his face. Only yesterday he had been dreaming about his reunion, about his noble wife, about the peaceful togetherness... yet today he was cursing "May the devil take her". The road seemed unbearably long and toilsome. He drove his horse unmercifully and gnashed his teeth. What did it matter if the horse fell dead. Only a few minutes now and he will be at the gate.

There was a crashing in the undergrowth and Antonius, all smiles left out before his Lord to greet him; but then his heart almost stopped with fear. The Count, what was the matter? He looked so strange. Antonius had just cried out joyfully because he had found the lost ring in a raven's nest at the top of a pine tree. He had put it on his little finger to carry it safely and joyfully to his mistress.

"Come here miserable traitor" bellowed the Count and slashed him across the back with his whip. The poor lad Antonius staggered forward through the open gate. Surely he is to be put

in prison again, but for what this time?

The Count dismounted and his angry gaze swept over the young man and - he saw the ring. "Where did you get this ring?" he shouted like a wounded steer.

"Sir" said the youth trembling, "I had just found it in a raven's nest, the Countess..." The whip caught him across the face leaving it bleeding. "Out of my sight hypocrite, miserable wanton. Tie him to my horse's tail Gonzala then drive it out with its noble freight, Ha, ha, ha, I am the Lord and judge here".

Antonius wept and cried out "Help me Countess, help". His cry echoed horribly round the courtyard. Windows opened, faces appeared leaning out. Who is calling for help? Lady Idda hurried to a window, "My God what is happening down there" Heinrich is in a great rage. Antonius is being tied up to a horse's tail and dragged out. She could still hear his cries of despair, "Lady, help me". Sobbing she fell to her knees, her heart threatening to break. "Dear God, do not abandon me" she prayed in deepest trouble "Remember him when he comes into your kingdom. Give him a good death for it is surely for my sake that he is about to die". Her whole being was trembling. What could have happened? Oh Jesus how heavy is your cross. I am afraid. Lord hide me in your wounds".

The Toggenburg deserted, dead, Where are the maids, the servants, the esquires, those who came so expectantly to the castle? The dreadful deed has made would be visitors shy away fearful, there was nobody to be seen. Just one window stands open. The old Chaplain looks down to the courtyard. His trembling voice calls, "Heinrich, what are you doing? Heinrich stop". But he is weak unable to confront the raging anger of the Count. Far below out of the depths comes faintly "Countess, help me, Jesus, Mary". Lady Idda could still hear it but not with her ears, Never, never will she forget that fear laden call. Now she can help no one. "Jesus, Mary help him. You are good you are merciful you are mighty". Then she hears Heinrich's foot steps. She cannot summon the strength to go and meet him so terrible did he appear. "My God, do not desert me" she groaned inwardly. He approached her room she heard him clearly but remained kneeling. "Wife, where are you? Devil take it is no one at home in my castle"? he shouts, almost out of his mind. Trembling Idda rises "Here I am" she says softly, "Who has made you so angry Heinrich"? She tries to smile and to go lovingly, gently. But all trace of a smile disappears from her features as suddenly she is grasped so powerfully by the arm that she cries out. "You wretch, you hypocrite, you betrayer of the marriage bond". These words fall like blows of a club on her innocent heart.

"I will take my revenge on you. You have lied to me, cheated me, Away out of my sight. Go to your wonderful Antonius. Ha Ha, he is waiting for you down there".

She hardly hears what he is saying; she cannot grasp what is happening. Heinrich drags her out of her chamber and up to the battlements. Shocked now, her eyes widen, what does he want up here? "Heinrich I still love you; I have done nothing against you" she said with trembling lips. A terrible thought came to her, but no, no it cannot be that Heinrich is about to commit such an infamous felony. "My God, my God save me" she prays. But with a curse, fuming with rage he threw her out over the battlements.

The Toggenburg is like a house of the dead. The old Chaplain staggers away from the window to his armchair. The shock was too great. The darkness comes early. The sky is like

thunder. Heinrich goes around the castle like a man demented. The maids are weeping. The youths huddled white faced with terror. In the evening twilight Anna crept out of the gate. She hurried down the mountain and wandered through the forest searching for her beloved mistress. She found not a single sign. Somewhere her poor dead body must be lying, but night came on and she was forced to turn back. Tomorrow she'll return and continue her search. "God, please grant her eternal rest and let perpetual light shine on her" she whispered.

But Countess Idda was not lying dead in the valley. God does not abandon his own. She wanders alone through the forest, alone in the world. Deserted by all, repudiated by her own husband, and yet, deep within her soul an undeniable peace has returned, a light which shines more brightly than the sun in her heart. Angels go with her. At times she sinks to her knees, overpowered with gratitude. "My Saviour you have indeed saved me. You sent your angels to carry me over the rocks. I cannot comprehend your graciousness. I am not worthy of so much love that you would work a miracle to save me; I know that now you will continue to help me. My innermost being has long since belonged to you. I promise you total chastity and I will be your perfectly obedient child and will go wherever you guide me".

And it was as though the Lord answered her; "I have betrothed you to myself from eternity. You have drunk of the cup I sent you and now you will find safety and peace with me", and what the Lord said, that he brought about. Idda is blissfully happy, a deep peace fills her, a sense of security, of assurance such as she had never before experienced in her life; and even though night fell and enfolded her but what, she asks is an earthly night when a divine light shines within and around her? Just like a child on its mother's breast she slept on the moss covered forest ground in the arms of her Lord.

In the morning a bird was singing in the bough of the tree under which she had slept. Lady Idda awoke, where is her maid? "Anna", she called, "Who is that singing"? - Oh of course, she is in the faint light of the forest. Suddenly the terrible events of yesterday came to her mind in brutal reality. Heinrich had been dreadful. She heard again the terrified cries of Antonius. She felt again the terror caused by her husband's anger. He had thrown her out over the battlements of the castle. He hates her with an excessive hatred. And then... Oh what came then was so wonderful so beautiful, so unearthly, and the repudiated one smiled again. Jesus had saved her and she now belonged totally to him. He had sent his angel who would protect her.

Her life now lay in his hands. In her loneliness she will atone for what Heinrich had done. She would beg for grace and mercy for him. But what is she to do right now? She cannot stay here, she would be seen and recognised. Soon the nights would be cold. The wisps of mist could already be seen in the valley. She wandered slowly further on. God would show her the way. God is her Father; he feeds the birds here in the trees, he clothes the wild flowers under her feet and this loving Father would not forget his poor child. Since he had performed a miracle to save her from death he would surely provide for her now in his tender love and care.

* * *

LIFE IN SOLITUDE

"Anna" called Idda many times more in those first days of her loneliness. Every morning Anna used to come and plait her hair, button her gown, pass her jewellery to her and go with her to chapel. She was always there and when Idda busied herself with her embroidery Anna would sit at the spinning wheel and when the Countess went looking for the domestic servants Anna would accompany her. If on Sundays she wanted to go into the forest Anna would hold the branches back for the Countess to pass through and then go before her to see that no bush or bramble would scratch her. So Idda called her dear name in vain - she is now alone. Her hands are not accustomed to breaking pine branches, collecting moss. Her feet hurt when she trod on tree stumps or walked through swamps. Nor is Antonius around any more. He had held the stirrup for her when she mounted her beautiful horse; he led it when the path was steep and difficult; now there was no horse and no servant. At the castle the stores were full of food and drink; she had always intended to make an offering when from time to time she abstained from these things. Where are the delicious foodstuffs, the strengthening wines, where are the pages who waited at table and where the maids? The noble lady is deserted and helpless. She is poorer than the poorest charcoal-burners wife, poorer than a widow.

"Heinrich" she sighed over and over again "Heinrich I love you truly" but the reality was deaf to her sigh. If he were dead she could still be one with him, she could search for the grave where his body lay buried, but he is not just a body, not dead, he lives but with a dead soul among the living. "Heinrich how could you be so cruel? Where is your love? Do you never recall the days when you gave me such care and attention? Those hours when we swore to be true to each other? Have you forgotten our wedding day when God's goodness bound us together for all time? Have you forgotten our oath of fidelity made before the priest? Do you never think of the love I always showed you? Heinrich I still love you, if you only knew and could comprehend; but you have lost your peace - who will give it back to you? I will do penance for you. I will endure my loneliness to win the grace of God for you". Her sighs echoed in the solitude of the forest, Tears come and go as she makes her way through the trackless gloom.

The tender hands of the Countess are torn and bloodied by the thorns, her feet hurt, weariness and hunger torment her. But then Jesus bled under the crown of thorns, he too had to walk with sore feet in order to save mankind smiled the noble lady. Just then she clearly heard the sound of a brook inviting her feet. She rested there. Nearby there were mushrooms. Idda knew the mystery of the forest which crowned the Toggenburg. The water refreshed her, the food strengthened her. For 'Him', her beloved, no sacrifice is too great and he in turn will invite her to his table and share a loving repast with her. Further and further from the Toggenburg she travelled. The surroundings were unfamiliar. From a clearing in the forest she could look down on the valley. The hills and forest of her homeland lay far behind. A wooded mountain lay before her. She knew it was the Hornli. To this moment she had seen no-one. The sun was already sinking in the west. Idda knelt to pray. She is poor, distressed, rejected and lonely. How could God's compassion unendingly loving and tender not fall upon her? She remembered the last words of the castle Chaplain, "God is good, so good and will make you happy". And even though the test was unspeakably hard for her tender body, her soul overflowed with peace and trust. Just there the light was dim because of thickness of the pine foliage which came down almost to the ground. It is dry here; no drop of rain could penetrate the green cover. Also just there were many berries; Idda decided to pass the night

there. The angels will have to protect her from wild animals. Far away she could hear bells ringing the Angelus. Darkness falls. Her second night away from the castle, from her comfortable room and from all the things that made her life pleasant. "Mary, cover me with your protective mantle it will make me invisible to the wild beasts, it will be, to me, a shield against the wicked enemy. Mary you are my Mother, take care of your child that no ill befall her". With this prayer the exhausted young woman fell asleep. At that, she saw the heavens open and the holy Mother came down with angels and watched over the poor rejected pilgrim. Idda smiled in her dream; morning came and the sun rose in the east. The Countess woke up: Who was there? Just then a greatly loved voice had spoken to her; then she remembered the beautiful dream in which the Mother of God and angels had come to her. She knelt for her morning prayer, what else had she to do in this solitude? Prayer meditation and contemplation are now her daily work. She had heard about saints who once, long ago had left everything to go into the desert and consecrate themselves totally to God. So the forest must be her desert and even though she had not willingly chosen it she renewed her promise to remain here where God had led her, for as long as He willed. She almost shrank back at the words, 'as long as you will', suppose I remain here always, alone, years and years, can I bear it? Should I perhaps go to one of my people in the valley and ask for shelter? Shall I have the strength to endure this hard life? Is the cross not too heavy? Great and bewildering was the temptation and it robbed her of peace and inner quiet. Then the lonely woman remembered the past nights when the Lord had protected her and the holy Virgin had come down so lovingly to help her. Then it came to her that in spite of the very limited food, she had remained healthy and strong. She was ashamed of her doubts and lack of courage. Tears filled her eyes then she smiled and prayed, "My Saviour, you must have patience with me until I have learned total surrender and unlimited trust, it is true, I can do nothing, nothing at all but you can do anything, please make me totally trusting and obedient, blind and deaf to all that is not you".

Day followed day; the leaves fell slowly from the trees and the nights became chilly. Idda asked the holy angels to lead her to a protected place in the solitude, Then she wandered on through the thick forest. Suddenly she found herself standing in front of a small hut. Nearby a spring murmured. Surely it is God who wants her here. In childlike joy she cried out "I really knew that my Father was looking after me, I will stay here". She had to stoop down to enter through the low doorway, but now she has a roof over her head and is protected from rain, storm, snow and wild beasts. It's probably a charcoal burner's hut thought Idda as she saw round about there places where coals had been burned. Idda stood a cross in front of the hut. There was a forest clearing there where the sun shone warmly. The Countess is once again a happy child of the heavenly Father. She began immediately on the work of making the hut as neat as possible. To her joy she found various tools there, an old hide lay on the floor. All round the hut the ground is dry; damp and cold will not be much of a problem for her. In the forest there was a great deal of dry foliage from which Idda made herself a sleeping place. She will collect some moss, dry it in the sun and cover the floor with it. She must also take care of the food problem, she must collect berries and nuts also mushrooms and edible roots and the wonderful wine that will be available in the spring she smiled, and then God will help again; the God who had wonderfully saved her and in his concern had led her to this hut. An inner light illumined her soul and already she could feel that the greatest joy was to be found in renouncing everything. But, she realised, there would still be many temptations which would endeavour to darken that precious light. Evening comes again, the sun sinks in golden glory and the little clearing by the hut grew dark. The lonely lady knelt before the cross and prayed. From somewhere an evening bell rang out, probably from the church of the Mother of

God in the meadow, from that holy place which a former Countess of Toggenburg had caused to have built. "God bless you for it" she whispered, "I will seek out this house of God tomorrow morning, it is hardly likely that anyone will recognise me". She looked down at her clothes, "or will they? Will they not recognise me by these clothes? Here for instance this embroidered coat of arms will betray me, I'll have to get rid of that, and these gold borders on the arms and neck, do they appear to be the clothes of a hermitess? I shall have to cut them off, Luckily I have a head covering with me, it will hide my hair". Then it occurred to her for the first time that hidden under her dress she carried a precious treasure, it was her prayer book that always, since her youth, she had carried on her breast. She kissed it like a faithful friend, it would make her solitude bearable.

Early in the morning, the dawn hardly showing yet in the east, the Countess picked her way through trees and undergrowth in the direction from which the bells had rung out. "Will I perhaps get lost and lose everything, the way to the church, my little hut?" she said fearfully to herself; but listen, singing came drifting through the air then the bells joyfully rang out their Ave; was she so close to the church? Indeed the angels were good guides, would they also protect her from curious men? Later, in the dim early morning light the lonely pilgrim knelt down; she had found a place at the front so that no one would look her in the face since even here someone might recognise her. After all a Countess of Toggenburg is not exactly like a serving maid, and when she had ridden up on her horse through the countryside with her followers, the people had stood out in front of their dwellings and looked carefully at the nobly born, their clothes and their faces. Here she had knelt at Heinrich's side. She well remembered the day that she had celebrated the birthday of the dear Virgin. In fact, every single altar cloth now on the altar, she had brought as gifts. Now she has nothing to give, she is poor among the poor of the district, but this poverty did not worry her. It seems sweet to her and she is happy to follow her Master who also went through this world as a poor man. After the Mass, bread was distributed to the poor. Humbly the Countess accepted her share and sang in her heart the prayer of thanks. Yes, God is good, he is the Father who never forgets his children. Alone she wandered home. The forest is her place of sojourn, the little hut her refuge, but God is her home.

* * *

WHAT IS HAPPENING BACK AT TOGGENBURG WITH COUNT HEINRICH?

The days crawl by endlessly since the Countess is no longer there. Everyone tried to flee from the Counts presence, they all feared his forbidding countenance. Nobody believed in the Countess' guilt but nobody dared to contradict the Count or to stand up for her. What was to be gained by doing so? She is now dead, smashed to pieces and eaten by wild beasts. Anne was beyond being comforted by anybody after her return from searching for the body. They all knew that no sign of the Countess had been found. Anne could stand it no longer at the castle. One day she packed her belongings and made her way down the mountain to Fischingen. There, there were good nuns, she will seek refuge with them, if she can just be a maid in the cloisters, she will find peace and quiet there.

Gonzala, that monster, has never returned to Toggenburg. Nobody asked about him, nobody cared. The castle servants had heard below that he had run away shouting, "They're coming, they're coming. Now Antonius has me, the Countess too. Don't look at me like that, yes, I know that I'm the murderer". The people had run away from him crossing themselves and from everywhere the word came in that nobody believed in the guilt of the Countess. Guests no longer come to Toggenburg. Many of the maids did the same as Anna, packed their small bundles and went down the mountain. They all feared for their safety at the castle. There one gloomy November day, a couple of weeks after the awful events, the gatekeeper announced visitors. Count Heinrich sat brooding in his chamber. He got up and opened the parchment covered windows to look down on the courtyard. He lifted his gaze unwillingly to the yard below where so recently there had been singing and dancing; where his wife had gathered the poor around her and filled their children with all sorts of good things. The yard is now gloomy and the lime tree bare. The gate opens; Abbot Cuno of Fischingen rode in on his black horse. "May the devil take him" ground out Heinrich and balled his fist. Then there came a knock at the door and a servant announced the guest: "The gracious Abbot Cuno wishes to speak to Count Heinrich".

"Let him wait in the knights hall" came the muttered reply from Heinrich. The servant withdrew. The Count got up and went with heavy step through corridors and up steps to the knights hall. The abbot heard him coming, his strong face is paler than usual and his eyes appeared deeper in their sockets than usual. Many a disobedient son has felt these eyes piercing to the depths of his soul and many lowered their eyes before him. Today however it will be a very different one who stands before him, one who owes obedience to him, one who even he, the Abbot calls Lord. This makes his duty even more difficult but he must not shirk it. He owes this duty to his God and to the deceased and innocent Countess. A gust of wind blew round the castle and rattled all the shutters - a November storm. The door opens and an old man enters. Count Heinrich has aged in just a few weeks. The Abbot rose before this mournful looking man, "God's greeting to you" he said kindly. "And to you lord Abbot" is his short reply, "What is your business"?

"I come to see how things are with you. It is a long time since we have seen you in Fischingen Count".

"I have no reason to go there".

"Oh yes Lord Count I believe you have very good reason to go there".

"There is nobody who can order me where to go or what to do".

"No, you are free, that is true Lord Count but today you are free no longer".

"Why"?

"Because a certain one has you in his claws and is tormenting and torturing you".

"Religious rubbish".

"Lord Count you are trying to cut out the voice of your better self with such empty words. You cannot do it. Your conscience gives you no peace until you are at peace with God. Your innocent wife...."

"Silence, she was guilty".

"No Lord Count".

"What is that to you?"

"It means very much to me whether you run into the pit of hell with open eyes or whether you make your peace with God, I owe that much to the Countess".

"Silence about her, Lord Abbot". With eyes sparkling with rage he stood before the monk but he did not bend before him. He had risen seeing clearly that the Count's heart was still hard; but the struggle will not yet be given up. He had seen many hardened sinners changed by gloomy days of destiny when he and his monks had prayed and fasted for them. "I am going now Lord Count since you have closed your ears to my words yet you must know that Abbot Cuno has a fatherly heart for all who have been tried by the evil one". With these words the Abbot went out through the door of the Knights hall.

Count Heinrich called hoarsely for his prayers. The storm sweeps again through the castle and shakes the lime trees: the Count shudders inwardly "Goodbye Lord Abbot" he calls briefly and stamped back to his chamber. A sense of consolation came to the Abbot remembering all the Masses celebrated and the prayers offered there. "Everything here seems to be dead" he said to himself. The servant who was leading him heard the whispered words and said, "You are right noble Lord; since the Countess went we all live in a house of the dead, Nobody laughs, nobody plays. Laughing is forbidden, joy has gone from us". "And what about prayer, tell me young man".

"Even prayer has been forgotten," said the servant shame-faced in answer. "Old Kunigunde sends me to the chapel morning and evening to ring the Angelus, but since the Countess went and the Chaplain died it is lonely in the chapel. The maids say indeed that they have heard the Count during the night going across the courtyard to the chapel, but I don't believe it; women see ghosts when the moon shines and when the wind sighs through the pine trees, they hear spirits".

The Abbot shakes his venerable head and says almost to himself "That's what happens when man banishes God and his holy angels. The Countess was an angel".

"Shh... not so loud father Abbot" warns the servant, and looks anxiously up at the window of Heinrich's room. "One is not allowed to pronounce the name of the Countess here".

"Perhaps the day will yet come when it will be permitted to shout it loud and joyfully".

"I don't believe it, father Abbot. The Count has judged her to be an unfaithful wife: but we all believe her to be innocent, but nobody dare say so, otherwise the same fate which overtook poor Antonius could be his".

"Perhaps the Count will come to his senses one day. God's mills grind slowly but very surely".

With these observations they reached the gate. The gatekeeper opened up and the Abbot

mounted his horse and left the castle. Heinrich now stays no more at the castle. He keeps telling himself that his wife was unfaithful. After all, how account for their wedding ring being on Antonius' finger? But his conscience continues to accuse him; what if she were innocent? He could find peace no more. Often he would get up at night and pace to and fro in his bedchamber, or he would go secretly across the courtyard to the chapel. What was it that drove him? Was he seeking his wife, his beloved? He is frightened by shadows. One morning he saddled his horse and left the mountain. He rode through lonely places. He wants to get away from people. He knows quite well that they are scared of him when they recognise him. At far distant dwellings the Count of Toggenburg would be welcomed. Perhaps he would stay with the Emperor's army. His main army would be in Wurzburg today. The days become shorter and colder. Heinrich can ride as far as he desires but heavy snow clouds hang in the heavens. The lonely Count rides south. "Perhaps I'll get to the castle before the snow storm begins" he thinks to himself. But then a colder wind came and brought the first snow flakes. It becomes even darker. Suddenly the flakes whirl around him thicker and thicker. He pulls his mantle tighter around him and spurs his horse on "If only there were a hostel nearby I would rest". But listen, a bell. Could it be the monastery at Fischingen"? The Count breathed hard and spurred the horse on. The bell is now clearly audible. How will they receive me? The pious monks tremble when they hear my name. But the Abbot had said, "Abbot Cuno always has a fatherly heart for the tormented. Did I perhaps treat him too roughly that day when he visited me at Toggenburg"? The snowstorm whirled so thickly around the rider that he could hardly see the track a couple of steps ahead of him. Suddenly a wall loomed up before him. He breathed a deep sigh of relief, this is the monastery; he leapt from his horse slapped him on the neck and said, "Well you've earned a shelter old fellow" then he seized the knocker on the cloister door and heard his thundering echo through the corridors. The doorkeeper comes quickly, "Who is out there in such weather"?

"Count Heinrich is here". He saw how the brother flinched but quickly pulled himself together and said humbly "Welcome Lord, come into the warm and take some refreshment, I'll give your horse a place in the stall".

Heinrich shook the snow from his cape and followed the brother through the passage to the cloister. Perhaps in this monastic peace he will feel better. It was not his usual way to seek the company of monks, he much preferred more worldly hostels; but his wife, his Idda came here frequently. His wife? Is she then still his wife? that unfaithful one, but he spoke the word ever more gently. The Count was shown into the best room which corresponded with his rank and was there served with food and drink. He would like to stay in this warm room since it seemed to him he might find peace here. His look swept along the walls. Really rich tapestries hung there; but hasn't he seen that particular tapestry somewhere before? His gaze fixed on it as on something long lost and then found again. Then he remembered where he had seen those flowers. He brushed his eyes with his hand; his Idda had embroidered that. He could still see her before him bent over the fine work, her delicate inner beauty being somehow transferred to the tapestry she was working. In her chamber she sat by the balcony. Oh how the memory hurt. If only he knew for certain what it was between her and Antonius. Whether she was guilty or innocent. Hark, footsteps in the corridor. There is a knock on the door. Heinrich quickly pulled himself together and the Abbot entered. Reverently, as became a knight, he greeted the father of the monks. They talked of this and that; the weather, Heinrich's journey, about jousting but both knew they would rather be talking about something else. The Abbot noticed, with the eyes of a reader of souls, that Heinrich's pride is broken and he is weighed heavily down with great suffering, so he dared to open the door of

silence. "Lord Count, you are in for a lonely winter up there at the castle" he said in a friendly voice. Heinrich looked keenly at him. Should he reveal his torment to this priest? He just cannot bottle it up inside him any longer. Something broke out of the depths of his being, the flood gates of his pride which have for so long held at bay any gentler voice now burst out. Heinrich wept. The Abbot left him alone. Now is the hour of grace for the Count. It will have been won for him by his noble wife, by her good life and painful death, thought the abbot. After a while he broke the silence with the words: "Count Heinrich, you suffer grievous torment, can I help you in this deep need"? "Do you think, reverend sir that any man could help me? never, never, Oh what a pitiful wretch, what a fool I am", and the big man was again shaken by a great sob.

"Indeed noble Count someone can certainly help you, the good God who is closer to you in this moment than ever before and he will lift you up again to new life".

"God will certainly reject such a proud and miserable wretch as I. He could not still love me reverend Father, you see, I have not very often sought him. I was cruel and unjust. I judged my wife without any previous inquiry. If only she were truly innocent. Oh this torment. The uncertainty of her guilt or innocence weighs very heavily, more so that my own wicked action. And nobody can bring me enlightenment, can one even now trust another? and both of them whom I took to be guilty are dead". "Count Heinrich listen, I am totally convinced of the innocence of the Countess".

He listened and then asked, "How can you give me so certain an answer? Have you evidence of my wife's innocence"?

"According to how you see it, For me, the proof is good enough and I would put my hand in the fire as witness to the Countess' innocence".

"Tell me reverend father what has given you such sure conviction"? pleaded the Count.

"Yes sir, that is what I will do, I wanted to talk to you about it when I visited the Toggenburg. So please come with me to the adjoining room, I shall be better able to explain there".

The Count got up "amazing that it will be easier to explain in the next room" he thought. The tall proud man had almost to bow down to pass through the door. Even the Abbot went slightly bowed: he had carried many a cross and the burden of his duties weighed heavily upon him. He asked the Count to enter the simple pilgrims' room next door.

"How bare it is in here," thought Heinrich it smells of monastic poverty".

"Do you know Count why I have asked you to come here"? Thus began the Abbot his explanation. "It will seem odd to you, but see, right here in this poor room I saw the Countess for the last time. She sat in that same chair that are occupying now, I still see her in my mind's eye. She wore a mourning dress for her dead father. Her face was pale and tears filled her eyes. I supposed that her sorrow was caused by the death of her father, but she said in a friendly voice that her mourning was lightened by sweet hope and peace. It was another great concern and dark presentiment that was troubling her". Heinrich listened intently his pale face winced painfully. "And then, what did she say then", he asked quickly.

"Then" continued the Abbot, "she said there was a certain evil servant in the castle called Gonzala who watched her lustfully. She was in great anxiety that he would invent some evil and by his lies provoke the Count to take revenge on her". "My God, he has done just that" shouted Heinrich, "And I believed him" and a deep sob shook him. "Idda, my Idda you are innocent, come back", he called amidst his tears. "Reverend Father, I believe now in my wife's innocence. The scales have fallen from my eyes. So it is I who am the murderer of two

innocent people and my wife was truly a saint. You see, I always considered her to be such until the hour when the devil fabricated this story for me. With her all went well for me, with her my hotheadedness was gentled. She was always good. She never refused me anything. Oh what can such a wretch as I do? Is there forgiveness for such an evil murderer as I”?

Horribly the self accusations of the Count rang out in the silence of the monastery, but soft and mild as though filled with heavenly peace comes the Abbot's voice.

"What, do you think, Lord Count that God's mercy goes only so far? Surely you are convinced that your noble wife has already forgiven you everything, aren't you"?

"Yes, she has certainly done that, she is pleading for me, a sinner, before the throne of God. That is the only thing that brings a ray of hope to my soul".

"Lord Count, if Lady Idda is so good, her goodness is merely a reflection of the love and mercy of God. Look at the cross there on the wall, that tells you everything. Here hangs the one who has taken all the guilt of the world on himself and that includes yours".

"Do you really believe that reverend father, that I can truly have forgiveness?"

"Quite certainly, my son".

"Come with me then into your church and I will confess, I believe in the forgiveness, I will do penance".

"In that you will fulfil my deepest wish, You will find peace again".

It is already twilight, soon it will be dark and the snowstorm still rages round the monastery. The Good Shepherd waits there to take the lost sheep back into his arms. In the dark confessional the light of heaven penetrates the sinner's soul. Yes, God is good, so good. He remained kneeling in the church for some a long time. The joy of the restored peace is almost incomprehensible. Lord Heinrich, if only you knew that in that same hour your Idda is kneeling on the hard earth in a little cold hut and is praying for you. You would hurry through the woods searching and would carry her home in your arms to serve her; but that is not God's will; God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

* * *

THE WATCHFULNESS OF PROVIDENCE

Years have passed since the noble Countess was thrown from the Toggenburg. All talk about her has faded out. New events have captivated people's attention. Everybody has believed her dead for years. Count Heinrich has become a quiet person, his hair has turned grey. Nobody knows him now, the once proud old hot-head.

In the solitude of the forest however the good Lady Idda lives a hidden life. A few people in the area knew well the hermitess, here and there they have seen her but nobody made much of it, she was probably a penitent who like many others from the wide world came here to live in the solitude. One never saw her except at Mass. Nobody knew where she lived. We however will wander to the dear true soul and ask her how things are with her, and whether her life here is not terribly hard. She just goes out in front of the hut and paces to and fro. Isn't that the one time Countess? She has become pale and thin and her shabby dress shows her poverty. But if we draw near and look into her eyes we recognise the loving serene look that enlightens a beautiful soul. We would be filled with a shy reverence before this great lady. Perhaps her eyes have indeed seen into heaven. Then she smiles that gentle charming smile of long ago. There is still a child-likeness in her face, yes it seems that she is very happy.

Indeed, Lady Idda is happy. Her body has gone without so much and borne great hardships in these years. Her heart has sometimes yearned for people, but she has offered up everything and therefore she has received a hundredfold in return. What God gives is worth more than all the treasures of the world. She is now dead to the world. Her desires are now only for heaven; but sometimes she does think "If only I could talk to Heinrich just once more, He must know that I still love him and have forgiven him everything, but God knows what is best". On this mild bright evening it seems to her as though God is especially near to her. He has made the sun shine again and its beams come down on the little garden that she has laid out with her own hands. Just today the first flowers have come out and the birds are singing merrily in the branches - she must give thanks, thanks always thanks. But hark, what is that crackling sound coming from the woods; could it be a wild beast finding its way through the forest? Idda turned round, there, no, well I never; a man stood there. "It'll be a hunter" she thought and will want to come into the hut. He however had already seen her and called, "Hey there, have you seen a dog running around here"?

"No sir" she answered "I've not seen or heard anything except the birds in the trees".

"I'm no 'sir' I'm just a servant of my Lord the Count of Toggenburg, but what do you do here alone in the forest"? said the man and stepped closer. It dawns on him how remarkable to find a woman alone in this wilderness. And she even has a hut and a little garden. He looks more closely at her "Oh if the Countess were still alive, I could almost believe this was her" he thought. The woman seemed quite friendly and had a certain manner with her. He asked another question, "Is that your dwelling woman, so far from other people"?

"People have rejected me, so I came into the forest to be with the dear little beasts".

"Yes, yes, you've got it right, men are often worse than beasts. Did you not hear how my Lord, the Count threw his wife into the depths of a ravine, its already a few years ago but one doesn't forget something like that and I believe the Count will be the last to forget it. He is a

different man now".

Idda had listened intently, her heart beat faster, what should she say? But then the man went on, "Was it something similar that happened to you"?

"Yes, very similar" she said softly and a tear gleamed in her eyes.

"You know lady, when you look at me like that, I really think you have the eyes of our dead Countess".

At this Idda wept in earnest, she could no longer hold herself back, "Yes I have these eyes, I am your dead Countess but still alive. The man threw himself to the ground. He wishes to show honour, to kiss her hands, but Idda restrained him gently.

"Leave all that, you mustn't treat a poor hermitess like a noble woman, I belong no more to people, only to God".

"But you must come back to us Lady" implored the hunter "Oh the joy, come, please come with me"

"I cannot, God does not wish it".

Just at the same time that the hunter discovered the Countess, Count Heinrich is riding through the valley on his way home. In Fischingen he dismounts from his horse because here, where he recovered his peace he cannot pass by without a greeting. Quite close to the path there is a garden which belongs to the nuns and they are there working. But see, one of them greets him, "Good day to you Lord Count, do you not know me"?

"Yes now, what shall I say" answered the Count, "You are not unknown to me but I cannot say where I have seen you before".

"I am Anna, remember, I came here from Kirchberg to Toggenburg with the Countess".

"Well yes, of course, that's who you are. You left Toggenburg very secretly and I never knew that you were here in the convent. You did well. Peace is not to be found in the world" said the Count.

"How he has changed" thinks Anna, and other people who knew him say the same; but she wants to talk to him about the Countess and tell him that she was innocent.

"But why did you leave without a word"? he asked.

"Ah, Lord Count, just think back to that time, I'm sure you know".

"Yes I know what you mean, but now Anna there's no need to be afraid to speak to me plainly. You must have known all that went on in my wife's last days. Even now I think all the time about it and would gladly have gone looking for you; dear God, it's all in the past now".

"Lord Count, I would like just this once to tell you the truth about what happened, then I shall be able to die in peace. Your wife was an angel. Never did she break her faithful commitment to you, never neither in word or look or deed. She loved Antonius like a mother, he was a good young man. It was Gonzala who laid a trap for her, I myself was there. Even now I can hear her call, it was in the night. Nobody in the castle was still about, then Gonzala burst into her room. With all the dignity and power of her nobility she ordered him out of her room and he was forced to obey. At that moment I came into the room; he directed devilish glances to me, but he went. The Lady Countess however was trembling in her whole body but like a child she allowed me to comfort her, and I stayed with her. I remained close to her at all times until you, Lord Count returned home".

"Anna, at last I know just how things were, My God, what a miserable wretch I was, but tell me, do you know the truth about the ring"?

"Yes sir, the Countess took off her jewellery when she received news of her father's death and

she laid it on the little table near the window. A few days later some guests arrived: I remember it all so clearly, she put on her festive gown and her jewellery but her wedding ring was missing. She called me and I searched for it. I looked under carpets, in trunks and chests but found it nowhere. Then it came to me that a raven or a magpie may have taken it because so many of them flew round the castle. I told the young men and they went searching the nests in the pine trees but it soon became too strenuous for them and they gave up, all except Antonius. Then on the day you returned, just before you arrived at the castle, he found it, only it was too late".

In silence with bowed head the Count had listened to the story, then he went on slowly, "I thank you Anna, Please pray in your cloister for an old sinner". It is now evening, the golden sun sinks as Heinrich rides home. The road gets steep, he dismounts. There is a shrine standing in the bushes. He had had this erected in atonement because this was where they had found Antonius' dead body. Heinrich prayed here for a while then continued slowly up the path. Never since he had repented and confessed his sin, had he allowed his horse to carry him beyond this point. Up and up he climbed till he could hear his hounds calling. The evening is truly beautiful, The mountains glow. A gentle breeze wanders through the tops of the pine trees. Down in the valley it was already dark. Hardly had Heinrich entered the castle courtyard and passed the reins of his horse to a servant than the hunter hurried to the Count.

"Lord Count" He called excitedly, "I have a most important message for you".

"What is it, old one that is giving you back the fire of youth"?

"Just listen Count and that fire may come back to you".

"To me, Oh no it would take a miracle to do that".

"Yes, the miracle has happened, just believed it, I have found the Lady Countess".

"Tell it to someone else, fairy stories no longer move me".

"But, Lord Count you must believe it, I have seen your wife, I have spoken to her, I touched her and wanted to kiss her hand. She is most certainly alive. In the deep forest at a place called the little horn she has a hut and serves God as a hermitess ever since the day she was thrown out".

"No, it was some other Lady you saw, my wife is long dead".

"Well just come sir and speak to her and you will see that I am telling you the truth".

"I cannot believe it, should I on the strength of your mistake go on such a strenuous journey? I feel my age now. In my bones".

"Count, I beg of you, come; you will never regret it" pleaded the hunter.

"Well since you are so in earnest about it I suppose I must come, but I cannot believe that my Idda is still alive. She would have had to be saved by a miracle and in that case we would have found her long ago".

"Sir, now I am satisfied, You can believe what you like now if you'll only come with me".

Heinrich needs sleep but he cannot rest. If only it were true what the hunter had said, but it's quite impossible, and yet the question keeps coming back; could it just possibly be true? The morning never seems to come, the night is far too long, but at last the dawn appears in the East. Count Heinrich gets up. Today is his first day back at the castle. Everything comes alive. The huntsman is already at his post. Two horses are saddled and go out in the grey of the morning. When the sun gets high in the heavens, they will be at the foot of the little horn.

Idda is weeding her garden. As so often she is immersed in her thoughts. Will the hunter get back to the Toggenburg with his message? Will Heinrich believe it? What will happen? She

tries to pull herself together, but Oh the dear Lord must have patience with me today. The Master knows her heart and will not be angry with her because he knows for sure that she now and always will follow him alone.

Idda listens. Her ears have become accustomed to all the noises of the forest. She knows the sound of the roe and the stag, the young hare and the pole cat. She knows the call of all the birds. But that, listen, that is something different. Is somebody coming again? She pulled herself together again nervously. The she heard two mens' voices, "My God, is that Heinrich's voice"? Idda takes a few steps forward and there is Heinrich. He stands still and covers his eyes with his hands as though he wanted to focus his vision; he goes a few more steps forward and shakes his head. Is it possible? There comes a woman, could it be Idda? but this one is old and pale and thin. Nonsense its a poor woman. But listen, her voice, truly no other voice in all the world has that gentle tone but only hers. Am I out of my mind? Is it a dream? Then Idda stands there before him and again, that gentle voice, "Heinrich" and her smile makes her pale face younger, her eyes beaming. Heinrich sinks to his knees, then she says clearly and distinctly "Heinrich it is I your wife Idda whom you threw out".

"Is it true, is it really you my Idda or not. Is all this a dream? My God, my God, I cannot comprehend it" says Heinrich; give me your hand so that I can feel, can know that this is no dream". He takes her hand, holds it fast and imprints a kiss on it. The tears fall from his eyes on to these tender hands which have so many times been folded in prayer for him. Idda also weeps. In tears they let go of each other, the two reunited, but Heinrich shrinks back, "How dare I kiss your innocent hands, how can I take you in my arms? I am your murderer" and sadly he casts his eyes down. Idda however answers him full of tenderness. "How could I still think of all that Heinrich, I have forgiven you long long since. After God had saved me by a miracle I gave myself completely to him in love. And how could I so fully and completely have forgiven you, had you not have fully disowned and repented of that evil act? Heinrich I have done penance for you, I have prayed for you daily that you would again find peace".

His heart responded, "Oh such goodness, is it possible that there could be such joy on earth"? he said when he finally pulled himself together. The two walked to the hut hand in hand. "See Heinrich, this is my palace, my castle" smiled Idda. "Here I have celebrated court days with the angels, here I have lived in superabundance of riches from my heavenly father".

Heinrich gazed astonished, is it possible to live like this, especially a delicate woman? Then he began to beg and plead with his newly found wife to go home with him, to the Toggenburg. But Idda shook her head and firmly rejected his plea. "No Heinrich, I cannot do that, I have consecrated my whole life to God, He has wonderfully supported me, I am no longer accustomed to the society of others, I cannot go back, Allow me to live alone and poor until I die, And you must accept this sacrifice as an atonement, I know it will be hard, you are losing me a second time but God will reward you". Heinrich wept silently. It has all been just too much. Idda stroked his hands gently. "See my dear, here is the cross, this is what I put in place here first of all. Before this cross I have daily brought my life to God as a sacrifice. Here I have received untold graces from heaven. Heinrich come, kneel here with me, pray with me; bring me to the Saviour as a sacrifice and yourself also, totally". They kneel together Heinrich and Idda. They pray with heads bowed. The peace of God enfolds them both. He doesn't know what goes on within him, to feel so much pain and joy together is something he has never experienced before in his life. Yes, God is indeed good. He watches over the fate of men and knows how to bring good out of evil, and out of sinners, saints. The

hours fly by. Heinrich and Idda have so much to say to each other, yet soon they must part again. Heinrich wants to fulfil every wish of his saintly wife and leave her to her solitude. Yet before he goes he so desires to do something for her to express his love. He begs her to express a wish, "But what should I wish, Heinrich, God has given me everything I need".

"But remember, you are older now and the road to the church is long. Wouldn't you like to live a little nearer to the church"? he asked.

"Well, yes I hardly dared express such a big wish, but since you have brought the matter up, I'm sure the good Lord wants you to fulfil it for me".

"With a thousand joyful thanks, you'll have a dwelling very near to the church of Our Lady. Will that suit you"?

"Yes Heinrich, but it must be simple. There must be nothing in it that will recall my previous rank".

"Just as you will my Idda, but it must protect you against privation and cold and you know, you need a new dress".

Idda smiled and looked down at her poor simple and many holed dress that hardly held together. "Yes you're right, this won't last much longer, but get me the kind of dress a penitent wears, like the nuns wear".

"And then I have a favour to ask you, my Idda".

"Alright, let me hear it. If it is nothing contrary to the vows I have made, I will do it". Count Heinrich hesitated then slowly he said "If I should be dying, I will send you a message. If you would then come and be with poor sinner in that hour, my last wish will be fulfilled".

Idda took his hand, "Heinrich, I believe that I can fulfil that wish of yours if our God calls you home before me. And now, goodbye dearest, be strong, God would have it so".

Once more he kissed the hand of his noble wife and once more looked into those faithful innocent eyes. Tears were glistening there, then he went slowly, slowly out of the hut, He looked back once and waved his hand. "Goodbye, God protect you".

It is now evening. Idda still weeps. Her sacrificial style of life weighed heavily on her soul today, but then Jesus knew all about that, he who was so horribly on the cross. From mountain to valley the wonderful news spread like a forest fire. 'The Countess of Toggenburg lives still and has been found, Workmen are building a hut for her in the meadow very close to the church since the Countess is not going back to the castle. She wishes to live now as a hermitess, and in fact they are already driving the first stakes into the ground, and the Count himself comes riding to the site to oversee the work'.

He drove them on to every more strenuous efforts; it was as though he was in a great hurry. Soon the hut was roofed and then they brought all kinds of things from the castle, things necessary for daily life. Before the raw November wind began to howl, the Lady Idda came accompanied by her husband to her new home. It was already dark but Heinrich had obtained an oil lamp and, quite enchanted Idda exclaimed, "Oh Heinrich this is all too wonderful for me, this lovely little house and even the bench in front".

"Yes, but just come inside, it is indeed simple and poor just as you said you wanted it". She stepped over the threshold praising God in her heart. On the wall hung a large cross and in front of it a kneeler for prayer. "That is my whole treasure" cried Idda. The little room contained nothing worthy of a Countess but that is how she wanted it and now it was well built. The wind would find no cracks to whistle through as in the old one and the roof was

rain and snow proof.

"Heinrich, God reward you. We need not be together here. This hut can be a dwelling place for God where I, a poor sinner will serve him day and night. I will place the sacrifice of my life in his hands and you, Heinrich do the same, give up your claim on me, on my company, my caresses, God will allow us to be together in eternity".

So he goes. He has known long since that they would have to part. The days go by. Far and wide people tell the wonderful story of the Countess of Toggenburg. Many people come wanting to see her but they look from a distance and do not dare to go closer. Then they tell how they had seen the one who had been saved by a miracle. They had seen her sitting in front of her hut reading and wearing the dress of a nun. A boy and girl who were collecting wood in the forest came upon Idda's hut unexpectedly. She smiled at them and asked their names. They soon lost all shyness and chatted with the holy lady. Little Mary said, "You must have been hungry being so long alone in the forest, didn't anybody bring you something to eat"? "The good God saw to it that I always found something to eat".

"Yes, but now, where will you get food now?"

"God will see to it my child, perhaps he'll send me something by some good person "

But you are a rich Countess, my mother said; why don't you go back to your castle, you'll have everything you need there and won't have to be hungry" she said.

"Oh child" laughed Idda, "I am rich enough, you just don't understand that one can be quite happy when one has nothing, much happier in fact than in the most beautiful castle".

At this, little Mary opened her blue eyes wide and said, "Yes, my grandmother has often said she would prefer to be poor and wouldn't change with the Countess in the castle".

"She's right, your grandmother, but you must be going home, its getting dark already, the holy angels will go with you".

The children back home tell all about the friendly nice hermitess and by the next day the neighbours hear that Idda must be a good woman and one of them thinks; I'll go and see her and take something for her, she'll surely pray that my husband will get better and be able to go back to work again. She put a towel around her and put a loaf inside and set out. She felt quite nervous as she approached the hut. How shall I address her? Will she listen to me? She is, after all, a countess and very holy. The woman almost turned around to go back when Idda came out of the hut, she smiled in such a friendly way and waved a greeting. Elspeth felt her warmth and went nearer. "God be with you", said Idda in a soft voice and looked so kind that Elspeth took courage to say, "Dear Lady Countess" she stammered.

"Please don't call me that, just say Mother Idda" she encouraged her, "what is your desire".

"I have great trouble, my husband has been ill for a long time and I cannot manage alone, so I thought, you are a pious woman and you pray so much, perhaps you would pray for my husband that he will recover his health". Elspeth blushed bright red, but Idda just smiled.

"Be of good courage, my dear, you must try hard to be patient with him, Where there is no peace in the home, God's blessing cannot enter". Elspeth put her hands to her eyes attempting to hide the tears there. She cast her eyes to the ground before the holy woman, How does she know that she quarrels with her husband when he doesn't work? She certainly knows more than other people, she must pull herself together so the good Mother Idda could see that too.

Idda then said kindly, "Go home now and I will pray in the meantime and things will get better, but remember what I said about having patience".

"Yes, Oh yes, I'll certainly think about that" stuttered Elspeth. Idda laughed "I'll certainly know; do your best. Go in the little church there and ask the Mother of God to help you".

Elspeth took the loaf of bread from her bag and gave it to Idda, then she limped away, knelt before the picture of Mary and had in her heart the firm intention to change her ways. She can hardly wait to get home. Her husband was sitting in front of the house in the sun. He looks sullenly around. No-one is friendly or kind. His wife comes round the corner - what on earth has happened? She is laughing then she sits close to him and with a loving look tells him about her experience. A smile comes to his face too and he thinks, "Its going to be better for me too", and from then on, only kind words were heard in the house. "Elspeth dear" he would call when he wanted something, and she would come quickly and say, "What do you want my dear"? And by evening he was feeling so much better that Elspeth said, "Oh yea, Mother Idda must be a saint, she can do more than any other".

Every day thereafter, the poor and the suffering came to Idda and soon she was Mother Idda to all. She had a gift of comforting, advising and encouraging. She became indispensable to the poor. All the problems of life were brought to her and for each one she had advice and help and she would kneel before the cross and pray for them. The people said that the good mother could read the heart. What a complete change there has been in Idda's life. She could almost wish herself back in the solitude.

And her heavy destiny rode through her mind. Her arrival at Toggenburg so many years ago, her father, the wedding, the light and the dark days, those last terrifying moments on the mountain, Antonius, being thrown over the battlements; her heart beat faster as she progresses up the old familiar way. The drawbridge is already down; mutely the gatekeeper stood there. The maids and the young men go silently this way and that. The Count is dying. There were very few there now who remembered Idda as the Countess, they took no notice of the poor woman pilgrim; she had told the hunter not to make known her presence at the castle. It was already getting dark, Idda quickly found her way to the Count's apartment, went up the stairs and straight to Heinrich's room. Quietly she opened the door, the room is illumined by the requiem candle. The Count lay on his bed pale and silent, he looked asleep, his hands are folded and hold a cross. Idda's soul is deeply affected. Here lay the one, at his last gasp, whom she loved above all others, for whose soul she had lived, prayed, sacrificed and suffered. "Lord Jesus, be merciful to him, take him into your kingdom. Father, into your hands I commend his spirit in this his final hour". She knelt down and pressed a kiss on his hand and said in her gentlest voice, "Heinrich, I am here" then it seemed that new life came into the rigid features of the dying man; he tried to smile and to open his eyes. "My Idda, thank you" he breathed, she gently stroked his cheek and said, "Heinrich, courage, all is well. Let us pray together", and she prayed slowly and clearly so that he would understand the words. "Jesus mercy, take his soul into your kingdom. For the sake of your own bitter death and sufferings and meritorious intentions, take all guilt away, clothe him with the wedding gown of your grace. Send your angels to guide him to heaven. Mary dearest Mother, see your child is dying, stay with him: stretch your hands over him that the evil enemy goes far from him. Lay your prayer for him before God. All you saints come and accompany this soul to the judgement seat of God and ask pardon for him who also forgives all who have hurt him in any way during his life".

The dying man breathed quietly "Yes, forgiveness, forgiveness". Idda wiped the perspiration from his brow. "Heinrich, all is forgiven, you have done penance; God will take you into his unending peace" and she prayed on "All you saints, call him by name that the chamber of death may become a sanctuary". Heinrich smiled and his breathing became even lighter. Under the eyes of his holy wife he slipped gently into eternal life. Idda knelt now mute in her place. She pleaded in her heart for his soul. Jesus is so good. Heinrich is already with him, looking entranced into his face, waiting his judgement. It will be favourable. After a few moments Idda pressed his eyes closed. In heaven she would find his soul again. She knelt again, she found it almost impossible to part from him. Her feelings have been deeply shaken, full of sadness and joy together. She wept then prayed again, "My soul glorifies the Lord", it seems to her that the Master is present and looking at her so deeply and lovingly, a look full of understanding. "Idda receive my thanks, through you I have been able to save his soul". A wonderful sense of security filled her. When Jesus thanked, he overwhelmed the poor human with love and felicity; something beyond human powers.

The candle flickered and burnt down. It took all Idda's strength to tear herself away. Gently she bent over and pressed a last kiss on the forehead of the now dead Count. She looked long at the peaceful features and then left. The servants were waiting at the door. Idda addressed them. "Your master is dead, you must make preparations for a fitting funeral". One of them said, "A cousin of the Count is here, the Count left everything to him, I will call him".

Idda waited for him in the gloomy corridor, she, the once Countess here and even now the rightful mistress. Who would pay attention to a nun or whatever she was?

The young Toggenburger stood before her proud and upright, unspoiled youth. "Sir" she said, "I would like just a few words with you. You will have gathered by now that Count Heinrich of Toggenburg has just died".

"Yes, but what has that got to do with you"? said the young man.

"Very much" said Idda, "I am the wife of the deceased".

"You, noble Lady, you are..." The young man is quite disconcerted.

"Yes, that is who I am. I wanted to say to you that it is your responsibility now to make proper arrangements for a worthy funeral in the monastery of Fischingen, that is all I have to say to you. I renounce all claims as widow of the deceased. Show yourself in the sight of God to be a worthy successor here". She goes without waiting for an answer. She crosses the dark courtyard. The gatekeeper opens up for her and lets her out. Once she turns around. The grey castle towers ghost-like up in the heights. Clouds chase wildly round about it. Suddenly the moon comes through the clouds and illumines the towers and walls, then it is dark again.

"Goodbye old castle, a new family line will flourish in you now, You have no attraction for me now. It has to be so. Families flourish and then die, There is an eternal coming and going in the world, If only they all serve their Creator and their going indicates a going home to heaven. Goodbye Heinrich, goodbye you battlements where I stood as a happy bride, where I wept in bitter distress and where I experienced my most terrible hour. Goodbye dear old chapel, you towers and walls, I see you today for the last time. I leave without sadness because I hope soon to enter into a different castle where happiness and peace prevail".

* * *

FINAL HOME IN THE WORLD

The November wind shakes the last leaves from the trees. A dark mist hangs over the mountains, it will not grow light today. In her lonely hut Idda kneels on her prayer mat. It is already cold. She is more sensitive to the rigours of winter each passing year. The cross of life's evening presses more heavily, and the walk to Fischingen becomes ever more tiring for her. "May my wanderings on earth soon come to an end" sighs Idda. "Dear heavenly Father may I not yet come home to you in heaven? Still let it be as you will".

There is a knock at the door, probably the wind playing its games. The knock comes a second time, Mother Idda opens the door. A nun stands there, she smiles, kisses Idda's hand and says, "Lady, don't you know me"? The Countess looks into the candid face and thinks back, a beam of joy breaks out of her eyes as she says, "I really think you are my dear true Anna, isn't that so"?

"Yes my Lady, that's who I am" she says joyfully. Idda embraces her with motherly love, "Its really you, Oh what joy, is this possible? Come into my house, its very small but big enough for two happy people". Anna entered the hut, "You are truly poor, my Lady, truly poor, you haven't even a bed".

"Oh you foolish thing, I am truly rich, I have no wish unfulfilled, all is complete and as I would have it. I have consecrated myself totally to God. My husband died a holy death. Its all the same to me whether what I lie on is soft or hard. You see, I gave my bed away. The poor soul who has it now is so pleased with it, I have been used to sleeping on the hard earth for a long time now. But what have you come for? I see you are a nun".

"My Lady who could have imagined that I would see you again in this life? When you were thrown down from the Toggenburg I grieved for you like a mother, I had no idea that you could be anything but dead. I couldn't bear it any more at the castle so I knocked on the door of the convent in Fischingen, the Benedictine Sisters. There I found peace and quiet. Then I heard the amazing news of your survival and many people came to the convent with further pieces of news about you. Then one day the Prioress called us together, it's not very long ago, and she asked each one of us what we thought, whether we should invite the Countess Idda who was living a holy and very hard life, to come into the convent and spend the evening of her life here. You can imagine how eagerly I awaited the opinion of each one. One said quickly, "We should do that", another asked whether it would be permissible in the rule of St Benedict, another said that the holy lady would be able to give us good instruction. And I? do you know? I could hardly speak, my heart was beating so fast. I fell at the feet of the Prioress and begged her, "Grant the Countess this favour, you will never regret it". So it was decided that we should invite you dear Lady to come to our convent and I was chosen to bring you this invitation, please say yes, come to us, you are old now and its tiring for you to walk so far, you'll be safe with us".

"Is that really true Anna? It isn't a dream? You really want me in your convent? You see, only today it came to me that my life will be very hard this coming winter and I asked our loving God to take me home soon. And now he sends me his answer. The heavenly home, not yet, but I will be allowed to live in your convent until the end. Oh how good our God is, I have never been disappointed by him in my whole life. If only all people could understand this".

"So you will come with me dear Lady, Oh how happy you make me".

"Yes, I'll come Anna, but please don't call me Lady, we are sisters now. Go now and take my greetings to the Prioress and say that this evening when it begins to get dark I shall take leave of my hut and enter into the peace of the cloister. She should give me a very simple room where I can serve God day and night. I am not worthy to share community life with Sisters consecrated to God and she should therefore give me a cell where I can live as a penitent alone, as I am accustomed to do. That is my wish Anna, please pass it on".

Anna thanked the Countess for her message. She would have preferred that the holy lady would live with the Community, but the main thing was that she come and live under the same roof. She hurried back to Fischingen. The wind made her face raw. A farmer stood in the path greeted her respectfully and said, "The little Sister seems to be in a hurry" but Anna wasn't bothered by either farmer or wind. She hurried on home to bring the good news to the convent.

Mother Idda's heart is full of joy with just a slight mixture of melancholy "That's what the heart is like the stupid thing" she smiled. "Hardly has it rejoiced than it weeps again". The hut here was precious and dear to her, she had received so many graces in it. And what would the good people say who had brought alms to her here? Only yesterday Elspeth had been here and Mary's little sister Rose never went through the forest without coming for a little chat with her. The woodman Sepp and Fina from Lindenhof, what would they all say? But hark, that is surely Rosie going by, that is her step. Mother Idda opened the window and called "Rosie, is that you"?

"Yes, yes Mother Idda, I have to go into the forest, the winter will soon be here and we need lots of wood" said the little one.

"But just come quickly here to me" said Idda. Rosie opened the door, "What do you want" she asked as she gave her hand to Idda. "My child, I have to say goodbye and I just wanted to feel your little hand and talk to you before I go".

"But Mother Idda, you're not going back to the castle, are you? Surely you mustn't go back there. My granny said there are ghosts in the old castle and the ghost of Count Heinrich roams about". "No, no child I'm not going to the castle, I'm going to Fischingen to the Nuns" answered Idda.

"Oh Mother Idda, don't go there" pleaded Rosie and clung to the Countess. "I like you so much and who'll give me nuts and oatcakes if you go, and you know, everybody likes you, even my dad said so. Please don't go".

Mother Idda gently stroked the child's face, a tear glistened in her eye. She loves this little creature and her brothers and sisters and indeed all the people around here have become dear to her. But that is life, an eternal parting until that everlasting day when no-one will have to leave home. "You see little Rosie" said Idda, "Our dear Lord has invited me to go there and he really wouldn't like it if I refused".

"Oh yes, Mother Idda, if the Lord has invited you, then you must go" answered the child with grown up wisdom. "But now I'll have to go quickly home and tell my mother and the others so that they'll come and say goodbye" and off she ran.

Idda's heart seems to get heavier every minute. If only she were in the convent already. She is not alone for long. All her friends come to her, the wives weeping, and they all want to shake her hand. She spoke to them all and commended them to God's protection and promised to pray for each one. It has to be so and God's directions are always for our good. Dusk was beginning to fall. The mist came down the valley. Here and there the people lit their oil lamps. Finally Idda went out over the threshold. She has no treasures to take with her, only the cross that Heinrich had put on her wall, this she lifted off and carried it like a precious treasure. Tears were falling down on to it. Once more Idda turned and with a loving glance printed the picture of the hut in her memory, the bench there in front, the nut tree, for the last time, then the forest swallowed her up. It is now completely dark and the wanderer goes with tired step, then suddenly from behind the pine trees the twelve lights shine out. "Oh my good friend are you coming too to say goodbye?" called Idda to the stag. He approached her quickly and pressed close to her as though he knew that this would be his last walk with her. She lovingly stroked his hide as they went and whispered. "You have served me many times and have been an obedient servant of the Lord, so come, let's praise him" and she prayed softly as they went. She could hear the convent bell calling to night prayer. Mother Idda drew near to her final home on earth. When they arrived close to the convent she said to her guide, "Go back now, you won't have to wait for me any more, I'll not be coming back through the forest again. The stag continued to stand still, it was as though he wanted to say, "I like you too, just like the people". Idda softly fondled his throat and said again, "Go back to the woods dear companion" and she gave him a light slap. Then finally he seemed to understand that he had to go alone. Majestically he turned around and took his brilliant antlers back into the forest. Mother Idda continued looking after him for a long time. "All you beasts, praise the Lord, you forests praise the Lord". The she stood before the convent door and took hold of the knocker. The sound echoes through the passages. A nun comes and opens and asks the newly arrived to wait a moment and hurried away. So the noble Countess of Toggenburg/Kirchberg stood like a beggar in the bare convent entrance. But listen, Psalm singing. It sounded some distance away to Idda but it was so sweet and heavenly. It seemed to be coming nearer. What feast could the nuns be celebrating today? Then a small light comes through the passage. "Am I in heaven then"? Idda asked herself. "Is it angels singing or is it nuns"? But look, there comes the choir group, nuns one after another each one carrying a lighted candle in her hand, it is a picture of heavenly peace. The virgins going to meet the bridegroom, thought Idda, but where are they going now? Good Lord, I hope they don't see me standing here. Idda drew back into a corner. "I shouldn't be standing here, she thought as she clutched the cross firmly to her breast. "What is going on and what are they doing"? Surely it couldn't be that all this was meant for her? Now the Mother Prioress comes with her candle; her gentle appearance enhances her motherly face. She places her arm around Idda, drew her to herself and said clearly, "Peace be with you under this roof". The next nun came forward, embraced the astonished Idda and repeated the same welcome, and so the whole community one by one greets the lonely one with sisterly love. The very last one to come was Anna who took her one-time mistress by the hand and led her out to the nuns choir benches. The chapel shimmered in the light of all the candles and so the newly arrived member came to choir. Weeping quietly with deep emotion and holy joy Idda knelt among the nuns. A priest, the chaplain of the convent blessed her, and then the Prioress led her to her cell quite close to the chapel. "Is this alright for you, dearly beloved sister, to live here? If so, then take possession of your little room" she said.

"Oh I thank you reverend Mother, thank you. I do not deserve it" and tears choked Idda's

voice. “How good you are, I can hardly grasp it all; and I can live here next to God's house”? Maybe she might hear someone call, 'Mother Idda, pray for us, help us' still showing their confidence in one trying to live a holy life here with the nuns. The people were, of course, aware of this. Elspeth from the meadow would be there and little Mary too, and I have this little window that look out at the altar of God. Is it possible that the evening of my life will be passed here? I can listen to the singing of the nuns in choir and I can praise, thank and glorify God.

* * *

RECEIVE THE CROWN

Idda now lived hidden in her cell just as she used to in the forest; her life of seclusion is offered for the world. She hardly noticed how the winter passed, the spring awakened, the summer glowed. Behind the walls she had even renounced beautiful nature; the dark forest with its rustling, its bird song and beautiful flowers. God alone is with her. God alone completely fills her. His friends are hers. Soon she will exchange the little cell for her heavenly homeland, she can feel that her life is nearing its end. Kneeling becomes ever more difficult for her, pain torments her. Her prayer is often more a sigh than praise. Her noble face is wasted and pale, only the eyes have retained their other worldly gleam. One day the Prioress came to the little cell but could not see her in her usual place on the kneeler. She looked over to the sack of straw in the corner, there lay Idda white as death. The Prioress is shocked and bends over the dying woman, Idda smiled and her face became radiant. "Mother, I can go home, please fetch the priest and ask him to bring the Saviour". Already the cloister bell is ringing through the corridors. The nuns, candles in their hands accompany the priest carrying the Eucharist. The priest arrives at her cell and gives her absolution and holy communion for the last time. Idda lies quite still as the Lord comes to her in the form of bread. A heavenly peace seems to come from the communicant and a wonderful joy fills the hearts of all in spite of their grief. Heaven has come down to this poor cell. "The body of Our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you for everlasting life" prayed the priest. A glow came to the dying one's face. All now kneel around her and the priest anoints her with the holy oil; "Come bride of Christ, receive the crown prepared for you by the Lord from all eternity. You have loved goodness and hated iniquity and therefore God has anointed you with the oil of gladness above all others". It is all quiet again only Idda's laboured breathing can be heard. The candles flicker, a bird sings, it seems to have lost itself and comes to settle on the windowsill, a joyous song now sounds in the cell bringing Idda a last greeting from her beloved forest. She tries to smile. The priest prays, "The rain stops, the winter is past, already the call of the turtledove is heard in our land come my sister, my bride, you have wounded my heart". A last sigh in the tired breathing and gently Idda's soul passes over to the land where winter has gone for ever. Peaceful, transfigured Idda lies there, the nuns weep, each one approaches the body and kisses the lifeless hands and the Prioress is heard to say, "A saint has gone from us".

All through the valley the news went round, The Countess of Toggenburg is dead and the people said to each other, "She was a holy one, I'll be going to the funeral".

On the third day the bells of the Benedictine convent of Fischingen rang out as though for a feast day. There was singing and rejoicing, now high now low, not at all like a funeral and between the tolling, the little bell of the nun's cloister tinkled as though it could not remain silent.

The people streamed out from villages and farms. They stood and waited in front of the convent to accompany the saint to her last rest. An old woman bent and wrinkled pushed her way forward. "Hey there" someone called, "Must you have your nose ahead of everyone else?" but the old woman took no notice. "Its got nothing to do with you" and she turned round. "I knew the Countess Idda first, the day she arrived at the Toggenburg and I tell you, I've still got the silver coin she put into my hand all that time ago, yes, its me, Kathri of the mill. Yes, yes, I said it then, she is an angel", and suddenly Kathri had to take the corner of

her apron in hand to wipe the tears from her eyes. "Oh the poor Countess how much she had to suffer and what a hard life she had" lamented Kathri.
"Be quiet now, she's just coming" someone said.

It looks just like a triumphal procession, She who willingly lived poorly and died as a pauper is carried to the grave as a queen. The Toggenburg banner flutters on high. Noble squires in front then the pages followed by the monks in their benedictine habits, after them the nuns, the ordinary folk last of all. With festive singing Idda was taken in to the convent chapel and buried in a side chapel. The stream of people continued passing by. Poor sick people drag themselves painfully forward, they weep as they come. One woman stands there, a man kneeling at her side; he comes here from the Hornli. He had seen the holy woman once in the meadow she had greeted him so kindly he had always remembered it. He knelt there now in deep sorrow, his wife lies at home, lame in bed, she cannot move even her tongue any more. He beseeched fervently her who was now in heaven, "Holy Mother Idda, please help my wife. You were always so good, how could you forget us now"? He does not give up his requests but makes them in a peculiarly peace manner. If only her were able to see what was happening at home in the room where his wife lay, he would weep for joy and gratitude. He would see the lame one getting up hale and hearty and using her tongue to give loud praise and thanks to God. "Lord, you are glorious in your saints". Streams of grace flow to the needy. By the prayers of one chosen soul a whole people are blessed. Deeply moved, the Abbot of the monastery went up to the chancel to speak to the people. He told them in simple words about her holy life then he turned to the grave of the saint and said aloud, "You, chosen soul, plead for your people whose mother you were, plead for them at the throne of God. Do not forget your poor ones, the sick, the sinners and the dying. You freely chose poverty, teach our hearts to be free of desire for the things of this world. You chose perfect chastity, teach our hearts so to love the Creator according to his will without any undue selfishness. You were obedient to every call of grace your whole life long, teach us to renounce our own will, to let go of our own opinions and to grow as you did into God's will. Chosen soul, do not forget us before the throne of God". Everyone was in tears. "Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord", chanted the monks. "Give her everlasting peace, that peace in you which is true happiness. May your light shine on her for ever, the light of your glory that you give to the children of your grace in such abundance".

The singing of the monks and the sound of the bells mingled like a song out of the eternal home.

St Idda pray for us. Amen.

* * * * *