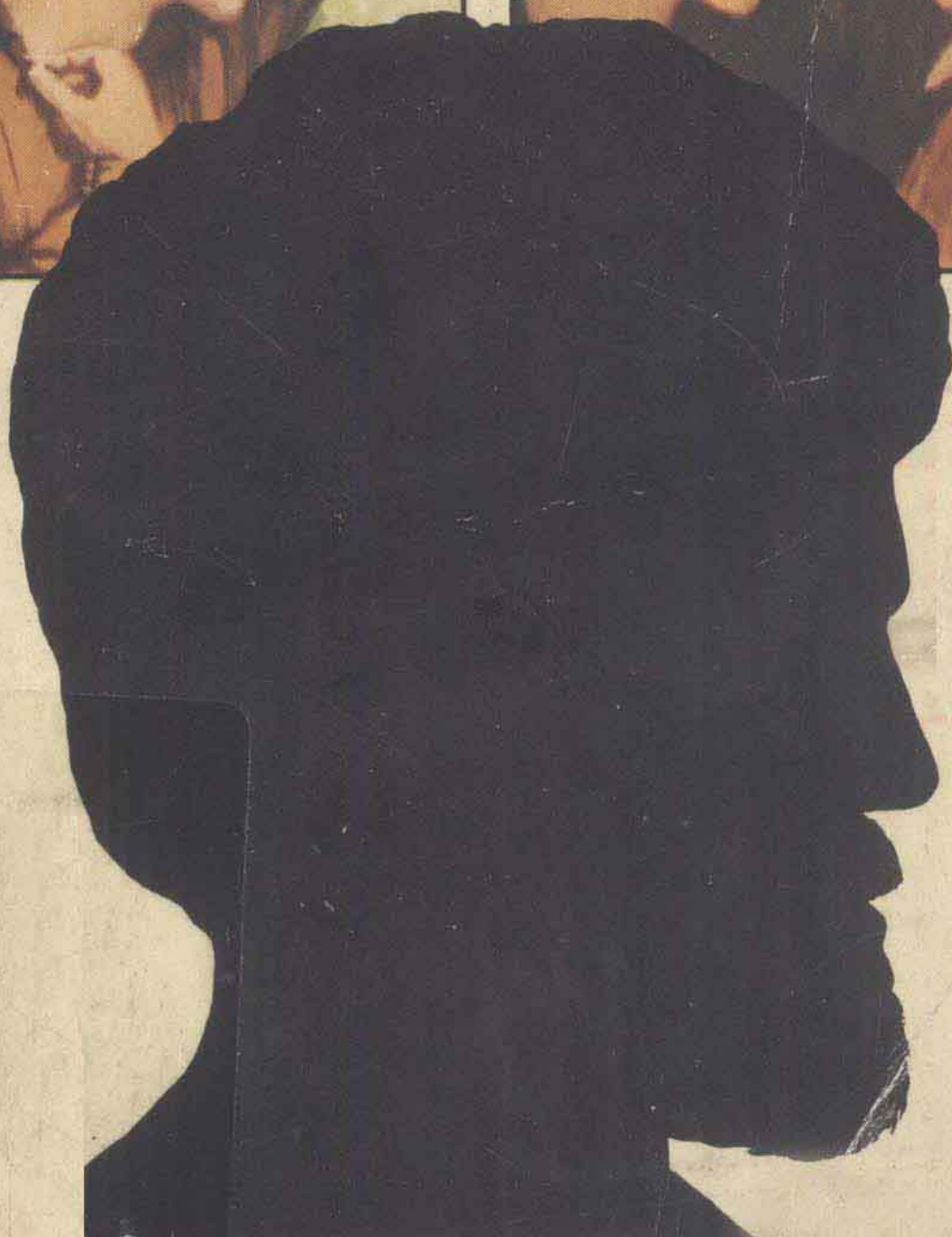
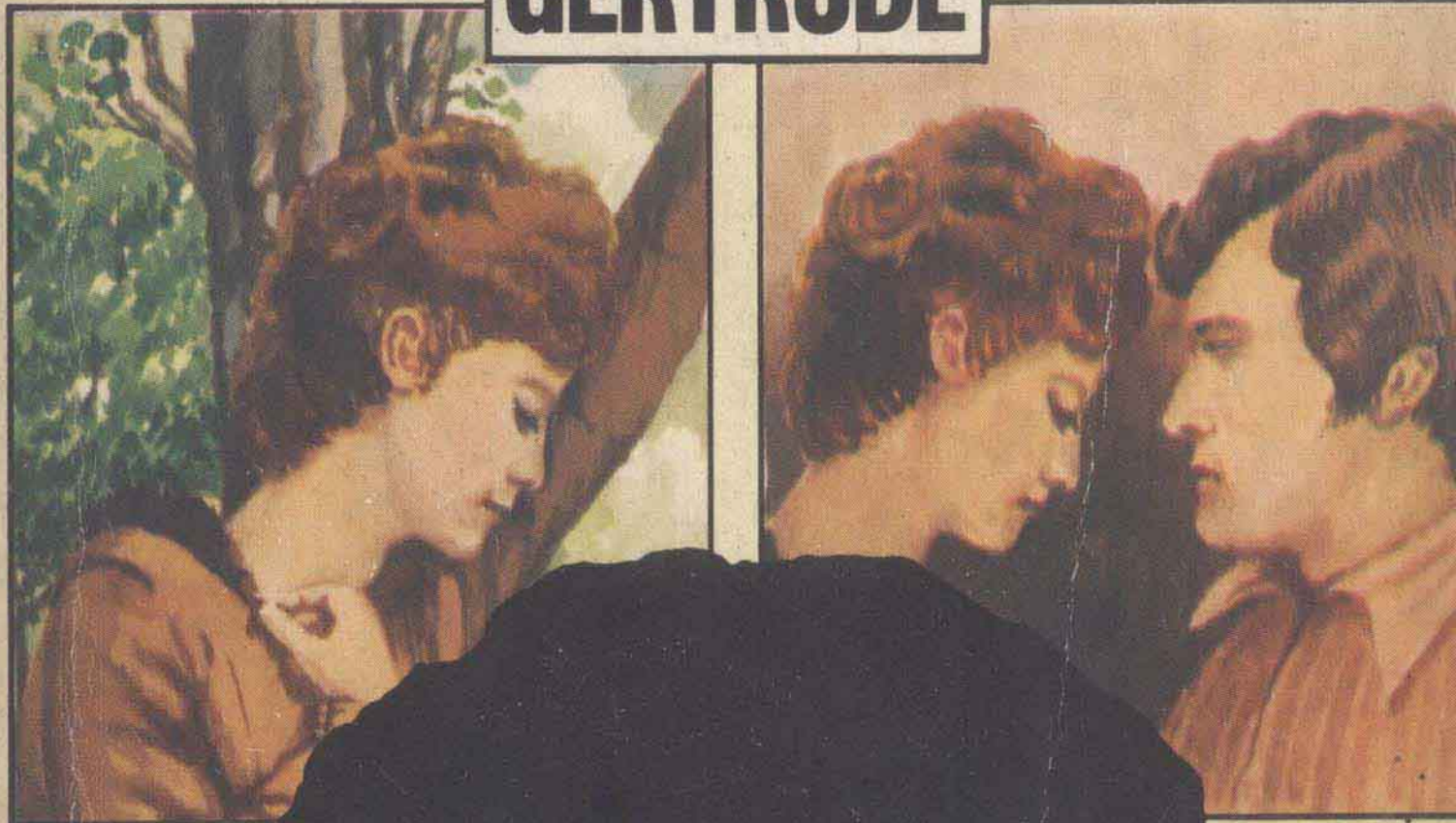




HERMANN

# HESSE

GERTRUDE



## Penguin Modern Classics

### Gertrude

Hermann Hesse was born at Calw, Germany, on 2 July 1877. Having begun his career as a bookseller in Tübingen and Basle, he started to write and to publish poetry at the age of twenty-one. Five years later he enjoyed his first major success with his novels on youth and educational problems: first *Peter Camenzind*, then *Unterm Rad* (*The Prodigy*), followed by *Gertrud*, *Rosshalde*, *Demian*, and others. Later, when as a protest against German militarism in the First World War he settled permanently in Switzerland, he established himself as one of the greatest literary figures of the German-speaking world. His humanity, his searching philosophy developed further in such novels as *Der Steppenwolf* and *Narziss und Goldmund*, while his poems and critical writings won him a leading place among contemporary thinkers. The Nazis abhorred and suppressed his books; the Swiss honoured him by conferring on him the degree of Ph.D.; the world paid homage to him, finally, by bestowing upon him in 1946 the Nobel Prize for Literature, an award richly deserved by his great novel *Das Glasperlenspiel* (*The Glass Bead Game*). Hermann Hesse died in 1962, shortly after his eighty-fifth birthday.





Hermann Hesse

# Gertrude

Translated from the German  
by Hilda Rosner

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## Chapter One

When I consider my life objectively, it does not seem particularly happy. Yet I cannot really call it unhappy, despite all my mistakes. After all, it is quite foolish to talk about happiness and unhappiness, for it seems to me that I would not exchange the unhappiest days of my life for all the happy ones.

When a person has arrived at a stage in life when he accepts the inevitable with equanimity, when he has tasted good and bad to the full, and has carved out for himself alongside his external life, an inner, more real and not fortuitous existence, then it seems my life has not been empty and worthless. Even if my external destiny has unfolded itself as it does with everyone, inevitably and as decreed by the gods, my inner life has been my own work, with its joys and bitterness, and I, alone, hold myself responsible for it.

At times, when I was younger, I wanted to be a poet. If I were, I would not resist the temptation of tracing back my life into the dim shadows of my childhood and to the fondly preserved sources of my earliest memories. But the possession is far too precious and holy for me to spoil in any way. All I will say about my childhood is that it was good and happy. I was given the freedom to discover my own inclinations and talents, to create my inmost pleasures and sorrows myself and to regard the future as the hope and product of my own strength and not as something fashioned by a strange power from above. So I passed unnoticed through the schools as an ordinary, little talented, but quiet scholar who was finally left alone as I did not seem to be subjected to any strong influences.

When I was about six or seven years old, I realized that among all invisible powers, I was destined to be most strongly affected and dominated by music. From that time I had my own world,

my sanctuary and my heaven that no one could take away from me or belittle, and that I did not wish to share with anyone. I was a musician although I did not learn to play any instrument before my twelfth year and did not think that I would later wish to earn my living by music.

That is how matters have been ever since, without anything being essentially changed, and that is why on looking back on my life it does not seem varied and many-sided, but from the beginning it has been tuned to one key-note and directed solely to one star. Whether things went well or badly with me, my inner life remained unchanged. I might sail for long periods across foreign seas, not touching a manuscript-book or an instrument, and yet at every moment there would be a melody in my blood and on my lips, a beat and rhythm in the drawing of breath and life. However eagerly I sought salvation, oblivion and deliverance in many other ways, however much I thirsted for God, understanding and peace, I always found them in music alone. It did not need to be Beethoven or Bach: it has been a continual consolation to me and a justification for all life that there is music in the world, that one can at times be deeply moved by rhythms and pervaded by harmonies. Oh, music! A melody occurs to you; you sing it silently, inwardly only; you steep your being in it; it takes possession of all your strength and emotions, and during the time it lives in you, it effaces all that is fortuitous, evil, coarse and sad in you; it brings the world into harmony with you, it makes burdens light and gives wings to the benumbed! The melody of a folk-song can do all that. And first of all the harmony! For each pleasing harmony of clearly combined notes, perhaps in one chord, charms and delights the spirit, and the feeling is intensified with each additional note; it can at times fill the heart with joy and make it tremble with bliss as no other sensual pleasure can do.

Of all the conceptions of pure bliss that people and poets have dreamt about, it seemed to me that the one of listening to the harmony of the spheres was the highest and most intense. That is where my dearest and brightest dreams have ranged – to hear for the duration of a heartbeat the universe and the totality of life in its mysterious, innate harmony. Alas! how is it that life can be so confusing and out of tune and false, how can there be lies, evil,

envy and hate amongst people, when the shortest song and most simple piece of music preach that heaven is revealed in the purity, harmony and close play of clearly sounded notes! And how can I upbraid people and grow angry when I, myself, with all the goodwill in the world have not been able to make a song and any sweet music out of my life! Inwardly, I am really aware of an imperative urge, of a thirsting desire for one pure, pleasing, essentially holy sound and its fading away, but my days are full of mischance and discord and wherever I turn and wherever I strike, there is never a true and clear echo.

But no more; I will tell you the story. When I consider for whom I am covering these pages and who has, in fact, so much power over me that she can draw a confession from me and penetrate my loneliness, I must give the name of a beloved woman, who is not only bound to me by a large slice of experience and destiny, but who also stands above everything for me like a star and sacred symbol.



## Chapter Two

It was only during my last year or two at school when all my schoolfellows were beginning to talk about their future careers that I also began to think about mine. The possibility of making music my profession and means of livelihood was really far removed from my thoughts; yet I could not think of any other career that would make me happy. I had no objection to commerce or other professions suggested by my father; I just felt indifferent towards them. Perhaps it was because my colleagues were so proud of the careers of their choice that an inward voice also told me that it was good and right to make a career of that which filled my thoughts and alone gave me real pleasure. It proved useful that I had learned to play the violin since I was twelve and had made some progress under a good teacher. The more my father resisted and worried at the thought of his only son embarking upon the uncertain career of an artist, the stronger grew my will in the face of his opposition, and the teacher, who liked me, strongly supported my wish. In the end, my father submitted, but just to test my endurance and in the hope that I would change my mind, he required me to stay on another year at school. I endured this with reasonable patience and during this time my desire became even stronger.

During the last year at school I fell in love for the first time with a pretty young girl who was in our circle of friends. Without seeing her often and also without strongly desiring her, I suffered and enjoyed the emotions of first love as in a dream. During this period when I was thinking about my music as much as about my beloved and could not sleep at nights through great excitement, I consciously retained for the first time melodies which occurred to me. They were two short songs and I tried to write them down. This made me feel bashful but gave me acute

pleasure, and I almost forgot my youthful pangs of love. Meantime, I learned that my beloved took singing lessons and I was very eager to hear her sing. After some months my wish was fulfilled at an evening gathering at my parents' house. The pretty girl was asked to sing. She resisted strongly but finally had to give in and I waited with great excitement. A gentleman accompanied her on our humble little piano; he played a few bars and she began. Oh, she sang badly, very badly, and while she was still singing, my dismay and torment changed into sympathy then into humour, and from then on I was free from this love.

I was patient and not altogether indolent, but I was not a good scholar, and during my last year at school I made very little effort. This was not due to laziness and my infatuation, but to a state of youthful daydreaming and indifference, a dullness of senses and intellect that was only now and then suddenly and powerfully pierced when one of the wonderful hours of premature creative desire enveloped me like ether. I then felt as if I were surrounded by a rarefied, crystal-clear atmosphere in which dreaming and vegetating were not possible and where all my senses were sharpened and on the alert. Little was produced during those hours, perhaps ten melodies and the beginnings of harmony, but I will never forget the rarefied almost cold atmosphere of that time and the intense concentration required to give a melody the correct emotion and interpretation and not just the rough conception of it. I was not satisfied with these small results and did not consider them to be of any great value, but it was clear to me that there would never be anything as desirable and important in my life as the return of such hours of clarity and creativeness.

At the same time I also had periods of daydreaming when I improvised on the violin and enjoyed the intoxication of fleeting impressions and exalted moods. I soon knew that this was not creativeness but just playing and running riot, against which I had to guard. I also realized that it was one thing to indulge in daydreaming and intoxicating hours and another to wrestle strenuously and resolutely with the secrets of form as if with fiends. I also partly realized at that time that true creative power

isolates one and demands something that has to be subtracted from the enjoyment of life.

At last I was free. My schooldays were behind me. I had said good-bye to my parents and had begun a new life as a student at the School of Music in the capital. I commenced this new phase with great expectations and was convinced that I would be a good scholar at the School of Music. However, this did not prove to be the case. I had difficulty in following the instruction in all directions. I found the piano lessons which I now had to take only a great trial, and I soon saw my whole course of study facing me like an unscalable mountain. I did not think of giving in, but I was disillusioned and disconcerted. I now saw that with all my modesty I had considered myself some kind of a genius and had considerably underestimated the toils and difficulties encountered along the path to an art. Moreover, my composing was seriously affected for I now only saw mountains of difficulties and rules in the smallest exercise. I learned to mistrust my sensibilities entirely and no longer knew whether I possessed any talent. So I became resigned, humble and sad. I did my work very much as I would have done in an office or in another sphere, diligently but without pleasure. I did not dare complain, least of all in the letters that I sent home, but continued in secret disillusionment along the path I had commenced and hoped to become at least a good violinist. I practised continually and bore hard words and sarcasm from the teachers. I saw many others whom I would not have believed capable of it, make progress easily and receive praise, and my goal became even more humble. For even with the violin things were not going so well that I could feel proud and perhaps think of becoming a virtuoso. If I worked hard, it looked as if I might at least become a proficient violinist who could play a modest part in some small orchestra, without disgrace and without honour, and earn my living by it.

So this period for which I had yearned so much and which had promised everything to me, was the only one in my life when I travelled along joyless paths abandoned by the spirit of music and lived through days which had no meaning and rhythm. Where I had looked for pleasure, exaltation, radiance and beauty, I found only demands, rules, difficulties, tasks and trials. If a



musical idea occurred to me, it was either banal and imitative, or it was apparently in contradiction with all the laws of music and had no value. So I said farewell to all my great hopes. I was one of thousands who had approached the art with youthful confidence and whose powers had fallen short of his aspirations.

This state of affairs lasted about three years. I was now over twenty years old. I had apparently failed in my vocation and only continued along the path I had commenced out of a feeling of shame and duty. I did not know anything more about music, only about finger-exercises, difficult tasks, contradictions in the study of harmony, and tedious piano lessons from a sarcastic teacher who only saw a waste of time in all my efforts.

If the old ideal had not secretly been alive in me, I could have enjoyed myself during those years. I was free and had friends. I was a good-looking and healthy young man, the son of wealthy parents. For short periods I enjoyed all that; there were pleasant days, flirtations, carousing and holidays. But it was not possible for me to console myself in this way, to lay aside my obligations for a short time and above all to enjoy my youth. Without really knowing it, in unguarded hours I still looked longingly at the fallen star of creative art, and it was impossible for me to forget and stifle my feelings of disillusionment. Only once was I really successful in doing so.

It was the most foolish day of my foolish youth. I was then pursuing a girl-student studying under the famous singing-teacher H. Both she and I were in a similar predicament; she had arrived with great hopes, had found strict teachers, was unused to the work, and finally even thought she was going to lose her voice. She had a light nature, flirted with her colleagues and knew how to infuriate us. She had the vivacious, gaudy type of beauty that soon fades.

This pretty girl called Liddy continually captivated me with her ingenuous coquetry whenever I saw her. I was never in love with her for long. Often I completely forgot her, but whenever I was with her, my infatuation for her returned. She played with me as she did with others, enticing me and enjoying her power, but she was only indulging in the sensual curiosity of her youth. She was very pretty, but only when she spoke and moved, when



she laughed with her deep warm voice, when she danced or was amused at the jealousy of her admirers. Whenever I returned home from a party where I had seen her, I used to laugh at myself and realize that it was impossible for a person of my nature to be seriously in love with this pleasant, light-hearted girl. Sometimes, however, with a gesture or a friendly whispered word, she was so successful in exciting me, that for half the night I would loiter with ardent feelings near the house where she lived.

I was then going through a phase of wildness and half-enforced bravado. After days of depression and dullness, my youth demanded stormy emotions and excitement and I went with some other companions of my own age in search of diversion. We passed for jolly, unruly, even dangerous rioters, which was untrue of me, and we enjoyed a doubtful but pleasant heroic reputation with Liddy and her small circle. How many of these urges could be attributed to genuine youthfulness and how many were a desire for forgetfulness, I cannot now decide, for I have long ago completely outgrown those phases and all extreme youthfulness. If I indulged in excesses, I have since atoned for them.

One winter's day when we were free, we went on an excursion to the outskirts of the town. There were eight or ten young people, amongst them Liddy and three girl friends. We had toboggans with us, the use of which was still a source of childish pleasure to us, and we looked for good slides in the hilly districts outside the town, on the roads and on the slopes of fields. I remember that day very well. It was extremely cold; at times the sun would appear for about a quarter of an hour and there was a wonderful smell of snow in the strong air. The girls looked lovely in their bright clothes against the white background; the sharp air was intoxicating and the energetic exercise in the fresh air was delightful. Our little party was in very high spirits; there was much familiarity and chaffing which was answered with snowballs and led to short battles until we were all hot and covered with snow. Then we had to stop a while to recover our breath before we began again. A large snowcastle was built and besieged and every so often we tobogganed down the slopes of fields.

At midday, when we were all extremely hungry as a result of our exercise, we looked for and found a village with a good inn;

we cooled down, took possession of the piano, sang, shouted, and ordered wine and grog. Food was brought and enjoyed enormously, and there was good wine in abundance. Afterwards the girls asked for coffee while we had liqueurs. There was such an uproar in the little room that we were entirely confused. I was with Liddy all the time who, in a gracious mood, had chosen me for special favour that day. She was at her best in this atmosphere of merrymaking and noise; her lovely eyes sparkled and she permitted many half-bold, half-timid endearments. A game of forfeits was commenced in which the forfeiters were released after imitating one of our teachers at the piano, but many also through kisses, the number and quality of which were closely observed.

When we left the inn and set off home, in high spirits and with much noise, it was still early afternoon but it was already growing a little dark. We again romped through the snow like care-free children, returning to town without haste in the gradually approaching evening. I managed to remain by Liddy's side and appointed myself her companion, not without opposition from the others. I drew her on to my toboggan and protected her to the best of my ability against the renewed attacks with snowballs. Finally, we were left alone; each girl found a male companion, and two young men who were surplus joined forces with much chaffing and mock belligerence. I had never been so excited and madly in love as I was at that time. Liddy had taken my arm and allowed me to draw her close to me as we moved along. She was soon chattering away; then she became silent and, it appeared to me, content to be at my side. I felt very ardent and was determined to make the most of this opportunity and at least maintain this friendly, delightful state of affairs as long as possible.

No one had any objection when I suggested another detour shortly before reaching the town and we turned on to a lovely road that ran high above the valley in a semi-circle, rich in extensive views over the valley, river and town which, in the distance, was already aglow with rows of bright lamps and thousands of rosy lights.

Liddy still hung on to my arm and let me talk, received my

ardent advances with amusement and yet seemed very excited herself. But when I tried to draw her gently to me and kiss her, she freed herself and moved away.

'Look,' she cried, taking a deep breath, 'we must toboggan down that field! Or are you afraid, my hero?'

I looked down and was astonished for the slope was so steep that for the moment I was really afraid at the thought of such a dangerous ride.

'Oh, no,' I said quietly, 'it is already far too dark.'

She immediately began to mock and provoke me, called me a coward and said she would ride down the slope alone if I was too faint-hearted to come with her.

'We shall overturn, of course,' she said laughing, 'but that is the most amusing part of tobogganing.'

As she provoked me so much, I had an idea.

'Liddy,' I said softly, 'e'll go. If we overturn, you can rub snow over me, but if we come down all right, then I want my reward.'

She just laughed and sat down on the toboggan. I looked at her face; it was bright and sparkling. I took my place in the front, told her to hold tightly on to me and we set off. I felt her clasp me and cross her hands on my chest. I wanted to shout something across to her but I could no longer do so. The slope was so steep that I felt as if we were hurtling through the air. I immediately tried to put both feet on the ground in order to pull up or even overturn for suddenly I was terribly worried about Liddy. However, it was too late. The toboggan whizzed uncontrollably down the hill. I was only aware of a cold, biting mass of churned up snow in my face. I heard Liddy cry out anxiously – then no more. There was a tremendous blow on my head as if from a sledge-hammer; somewhere there was a severe pain. My last feeling was of being cold.

I was relieved of the tumult and agitation which took place after the accident. For the others it was a painful time. They had heard Liddy shout out and they laughed and teased from above in the darkness. Finally, they realized that something was wrong and climbed carefully down to us. It took a little while for them to sober down and come to a realization of the position. Liddy



was pale and half-unconscious, but quite unharmed; only her gloves were torn and her delicate white hands were a little bruised and bleeding. They carried me away thinking I was dead. At a later date I looked in vain for the apple or pear tree into which the toboggan had crashed and broken my bones.

It was thought that I had concussion of the brain but matters were not quite so bad. My head and brain were indeed affected and it was a long time before I regained consciousness in the hospital, but the wound healed and my brain was unharmed. On the other hand, my left leg, which was broken in several places, did not fully heal. Since that time I have been a cripple who can only walk with a limp, who can no longer stride out or even run and dance. My youth was thus unexpectedly directed along a path to quieter regions, along which I travelled, not without a feeling of shame and resistance. But I did go along it and sometimes it seems to me that I would not willingly have missed that evening toboggan ride and its consequences in my life.

I confess that I think less about the broken leg than about the other consequences of the accident, which were far happier. Whether it can be attributed to the accident, the shock and the glimpse into darkness, or the long period of lying in bed, being quiet for months and thinking things over, the course of treatment proved beneficial to me.

The beginning of that long period of lying in bed, say, the first week, has quite vanished from my memory. I was unconscious a great part of the time and even when I finally recovered full consciousness, I was weak and listless. My mother arrived and every day sat faithfully beside my bed in the hospital. When I looked at her and spoke a few words, she seemed calm and almost cheerful, although I learned later that she was very worried about me, not, indeed, for my life, but for my reason. Sometimes we chatted for a long time in the quiet little hospital ward. Yet our relationship had never been very intimate. I had always been closer to my father. Sympathy on her part and gratitude on mine had made us more understanding and inclined to draw closer, but we had both waited too long and become accustomed to a mutual 'laissez-faire' for the awakening affection to show itself in our conversation. We were glad to be together and left some



things unspoken. She was again my mother who saw me lying ill and could care for me, and I saw her once again through a boy's eyes and for a time forgot everything else. To be sure, the old relationship was resumed later and we used to avoid talking much about this period of sickness for it embarrassed us both.

Gradually, I began to realize my position, and as I had recovered from the fever and seemed peaceful, the doctor no longer kept it a secret from me that I would have a memento for good as a result of my fall. I saw my youth, which I had hardly yet consciously enjoyed, grievously cut short and impoverished. I had plenty of time in which to realize the state of affairs as I was bedridden for another three months.

I then tried hard to conceive my position and visualize the shape of my future life, but I did not make much progress. Too much thinking was still not good for me. I soon became tired and sank into a quiet reverie by which nature protected me from anxiety and despair and compelled me to rest in order to recover my health. The thought of my misfortune tormented me frequently, often half through the night, without my obtaining any solace.

Then one night I awakened after a few hours of peaceful slumber. It seemed to me that I had had a pleasant dream and I tried in vain to recall it. I felt remarkably well and at peace, as if all unpleasant things were surmounted and behind me. And as I lay there thinking and felt light currents of health and relief pervade me, a melody came to my lips almost without any sound. I began to hum it and unexpectedly, music, which had so long been a stranger, came back to me like a suddenly revealed star, and my heart beat to its rhythm, and my whole being blossomed and inhaled new, pure air. It did not reach my consciousness; I just felt its presence and it penetrated my being gently, as if melodious choirs were singing to me in the distance.

With this inwardly refreshed feeling I fell asleep again. In the morning I was in a good humour and free from depression, which I had not been for a long time. My mother noticed it and asked what was making me feel happy. I reflected a while and then said that I had not thought about my violin for a long