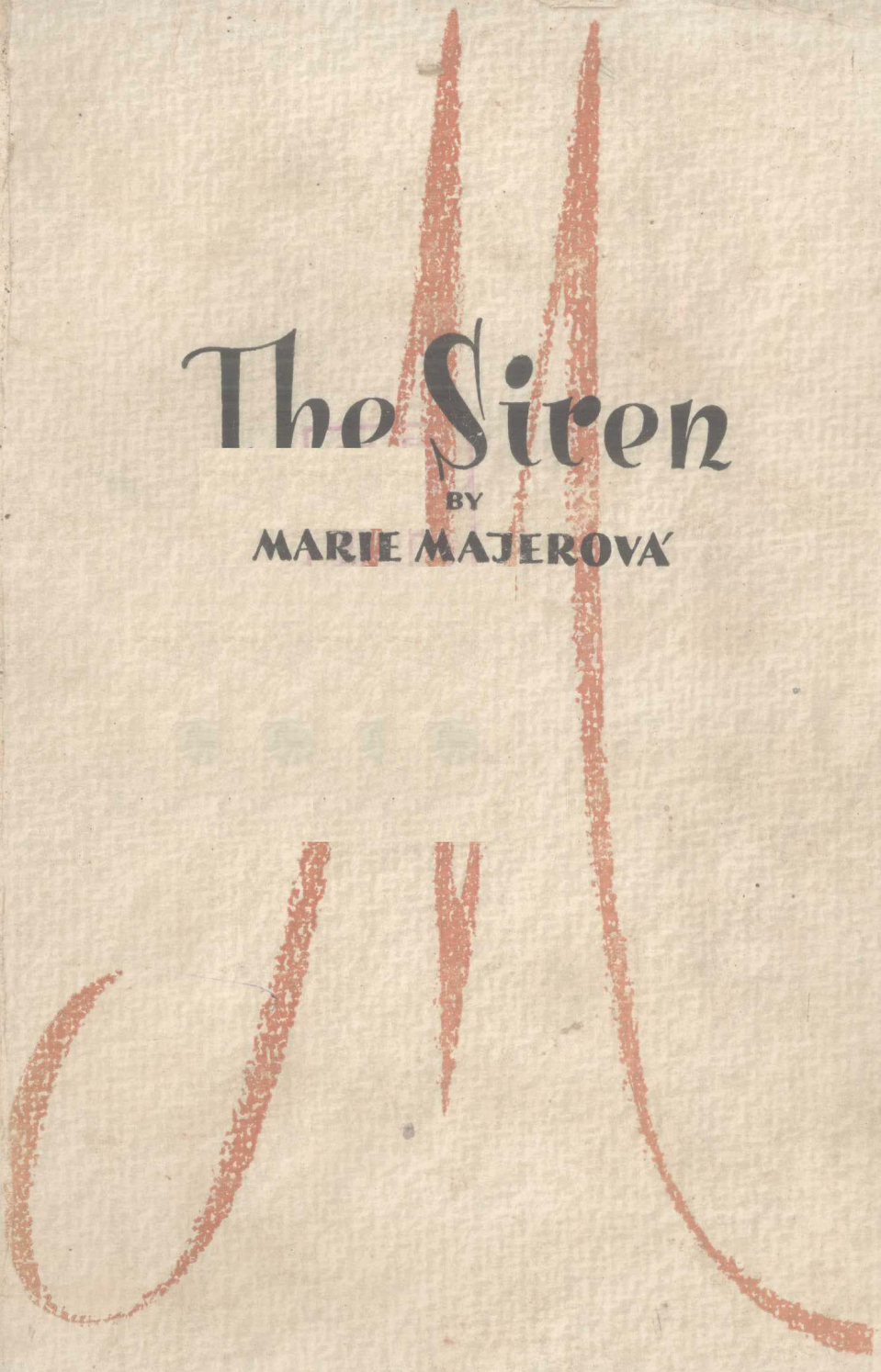
The Siren

BY

MARIE MAJEROVÁ



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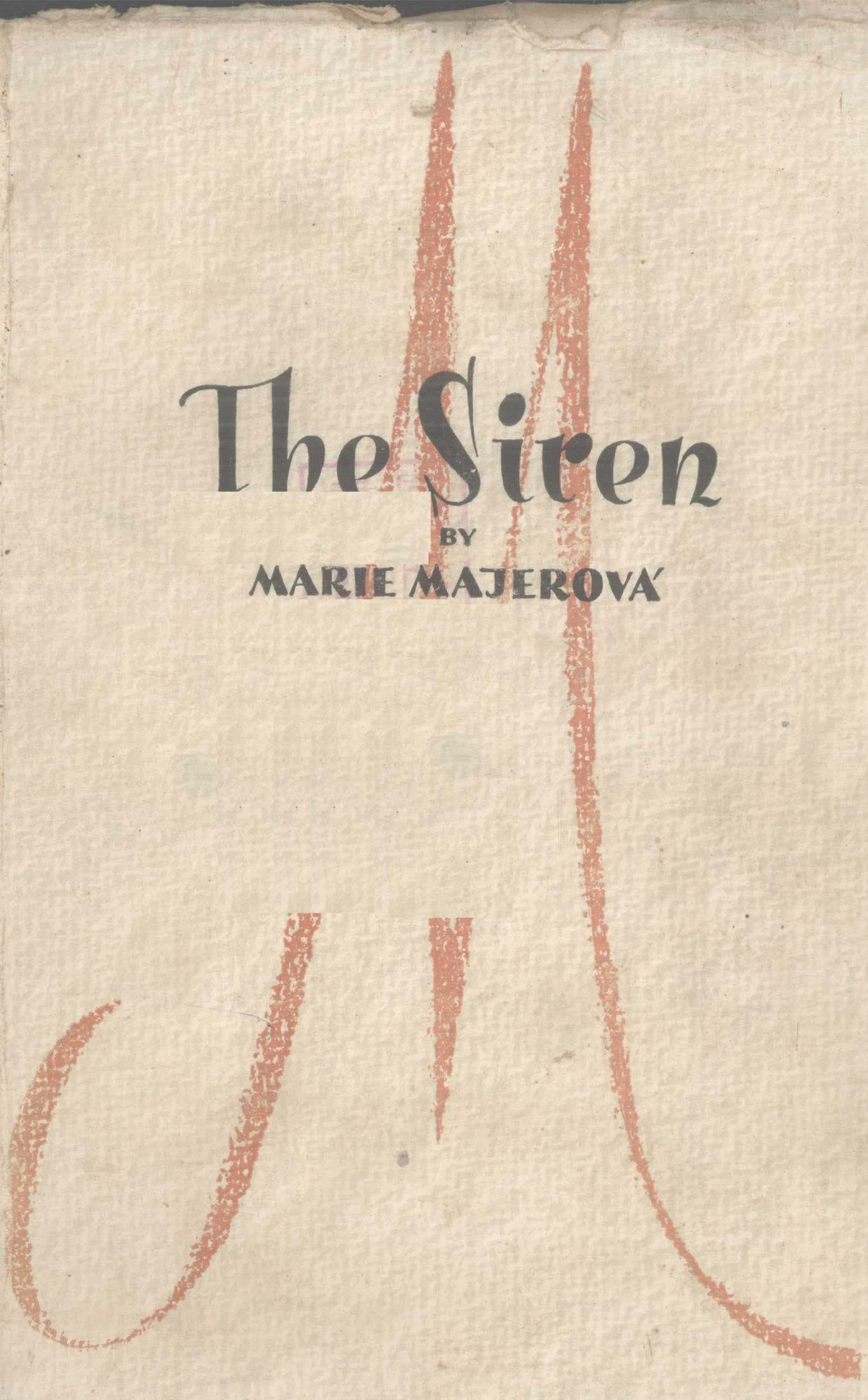

THE SIREN

A Novel by

MARIE MAJEROVÁ

TRANSLATED BY IRIS URWIN

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CHAPTER ONE

The Inventor.

"Hallo there! Anyone about?" called Christian Rienz looking in at the door of the charcoal burner's hut.

Nobody answered.

And yet the figure of a man was lying in a heap on the floor of the hut, lying twisted and cramped, rather than relaxed in sleep.

The young man turned away. The sight put an abrupt end to the delightful inward buoyancy which had lightened his steps as he walked through the forest. He was vexed, for only the churlish and embittered enjoy being put out of temper. He was aware that the other's mishap would prove full of demands on his own well-being. He was just backing out to save himself from this danger when the figure on the floor moved slightly. It was no corpse, at any rate.

Now he felt himself bound.

"What are you up to?" he shouted in the rough voice he had learned to adopt towards the ragged charcoal burners.

"I fell and hurt myself, begging your pardon."

"Bad luck. Can't you get up?"

"No", came from lips on which the down was barely visible.

The hut was getting lighter every minute. A pair of wooden clogs lay by the charcoal burner's side, one lying on its side and the other dark with blood.

"Were you shot by a keeper, or did you catch yourself in one of your own snares?"

The charcoal burner was still a boy, judging from the youthful look of his face, but he was full-grown and certainly taller

than Christian. Wearily he closed his eyes and the smooth face lengthened.

It was the gesture of a dying being begging for help. Christian threw aside his gun and felt the broken bone; the swollen flesh was badly lacerated and the place was spattered with blood. He gave the wounded man a drink from a jug standing by the door, found a sack on the bench to put under his head, and pushed a flat board under the wounded leg. He noticed that the hut was littered with tools of all kinds, planks fitted together, carts carved out of wood and strange bits of metal.

"What a kid, playing with toys," he thought to himself.

Aloud he said, "Lie still, I'll send the bonesetter to you."

He turned again in the doorway, felt in his pocket for his silver box and dropped a handful of pink comfits into the man's hand.

By this time it was broad daylight. In front of the hut slanting rays of sunshine lay across the clearing where a charcoal furnace was cooling down. The woods on all sides ended in a thick green line of beeches which gave the clearing the enclosed privacy of a room. All the more striking was the rawness of two beams propped against each other at an acute angle with the tip pointing over the clearing. The wood had been recently hewn, the raw flesh of the tree trunk was sweating great drops of resin and sap; the sharp scent stung the air and added a stimulating tang to the breath in the nostrils.

Christian glanced at his turnip watch with its enamelled cover, and quickened his pace. As he walked through the waking wood watching the conquering play of the sunlight on the pine needles and listening to the intimate whisper of the morning breeze and the creaking of the treetops as they swayed, his sense of well-being at once returned.

At the manor he dropped in to see the bailiff; he had a stretcher sent for the young man, and asked the bonesetter to let him know how the charcoal burner fared. He felt he had fulfilled his moral obligations. But the moment he stepped into the cheerful cretonne-hung room and caught sight of the

inviting muslin and forget-me-not china of the breakfast table, he forgot all about the forest, the charcoal burner and the bonesetter.

The great forests of central Bohemia with their hunting reserves and charcoal furnaces, their sandpits, saw-mills and quarries, were entirely the property of the Furstenbergs. From time immemorial the clan had been settled at the source of the Danube; there they looked after their estates, ruled their serfs, enjoyed the profits of their land and of the work of a great number of people, and thus amassed money without pause. Soon their great estates in Bavaria seemed too small. Like some Great Power they extended their property interests even beyond the frontiers of what was to become the German Empire. One of these colonies of theirs was their land in Austro-Hungary.

They were constantly embellishing their estates in the heart of Bohemia, putting up new ventures with the promise of still bigger profits, and acquiring various new estates by inheritance and marriage.

One of the pillars of the house of Furstenberg who from time to time spent a few days in the manor at Nizbor on the Beroun bought a small foundry on the advice of his sharp-witted Intendant. This official managed all the estates so successfully that although profits showed a sharp rise he himself grew rich out of all proportion. He owed his success to the fact that he followed with keen interest all that went on in the world of business. This enabled him to foretell the boom in cast-iron, which on account of its cheapness was beginning to oust wrought iron. He had just married off his daughter to one of his assistants, and wanted to get his son-in-law, Christian Rienz, put in charge of the new business.

"We're at the beginning of a new era", he used to say. "This will be better than making money on woods and fields."

The elderly Intendant worked for all he was worth, pulling strings from morning to night, giving liberally of his apparen-

tly inexhaustible energy. His son-in-law felt he was well taken care of beneath this powerful shield, and light-heartedly gave himself up to his pleasures. He was passionately fond of shooting and spent his time wandering through the boundless Furstenberg forests with a gun slung over his shoulder, protected from the wrath of foresters and gamekeepers by the family ties between him and the feared Intendant. As it happened, he never caused either damage or panic in the forest and his sport consisted in watching the secret life of the forest animals rather than in collecting trophies of the chase. Watching the grouse and listening motionless to their love-song was a thousand times more to his liking than stalking and killing deer.

He loved the boundlessness of the forest; its picturesque beauty satisfied his sight, it satisfied his ears' longing for soft melody and dramatic storminess, it satisfied his nostrils' delight in ozone and spiced breezes. He liked reading Schiller, and he felt the verse of the poet of pathos soar towards the mountain heights in the nobility of the centuries-old firs. There was something in him of the dying romantic century which felt at home in these surroundings. There were moments when he felt the forest in its fulness gave him complete satisfaction of soul. And then, each day brought new adventures, boundlessly varied in the boundlessness of the forest, whose dark wild beauty seemed to have grown into his soul.

He often sighed: "Only alone in the lap of nature does man feel himself a part of the Universe; everywhere else he is a prisoner!"

The twentyfour hours before he was due to be received in audience by the Earl he spent stalking a fine twelve-brancher which he knew usually came down to the meadow below the spot called "By the elm tree", probably to train for the coming autumn duel by challenging one of his rivals. The young man had spent several nights hiding in the undergrowth from early evening to dawn, but the stag had scented his presence and had not shown himself. This time he carefully stationed himself on

the leeward side, and succeeded at last in watching the whole of the beast's performance. Like the stanzas of a legendary epic the moments followed in noble succession: when he first heard the rustle of the branches brushed aside by the powerful animal breasting up to the clearing, when he strained his eyes to see its delicate and stately tread as it picked its way across the grass, the moment when everything trembled and the stag stood still just on the spot where the full moon shone between its antlers, and the supreme moment when the commanding voice of the belling stag told of its awakening desire.

Lying motionless on the ground Christian held his breath though he could feel the ants running to and fro across his body and the sharp scent of dying blossom crushed beneath his chin irritated his nostrils with the desire to sneeze. He lay without a sound until the wonderful sight was over, and when the stag went away without having caught sight of his rival the man got up and stretched his stiff muscles. In his mind he went over again the stag's every movement and repeated the strange belling call. So wrapped was he in his experience that he lost his way, and came to himself in the middle of the morning mist.

The young man stared round as if out of his senses; the world seemed topsy-turvy. He shook his head in amusement, for surrounded as he was by a soft cloak of mist he had no idea which direction to take. The shapes of the tree-trunks were vague and indistinct, for everything solid merged in the flowing morning mist, and he felt as if he was floating in a balloon. Instinctively he stretched out his hands to feel his way. He knew the spot well, and had always been sure he could find his way about the forest even in the dark. After wandering about for half an hour he realised he had been mistaken. He retained a clear impression of the meadow, a flat oval space between two steep slopes; the sharpness of the valley sides was softened here and there by old landslides overgrown with juniper trees and sparse undergrowth among the bracken. A tiny stream trickled across the meadow. The

little forest amphitheatre was shut in on all sides, except where it was entered from the valley which rose in terraces towards the level Kladno uplands.

Aroused by his laughter, the morning awoke. The forest revealed clumps of trees he had thought he knew in every detail. Over and over again he lost his way, and only realised for certain where he was when he came up against the back wall of the charcoal burner's hut.

Losing his way, and then talking to the injured charcoal burner, he had been delayed. He had barely time to eat his breakfast and change his clothes; his young wife and the maid had everything laid out ready, more impatient than he was himself.

Being received in audience by the Earl was more of a formal ceremony than the taking of a decision on something that was taken for granted. Neverthless the nobleman, whom Christian in spite of all rumours and anecdotes thought a mere moneybags, took him aback by the ironic tone which coloured his conversation, that of a courtier and scholar in one. Rienz felt that his astonishment was apparent in his face, but he could not help himself; his youth told against him, the impersonal mask of a nobleman's servant did not yet fit perfectly. The Earl seemed amused and not unfavourably impressed.

A flicker of satisfaction appeared beneath the Intendant's lowered lids as he replied with a silent bow to the words with which the Earl brought the audience to a close:

"Mind you take good care of my ironworks, young man, so that the Intendant does not lose by it!"

The very next day marked a complete change in the life of Christian Rienz, formerly Intendant's assistant, now commander-in-chief of the New Iron Works. Ore, fire and iron now filled his day.

At first he ruled through the works' experts from below and his father-in-law's support from above. The day was one long round, and only at night when his young wife pushed a leather

cushion under his head as he dozed on the sofa did he whisper, half asleep as he felt for her hand, "Adelaide! Die schönen Tage in Aranjuez sind nun zu Ende!"

There could be no thought of the forest and its pleasures. Only a Sunday ride in the dogcart, an occasional picnic to the Green Cross at the crossroads in the shade of the young firtrees, or a sledge ride at the New Year or at carnival time.

The Furstenbergs' Intendant, as usual, had backed a winning card. The ironworks found a good market for its cast-iron products; contractors putting up new houses ordered ornamental columns for the balustrades on stairs and balconies, wealthy citizens wanted graveyard crosses, growing cities needed lamp-posts, public institutions and the gentry called for medallions and bas-reliefs.

Stocks of the charcoal used for smelting ore in the blast furnace piled up on the island in the Beroun. And orders, calculations, offers, considerations, all piled up on the young manager's desk, while plans for improving and extending the works, plans full of a precise imagination, completely filled even those corners of his mind which used to be given over to unrestrained fantasy. The reader of poetry became a reader of technical handbooks and stock exchange news. The ironworks had been laid upon his shoulders like a yoke and now he dragged it along with every muscle and every fibre of his being enslaved, his gaze bent forward only to seek the best path to carry his load further without mishap.

The background of the works filled his horizon night and day, the sulphurous fumes of the furnace took the place of forest resin. He was deep in an important calculation when a breathless messenger brought word of fire on the island. The news shook him. He did not realise at first that one of the elements had gone over to the attack, so accustomed had he grown to seeing its forces tamed. He was the prisoner of this new world, making ever greater demands on his time and attention as he delved deeper and deeper into it. When he realised that this new world was in danger he suddenly found

his presence of mind and promptly had the alarm sounded throughout the works.

The smoke and fumes spread abroad by the wind roused the village and all the hamlets within reach. When Rienz arrived at the scene of the fire he put some sort of order into the lines of people forming up to pass water along a living chain to where the heat and the poisonous fumes of the conflagration made it impossible to breathe. But the water was swallowed up as if in an invisible furnace and disappeared without being of the slightest use — it just changed into hissing steam. From somewhere among the piles rose an unwavering column of thick black smoke which broke somewhere above the thick pall, for the smouldering flakes came dropping back to earth. Wisps of smoke came to rest on the meadow and the river, like muffled figures they formed a menacing, shapeless throng driven down to the smooth waters of the river, rolling before the currents of air. Hell-fumes enveloped everything. There was no sky, there was no earth, men were moving about in a thick black cloud, feeling blindly for the pails of water, handing them on to invisible companions, and the last in the line, those who were pouring the water out, fell to the ground unconscious. The chain of people kept moving forward, the unconscious were carried about aimlessly from place to place; some, stupefied by the fumes, staggered down to the river, where the women poured water over them and brought them round. Many of the volunteer firemen began to retreat, for the blazing conflagration would not let them get near. Brought to a standstill and beaten by the flames, they were merely pouring water on the blistering ground. Shouts and wrangling, words of encouragement, curses, groans of pain — it was indeed a terrible scene of confusion.

Christian Rienz himself was losing courage and regretfully calculating the extent of the damage as it would appear in the year's balance sheet, when he discerned a movement of hopeful excitement in the desperate aimlessness of the crowd.

He saw a wild-looking band of men breaking through the

curtain of smoke and soot, men with unkempt beards and faces blackened in their haste to block the charcoal furnaces so as not to spoil the coal, breathless from their race yet full of confidence in their ability to help.

"The charcoal burners!" flew from mouth to mouth.

The charcoal burners from the depths of the forest! The men who knew the most intimate needs of charcoal, the makers and connoisseurs.

Christian was moved by the impressive sight and watched with excitement as the men pushed heedlessly through the crowd making way for them with audible sighs of relief. Slowly and deliberately they surrounded the fire and began their safety measures, as if they were offering up sacrifice to the gods of fire. They called to each other with sounds that came not from human speech, but had been overheard round the charcoal furnaces in the menacing silence of the forest — sounds like the voice of the deer and the creaking of trees. And the flames which were consuming their charcoal to ashes behaved like a dog obedient to his master's voice. Slowly their explosive force was tamed, their darting tongues grew shorter; the fire died down like a blossom folding its petals in the evening, until as the darkness fell away and men began to greet each other with relieved faces, the fire was but purring and growling, vanquished, dying and powerless.

Pleased, Christian Rienz beckoned to the leader of the charcoal burners, the man who had first got his gang together. A tall, slim young fellow came up to him, several scars showing on the bared chest. The manager was held by the expression in his eyes, lit with a visionary gleam. And when his gaze came to rest on the smooth face ending in a pointed chin, there rushed upon him the memory of a clinging cloak of early morning mist in the forest, the sharp scent of resin and sap from freshly stripped trunks. The lost paradise of his forest wanderings clutched at his heart.

With a touch of longing in his voice he said:

"You are the man I found with the broken leg that day, aren't you?"

"That's long since healed, your honour."

The words brought Christian Rienz back to the present. The charcoal burners got their reward and disappeared into the forest again, quickly, for they feared for their charcoal furnaces. They vanished into their secret forest haunts, as unreal as witches in the suddenness of their appearance and disappearance. Only their leader was told to come to the office next day.

That was a memorable day for Joseph Hudets; from a mere charcoal burner he became a worker in the Furstenberg foundry. Never had he dared to dream of such good luck.

From his childhood he had lived more in the world of dreams than in reality. What he imagined was always more important than what he was doing. And yet he was a good charcoal burner. He understood his trade, in spite of the fact that he had been found deserted in the forest, left behind by a wandering musician's family who had never reappeared to claim him. Before he was a grown lad he knew how to look after a charcoal furnace: fixed the centre log, arranged the layers, banked over with twigs and clay. His ditches between the logs were calculated to a nicety and even grown-up charcoal burners took his advice on how to block the furnace. But that wasn't enough for him.

He built himself experimental furnaces of rods and tried out new ways of making charcoal. Often it all burnt to ashes, and then everybody laughed at him. He never got angry, nor did jokes at his expense worry him. He was able to laugh with his mockers and did not even blush, let alone pick a quarrel. When he grew out of the age of playmates and into the age of comradeship at work, he became the centre of attention, and many a charcoal burner imitated the way he saved himself drudgery while improving the weight and the blackness, the brittle firmness and the hollow sound of the burnt wood.

Even that wasn't enough for him. Once he nearly suffocated. He made an enormous smoke cap of metal and fitted it over an experimental furnace to see what the smoke deposits were like inside. When the furnaces called for little attention he would disappear for days on end, going round to the old charcoal burners and storing up in his memory what they had learned during a life of charcoal burning, and what they had heard from their fathers.

Another time, trying to rig up an overhead transport cable for the sacks of charcoal, he fell from a pole and broke his leg. It was a wonder he survived, for he was working at his invention in a lonely forest hut. That was the time Christian Rienz found him.

Joseph Hudets got over it and managed to get his cable rigged up. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it baulked. He was always trying to improve it. He had the help of two comrades of his own age who worshipped him and managed to inspire the whole neighbourhood with their own belief in his courage and ability. Thus his fame, like that of everybody else, grew through the help and devotion of others. He became the acknowledged leader of the charcoal burners without anybody quite realising how it had happened.

And so, when he saw the fire and learned that the stocks of charcoal were burning, he called his mates together. They came running from the woods and in his name passed the call on through the forest; thanks to him the self-generated fire was conquered. It was a real stroke of luck for the foundry, which was working at full pressure to keep up with orders. Without these supplies of coal the company would have suffered a severe loss.

The charcoal burners all felt that Hudets had been rightly rewarded and accepted his transfer to foundry work with satisfaction, chuckling into each other's ears, grown with blackened hairs:

"He'll open their eyes for them!"

"He'll give them more than they've bargained for!"