

Become Who You Are [1894]



Hedwig Dohm

In the mental hospital of Doctor Behrend, in the vicinity of Berlin, an old woman—she would have been about sixty—created quite a sensation. She had delicate, interesting facial features, thick, gray hair, and big green eyes. These eyes never stared into space. Either they were shiny, dead to the outer world, gazing inwardly at something, or they were fixed upwardly, sometimes with an expression of passionate, errant searching, sometimes fixedly absorbing some object with delight. The eyes of a seer. These wondrous eyes gave her head the character of a young woman.

Usually, she was taciturn. Occasionally, however, she started to talk; then it was as if she were carrying on a conversation with a supernatural being. Her words breathed immeasurable melancholy or dithyrambic ecstasy. She uttered profound and sublime thoughts in a form that was reminiscent of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*.

One would have believed that this old woman had been a great poetess and that an excess of intellectual provocation caused the mental disturbance. The opposite was the case.

The neurologist, who was interested in this peculiar form of insanity, made inquiries about her previous life. What he found out highly astounded him and was in no way helpful in solving the puzzle of her being.

Everyone who knew the spouse of the Privy Councilor Schmidt agreed that she had been a good, well-mannered, somewhat limited and philistine housewife, ignorant and totally absorbed with family life. She had two daughters who were long married. Her relationship to her children had always been exceedingly affectionate. In the last eight years [of his life], she had cared for her paralyzed husband in a self-sacrificing way. After his death, she may have felt somewhat lonely. She had been to visit her two married daughters. None of her relatives had noticed the slightest eccentricity in her, only that she appeared to them more taciturn than usual, which found an adequate explanation in her mourning for her spouse and in her loneliness.

But then, quite suddenly and disapproved of by her daughters, she had undertaken long trips totally alone, despite her limited means. Shortly after her return, her insanity broke out.

The invalid ate little nourishment; she visibly grew thinner so that her large, glimmering eyes had an uncanny effect in her pale face. It was as if the soul, which was gradually consuming, wanted to consume the body.

This old woman was peculiarly attached, with a certain tenderness, to the dress that she was wearing when she was brought to the sanitarium: a black, wool dress from the era of Marie Antoinette. Her full gray hair, a little curly on the ends, fell almost to her shoulders. In the course of the two years that she was in the sanitarium, it had become white. When they wanted to pin up her hair, she would not tolerate it. The same thing happened when they gave her a new dress in a different style to replace the worn-out one. She could not be moved to put it on. They had to have a new dress made for her in exactly the same style as the old one.

They had observed that every Sunday when the organ began to play in the small chapel, she took a wilted wreath of myrtle out of her dresser—the doctor conjectured, her bridal wreath. She decorated herself with the wreath and remained standing in the middle of the room, her hands pressed against her breast, her eyes fixed on the door with an anxious expression until the organ stopped playing. Then, softly shaking her head, she put the wreath away, covered her face with a black veil, and ate nothing the whole day.

A few times, she was visited by her daughters. They were equally as astonished as distressed by the sight of their mother. They found her totally changed in her expression as well as in her characteristics; and they were hardly capable of putting themselves into a filial relationship with this peculiar figure.

The invalid, when she saw her daughters, appeared to recollect something. Gradually, she fell into a restlessness that mounted so much that the doctor had to shorten the visit. When the daughters came a second time and the same agitation made itself known, he implored the young women to discontinue their visits for a while, but dismissed them with the hope for the recovery of their mother.

In the interests of psychological science, Doctor Behrend observed for two years now with intense attention this rare example of a disturbed mind, in which to a certain degree the disturbance had created a new individual. She felt the interest that he took in her and often fastened her eyes on him for minutes at a time, as with a searching question, a somberly painful astonishment.

One day, a young, southern German doctor, a fellow-student of the neurologist, came to the sanitarium in order to observe the patient. Doctor Behrend had told him about his interesting case and gladly complied with his colleague when he expressed the wish to see the patient.

Exactly on this day—it was a Sunday—the invalid completed her sixtieth year of life. Her daughters had sent flowers; the whole room was fragrant from them.

When the two doctors entered, she was in the process of spreading the flowers on the floor. She had put the dried-up myrtle wreath in her white hair. With its sharp brown stems and withered leaves, between which only here and there a couple of dead, yellowed blossoms swayed, it resembled a crown of thorns. In her hand, she held a dried-up passionflower.

And now something totally unexpected happened. When the old woman caught sight of the strange doctor, a deep red covered her face. Pulsing life came into her shadow-like appearance, flickering light into her eyes.

“Johannes!” she said, stretching out her arms towards the stranger. Her voice sounded soft and full.

“I knew that you would come. When I wear your myrtle, I see into the distance.”

She touched the wilted wreath with her hand. “On the day that you gave me the myrtle, you betrothed yourself to me. Come! Come! The white sacrificial flame is burning in the golden bowl, you know, in the cave on Capri. We dare not let him, the silver-haired one, wait. Don’t you hear the metallic singing out of the depths? The sirens! The blue sea, they wear it as a jewel on the chest. They sing with blood-red lips. They sing the bride’s song. And I kiss your soul.”

She had spoken the last words half-singingly. She kissed the wilted flower in her hand and, slowly, without looking at him, she walked towards him.

Doctor Behrend, embarrassingly touched by the scene and worried that something unseemly could happen, grabbed the madwoman by the arm and said firmly and loudly, as he otherwise never spoke to her:

“Come to your senses, Frau Schmidt, do not forget that you are an old lady.”

The invalid shuddered and looked first at him, then at the strange doctor. An uncanny change took place in her face. Precipitately, her pupils rolled in their sockets. Gradually, her features

appeared to stiffen. Like a burning piece of wood that suddenly collapses into itself and becomes ashes, so did her body collapse. She would have fallen to the floor had Doctor Behrend not caught her in his arms. A deep unconsciousness befell her.

They took her to bed. When the unconsciousness turned into sleep, Doctor Behrend returned to his colleague. He assured him that the invalid had never before had such an attack. Up until now, no trace of erotic insanity had shown itself in her. He would assume that she identified his colleague with her deceased spouse, except that he had been named Eduard.

“And, my name is Johannes,” the stranger countered with bleak ill-humor.

“Highly extraordinary! And that she imagined she knew you.”

“She does know me. I met her three years ago on Capri. Back then, her peculiar appearance attracted my attention. She wore the same dress, or a similar one as today.”

Doctor Behrend inquired as to whether he had known her fairly well.

Absolutely not. He did not remember ever having spoken with her. Even though she had sat across from him at the Hotel Pagano, she never participated in the conversation, however, it did appear to him as if she carefully paid attention to everything that he did or said. However, when he ran into her during walks, she avoided him.

Doctor Behrend asked him to share everything that he had found out about her.

“It’s not very much,” answered the young doctor somewhat hesitantly.

“She had a very shy nature, as if she were apologizing for her mere existence. It was odd, how different she could look, sometimes like an old woman, and then again she appeared to be barely a forty-year-old.

“Once, I met her down by the sea, at the small marina. She was having one of her young days. She bent over towards the

water and mumbled to herself with smiling lips. Then she saw me and became as red as she did just now. I always get embarrassed when I see an old woman blush. I wanted to talk to her and noticed to my astonishment that she suddenly looked very old and frail. Strangely, almost angrily, she looked and turned away with a twitching movement of her arms. She did not want to be disturbed at that moment, and so I moved on.

“Another time, I noticed her on a cliff that rose straight out of the sea, but not very high. She stood tall and upright with her arms towards the back, embracing the rock. Her glances wandered over the sea with the expression that people have who are finished with this world and are on the verge of seeking another one. I stood still, in a sort of anxious suspense fearing that she could want to throw herself down. I took her for a poetess who wanted to remain incognito. An inspiration occurred to me to pay her some sort of homage. Gently, I climbed up the cliff after her and threw a bouquet of myrtle that I had freshly picked at her feet. She did not appear astonished and did not look around, only smiled and pressed the bouquet to her breast. At this moment, she had the physiognomy of a young maiden, and I fervently regretted that she was not one.

“Coincidence is sometimes cruel. When I later entered the anteroom of the dining hall where the guests were accustomed to meeting, my neighbor at the dining table, a man who was considered witty, approached me and asked if, earlier, I had noticed our vis-à-vis on the cliffs, the pure Sappho from the *Fliegende Blätter*.¹ In a fit of that base cowardliness, which against better judgment sometimes makes us the echo of the unkindness of others, I answered: yes, I did see “Grandmother Psyche.”² Barely had this hateful mockery crossed my lips when an uncanny feeling crept over me that she was standing behind us. And, she was standing behind us. At this moment, with her opened lips and her large, staring, and horrified eyes, she reminded me of a Medusa. As if absent-minded, she took a step

towards me and with a mechanical movement, grabbed the passionflower that I held in my hand and went outside. I was determined to somehow make up to her the outrage I had committed. The opportunity was not granted to me. I never saw her again. The next morning she had departed. And that I now find her again here is embarrassing for me, very embarrassing.”

“No one is accusing you,” Doctor Behrend soothed him, and, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, he added: “anachronism of the heart. Nothing out of the ordinary for aged women with a far too sensitive nervous system.”

The stranger left the sanitarium after he had asked the neurologist to keep him informed about the further fate of the old woman.

When Doctor Behrend visited the invalid again, she was awake. She had asked that the window be opened widely. She signaled to the nurse to leave her alone with the doctor. She breathed slowly and deeply, as if, greedy for life, she were drinking the last drops from the cup of time with intense consciousness. Her nostrils trembled faintly. Her face was wholly spiritualized, every wrinkle had disappeared from it, as normally tends to happen only after death.

Even before she spoke, the doctor knew that her mind was healthy again. She held out her transparent hand to him.

“I thank you for all of your care and interest and for leaving me in peace. Here in your sanitarium, I was less insane than during my whole, previous life. I had great thoughts, saw wonderful things. Dreams and visions are indeed also life. As for Siegfried, the language of the birds was made known to me.”

She pointed to a book that lay on her bureau. He brought it to her.

“After the death of my husband, I began to write a journal. I entreat you to burn it. You are a psychologist. If you would like to find out, how and why my mind became disturbed then read it before you destroy it. No one else should read it.”

He took the book out of her hand.

“I don’t want to be buried,” she said after a pause. “Burned, in flames blazing upwardly—in flames! That I want.”

And again after a pause: “Many women die on the cross, but whether only to be dead, like the poor thief, or whether for others, like our Savior?”

Her eyes looked far away, large and radiant and remained fixed on the firmament, as if she were expecting an answer from above. Then she slowly lowered herself and assumed the expression of a prophetic, most inward-looking rapture. “Yes, for the others—the other women.”

She quietly moved her lips. The doctor thought that she was praying and silently left.

Scientific curiosity and personal interest in the dying woman impelled him to read the journal immediately. Here are its contents:



I must write—yes—I must! Otherwise—otherwise what? I don’t know. Am I suffering from heart disease? Or does it come from the brain? My insides are gnawing, the sensation of bleeding to death, of ceasing to exist, and then again the whirling restlessness. It is illness. What kind of illness?

Write I must, I certainly can’t talk to anyone. And if I could, I wouldn’t do it, no, never, not at any price. They would laugh, laugh about the old woman who should be happy that she has her dear life.

An old man—that is a person who isn’t going to live much longer, whose days are numbered, but he lives! An old woman, however, who is poor and a widow, she is as good as dead. What does she still live for! Is this what’s eating at me—that I’m still here, without knowing what for?

Yes, I must write so that I don’t go crazy. Had I lived three hundred years earlier, I would think that I were possessed. By what? By the devil? But indeed, there is nothing evil in me.

Is it death? Is the wild shuttering of nature shaking me before the end? No, I am not afraid of the end. It is nothing grinning or frightening that is wearing away at me. It is something powerful, wondrously urgent, something that wants to come to light. Labor pains? What wants to be born? I don't know.

But, quiet, quiet! Indeed, I write in order to become calm.

Actually, why don't I want to become crazy? Are there not hallucinations, captivating and beautiful? If I only imagined, I were—. Away! Away! I want to be rid of it, this confusion, the black shadows, and also the luminous visions.

Coldly and matter-of-factly, I want to examine how it happened that I became like this. I want to write a sort of necrology of myself. For I am at the end. Nothing more can come. I simply want to tell the life of Agnes Schmidt who is fifty-four-years-old and has been a widow for two years with an income—life insurance and pension included—of 2,500 deutsche marks.

Something worth telling in my life? Is there anything? And what would that be?

I sat for a long time with the quill in my hand and reflected. Nothing, nothing!

Am I really Agnes Schmidt? Quite certainly Agnes Schmidt? I certainly was until my husband died. And now, gradually, it seems to me as if Agnes Schmidt is fading more and more out of my sight, into the far distance, a shadow that is before me, and that shadow is becoming ever paler, thinner, and in its place—

Quiet! Quiet! Yes, how did this come about! Indeed, from the start, everything was always organized in fixed, good order. Such a very simple, good, totally full life, my life.

I want to begin at the beginning, with the child Agnes. A well-behaved, good child, a gentle and pretty child. I didn't cause my parents any worry. I did whatever was demanded of me. However, they preferred my brother to me, and when later, I never learned music or drawing or languages or anything else, it was because my brother received everything that could be saved

up for. Now I know why they preferred my brother: because he was the son and I was only the daughter. And the son caused my parents a lot of grief, the greatest when he died, barely twenty years old. I really believe that my parents would have found it less bitter if I had died. I couldn't help it. After that I became even more well-behaved; I barely had time and opportunity to be any different. My father's salary—he was chancellery councilor—was small. Mother and I, we faithfully held everything together. Barely twelve years old, I helped with the household, in the kitchen, with the laundry, in the free time that I had from school. I did it all gladly; it didn't even occur to me that things could have been different. All girls who lived in simple circumstances like we did, did pretty much the same. I was cheerful, content, and very healthy. The private school where I was sent must have been inadequate. I neither learned to write with correct orthography, nor really anything else. And yet, I thanked this school now and then for the Sunday mood when we read the classics. Once I had to recite a Schiller poem. I did it with glowing cheeks and so solemnly that the whole class laughed. I was ashamed of myself, never did it again, and from then on monotonously recited the poems just like the others did. I've apparently always been shy and sensitive.

Similarly, it excited me when at night the moon shone on my bed. I got up, climbed onto the table that stood in front of the window and, with a throbbing heart, looked out into the silver dream world. Once, the table toppled over. There was great clamor in the house. I was punished and learned that I had done something very bad. And when the moon again wanted to tempt me, I pulled the bedcovers up over my head. This is how they taught me to recognize what good and evil is.

I often dreamed that I could fly, far, far away, and as high as the sky is. Then I felt annoyed when I woke up. It had been so wonderful, the flying. My mother was certainly a good woman. I don't know much more about her. But I do remember that she

rigorously paid attention to order and decorum. What others did, that was the right thing for her. It would have bothered her had my dress been a few centimeters longer or shorter than those of the other school children. We dressed according to the calendar, not according to the thermometer. Mother essentially lived only for father. He was presumably somewhat stunted. He barely took any notice of me. He didn't know what he should talk to me about. I think that he considered only sons to be rightful children. Since parents are always disappointed when daughters instead of sons are born to them, girls had to be subordinate.

From time to time, I was allowed to read on Sunday afternoons. When I was grown up, I very much liked to read the novels of Marlitt. Marlitt's novels and, on holidays, apple cake with whipped cream, these were the extra joys of the daughter of the chancellery counselor.

When I was still very young, a young civil servant who worked in my father's office courted me. My parents thought that he would be competent and upright and suitable for the demands that a simple girl without means could make.

I liked him; an engagement I liked even more. What tempted me irresistibly, however, was the idea of the white satin dress with the train, of the myrtle wreath, and of the veil.

The marriage was still so far in the future. What it would be and what kind of demands it made on women—I didn't inquire after that. And no one taught me about it.

In composed cheerfulness, the four years of my engagement passed by. During this time, I was even much busier than before. I sewed my whole trousseau, as is proper. I learned to cook and do tailoring in order to be prepared for any situation, as my mother said. And evening after evening, my groom, Eduard Schmidt, came, and I cut and buttered bread for him, and he appeared to me to be so clever, because he knew so much about which I had no idea.

I really liked Eduard. I think that every person has to really like someone; for me, it was Eduard.

One day, however, it was time for the wedding. After a short honeymoon, we moved into a small apartment on the ground floor on Philipp Street. The rooms were located on the north side. The sun never shone in.

During the first part of our marriage, I was less cheerful and satisfied than during the engagement. I also didn't like Eduard as much. I suppose I am naturally cool and shy, and my inner being balked at much of what belonged to marriage. After I bore him two children, Eduard understood that his salary would not be enough for an even larger family. And from then on we lived peacefully and were together in a cloudless marriage that lasted thirty-three years.

Now, when I think back on him, I think that he was an honorable man, a total bureaucrat. He always held the opinions that befit him as bureaucrat, not out of love of service, but out of an honest sense of duty. He had as much affinity with my mother as possible. That he was convinced of his superiority over me, was somewhat willful and strict in his demands on me, did not disturb the peace of our marriage. I never opposed him, rather arranged everything quite as he wished it. In the interest of his family, he had bought a lot of life insurance. Thus, I had to work diligently in order to make ends meet. I did what I could; it also really wasn't too much. All young women who married bureaucrats without means did the same, and I did it gladly. Indeed, I was accustomed to it from my youth.

Towards evening, I was always ready to go walking with Eduard. But he usually walked so fast that it was strenuous for me. He liked to play cards before going to bed. I didn't like to play cards, was happy, however, that I could perform this small service for him. And then I was so tired and slept so well. I was healthy, my husband was happy and satisfied, my daughters Grete and Magdalene blossomed. Hearty and lively children whom I loved with my whole heart, but who saw to it that I had to work vigorously.

And one day was like the next. As if on wheels, my life glided forward, quickly, quickly. Only when I had to sit at the sewing machine for a couple hours straight did I get nervous. Then I sometimes had a strange sensation: a rippling shiver in my nerves. The thread broke, the needle fell out of my hand, and I sat up and took notice, as if something had to happen—what, I could not have said. A vague astonishment about the woman who sat there at the sewing machine and so busily stitched, a sudden feeling of estrangement in the dear, familiar surroundings. But it always passed quickly.

I really lacked nothing except that I got to read so seldom. I liked to read so much. But I consoled myself with the thought that when my girls were grown and married, then I would have time, so much time to read, whole afternoons and evenings.

And they did grow up, and I was able to read less than ever; because now they were socially active, and we had to reciprocate the invitations. Preparing their toilet, concern about meals totally absorbed my time. This was also the time when my heart often would become heavy, for the sake of my girls. One time I was afraid that Magdalene might become engaged to a foreigner whose character offered no guarantee for a good marriage. Another time, the idea tormented me that the young factory owner, who had courted Grete so long already and to whom her heart belonged, was perhaps only playing a reckless game with her. This anxiety and uneasiness lasted for three years, a time in which I was totally engrossed in the sufferings and joys of my daughters. In the end, everything turned out for the best. Grete married the young factory owner and Magdalene [married] a judge of the District Court. Distressing for me was that neither of the two stayed in Berlin.

Privately, I was somewhat amazed that they had given their affections to these particular men, but was happy indeed to know that they were well provided for.

More cheerful than ever, I looked towards the future. Grete and Magdalene wanted to visit us often in Berlin, and I wanted to go to them every year with Eduard.

And, we would travel. Eduard promised me that. Until now, we had only occasionally had a summer vacation for four weeks in the vicinity of Berlin, in Misdroy or in the Harz, where we regularly took the servant girl so that we could economize. This had resulted in some stress in the small bathing resort. I had always had twice as much work. And afternoons, when walks were taken, I was already tired and preferred to stay at home. And if I sometimes accompanied my family, my thoughts still remained behind with the servant girl, with the evening meal; also I had to exert myself in order to keep up with the others.

But now, everything was supposed to change. We now had enough money. We wanted to travel far, far away, to Switzerland, to Tyrol. Maybe even as far as Italy.

It wasn't meant to be. A few weeks after the marriage of our daughters, Eduard got sick. He didn't get well again. An infection of the spinal cord developed that bound him to his sickbed for eight years. For eight years I cared for him. With the loving stubbornness of a sick person, he would take nothing, not even the smallest assistance, from anyone except me. He ate only what I myself prepared for him and was even dissatisfied when I had to leave his sickroom. Poor, poor Eduard! Never had every hour of my life been so filled up as during this long illness.

There could be no talk of a trip to my daughters. Now and then, they did come to Berlin for a day. But everything was so sad in the house; I didn't even have a moment's time for them, so that I didn't dare to try to persuade them to stay longer, or visit more often. The factory of Grete's husband was in the vicinity of Magdeburg, and Magdalene's husband was a judge in a small town near Hanover.

In the course of the eight years, they presented me with four grandchildren. I didn't get to meet them.

I only fleetingly saw my sons-in-law when they accompanied their wives to pay a short visit to the poor invalid. I was so awkward and didn't know how to extricate myself to do something for their amusement.

Eduard died. I fervently mourned him. In the beginning, it was incomprehensible to me that he was no longer there, that I shouldn't take care of him any more. During the day, I ran restlessly through the rooms, always listening in case he should call me. Often, when I woke up in the night, I rushed to his bed. Everything around me was still, empty.

My daughters had wanted to take me with them immediately after the funeral. I had asked them to let some time pass until I had become more composed. They understood and let me be. I had to promise to come as soon as possible.

I was still busy for a few weeks with putting the estate in order; then I was done with everything. I was tired from the hard, daily work of the past years. I was allowed to take a rest. Why did rest not come? It didn't come. And now it started, quite gradually—the strangeness, the gnawing, the ruminating, the frightfulness.

I sat for hours and did nothing and just dozed. Then I ran from the apartment onto the street and from the street back into the apartment. I had such an aversion to visiting my daughters. And they couldn't come to me. Grete was expecting her third child; Magdalene couldn't be done without for one day in the household. She also knew that I was well, I lacked nothing. Right—what then?

I had written my daughters that I would come in the spring, but in the spring, I wrote that I wouldn't travel until fall. They answered that I would be heartily welcome at anytime.

Everything had been so good in my life. No serious trouble had afflicted me. Even Eduard's illness had been a gentle, gradual, almost painless extinguishing. At the last, he had been so happy when he received the title of *Geheimrat*. It had done me well to care for him.

Now, I learned to read, read as much as I wanted. And I read novels like the ones I used to love, in the style of Marlitt. I don't like them any more, I often read mechanically without knowing what. I am so indifferent as to what is in them, just so indifferent.

I did delicate embroidery for the clothes of my grandchildren. Grete and Magdalene thanked me very nicely for it, but I read between the lines that this kind of embroidery is no longer fashionable. And I should save my poor, old eyes, they write. My poor, old eyes, however, are still quite healthy. I gave up embroidering.

Now what? I water the plants, which have enough water; I wipe dust from the furniture on which no more dust lies. I often stand in the middle of the room and look around me for something to do. How ugly my room is! So many crocheted doilies! I pick up the crocheted doilies and put them down again. I've gone to the churchyard daily and have gathered the wilted flowers on Eduard's grave. When I noticed that these walks to the churchyard were just habitual, I gave them up.



Yesterday, I by chance glanced in the mirror. I was shocked. My God, I was indeed an old woman. So many furrows and wrinkles. How long have I been this way then? How quickly this happens. Until now I had never thought about my outward appearance. How inadequate and tasteless my dress was! The black, wool dress with the long waist, the narrow sleeves, and the black, silk apron on top of it, the small, outdated, white collar with the large porcelain brooch upon which Grete's image had been painted, but not at all like her. And the black netting over my flat, pulled-back, gray hair. Ugly and old! That was I.

I often stand for a long, long time at the window and watch people go by. Odd, that no one knows I am standing up here and watching. And no one knows about the other; no one knows anything about anyone.

Did I know a lot about Eduard? What did I even know? That he liked to eat scrambled eggs and ham and that I always had to put his handkerchiefs, numerically ordered, in the dresser, otherwise he would get angry.

And he,—what did he know about me? Indeed, there wasn't anything to know about me. We were both upright people who did their duty.

And this frightening restlessness now, as if I had a bad conscience? Whom did I ever hurt? Or is it after all because Eduard died? At first, yes, then the shuddering astonishment about it, his death, overcame me. But now, his facial features have almost disappeared for me. Violently, I want to press my thoughts towards him; they find nothing to which they can cling. I want to think about Grete, about Magdalene. But it is only the children, the young girls whose pictures I have in mind. I don't know their lives as women. I look at the photographs of my grandchildren whom I've never seen; I am incapable of grasping the idea that they are the children of my daughters.

I search for memories from my childhood, from my married life—nothing. I read Eduard's letters—nothing. The letters from my daughters—nothing! Nothing!

But still, there has to be something, anything at all.

I give up occupying myself. I don't sew any more. I eat what the maid happens to put in front of me. I don't water the plants anymore. They dry up. Incessantly. Indeed, I'm also drying up. When friends from the past visit me and they talk about household things, then it becomes difficult for me to listen to them; I don't comprehend that in the past my thoughts hung on such things as turning old material and utilizing left-over pieces of meat. If they come again, the old friends, I will just not be at home. I want to be alone.

There is something in me like a vague memory of something distantly remote, from a long, long time ago, perhaps only in dreams that I used to dream and have since forgotten.

Mignon,³ who had never seen Italy and yearned to go there with all the fibers of her heart. The feeling of *Heimat* was in her blood. Am I also such an old Mignon who—yes, I am searching for where I am at home. Strange idea: an old Mignon with a large porcelain brooch and—

I have found where I am at home, have to be at home—at my children's. That's where I belong. I won't write anymore. I want to meet my grandchildren. Magdalene was always so sweet and thoughtful. Perhaps I can talk to her about my shattered nerves. She will certainly have some advice. Tomorrow already, I will leave. I'm looking forward to it, I'm very much looking forward to it.



Eight weeks later.

I will indeed write again. It's only gotten worse. I was at Grete's for four weeks, and now I've already been at Magdalene's for a whole month. Now I know the kind of madness for which I have a tendency: paranoia. My daughters, my sons-in-law, my grandchildren, all of them dear, excellent, cheerful, and happy people, and yet—yet—I wish that I were away once more, at home. Everything in their homes is so solid, so matter-of-factly light as day.

Right away it made me nervous that my dear children still call me “*Mämmchen*.”⁴ “Mother,” a nice word, “*Mämmchen*” is as if they didn't take their mother seriously, only as a comical, old woman, as if it didn't oblige them to anything. And Eugen and Heinrich, my sons-in-law, call me “*Mamachen*.” Big, grown-up men, strange men call me mama. It must be the custom. Grete and Magdalene, were they really still wholly my daughters? They follow in their husbands' footsteps in all ways. They speak with their words, they hear with their ears, they have adopted their opinions and habits.

It is good, very good that it's like this. But, they have indeed become quite new people, and I am self-conscious in their pres-

ence. My slender Lenchen is now heavy, Grete has developed into an honest to goodness woman of the world, and she is so clever. I'm amazed at her cleverness. She intimidates me somewhat, and Heinrich, her husband, he intimidates me too. And yet, he has so much goodwill towards me, he's always concerned about my health. Whenever he took a walk or paid a visit with Grete, then he thought that it would not be something for *Mamachen*; *Mamachen* would certainly much rather stay at home with the grandchildren. He also didn't permit me to expose myself to the evening air. And since they usually ate outside, I preferred then to eat the evening meal an hour earlier with the children. He simply doesn't want to believe that I am still quite strong and healthy.

I noticed that it was often embarrassing for Grete when I spent so much time in the backrooms. I put her at ease, I liked being with the children best. It wasn't quite so. I just prefer being with the children. Despite all of the counter assurances, I still can't get rid of the feeling that I hamper my sons-in-law a little in their domestic intimacy, if for no other reason than because I am their mother-in-law and also old and a bureaucrat's widow.

In the beginning, I often went into Grete's living room in the evening and read the newspaper there. The paper crumpled somewhat. I saw that it made Heinrich nervous.

If only I could at least do something for them!

For my Lenchen, who lives in simple circumstances, it would certainly be agreeable if I sometimes looked after the children or the canning of fruit, which I used to understand so well. Ach, I have become so listless about everything and also just so tired. Recently, when I wanted to bake a cake for one of the children's birthdays, it turned out badly, and the children descended on me with teasing. They danced around me like small savages and sang the popular song: "We Don't Need Any Mama-in-Law." And everyone laughed, the grown-ups too, and it was also really so very comical and yet—yet—Here I am always only called the mother-in-law, and actually, I am here as mother.

Is it also not comical when the little ones complain about me to their mother: the *Großmämmchen* took cookies, or the *Großmämmchen* looked at herself in your mirror, mama. And little Walter does not want me to have strawberries at the dinner table because then there won't be any left over for his nanny.

How they all always amuse themselves by that. Not I. I've become dulled, dulled. I don't even have a sense for the naïve roguish tricks of the little ones. I had imagined a grandmother otherwise, the children probably did too. They didn't particularly like me. That's quite natural. I'm not funny, don't bring them anything, and don't know any fairy tales. Just because I am their grandmother and old—that's certainly no reason to like me. They often play war. Occasionally, I have to play the enemy whom they stab to death. And they stab and hit me so valiantly with their little wooden spears that they seriously hurt me, but I laugh and act as if I find it charming, otherwise they would tolerate me even less, the cute mad fellows. Recently, when I forbade little Walter something, he said: "I won't obey you, you're only just a widow!" Wise child. A widow, that means: your husband is dead. You've been buried with him. The Indian widow-burning does indeed have a deep meaning—still today, and not only in India.

I am no personage. I am no one, that's also why no one can like me, even my children—barely—barely.

Now and again, I wanted to give Grete advice concerning domestic organization. However, she asserted that it had been so in my time, now everything had become more efficient. Or she didn't answer at all, only nodded pleasantly to me and probably thought: why spend any time contradicting the old *Mämmchen*. And Magdalene, she always had the same objection: "But Eugen says—" and Eugen really does say—. Psst! Mother-in-law!

Once I had spoken with Grete about a naturopathic treatment for children's illnesses. Then Heinrich stood up and said: "Please, mamma, anything but medicine." And the next day, we talked about education for girls. Then he stood up and said: "Any-