

The Bird

The birds were easy to kill. Through the water they glided gracefully, but on land they toddled like a small child. The fishermen stopped at the cliffs where they nested, the ground frosted white with their droppings. One by one they plucked them off the rocks and wrung their necks or crushed their skulls; hundreds of birds, more than they could ever eat before sailing back to shore. Some they cooked on the island—birds in the pot and birds underneath, their black, oily bodies set aflame. Those remaining they skinned, salted and stored in barrels.

When a market opened for their feathers, hunters harvested at their nesting grounds all season long. After a while they stopped bothering to kill them, just let their naked bodies drift away on the current, their feathers later stuffing a pillow or adding a fashionable touch to a hat.

The birds became harder to find. On the outcrops, where they had once numbered in the thousands, hunters never found more than a dozen. But the rarer the birds became, the more collectors paid for a beak or a bone. Museums needed skins, innards, skeletons. Their numbers dwindled until no one saw a single bird in over a year. But last night, at the Red Lion Inn, the Dowell brothers overheard a fisherman: he had seen a nesting pair on Elders Rock.

The sea was always rough around Elders Rock. Nine men had already drowned near the island since the beginning of the year, one later tangling in a fishermen's net, his body

dark and bloated, like some monster from the deep. But if the brothers caught the birds, they would be paid over a year's wages by some rich man on the continent. Over a year's wages!

They left before dawn.

A thin fog hung over the island as the three men clamored ashore. When they walked through the mist, hundreds of seabirds took off into the air, their cries echoing across the water. But the two birds they wanted, large and flightless, stayed behind. On their nest lay an egg the size of a man's fist. Struggling to their feet, the birds waddled towards the edge of the cliff, their wings tucked in close to their bodies. If the men didn't act fast, they'd dive off the rocks and disappear under the waves. Colin caught the smaller bird, pinning it to the ground where it squawked and thrashed about, until William came from behind and snapped its neck. John, the oldest brother—with several missing teeth and dark patches on his skin—went after the larger bird, catching it seconds before it jumped into the water. But the bird did not cry out. It only flapped its wings three times, blinking at him, and John felt almost sorry for the beast before he knocked it over the head.

The brothers carried the limp bodies back to the boat, already arguing about how to spend the money they would earn. During the chase, Colin accidentally crushed the egg, its insides now oozing out over the ground—slime and yellow streaked with red. In the center, a tiny heart still pulsed and pumped, beating and beating and beating, until it stopped.

And then there were none.

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Graf von Sidell wanted to show the bird first to his wife. The Kaiser had arranged a private viewing tomorrow morning and the official unveiling at the *Naturkundemuseum* was in the afternoon, the bird's display cloaked behind a black velvet curtain and a fanfare played in celebration. But his wife would see it first.

The display housed an elaborate cliff—painted black, with specks of chalk for bird droppings—which the builders had sculpted from steel wires coated with several layers of cement and burlap soaked in plaster. A mural of the sea was on the wall and several stuffed seagulls hung from the ceiling. In the middle of the cliff stood the bird with an egg at its feet. It was the Graf's idea to have the bird mounted at an angle, so visitors might feel it eyeing them warily, as though they had disturbed the bird in its natural habitat. The egg he made himself, sanding down the gypsum plaster to the exact diameter and carefully painting the uneven stripes, each a swirl of muted brown. The project took nearly eight months to complete—it still smelled like fresh paint behind the glass.

His wife, the Gräfin, was fifteen years younger than he was. She had a heart-shaped

face, her feet inside her boots the dainty feet of a child. Since the day they met at Schloss Cecilienhof, she was his beacon, her smile like sun upon his face, her laugh more heavenly than Haydn. They got married at *Deutscher Dom*, their reception on the banks of the Havel, with white roses and wild boar and meaty bones for the Kaiser's dogs. A year later his wife gave birth to their first child, a son.

"The governess has grown quite fat and idle," he teased her a few months after the child was born. But the Gräfin only smiled. She preferred to care for the boy herself.

Last summer, at their residence on Usedom, the boy came down with scarlet fever (Charles Darwin himself had lost a boy to the disease.) They sent for doctors in Stralsund, Rostock, for their own doctor in Berlin, but nothing could be done: the boy died five days later. He was only two years old.

Sad. Very sad. But they would have others.

His wife smiled less now. She no longer played piano or recited Schiller by the fire when the days grew colder. But the Gräfin loved all God's creatures. Before they lost the boy, she had often helped him pin beetles and butterflies, catalog feathers and label bones. Their footsteps echoed in the hall while they walked, arm in arm, to the display housing the bird, his greatest treasure, the *Schmuckstück* of his collection, kept hidden until every detail was perfect. When they reached it, his wife gasped and broke away to take a

closer look.

“Oh, Eduard, it’s so beautiful.”

“Yes, isn’t it? Such a pity there are so few of them. I daresay, this one might be the very last.”

The Graf smiled while his wife placed her hand tenderly against the glass.

Her husband’s idea had worked: The Gräfin felt like the bird was staring at her with its one visible eye, willing her to leave. If it weren’t for the egg, it would have long since made for the waves. Its grooved beak, the white tuft of feathers on its cheek, the flipper-like wings at its side, the cliff, the soaring seagulls and wild waves of the painted sea. She traced her fingers across the glass as though to test if anything could separate their worlds.

When the Gräfin was a girl, she once found a baby crow. The bird had fallen out of a nest high up in the beams of an old barn on her father’s land, with pink skin still showing through the edges of its downy feathers. She carried the bird home in the folds of her dress where she fed it berries, scraps of meat and grubs she gathered in the garden. A few weeks later, the crow fledged and flew away, but it came to visit, sometimes bearing gifts: a bit of string, a

hair pin, a silver necklace with a broken clasp.

Crows often gathered on the roof of their summer house on Usedom, cawing from their waxy black beaks over the garden towards the Baltic Sea—how had the fox ever tricked a crow into believing he wanted to hear its song? She loved the garden at the house even more than the sea. The dahlias and calendula, the apple trees and sea buckthorn shrubs, blazing with little orange berries in the fall. Several times last summer Friedrich insisted they smell every flower in the garden. They took turns, the Gräfin lifting him up for the hollyhocks, laughing when she later brushed the pollen off his nose.

One afternoon, when they were picking berries in the forest at the edge of the garden, she turned away from him for just a second. But when she turned back, Friedrich was gone. The governess searched through the house, while her husband drove down the road in case the boy had wandered to town or—god forbid—the beach. The Gräfin ran through the woods and clearing, muddying her boots and ripping her skirt, her voice hoarse from shouting his name. She found him later, fast asleep in a hollowed out log, his little fist full of red currants, their juice smeared across his face and breeches. Even in sleep, his lips puckered at their surprising tartness.

Erdbeerzunge. She had read the symptom in *Stein's Book of Childhood Ailments*, under s for scarlet fever. The day before they had spent at the beach frolicking in the gentle waves, the governess helping Friedrich build a sand castle when the Graf insisted, irritated the

girl had spent the afternoon on a wicker beach chair, reading some silly romance while she stuffed her face with chocolates. A rooster crowed at a neighboring farm while his fever rose, his tongue spotted, red and bumpy, like strawberries on the fields in Werder.

For Christmas, the Gräfin had given Friedrich a snow globe, its outerbase made of mahogany engraved with his name. In the center was a snowman with black coal eyes, woolen scarf and carrot nose. Candles flickered on the Christmas tree when they shook the globe, the little white flakes swirling through the water, Friedrich laughing and shouting *noch mal, noch mal*. Two days later, he knocked the globe off the table. It shattered when it hit the ground, the smell of the water inside strange and medicinal.

When Friedrich was ill, the Gräfin felt as though she held a similar globe in her hands. In the center was a woman sitting next to a small boy on a bed. The bed clothes were in disarray, the boy's white blonde hair pasted to his forehead. How strange and sad the scene! Although she wanted to watch the snow rise and descend, settling over the miniature figures, she dared not shake the globe.

She spied the boy's swollen tongue through the glass—the tiniest red dot, peeking out between his teeth—and thought of strawberries. How lovely it would be to stroll down the fields and pick the plump berries, gathering them in her basket to eat later with cake and sweet cream. Inside the globe, the doctors frowned and whispered—*nothing to be done, no hope*

I'm afraid—but outside a scent wafted through the room, sweet and grassy, as if someone had opened a flask of strawberry wine.

Friedrich lay there, dying, and all she could think about was how much she craved a certain summer fruit.

The Gräfin yanked her hand back from the glass, as though suddenly it had grown hot to the touch. Trembling, she cried out, the sounds she made more animal than human. The Graf rushed over and put his arm around her shoulders.

“My dear, come come. It’s only a bird.”

He handed her his handkerchief and she wiped her eyes, smiling weakly. When she had recovered, they turned and left the hall without a word.

A thin layer of snow blanketed the ground while they walked to their car, the Gräfin’s head bowed and hands clasped in front of her, as though in prayer. When the driver opened the door, Graf von Sidell helped his wife into the car, her small, gloved hand limp in his. The Graf loved his wife for her tender heart. Yes, he did. Of course. He did.

The driver shut the door and they headed off to dinner.