

**Susanne Popp**

# Loreley

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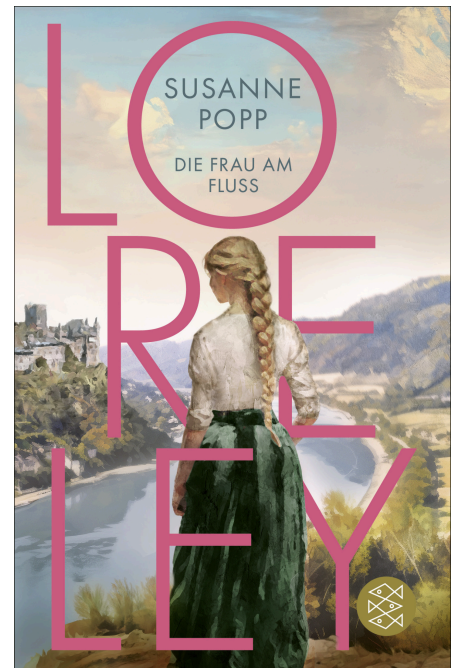
**The air is cool and it grows dark as the Rhine calmly flows.**

The picturesque town of Bacharach on the Rhine, 1817. Julie is a penniless orphan living with a foster family that shows her no love. The girl's beauty repeatedly causes jealousy and quarrels. The village priest even feels downright threatened by Julie and demands that she leave Bacharach, so her guardian decides to marry her off to the ferryman of Sankt Goar.

Simultaneously, near Karlsruhe in Knielingen, Johann is the son of an unsuccessful gold panner. After losing his family, he tries to make a living on the Great Rhine Straightening Project led by the ingenious engineer Tulla. Eventually, he signs up to become a skipper, navigating the meandering currents of the Rhine.

Julie and Johann meet and fall in love, yet their young happiness can not escape the ghosts of the past. Destiny, under the shadow of the mythical Loreley rock, takes its course.

**Susanne Popp**, born in 1967, is the daughter of youth hostel wardens - so rosehip tea, served in large metal pots, is a cherished childhood memory. Today, however, she prefers a cup of Darjeeling or Oolong, and she loves travelling to the tea regions of the world. Her writing career began with private biographies. Telling the story of the Ronnefeldt family was therefore a very personal business for her, since this traditional company combines her longing for distant lands with the fate of a family in Germany in the 19th century. The author lives with her husband and daughter on Lake Zurich in Switzerland.



## Summary

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### **Bacharach – a symbol of Rhine Romanticism**

Bacharach in 1817: Sixteen-year-old Julie (Juliane) Winter, a maid at the Löwen inn in Bacharach, has many admirers but also enemies and envious women who feel provoked by her beauty and allure. Time and again, she has to defend herself against assaults by men, for example by her guardian, the Löwen landlord Herbert Klein. His son Gregor Klein also desires the beautiful Julie, but has no hope of ever being allowed to marry the girl of humble origins. She is an orphan, the daughter of a charcoal burner, and the only living relative is her blind sister Ruth Klein, who lives alone in the ruins of Stahleck. Pastor Wurm, the parish priest of Bacharach, a religiously fanatical, uptight man, also has his difficulties with Luise. He can hardly resist her and therefore sees her as the devil. One night, he grabs her in his madness and chops off her long blonde hair with an axe. That night at the inn, Julie receives help from an unexpected source. The day before, she had met Elisabeth Merkens, an educated middle-class woman from Cologne, who is married to Peter Merkens, a successful merchant and member of the Cologne Chamber of Commerce. Elisabeth has a romantic soul and is very familiar with the literature of the time, the poems, ballads and novels. Bacharach, with its medieval buildings and the Werner Chapel, which has been repeatedly painted by English artists, appeals to her greatly, and she is immediately fascinated by the unlikely pair of sisters, Julie and Ruth. Elisabeth helps Julie to hide her mutilated hair, but has to promise her that she will promise to leave the matter alone and not take action against the priest. She only half-keeps this promise and continues to investigate the vicarage on her own. Later, she witnesses Julie saving the life of a farm labourer who is in danger of drowning in the

Rhine and is met with hostility from the local inhabitants. From then on, she decides to keep an eye on Julie.

### **Knielingen near Karlsruhe, Tulla and the straightening of the Rhine**

The story of Johann König from Knielingen, who has lost his parents and younger brothers to illness and now also has to bury his sister, is told parallel to Julie's story. The people of Knielingen were affected by the straightening of the Rhine and excavation work began in the village in 1817. Johann witnesses a meeting in which the villagers announce that they will use violence to defend themselves against the "cut-through", which they see as penalising them because of the loss of their fields. At this point, he has already decided to leave his hometown. He is hired by the engineer Tulla to work on the Rhine breakthrough and meets a man called Xaver Freigang, who forces his friendship on him. When one of his former neighbours turns up at the construction site with a gun and threatens Johann, Xaver stabs the attacker first and then murders him. Johann is in shock. He helps Xaver to make the dead man, Urban, disappear into the Rhine ditch. Johann then turns his back on Knielingen for good, and we meet him again years later when he has become a boatman on the Rhine. Julie, on the other hand, was forced to leave the town by the priest of Bacharach and the innkeepers. She married the ferryman from Sankt Goar, Ludwig Lenz, by whom she had a daughter, Mathilda. The plot resumed with the funeral of her husband, a ruffian for whom she did not mourn, in 1824. The friendship with Elisabeth Merkens has endured. The merchant visited Julie regularly and repeatedly tried to convert her to bourgeois virtues. But Julie is unruly and refuses to be patronised. Julie and Johann meet for the first time during a near-accident on the Rhine and become friends over time. Julie's bad experiences with men have made her cautious, but Johann is reserved and gives her a lot of space, so that she comes to trust him. He has almost lost his courage to face life due to the loss of loved ones - he assisted his seriously ill sister to die - and the murder of Urban,

but regains it through his friendship with Luise. A tender love affair develops between the two. Then Xaver reappears on the scene and poses a threat.

### **Family dramas and entanglements**

Xaver holds a key position in the novel because he represents the connection to Julie's biological mother, whose mother, whose death is described in the prologue - without mentioning her name. He knew her and took a locket that belonged to her. This locket contains a sealed glass vial with a document inside, the secret of which is only revealed in volume 2. Xaver now reveals parts of this history to Julie and confronts her with the fact that her mother was not in fact her biological mother. She doesn't want to believe him at first, but her sister Ruth, who overheard a conversation between her mother and the vicar when she was a child, finally confirms the story. On New Year's Day 1825, in the freezing cold, events come to a head: Julie is first threatened by Xaver, then walks through the snow from Sankt Goar to Bacharach to talk to her sister and is attacked and beaten by Gregor, who is now married. Johann, who has been stuck in Bingen with his ship, finds Julie in Bacharach, terminally ill. Ruth, Johann and Gregor, who deeply regrets his attack, fear for Julie's life. Eventually she recovers and Johann proposes to her. Many secrets are revealed, including Urban's murder and Julie's mysterious origins. Julie and Johann marry in 1827 and Julie returns to Sankt Goar. She and Johann have a second daughter, Lisette.

### **The beginnings of steam navigation on the Rhine**

Elisabeth Merkens, Lisette's godmother, is involved in many of the developments in the story. The development of the Rhine is told from her and Johann's perspective. Her husband, Peter Merkens, was instrumental in the founding of the first steamship company (1826) on the Rhine, which later became the Köln-Düsseldorf later emerged. We are therefore present at the trial voyage of the steamer De Zeeuw on the Rhine in 1824. Elisabeth

is also friends with Bettine von Arnim, who will play an important role in volume 2, and meets the poet Clemens Brentano, who wrote the Ballad of the Loreley in 1801. In the course of the novel, she gathers more and more evidence that Clemens Brentano could be Luise's father, without directly voicing her suspicions. Towards the end of the novel, Julie disappears from the Loreley plateau under unclear circumstances. Johann is unable to solve the mystery of her disappearance, but suspects that Xaver is behind it. At the funeral service in 1828 - Julie was never found - Elisabeth makes another discovery that leads her to believe that Brentano is connected to Julie.

**1817**

**1**

The church clock struck midnight as Julie slipped out of the house, heading towards the banks of the Rhine. It was mid-August, and although the days were growing shorter, the nights were still mild and too precious to be wasted on sleep. Without a lantern and barefoot – her wooden clogs would have made too much noise – she hastened through the dark lanes of Bacharach. The moon would be rising soon, but for now the darkness offered Julie the cover she sought. Julie crossed the dam and reached the sandy expanse alongside the Rhine. The pebbles nestled against the soles of her feet, interspersed with both prickly and soft grass that gently tickled her skin. Finally the river lay before her, lit only by the stars, its deep, dark blue barely contrasting with the black shores. She cast her gaze toward the small island of Werth, where the crowns of ash, elm and the large maple tree were silhouetted against the starry sky. Apart from the mournful call of an owl and the rush of water over rocks and stones, everything was quiet.

Julie moved closer to the river, her toes digging into the damp sand as the full moon rose over the vineyards, gradually casting its light over everything. Julie inspected the strip of sand and pebbles illuminated by the pale light. The beach was bordered by the dam, where the new road built by the French lay, and in front of it, there was a row of bushes and low young trees. There was no one to be seen; she was completely alone. She pulled the top of her dress over her head, shed the snug-fitting bodice, and then loosened the cord that held the skirt at her waist and let it slide to the ground. Now all she wore was her undershirt. She loosened the long, tightly plaited braid until her blonde hair fell in waves around her shoulders and in

front of her chest, and ran her fingers through it. After folding her clothes, she stepped into the flowing waters.

The water was cool but not too cold and, standing thigh-deep, Julie lathered her hair with a sage soap made by her sister Ruth. She carefully placed the precious soap on the shore before gliding into the water and letting the current carry her as she gazed up at the sky. She relished the feeling of being gently cradled and carried along. Julie knew the river like no one else. She knew the exact location of the rocks that demanded caution, and at what point downstream there was a convenient exit to the shore. She let herself drift, thinking of her mother Grete. Her beloved mother. She had not been a fearful person, and yet she had always wanted to keep her daughter away from water. When they had argued, which rarely happened, then always because Julie had secretly gone to the river again. Julie herself didn't really know where her great affection for the Rhine came from. No one had ever shown her how to stay afloat, she just could. To her, it felt as natural as moving on land, and eventually even Mother had conceded that it was not dangerous. Julie could also dive and hold her breath for minutes. "You must surely be an enchanted fish," Ruth had once said, not meaning it to be a joke, or at least she had a very serious face when she said it. But that was how her sister was. She often invented stories and then claimed with a deadly serious expression that they were true. Sometimes Julie didn't know what to believe - but despite that, they were very close, and Julie worried about Ruth, whose life was hard, just as Ruth worried about Julie, now that Mother was dead.

Julie's life had changed significantly since then. Now she worked as a maid at The Lion Inn because the innkeeper, Herbert Klein, had been appointed her official guardian. He was a distant relative of her father, whom Julie had never met because he died before she was born. Since their mother's death, Julie and Ruth were orphans.

It was regrettable that the innkeeper of all people had to be her guardian. She couldn't stand him. He drank too much, was lazy and threw his weight

around. His wife Gundel did most of the work. She wasn't quite as bad as he was, but she was very strict and often unfair to Julie. Only their son, Gregor, was actually quite nice. He was a handsome boy, blond and blue-eyed and, at seventeen, a year older than Ruth and her. Ruth had always been in love with him, but Julie knew her sister didn't stand a chance.

And then there was little Frieda. Julie felt warm thinking about her. Frieda was only nine years old and had lost both parents in quick succession. She had come into the innkeeper's family around the same time as Julie. Her mother was Gundel's younger sister, and although Frieda was a close relative, they did not love her. Julie was the only one who cared for the girl. She comforted her when she cried, took care of her hair and clothes, secretly gave her treats from the kitchen and willingly made room for her when she slipped into bed with her at night. They supported each other, making Julie's life a lot more bearable.

Julie realised that she had drifted too far. Turning onto her front, she swam against the tide with sweeping arm strokes until she found her footing at the point where the sandy beach area merged with the towpath. Diving under the surface of the water once more, her head and body submerged, she kept her eyes wide open so she could see the moonlight gleaming on the surface above her – but the light was faint, and the depths of the nocturnal Rhine remained impenetrable even to her sharp eyes. She held her breath and imagined being a water creature. Then she resurfaced, gasping, and deeply inhaled the pure, flower-scented air.

Gregor stood hidden behind a bush, watching Julie emerge from the water about ten feet away like a nymph. Moonlight sparkled in her hair and on her wet skin. Although she was not completely naked, the flimsy undershirt clung so tightly to her body that it clearly revealed the curves of her figure. As she stepped onto the shore and walked along the beach towards her clothes, Gregor saw her slender waist and round bottom as she bent over

to pick up her soap – and then as she turned slightly towards him, he noticed the dark triangle of her pubic hair.

Excitement gripped the young man. With bated breath, he watched as Julie dried herself with a cloth when he suddenly realised that he himself was being watched. The bright oval of a face, framed by dark curls, floated in the distance like a bodiless entity in the bushes, dark eyes fixed intently on him. Startled, he ducked down, but then he realised that it was Ruth, Julie's sister, who was crouched up there. She couldn't see him he thought – she was as blind as a bat.

Relieved, he didn't bother hiding or try to sneak away, he just had to try to be as quiet as possible. Gregor looked over again to Julie, who stood slightly bent forward, squeezing out her long wet hair. He briefly wondered what blind Ruth was doing alone down here on the banks of the Rhine, but when he looked back over to her, thankfully she had disappeared.

And then he stopped thinking. He watched Julie fasten her bodice over her undershirt, accentuating her slender waist. Briefly she turned her beautiful face towards him, and as she tilted her head back to quickly braid her hair again, her mouth opened, revealing even, white teeth. For a moment, Gregor held his breath, thinking she had spotted him in the moonlight, but then he was certain she couldn't see him in his hiding place. Julie bent down for the next piece of clothing and, in vain, Gregor wished that she would remain standing there for a while, clad only in her undergarments and bodice, for she was already slipping into her skirt and soon after slid her arms and head into her top – and at that very moment, someone softly whispered his name right by his ear.

"Gregor?"

He jerked back in surprise. "Ruth! Damn you. Must you startle me like that?"

She stood right beside him. How had she managed to sneak up on him so quietly? He felt caught out by Ruth, and the heat that he had just felt elsewhere now turned into a flush of embarrassment. Unlike many other young men he knew, he was extremely shy around girls and women. He had desired Julie for as long as he could remember, yearned for her, dreamt of her night and day – but he had only fantasised about intimate encounters with her. The notion of actually sleeping with a girl or a woman scared him. Every time he thought about it, his manhood shrank in size and he was mortified by how it looked then.

“What are you doing here? And how did you even know that it was me?” he exclaimed angrily.

The blind girl smiled. “Do you like her?”

“What? Who? What are you talking about?” he said and hoped that Julie could not hear them where she stood.

“My sister, of course. She often comes here on warm summer nights.”

“Not today. No one is here today,” he said, while he watched Julie leaving the sandy river bank a short distance away.

Ruth smiled and kept her dark eyes fixed on him, as if observing him, and not for the first time Gregor thought that she might be pretending to be blind – fooling the entire town of Bacharach for years.

He shook off the thought. “I need to sleep now. I have a long day tomorrow,” he mumbled.

Ruth shifted her cane, which she had held in her right hand and used to detect obstacles, into her other hand, feeling for his arm.

"Can I tuck my arm into yours?"

"Of course," Gregor said, appeased.

He looked at Ruth pensively from the side. While he found Julie beautiful and enchanting, Ruth made him uneasy. Her ability to simply appear out of nowhere was quite disturbing.

"What are you doing in the middle of the night down by the Rhine?" he asked.

Both girls, Ruth and Juliane, known to everyone as Julie, were wards of his father. While his parents had taken Julie on as a maid, blind Ruth had continued living in the ruins of Stahleck Castle.

"Oh, nothing in particular. I just took a walk and then sat down on the shore and must have fallen asleep," she replied casually.

"Are you coping all right up there alone?" he asked.

"It's fine, thank you for your concern," Ruth replied evasively.

"If you like, I can walk you home," he said.

"Thank you, Gregor, that would be kind." Ruth gently pressed his arm.

As they walked, his thoughts returned to the scene he had observed in the moonlight earlier. He couldn't imagine a more beautiful woman than Julie. At the age of ten, twelve, she had been small and plump with a sweet doll-like face, quite childlike. But then she had shot up in a short space of time; her proportions had changed and now, at sixteen, she was tall and slender. Even in the simple garb of a maid, she was a delightful picture capturing the eye of everyone in the tavern. Yet she seemed unaware of

her beauty. She was neither coy nor vain, but rather modest. Sometimes she was a bit childish, perhaps, but she could hardly be blamed for that. It was her way of coping with having to work so hard and yet possessing nothing.

“How is Walburga?” Ruth’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

He looked at her in surprise. Although they had been walking arm in arm, he had almost forgotten her presence, and now Ruth had reminded him of his betrothed!

“She is well, I think,” he replied, embarrassed.

“When are you getting wed?” Ruth continued.

“Not so soon.”

Before them now lay the ruins of the former Werner Chapel, perched on a small ledge above the town. It was dedicated to Saint Werner, who had allegedly been killed by an angry mob. Gregor always got the creeps from the high window openings at night that stared like dead eyes into the landscape. He walked past a little faster and was relieved when they left the chapel behind.

“Are you looking forward to the wedding?” Ruth asked.

She just wouldn’t let it go.

“Of course,” he lied monosyllabically, as he couldn’t possibly tell her the truth about his betrothed and the fact that the prospect of the wedding – or the wedding night – terrified him.

They covered the rest of the way in silence and now stood within the dilapidated walls of Stahleck Castle.

“Good night, Ruth.”

“Thank you for escorting me.”

She smiled at him in her inscrutable way and the next moment she was gone.

[...]

## 2

Rolandseck, 15th August 1817

*Dear Bettine,*

*Two days ago, Peter and I set off on our Rhine journey, and at the last moment, the post in Cologne brought me the copy of your brother's Rhine Fairy Tales, for which I sincerely thank you. You write that the Loreley appears in it. I am very curious to read about it, and, yes, I admit – and please forgive me (and don't tell my husband) – that I still have a bit of a soft spot for your big brother. I will never forget how we two girls sat in the arbour, and I showed you the love poem I had written for him. It was the year that Peter became a teacher at our institute, but in my defence, it must be said that I hadn't met him personally at the time. And I also had no idea how much you yourself worshipped Clemens. You were only thirteen at the time – and his sister, at that! But God knows, our dreams back then fuelled our girlish years without causing any damage.*

*You say that I should finally dare to send something of mine to the newspaper, and your confidence that my journey to the Rhine could at least yield a small harvest in this regard gives me hope. "Travel Letters From The Rhine" – what do you think of that as a title? So please be so kind as to keep everything I send you from my travels. I don't have enough time to make copies and as I believe that the authenticity of the experience comes across much better when narrated to a real person rather than an imagined audience, I will entrust my travel description to the post and send it to you in Berlin. You can send it back to me at your convenience, maybe even with a few annotations. That would be heavenly.*

*Sending you and your loved ones a heartfelt embrace,  
Your devoted friend,*

*Elisabeth*

Elisabeth set the quill aside, dried the ink with blotting sand, and walked over to the tea table to pour herself a cup from the samovar. She and her husband Peter had found lodgings with a widow who had two guest rooms for travellers and a lovely small salon, which was also her private living room. It was four o'clock now. Peter had had lunch with a business acquaintance in Bonn and should have been back an hour ago. Elisabeth was growing restless.

"Is your husband someone famous, Mrs Merkens? I read his name in the newspaper this morning." The widow opened the Rheinische Nachrichten and held the page out to Elisabeth. It was an article from Cologne, and indeed, there was his name: Peter Merkens.

"He is certainly always very busy," Elisabeth replied evasively. She put the letter to her friend Bettine von Arnim into an envelope and decided not to wait any longer for Peter, but to take a walk on her own.

Elisabeth took the writing materials to her room, put the guidebook in her pocket, opened up her parasol and was soon walking along the shore of the Rhine. The weather was splendid, and as she watched the locals going about their daily tasks, she had to admit how disappointed she was that she was waiting in vain for Peter again today. This Rhine trip was supposed to be a holiday for the couple – instead it was downgraded to a sort of business trip. “The opportunity is favourable since I’m here anyway,” Peter had said as he kissed her on the cheek before setting off.

Elisabeth walked along the road upstream. To her left, a little below the road, the river flowed calmly, revealing none of its raging power. After she had walked briskly for a good fifteen minutes, she turned and admired the picturesque scenery that now unfolded before her. A boat sailed downstream, driven by a gentle breeze, and a barque was crossing from Nonnenwerth Island to the shore. The cloister of the Benedictine nuns peeked out from among the tall trees; you could see the upper rows of windows, the roof, the tower and the chapel – and right at that very moment, the bells began to ring from there, a friendly chiming that sounded louder and then softer to her ears. Was it already time for vespers? Elisabeth sighed. She would have liked to have pay the island and the pious women a visit.

She allowed her gaze to wander and compared what she saw with the information in the guidebook. A steep hill rose to her left, dominated by a large stone arch, a remnant of the medieval Rolandseck Castle, and to her right, across the island and the Rhine, she could see the ruins of Drachenfels Castle on the opposite bank. Behind them rose, like a row of loyal vassals, the hills of the Siebengebirge.

Elisabeth found a tree stump suitable for sitting, settled down on it, and flipped through the pages of the book, searching. There it was, Lord Byron’s famous poem: “The Castled Crag of Drachenfels”.

The castled crag of Drachenfels  
Frowns o'er the wide and winding Rhine.  
Whose breast of waters broadly swells  
Between the banks which bear the vine,  
And hills all rich with blossomed trees,  
And fields which promise corn and wine,  
And scattered cities crowning these,  
Whose far white walls along them shine,  
Have strewed a scene, which I should see  
With double joy wert THOU with me!

She lowered the book and looked back at the Rhine. Butterflies fluttered away over the path, the air smelled of herbs, and the vineyards on the surrounding hills offered a view that promised richness and indulgence. A doubly joyful image! Oh, if only Peter were here now to enjoy this moment with her!

Lost in thought, she flipped through her guidebook again. Elisabeth loved reading, and when she and Peter first met, they used to spend entire nights discussing novels and plays, such as Goethe's *Werther* and Schiller's *Robbers* – or the fairy tales by E.T.A. Hoffmann, the works of Novalis, Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim.

But nowadays Peter had no time at all for literary pursuits. He no longer read novels, had lost interest in the theatre, and Elisabeth's attempts to become an author had almost completely passed him by. His focus was solely on his work, and although he certainly loved Elisabeth very much and was willing to fulfil almost every material wish she might have, he could barely comprehend her enthusiasm for atmospheric reading and her yearning for soulful experiences in nature.

A cloud pushed its way in front of the sun, which now stood noticeably lower in the sky, reminding Elisabeth that she had been out and about for quite some time. She headed back.

Peter had finally returned, but he hadn't missed Elisabeth, which put her in an even worse mood, and he wasn't alone. He had brought his business friend from Bonn, a Mr Noelle. The landlady had recommended an inn for the evening, which the three of them now visited to eat pork in aspic, bread with butter and a salad of cucumbers and radishes. This was accompanied by a wine, a fine Riesling that tasted tangy and fresh. Elisabeth made an effort to make friendly conversation, which wasn't so difficult, since Mr Noelle turned out to be a pleasant person, not only a merchant but also a refined individual. He was highly attentive to her and serious the whole time, making Elisabeth involuntarily wish to say something that would make him smile.

"I would have liked to have to take the water diligence up the Rhine but my husband was against it. He feared it wouldn't be comfortable enough for me," she said, turning to him.

A water diligence was a kind of stage coach on the water, a boat pulled upstream by three or four horses from the shore. The diligences had a structure in the middle that protected against sun and rain, and in the front and back a terrace area where passengers could linger in good weather, and there was even a cabin for two people where, for a corresponding fee, you could sleep. Elisabeth imagined travelling this way romantic.

"What is your opinion, Mr Noelle?" she asked, secretly hoping he would agree with her.

Unfortunately, he didn't. "I have to agree with your husband," he said. "Sailing against the current is very cumbersome. It can be entertaining with the right company, but it is tiresome. Certainly not suitable for a lady."

"Moreover, towing often leads to serious accidents," Peter said.

"Really?" Elisabeth asked.

"The horses break loose and pull the boat to shore, or, even worse, then go into the water, putting the boat and passengers in danger."

"Oh my goodness," Elisabeth said, thinking, however, that Peter was probably exaggerating to dissuade her from her idea.

"I have lost goods to the river myself, the financial damage was huge." Peter took her hand and squeezed it. "You have reminded me of something, my love. I have been thinking about founding an insurance company for freight shipping for a while now. I must definitely look into it." He winked at her.

Elisabeth withdrew her hand and gave him a playful slap. "Thinking about making money when talking about accidents – only men can do that," she said with feigned indignation, looking at Mr Noelle.

"Please don't lump us all together, dear Mrs Merkens," he said, showing a hint of a smile. "It will surely not be long before we can sit on a steamship and comfortably travel up the Rhine to Mainz, Strasbourg or Basel."

Peter immediately responded to this remark. "Did you also see the Prince of Orange last year, Mr Noelle?" he asked with enthusiasm in his voice.

"Yes, I did. What about you, Mrs Mertens, were you there too?"

Elisabeth nodded. Like half the residents of Cologne, she had stood on the banks of the Rhine in June last year, admiring the Dutch ship that had come up the Rhine incredibly fast against the current, without sails. It had

been powered by two large paddle wheels in the middle of the ship, driven by a steam engine. Peter and his friends and business partners had talked of nothing else for days. The steamship was originally an English packet vessel, previously operating on the Thames under the name Defiance. The English were leaders in this field; steam-powered liners operated in Australia and America too.

However, Elisabeth had not been as awestruck as her husband by the sight of the steamship. The black smoke billowing from the chimney had been impressive, but not necessarily picturesque. As much as she wished to travel on the Rhine, this would be a disadvantage in summer, when one preferred to wear light colours. She imagined how much the summer dresses of the ladies must suffer with this mode of transportation. However, objections of this kind always fell on deaf ears, so she didn't even bother bringing it up.

"Where does your confidence in steamships come from, Mr Noelle?" she asked. "As far as I know, the Prince of Orange originally intended to go all the way to Frankfurt but had to turn back in Bonn."

"It might not have worked at the first attempt, but the English have very capable engineers. They won't rest until the engines are strong enough."

Peter nodded in agreement. "It is the business of the future. I completely agree with you, Mr Noelle."

"Will you invest when the time comes?"

Peter nodded. "I can well imagine it."

"You want to become a shipowner?" Elisabeth asked, laughing. "That's news to me." She was used to a lot from Peter, but he had never spoken about owning a ship before.

“Not right now, of course, it will probably be a few more years.”

“But isn’t the current of the Rhine much too strong? I can’t imagine an engine being built that can replace six or eight horses,” Elisabeth objected.

“Not six or eight, more like twenty or thirty,” Peter corrected her.

Elisabeth pictured a carriage pulled by thirty horses and couldn’t help but laugh even more. “That’s impossible. How is that supposed to work?”

“The engine power of steamships is indeed described in horsepower, Mrs Merkens,” Mr Noelle said. “The Prince of Orange has twelve.”

“Twelve! And it still wasn’t enough?”

“When towing, you calculate two horses per ten tons of cargo,” explained Peter. “So for a hundred tons, you need ten to twelve horses. The Prince of Orange probably weighs at least that much. This shows how effectively the technology is already working. However, the current on the Middle Rhine is much stronger than further north, where the riverbed is wider.”

“Then it will probably stay that way with steamships only operating up there in the north,” Elisabeth said.

“The Rhine is, of course, very different from the Thames or the Hudson,” Mr Noelle said. “The Middle Rhine, in particular, is famous its strong currents. I am still convinced that steamships will one day navigate the entire Rhine. All you need is a larger engine.”

“And good quality coal to generate a sufficiently high heat,” Peter added.

“You might end up becoming a steamship captain yourself,” Elisabeth teased.

The next day the three of them continued their journey. Elisabeth slept poorly that night and was quite tired the next day, which was why she nodded off during the journey. When the carriage suddenly came to a stop with a jerk, she would have almost fallen forward off her seat if Mr Noelle, who reached out both hands to her, hadn't caught her. Elisabeth was surprised to suddenly be so close to him. She smelled the soap he had used to shave that morning, and there was a slight scent of pipe tobacco emanating from him, which she liked. Peter didn't spoke, even though she liked to see a man with a cigar or pipe in his hand. Mr Noelle smiled at her, and for a few seconds they looked into each other's eyes – his had a warm brown tone – and then he bent down to pick up the handbag that she had dropped. The confusing moment of closeness was gone. Elisabeth adjusted her cloak, smoothed her skirt and sat back up straight.

Peter hadn't noticed anything. He was busy working out what had happened out on the road because the carriage was still stationary, and loud voices could be heard from outside. He leaned his head out of the window.

“What's happened?” he shouted to the coachman up front.

“A carriage has broken its axle. They need to move it out of the way,” the coachman said in a relaxed tone. While Peter resignedly took out his newspaper, Elisabeth and Mr Noelle got out to look around.

The road was on top of a dam, and a bit further down was the towpath, which, however, was not allowed to be used by carriages, although such a prohibition was not really necessary as it was in very bad condition, churned up and muddy. A boat, pulled by a single horse, came into view behind some bushes.

“One horse power,” Elisabeth said, winking at Mr Noelle, alluding to their conversation from two days ago. It wasn’t a particularly subtle remark, but the corners of Mr Noelle’s mouth lifted slightly. “Exactly,” he said.

He really was rather handsome, Elisabeth suddenly thought and wondered that she hadn’t noticed it before. He had those brown, always slightly questioning eyes, brown hair, fairly bushy straight eyebrows and well-groomed sideburns. His chin was cleanly shaven and his lips, which rarely smiled, were well-shaped.

“What is it that you write, Mr Noelle? My husband mentioned that you are also a writer?”

“He shouldn’t have done that,” Mr Noelle deflected shyly. “Short stories, not worth mentioning. Very occasionally a newspaper publishes something I have written.”

“I would very much like to read something of yours,” Elisabeth said. A peculiar mood had gripped her, perhaps a premonition; she shuddered suddenly, and pulled her shawl more tightly around herself.

The day had started off well, but now it looked as though a thunderstorm was approaching. A thick black cloud was about to obscure the sun, so that parts of the countryside were already covered in shadows, while the rest was still bathed in bright light. Downstream, the river made several bends, forced by the relentless rock formations to change direction, and across the shimmering surface of the water, you could see hills covered with forests or vineyards and orchards, crowned by a castle, the outlines of which were barely discernible. Below the castle lay a town that they must have passed without Elisabeth noticing. She gazed at the cheerful scenery as though through a keyhole because there was a high rock in front of it, facing away from the sun, against which a few trees and bushes clung

heroically. The rocky wall ended abruptly. The almost perpendicular rock was washed by the water below. If there was a path there, it was certainly not visible on this day, let alone passable. Anyone wanting to get past this rock had to climb up and over it. A few salmon fishermen were pulling their nets into the boat in the shadow of the rock.

“What is the name of the castle over there?” Elisabeth asked Mr Noelle, who was thumbing through his guidebook.

“That must be Burg Katz,” he said. “It owes its name to its builders, the Counts of Katzenellenbogen. There is also a Castle Maus. As you can imagine, the gentlemen were not well-disposed towards one another. The place you see there is Saint Goarshausen.”

“And this rock wall?”

“That is the Loreley,” Mr Noelle said.

The Loreley!

Elisabeth’s heart beat faster. Without the accident and the forced stop, she might have passed by here without ever noticing the famous rock.

Her first impulse was to go back to the carriage and scold her husband for not drawing her attention to it until she realised that it was probably meant to happen that way and that her feelings were so strong now because they had hit her unprepared. She recalled the images she had seen of the rock, and remembered the descriptions from novels and travel reports. This rock was exactly as everyone said – wild and mysterious. For anyone passing by it in a boat, it must appear highly threatening, not to mention the sharp-edged rocks lurking beneath the water surface.

Then Elisabeth was distracted by something happening right in front of them because the barge that was being towed upstream had now almost reached their level. Two men could be seen onboard and on the tow path a single farm hand was leading the draft horse, a spotted grey with a shaggy mane, by the halter. He wasn't treating the horse kindly, but beating it repeatedly with his whip.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there was an accident," Elisabeth said to Mr Noelle.

Her companion shook his head sympathetically. "The poor animal."

The servant struck the stallion again. Now the team was so close that the bloody welts on the horse's flanks could be seen.

Mr Noelle raised his arm. "Hey, is that really necessary?" he called out to the farm hand.

He was about to whip the horse once more.

"That is not going to help," Mr Noelle shouted, a little louder this time.

Now the man reacted. His whip still ready in his hand for the next blow, he looked over to them to see who was interfering in his work. "Mind your own business," he shouted.

Mr Noelle walked a few steps down the hill until he was also on the towpath. "How much further do you have to go?" Elisabeth heard him asking.

"Oberwesel."

Mr Noelle took his wallet out, removed a coin and showed it to the man. "Here. This is for you if you stop beating the horse and treat the wounds with some ointment tonight."

The stable hand hesitated for a brief moment. Then he nodded and reached out his hand. "All right," he said, took the coin and set off again. He tucked the whip under his belt.

Mr Noelle turned around and walked back up to Elisabeth. She looked at him admiringly but also a little sceptically.

"Do you think that will change anything?" she asked.

"Not very much, probably. But it was worth a try," Mr Noelle said seriously.

Elisabeth nodded and looked thoughtfully at her companion, and then they both watched stable hand and horse go, presenting a peaceful picture from a distance.

[...]

3

Julie had the day off today – almost the whole day off, at least – because on Julie's free Sundays, Gundel naturally assumed that she would come to church, and Julie didn't dare to resist this expectation. They set off as soon as the bright frantic ringing of the bell began.

Julie entered the church with her gaze lowered, the tattered hymnbook that Gundel had left for her to use clasped in both hands. She didn't really

need it, because she couldn't even read. But she pretended to look at it because then it was easier to escape the gaze of Pastor Wurm, which she felt was always on her. He was a tall, wiry man with a dark, piercing gaze, who combed his straggly hair across his high forehead. He had hollow cheeks and a tiny round mouth with bluish discoloured lips. There was probably no other man in Bacharach whom Julie found more repulsive and disliked more – and it was mutual. Not that he found her repulsive – Julie knew that most men considered her beautiful – but the pastor still hated her profoundly, and Julie had not worked out why.

The service was reaching its climax. The pastor had just blessed the wine and communion bread and taken up his position in front of the altar to distribute communion to the congregation when Gundel, who was sitting next to Julie, made an awkward movement and knocked over a basket of plums intended as a gift for the pastor. The blue fruits rolled across the floor and between the feet of the worshippers, who had now risen to their feet.

“Watch what you are doing, you clumsy oaf,” Gundel hissed at Julie, although she had had nothing to do with the mishap. “Sort it out immediately.”

Julie hurriedly set about collecting the plums, which necessitated crawling among the legs of the congregation. She was on all fours on the floor when she raised her gaze and saw at the pastor, who was standing just a few steps away, the bowl of communion bread in his hands. His eyes widened in shock; he stared down at her, then he audibly gasped for breath, clutched at his chest, stumbled, and the next moment the communion bread rained down on Julie.

The pastor turned chalk-white and dropped to his knees. A commotion ensued. Some wanted to save the bread, the others rushed to help the pastor, and everyone got in each other's way. As if to underline the

dramatic nature of the situation, the church bells started ringing – one of the children had probably taken the opportunity to play a joke – and added to the chaos. Julie, who was still busy picking up the plums, using her skirt as a makeshift basket, feared the worst.

Later, Pastor Wurm lay in the sacristy with a damp cloth on his forehead to recover, and the congregation members stood outside the church, discussing the events. Gundel shifted all blame away from herself. She lamented her clumsy maid and sharply ordered Julie to go home and not cause any more trouble.

Julie complied and went to the inn to retrieve the basket she had prepared for her sister. Unfortunately, she ran straight into Herbert, her employer. Before she knew it, he had lifted the cloth from her basket, examined the food, and then looked at her.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” he inquired.

“I am going to see Ruth. Today is my day off,” Julie said, thinking he might take the basket away from her. But he didn’t. Instead he grinned, revealing his eye teeth. He twisted his mouth like this sometimes when trying to appear particularly friendly, but Julie always thought it looked strangely greedy. “Call me uncle.” He pinched Julie’s cheek patronisingly.

She ran through the village, and hastened up the stairs that also passed by the Werner Chapel. She still had the image in her mind of the pastor collapsing during the church service, staring at her. Julie still didn’t understand exactly what had happened. A few plums on the floor were certainly no reason to have a fainting fit.

Ruth was sitting on a bench in the sun when Julie arrived at the ruins. Julie hugged her sister and immediately told her what had happened in the church.

Her sister grew grave. "Be careful. If the pastor wants, he can turn the entire congregation against you," she warned.

"But I didn't do anything," Julie said in her defence. "The stupid innkeeper woman knocked the basket over. It wasn't my fault."

"You are just a maid and no one listens to you. That is dangerous. You have to take care," Ruth said, reaching out to touch the treasures in the basket that Julie had brought with her. "Cheese, ham, plums ..." she counted.

The girls talked a little and laughed, but then Ruth stopped, turned her head and listened. "Listen, I think someone is coming," she said.

Julie looked around and was not surprised to see a woman appear behind the wall. Even though she hadn't heard anything herself, nothing escaped her sister's ears.

"Is it someone we know?" Ruth asked.

"No - well, I saw her once yesterday. She's an elegant lady who arrived late last night at the inn with her husband."

"Good day. Does this path lead back to the town?" the stranger asked politely when she reached them, picking some burrs off her skirt.

Julie nodded. "Straight ahead and then left. But it is very steep. Perhaps it would be better if you took the path you came along, it is safer."

The woman thanked her, but instead of continuing or turning back she stood still and scrutinised Julie and Ruth. Her gaze lingered on Julie, who looked back at the stranger. The woman was very small, five feet at most, with dark brown, almost black hair, a narrow face and a long nose that

gave her expression an impish look. She wore a light brown dress, a delicate shawl with a paisley pattern in blue and beige, and a bonnet made of finely woven straw adorned with a ribbon of the same fabric. "I just visited Werner Chapel," the woman said.

"So it is still standing?" Julie asked, then bit her lip – she hadn't meant to be so forward, but sometimes it just came over her.

"Yes, it's still standing," the woman chuckled. She didn't seem upset by Julie's cheeky remark. "I have heard and read a lot about it, but to be honest, I didn't find it that special."

"You have to go early in the morning. That's when it is most beautiful there," Julie said, and it sounded rather cheeky again. "But from the hill opposite, you have an even better view. From there you can see the chapel and the Rhine," she continued, aiming for a friendlier tone.

"Thank you, that is a good tip," the little lady said.

Julie had stood up. "Would you like to sit down? The ascent is quite steep if you are not used to it."

"That is most kind," The woman took a seat.

"I will get you something to drink," Julie said, thinking that the small woman looked a bit pale. She returned quickly with a glass of water.

"Many thanks," the woman took a sip and inclined her head while looking Julie up and down. "Weren't you the one with the plums this morning in church?"

"You were there too?"

The small woman nodded. "I was there too. And I also saw that it was the innkeeper who knocked the basket over. That was not very nice of her to put the blame on you."

Julie shrugged her shoulders. That was how it was, and that was normal. "I am her maid."

The little lady took another sip of water. "It really is very beautiful up here. The view of the Rhine is delightful. What is that island over there?"

"That is Heillisenwerth," Julie told her. She was pleased with the stranger's interest in her beloved river.

"Does anyone live there?"

"No, no one does. There is no one there."

"But I can see a house."

"Don't go there. The island is haunted," Ruth interjected.

"It's haunted?" The woman looked at Ruth. "Now you have piqued my curiosity."

"A woman in white roves the island. She died there and now she is unable to find peace."

"Is that so?" The woman laughed. "What a lovely tale."

"No, it's not a tale. That really happened," Ruth insisted. She nodded, her face grave.

