



Old Heinrich's Leap

In the village there were two meeting places. A small area surrounded by scruffy buildings was used by radicals, nutcases and crackpots to tell the gathered audiences that the earth was shaped like an egg, that glass was invented by the Devil, and sneezing on someone during a half moon would cure them of shingles. The meeting place was known locally as the Cretin's Pulpit, but it didn't stop anyone with a half-baked theory from embarrassing themselves. It was almost a badge of honour.

One of the scruffy buildings sold gardening hardware and after buying a set of hooks for her tools, Lotte was surprised to find a notice pinned to the big timber noticeboard.

Invitation to watch the daredevil leap that has never been successful. On the first Saturday of the month, Heinrich Lob will take the plunge over the Obersee Falls in a sherry barrel. A feat that proved fatal for his father.

Her expression must have been peculiar because a passing villager noticed and explained.

"He's mad."

"It says it was fatal for his father," said Lotte.

"Yes. Old Heinrich, Young Heinrich's father, planned the event for three months. Went over the edge in a barrel and he was killed instantly. Pity. Great shame. Barrels are expensive."

"What?"

"I don't know why he wants to do the same. But the Lobs never learn."

"Isn't he the magistrate?"

"Yes. One of the reasons there isn't much crime in the area. No one wants to go up in front of him."

"I thought Queen Anteje was the judge."

"Only in serious cases. Treason, revolution. Everything else goes in front of him. Don't steal potatoes. He has a thing about potato thieves."

She made a mental note.

"The only occasion he showed any leniency was when he sent a man to prison for murder. Earlier that day he had another man whipped for, well, you know, stealing some potatoes."

The villager left, Lotte remained and stared at the notice. Hand written, the ink a bit smudged as if it was still wet. Two generations of Heinrichs trying to defy death.

Back at the castle Lotte put up her hooks, tidied away her tools and went down to the wine cellar. It had seen better days. Two rows of barrels squatted on each side of the mouldy, moss-covered storage room, more of a dungeon than a cellar. The last two barrels had hand written warnings on them: 'vinegar only.'

"Can I help you?"

Lotte had been joined by Prima, the castle vintner who insisted on calling herself a somelier. "I came to look at the barrels. They look indestructible."

"You wouldn't want one falling on you. Especially if they're full."

"You even have vinegar barrels."

"Cooking wine. I don't know who wrote that notice. It should be replaced. It's probably best not to drink those straight from a glass. Put it on the garden if you want. There's plenty of it."

"Would you ever go over a waterfall inside one of these?"

Prima squinted. "No. No one ever survives. A man from the village was killed doing that."

"Old Heinrich Lob."

"Yes."

"His son wants to try it for himself."

"The magistrate?"

"Yes."

"My god. You know, he's so extreme when it comes to handing out sentences he's probably decided to have himself executed."

"What's his problem with potato thieves?" said Lotte.

"Potatoe thieves? I have no idea."

The massive barrels looked too big to carry a human being over a waterfall and Lotte was sure there were smaller barrels, just as there were different size bottles. She left Prima to collect several jugs of the so-called cooking wine and went back out to the path into the castle courtyard. The sand was thinning out and the horses were slipping on the exposed stone.

Queen Anteje strolled out of the courtyard to inspect the work. "Do you have enough sand?"

"Yes. More than enough. It'll be shin deep by the time we've finished."

"Good."

Lotte was hopeless at concealing her thoughts and Anteje noticed the distant look on her face.

"What's troubling you?"

"Young Heinrich Lob is going to go over the Obersee Falls in a barrel."

Anteje grinned and then stopped herself. "Really. Let's hope nothing terrible happens to him."

"You don't mean that, do you?"

"Well, he has his good points and his bad points. He's very strict, and that means people are terrified of breaking the law."

"People keep trying to assassinate you, Majesty."

"Yes, but they don't live round here. Crime rates are very low compared to other valleys, so I hold him responsible for that. In part. But. . ."

"But?"

Anteje pushed the toe of her boot through the thick sand and drew a stick man hanging from a gallows. "He wants to execute everybody."

"Including potato thieves?" said Lotte.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"A man in the village says he'd rather execute potato thieves than murderers."

"Lotte, don't believe everything you're told by villagers. Some of them are not a full bag of carrots. Young Heinrich Lob wanted to execute a man, Timor Vargo, accused of murdering his wife. The gossip in the village suggested Timor's wife was having an affair with the magistrate. When she disappeared Timor was accused of killing her, but there was something about the evidence that didn't add up. When the appeal came to me I altered the sentence to life in prison. I didn't want to execute someone who might be innocent."

"I see."

She obviously didn't. The distant look on her face returned. "Now what?"

"It still doesn't explain why he hates potato thieves."

Anteje kicked the sand about and removed the hanging stick man. "Forget potato thieves. When you finish here I need you to sort out some winter displays around the entrance to the castle. Can you do that without being distracted?"

"Yes."

"Good. Here," she handed Lotte a small bottle of perfume. "I don't expect there to be any blossom at this time of year, so make use of this to add some fragrance to the displays."

She strolled back to the courtyard leaving a line of footprints in the new sand. Lotte was reassured to know her Queen wasn't quick to execute people, but she couldn't get potatoes and barrels out of her head.

Later in the afternoon, Lotte gathered a few snacks and set off for the Obersee Falls. The water plunged off a high ledge between monolithic slabs of rock. A wide, clear curtain of angry water that

cast a beautiful, glistening rainbow across the pool at the foot of the falls. The water was clear, clear enough to count every piece of shingle; freezing cold and fresh to drink. It was surrounded by the fading aroma of autumn blossom, delicate like Anteje's expensive perfume. Fallen leaves and small twigs drifted by, carried by the falling water from the wide stream high above the rocks, pausing to say hello before continuing on the journey to the lake.

Lotte sat on a soft cushion of grass to eat her sandwich and gazed at the pool. This was the final part of the plunge for anyone coming over the top in a barrel. This pool, this clear, shining . . . shallow pool. She was no mathematician or physician, but even Lotte could calculate the force and velocity of a barrel falling twenty metres into nothing more than a puddle. She stopped eating and looked for a route to the top of the falls.

No wonder Old Heinrich perished when he sat in his barrel and dropped to the rocks surrounding the pool. She crossed the stream to the far side where long grass had been pushed flat. This part of the pool had the width, but still not the depth to arrest the force of a barrel falling into it. If Young Heinrich was determined to carry out his ambition there needed to be something to reduce the impact.

Brushwood, slender branches, piles of leaves, Lotte ransacked the surrounding woodland for any loose material she could drag into place. When she was done, a pile of wood and mulch formed the only barrier between life and death if Young Heinrich insisted on making this suicidal leap. Lotte wasn't satisfied it was enough, but if the barrel floated along this side of the stream it might fall into this side of the pool and the piled up wood. Better still, Young Heinrich had to abandon his mad idea.

It was too late. Saturday arrived and the villagers were already in place. They gathered at the Cretin's Pulpit and lined the streets out of the village. At the big noticeboard, Young Heinrich arrived at mid-day, checked his watch and when he was satisfied the stars were aligned and the weather was just right he made another announcement.

"You are all aware that my dearly beloved father died in his attempt to go over the Obersee Falls in a barrel. You may wonder why he did it. Well, I will tell you. Because he could."

"He obviously didn't," said an unidentified voice in the crowd.

"I do not mean he could succeed, I mean the falls were there, the challenge was there. And the Lobs never back away from a challenge. It was always his wish that he would attempt the falls and now I intend to achieve his ambition on his behalf. Please do not be concerned about me. There are more important things in life than living."

The crowd didn't quite understand that last sentence, especially from a man with an enthusiasm for executing people. Lotte wanted to intercept Young Heinrich before he reached his barrel. Warn him about the dangers, ask him about potato thieves, but the crowd was dense, the route to the stream short and Young Heinrich had surrounded himself with men from the local militia.

He put on his gloves and offered one final announcement. "In order to support my intentions today I believe it is vital to consider the importance of life and to address past regrets. I believe there may have been an injustice, for which I take full responsibility. Several months ago I imprisoned Timor Vargo and having reflected upon this course of action I believe it is only right that Herr Vargo be pardoned and released with immediate effect."

After a few seconds of surprise and silence the crowd applauded. Their mood cheered which meant they supported Young Heinrich and wished him well, acknowledged his courage and human compassion and all the rest of it. Lotte didn't believe a word and struggled to get close to the magistrate who headed off for the falls, followed by an adoring crowd.

At the edge of the village, two Warrior Scholars on horseback made space for the procession. Lotte rushed up to them and handed them a note. "You must get this message to Queen Anteje. His life is in danger if you don't stop this."

"It's his life," said the first Scholar.

"Just do it please," Lotte rushed away. "I have to stop this."

She saw the crowd, but had lost the man at the centre of it. At the stream, a great pageant surrounded the area where the barrel waited for Young Heinrich. Lotte was too late, it was already

sealed, manhandled into place from a waiting cart and lowered into the stream where it rolled gently onto its side. She was right, it wasn't as big as the monsters in the castle cellar. Big enough for a large man, but the interior would be cramped and without padding or reinforcement no match for the height of the drop unless it went over the falls on the side where the brushwood had been piled.

The militia men pushed the barrel away from the bank of the stream, guided it along the water, and let the current take the weight and the direction. Lotte called out to the men. "Push it over to this side of the stream."

They ignored her, but she insisted. "The water in the pool is deeper and wider on this side."

One of the men waved her away and the crowd along the banks of the stream wondered who the frantic woman was trying to stop this great demonstration of bravery and pride. The barrel floated closer to the falls, the water slipping on ahead, increasing in speed. The barrel accelerated, the tops of the trees came into view, the canopies hanging over the drop of the chasm approaching with deadly intent.

Lotte called out one more time. The men had poles, but they refused to shove the barrel across the stream to the safer side where Young Heinrich would have a better chance of survival after shooting over the edge, which he did.

The crowd held their breath. The barrel dropped, half in half out of the churning white wall of water, through the sparkling rainbow and before anyone could gasp, smashed into the waiting rocks. The unforgiving rocks surrounding the pool where another crowd stood. In the middle of the crowd, Anteje on horseback, the two Warrior Scholars on either side. And two more scholars stood with an unknown woman and Young Heinrich.

The gathering momentarily distracted Lotte from the mess at the foot of the falls. The barrel had disintegrated and the wood was scattered across the pool and the rocky banks. Villagers stumbled across the rough ground to help the man inside what was left of the barrel. Lotte heard the name Timor Vargo.

Within minutes militia men and Warrior Scholars were moving the crowds away. Anteje crossed the stream. Her expression thunderous, her mood blackened by the accident.

"The rumours were true then?" said Lotte.

"Apparently so." She called to the Scholars retrieving the body. "Is he dead?"

"No. Not yet. We might be able to save him."

Across the stream Young Heinrich and the woman were led away in chains. "Is that his wife?" said Lotte.

"Yes. How did you know?" said Anteje. "About this stupid plan."

"Can you smell that?" The fragrance Lotte had detected during her first visit lingered in the air.

"Perfume?"

"Yes. When I smelled that it reminded me of the bottle you gave me. I thought someone must have been down here, maybe Timor's wife planning to kill Young Heinrich for putting her husband in prison."

"They were on their way to the pass when we picked them up," said Anteje.

"What will you do to him?"

Anteje pulled her horse and crossed the stream. "The evidence is clear, Lotte," she said. And rode away, back to the castle.