



2012

The Wild Huntsman (A Message for the Semi-Educated Classes)

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Roles

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Rachowski, Utz. "The Wild Huntsman (A Message for the Semi-Educated Classes)." Translated by Michael Ritterson. *The Literary Review* 55.2 (2012): 27-38.

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Abstract

Utz Rachowski was Writer in Residence in the Department of German Studies in spring 2012. This story of youth, family, and homeland was originally published in German in 2006.

Keywords

Rachowski, poetry, German

Disciplines

German Language and Literature | German Literature

Comments

This work was published in German by Utz Rachowski and translated by Michael Ritterson.

Utz Rachowski

The Wild Huntsman (A Message for the Semi-Educated Classes)

Translated from German by Michael Ritterson

For three days it had been snowing. No one was out on the streets. For three days I hadn't seen any of my friends go past the house, even though the village must already have had the taste of white sugar icing by now. The little caps on fence posts, the bushy cones over the garden beds grew taller and taller; the wondrously glittering powder on the roof of the shed kept getting thicker. At times, the trees in the yard would swing impatiently heavenward, indignantly casting off their white burden.

Blackbirds, finch, and titmouse, a whole flock of sparrows sat on the cover of the ashcan that I'd swept clear of snow with a whiskbroom just an hour before. Once again, with each little jump they took on the metal cover, the birds' claws sank into the snow. At the beginning of winter I'd driven a stake next to the ashcan and nailed a little feeding station onto it with two sides protected from the blowing snow by thin sheets of wood. Now the birds crowded with loud cries around the corncobs, rings, and loose seeds. Coming back inside the house just then, I'd noticed the distinct smell of roasted apples and freshly baked cake. For it was already Advent.

Well, why not, I thought: If I strap on my snow boots now, maybe I can meet up with some of my friends. Could be that one or the other of them has also thought of going out in this snow. But some token, I thought, you have to bring them some token, something from the warm indoors. I stood in the living room. Here, too, it smelled of the things whose odors had wafted over from the kitchen. I saw the powdery curtain falling outside the window. I touched the needles of the Advent wreath on the table with the four thick red candles planted in it, three of them already hav-

ing been lighted, their wicks black. A cigar's the thing, I thought, an eighty-center at least, one with a red-and-gold band.

I pulled open the drawer of the buffet cupboard, reached with practiced hand into the cigar box filled with several different varieties. I knew right away which one: I needed the dark Brazilians with the red-and-gold bands. I wasn't searching around; I knew my way. For no one in our house smoked. Well, occasionally my

It can be hard to quit once you start doing it, that much is certain, but how can you quit dreaming? The world is a glorious place for the child who smokes.

father did, very rarely, but even then more just to humor me. I was crazy about all of it: cigarettes, the little trays and silver tobacco boxes, the colors of the packages and their smells. At the age of five I knew what a meerschaum pipe was. I knew all the varieties: Cuban, Brazilian, Virginia, stogies, cigarillos with and without filter; pipe tools, pipe cleaners, smoke eliminators in the form of owls, cats, and dachshunds; cases with spring-loaded

lids, cigar cutters, snuff; cigarette papers with the name Gizeh and a picture of the sphinx; chewing tobacco in three strengths (red, green, or blue box); Bodespitzen and White Owl, Casino, Turf, Dubek, Salem Yellow and Salem Red, Jewel in packs of twelve or twenty-four, Orient with and without mouthpiece and that picture from the *Arabian Nights* of the city gate with a camel and its turbaned driver resting before it just a few steps from the gateway. Later on: Stanwell, Astor, and Amphora, all high-priced; Pall Mall with the charcoal filter that Peter Stuyvesant doesn't have, but Peer Export has the cork-tipped filter. Better not reach for HB, and don't come home with the Marlboro box (too many flavoring additives). My first Lord Extra, light and risky as hell up in the dormer under the wood beams in late summer of sixty-eight, blended with diesel exhaust from the armored vehicles. Speechless, Krus, and Curly Black make silent escape through iron bars. On a green box: Sándor Petöfi with hair as long as George Harrison's (ought to remind my history teacher of that). Coarse-cut, fine-cut, gold and silver shag; the dark Carmen from Seville, fate on the banks of the Guadalquivir, and quiet flows the Elbe, there's no love in all the world. Thus I shall render account to my queen, for the red and white, the savior of Europe, a Pole; I defeated the Turks at the gates of Vienna—my field dispatch: smoke Jan Sobieski! My word to you! Cleopatra, not bad, but bland, like a bog-lily,

though more refined, but then, Sweet Afton with the poem by Robert Burns on the package: "Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes, Flow gently, I'll sing thee a song in thy praise." Papastratos Number 1 must be smoked in Atlantis, on the rim of Santorini's crater. Finas Ovals from Kyriazi Frères on the Nile. Dark Gitanes with their yellow *papier maïs*. Karo, pursued by Memphis and the Guardia Civil. *Esportazione senza filtro*, in your eyes I saw the green ships sailing languidly up to Arcadia, not in haste. Ligeros and Ducados, these are sweet night odors from Granada's gardens. *Romeo y Julieta*—there comes Mercutio to the fountain, Tybalt will slay him, Romeo must flee to Mantua—thus Verona's morning dawns. And the Greeks before Troy, as we know, were smoking Achilles and Helena Blonde, it's just that Homer forgot to report that detail. Proof enough: In the end the whole city was smoking.

It can be hard to quit once you start doing it, that much is certain, but how can you quit dreaming? The world is a glorious place for the child who smokes. Leave chocolate cigarettes to father, mother, all the would-be types, and anyone else who wants them!

I stood in the living room, pushed the drawer of the buffet cupboard shut, and let the eighty-cent Brazilian with red-and-gold band slide down against my skin, across my chest, my stomach, all the way to my trouser top. The cigar came to rest there above my belt, a good hiding place: my mother would never notice it, and it wouldn't break easily, cushioned there between my body and my clothes, the perfect spot. And this way I could take it outside with me to my friends, a sign of warmth, out into the cold, sugar-powdered world beyond the window.

I pulled on shoes and jacket. Snow boots and poles were in the woodshed, and ski wax I took along with me from the shoe closet. That wasn't going to happen to me a second time, never again! At the school championships the year before, I had utterly disgraced myself. I'd come in dead last in my age group, and my horrified phys-ed teacher had yelled: "What's the matter with you! Last summer in cycling and swimming you sweep the whole field and here you take last place!"

It was all that damned Goldklister. It was because of that stuff that I'd had to let ten skiers, who had started later, pass me on the course with jeering calls of "Coming through!" So each time, I stepped off the trail seething mad to let them pass, with a layer of snow inches thick clinging to my skis. I'd used the wrong wax that time, pure and simple.

That afternoon, in the couple of hours before we were to go to the starting line, it had gotten suddenly colder. An icy wind brought a dusting of new powder, and

I made the mistake of using that Goldklistler, a gummy, tarlike mass that wouldn't let you take one step forward in freezing new snow. I had seen only the wet snow cover at midday and, thinking of the steep climb at the beginning of the course, I'd applied a thick layer of Goldklistler, so that on the descent on the hard, frozen-over trail I attained approximately the speed of a snail, while the ones passing me zipped by with a sound as if skiing on knife blades. They had either used no wax at all or, the best solution, they had lightly scraped an ordinary candle along the running surface of their skis. But for Goldklistler I had my brother to thank. He'd gone into town back then and let somebody talk him into buying the stuff, and I was mad at him all the way into spring, when the bicycle races started up again.

That wasn't going to happen to me this time, not on your life, and there in the shed I applied a paper-thin, greenish layer of rock-hard paraffin my brother had brought me from town at the beginning of winter as his final atonement, not even from the same store, as he assured me.

I clamped on the skis and zipped down the street in the falling snow, between the rows of houses, planting my poles far ahead of me in rhythmic alternation and driving the skis forward with long strides. Just above my belt, between clothing and skin, I could feel the cigar resting securely.

At the edge of the village I came to the garages, the cemetery on the right, the gently sloping field where corn and rye grew in the summer, then I saw the railroad line farther down, and before that the Cat's Back, where my friends would usually be and where I had supposed they would be now. But today I was making a fresh track, the only one, in the snow. I'd noticed it even at the top of the sloping field but was still hoping, there behind the thick-falling curtain of snow, once I'd gotten closer, that I'd see some sign of them. But at the Cat's Back there were only a couple of fresh tracks that a rabbit had recently made coming from the direction of the rail line. None of my friends had come here today, none of them had ventured out. Now I can smoke my cigar by myself, I thought, just because they're too chicken in this weather, and I climbed slowly up the side of the hill we called the Cat's Back.

A train went past, coming from either Leipzig or Zwickau, and in the yellow light of the steam locomotive's enormous headlamps I could see how thick the snow continued to fall. The lighted windows of the cars swooshed by as pale yellow patches, then the white billowing curtain closed back over the landscape.

I stood there a moment longer on the hill, checked the bindings on my boots, and pushed off down the other side, the steep slope of the Cat's Back. This was the way, on this side, that we always skied down, but I'd failed to consider that now

there was no trail to follow and that I'd be skiing blind all the way to the bottom of the hill, coming out at some point that I couldn't see from up where I started. Nor did I stop for even a second to think that I had used that hard, dull-green paraffin that would make my boards lightning fast on a steep downhill.

A bush bent double by the new snow caught my left ski with a jerk, I left what I thought must be the trail, just off to the right, sank into a gully filled with soft snow at the bottom, almost fell backward but stayed on my feet as I flew over the low ramp the little kids had built here for sledding a week before, no choice but to jump it, somersaulted, and landed on my back in some bushes, on a rock, I'm not sure what, and tailbone, spine, and the back of my head were hurting like crazy. I was all alone. The snow, it seemed to me, was falling gray now. High overhead was a black opening, and when I looked to one side, four horsemen with terrifying faces came riding across the field. They rode right up to me with lances at the ready. I looked into the great black space above me and suddenly saw my grandmother standing there. She held one finger to her lips and whispered to me: Don't call out to them! Those are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Don't speak to them, and they'll ride on.

I heard a noise from the other side now, a sudden hissing above me, and a fiery spot, borne on a great black wall, was coming toward me. Only when I saw the friendly yellow lights in the passing cars did I realize that it was the train and that I was lying just a couple of meters from the tracks. It must have been the inbound local from Bad Brambach. To my right, on the path across the field, I could no longer see the riders—they'd evidently passed the Cat's Back by now, and they'd left me unscathed. What if I'd spoken to them or called for help, what if Grandmother hadn't come to warn me?

I was still lying on my back, and I took hold of my left boot and struggled to turn it so I could finally unfasten the ski. My right boot had somehow come off in mid-air when I lifted off the ramp and did the somersault. I was all alone; I sensed for the first time, as if looking at myself in a picture, how alone I was. And yet, Grandmother had saved me from the four riders at the last minute, or it had been just a dream. Last evening she'd been telling me about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse; maybe I'd only been dreaming about them just now.

Again I tried to turn onto my side, braced myself with both arms. There was a stabbing pain in my back—and on the back of my head I could feel a large bump, slightly damp and soft like tar, maybe the curse of the Goldklistler, though today it would actually have been better to ski down with the brakes on, and even better not

at all, better to stay home altogether. But I did manage to get to my feet and take a first step toward the railroad embankment where my other boot was lying. With a little more momentum it would have landed on the tracks. I crouched down and again I felt the pain in my back and buckled on the skis. Slowly, I thought now, you need to take it slowly. It doesn't matter if it's getting dark, in this snow you wouldn't have been able to see much anyway. You'll find your way in the dark, you'd always find your way back, even at night, even without the trail, that's for sure. You just need to take it slow, really slow.

Just then it occurred to me that Grandmother always said, If you're ever in shock, there's a secret remedy: you have to pee. My God, I thought, maybe I'm in shock. I spread my feet a little, braced myself with one hand on the poles, and took careful aim between my skis. Not that I felt any better afterward, but I must have peed out the shock somehow if Grandmother was right.

The path that the horsemen had ridden across the field was already blanketed with fresh snow; I found no trace of them, even though their horses must have sunk in deep. The path seemed steeper now than I'd ever known it to be, and I thrust one ski forward, pulled the other one along mechanically, and I practically kicked my feet ahead of me so as to feel less of the pain in my back. The cold snow falling on my head the whole time felt good on the bump I'd received; my cap I'd lost somewhere in my fall from the Cat's Back.

It was already getting dark, and it was an eternity until the cemetery and then the garages finally came into ghostly view. I reached the lower end of our street. Nothing more could happen to me now, no one could harm me, and besides, maybe that stuff with the horsemen was all in my head. I'd been in shock and then peed it out of me. There can't really be horsemen like that; Grandmother must think it's funny, telling me such terrifying stories.

When I saw the red gate to our yard, the gray fence with its white caps, the white cones covering the shrubs, and above them the impatient, swaying branches of the trees, I wasn't thinking of a powdered-sugar landscape; I was thinking it was a better idea to stay home in a snowstorm like this one, home with the smells of baked apples and fresh cakes, and maybe to write your list of Christmas wishes for the big day next week.

"A sprained back, a bruised tailbone, a lump on the noggin, and a bloody forehead," said my mother when I appeared in the kitchen. "What else could you expect from this maniac?"

"Well, a bath with some herbs in it will do him good," said Grandmother.

She always had hot water ready on the coal stove, in a big gray enameled pot, sometimes bubbling away for hours. Nobody needed hot water around the clock, the black stovepipe no doubt glowing red under all the soot, and Father was always saying: "Such a waste!"

"Well, you just never know," Grandmother would always answer him.

Now they began ladling hot water out of the pot and into a big galvanized upright tub with a high back. Then they poured cold water in with the hot.

"Get those things off," said Grandmother, "you must be chilled to the bone."

I pulled off my heavy socks, my pants, and my sweater.

Grandmother said, "Get in quickly. Warm feet are the main thing, or else you'll get sick."

With one quick motion, I stripped off my underpants, took a big step over the rim of the tub, and stood there with shirt still on, up to my knees in water that shimmered greenish yellow from the herbs and bath crystals. I unbuttoned my shirt, and suddenly the cigar, the eighty-cent Brazilian, dropped out of my undershirt and splashed into the water, floating there on the surface, obviously broken in half, the red-and-gold band shining in bright, gaudy contrast with the soft tones of the water. I bent down quick as a flash, slid into the tub with my legs drawn up, and with one hand pushed the broken cigar under the surface. I had completely forgotten it! The way you forget that you're going to die some day. Goldklistler, Cat's Back, my friends—I could never forget them. But wouldn't you know—something like this!

"Now then, what exactly happened to you?" asked my mother, refilling the water on the kitchen stove, just in case.

"I took a fall," I said, "because the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were chasing me, trying to run me down."

"Now you're imagining things again," said my mother. "There's no such thing."

"What do you mean? Go ahead and tell us," said Grandmother.

"Well see, it was," I said, and began frantically trying to think how in heaven's name I could escape from the tub without arousing suspicion to get rid of the cigar, which was slowly beginning to disintegrate in my hand; the first few tobacco leaves were already floating, olive-green, around my knees.

"There's no such thing!" my mother shouted again.

But Grandmother said, "We'll see. Just let him tell us."

When I told them how I had shattered the long, silver lance of one rider with my unfastened ski and attacked the other three with the tips of my poles, stabbing

one of them in the leg, Grandmother said, "Nowadays you can't venture outside your own doorway anymore, this wouldn't have happened back then—but we can look it up in the *Brockhaus*."

"And better bring a psychiatrist back with you, too," said Mother.

Grandmother had to go upstairs to the bookcase, so I had her out of the way for a moment, and a moment was all I needed to take action.

"Look, here's the proof," I said to my mother. "That lump on the back of my head, that's from the hoof of Wotan's horse Sleipner, just ask Grandmother, that's one of their names, and they're dangerous, in league with the devil, go on up there with her and look it up for yourself, how could you expect to know all that by yourself?"

But I heard Grandmother already coming back down the wooden stair with unaccustomed haste, her footsteps in double time, her old house slippers rattling the steps as if descending a ski jump.

"Look at this," she called, just coming through the doorway. "The boy's right!" She had her glasses perched on her nose and the *Brockhaus* open in her hands.

Abandon all hope, I thought, the one coming through the door there is your grandmother, and there'll be no stopping her with that fat book in her hand. Might as well surrender. Family is worse than Wotan's riders—they *never* retreat.

The cigar in my hand under the water felt swollen now, like a ripe ear of corn with the leaves still on it in September, and it just seemed to keep growing.

"So, just as I was saying last night," said Grandmother, opening up the book, "there's Wotan right here, 'also called The Wild Huntsman, with his eight-legged steed Sleipner.'"

"I've seen it," I said, "but this time the horses only had four legs."

"Well see, those could have been other ones," said Grandmother. "The ones with four legs aren't as dangerous."

"Maybe Sleipner was sick," I said, "in this kind of weather."

"Well now, there's more." Grandmother sat down on the corner bench at the round kitchen table and laid the heavy book down on the tabletop.

"At his side Wotan has two howling wolves, Geri and Friki, and the ravens Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory)."

"I've heard about them, but they weren't there tonight either, maybe got lost in the snowstorm."

"You're both crazy," said my mother. "Practically Christmas and it's like living in an insane asylum here."

“Let me read the rest, would you?” said Grandmother. “The one-eyed god is followed by a bellowing, raging host, the army of wild riders—the Wotis-heer or Wut-heer—and behind them a pack of barking, snapping dogs, constantly driven forward by the riders with cries of Heyda, heyda, hafta or Hoho, hoho, hey, wut-hey, wut-hey, wutsche, wutsche!”

“That’s exactly how it was, they were running around screaming pretty loud all over the field.”

“But whoever dared to look directly at them was struck dead.”

“That’s what I said first off, a dangerous bunch.”

“But anyone finding a hoof from one of the wild riders will always have good luck.”

“Gotta have another look around next week. After my crash I didn’t really take the time to search very carefully.”

“Don’t keep interrupting me.” Grandmother smacked the table impatiently. “At the final harvest cutting, farmers would leave three heads of grain uncut, the Wotan’s knot, left there for Wode on fields north and south of the woodlots.”

“I probably sailed right over it before I was knocked down.”

“Aha,” said my mother. “I thought the riders had been chasing you.”

“The natural result of them trying to run me down, that crash.”

“Naturally,” said my mother.

“Quiet now, I’m almost finished. ‘Christian monks were powerless to oppose this custom. Yet another rider in Wotan’s train is the guardian of death, Mother Hulda, whose cave in Hörsel Mountain was falsely reputed to be the gates of Purgatory, following the Christianization of the Germanic peoples.’”

“Went there during summer camp,” I said.

“To Mother Hulda’s?” asked Grandmother, finally looking up from the book, closed it with a heavy bang, and took her glasses off.

“What do you think? No, to Hörsel Mountain, of course. It’s up near Eisenach.”

“You do not say ‘What do you think?’ to your grandmother, even if she is talking nonsense, and right now it’s getting pretty bad.” Mother pressed her lips tight and said no more.

“Eisenach’s where Uncle Rudi took delivery of his Wartburg,” I said, “Went

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there in person to make sure no screws were loose—on the car, I mean—so it was watertight in the rain and stuff, but unfortunately it was a beautiful sunny day, and a Sunday too, and Aunt Margarete hit him over the head with that Mireille Mathieu record until it broke in a thousand pieces, even though it was vinyl and they don't actually break."

"What is that boy talking about?" asked Grandmother in a worried voice.

"Because Margarete thought Rudi had taken a girlfriend along on the 'maiden voyage.'"

"That Mireille Maddyue?" asked Grandmother.

"No, that's just some singer, a French one. The album title was *Rendezvous with Mireille*. Aunt Margarete must have gotten something mixed up, but Uncle Rudi is into French, I've noticed that myself."

"What are you saying?" said my mother. "You're going straight to bed now!"

"Why?" I said. "*Beginning French*, Encyclopedia Publishers, Leipzig, I'm telling you, I saw it myself."

"Oh," said my mother.

"But Aunt Margarete must have suspected something when she found the bill for a double room from the Johann Sebastian Guest House in his jacket pocket, and the one from the Tournament of Song Restaurant for eleven small Budvar beers and two bottles of Bulgarian red, but Uncle Rudi claimed he drank all that by himself and also polished off two steaks, one 'à la Vogelweide' and one 'Wolfram von Eschenbach,' as well as two quick 'Martin Luther' aperitifs after dinner, he's always had indigestion, everybody says."

"Now don't ask which one of them it was," said my mother and gave Grandmother a stern look.

But Grandmother thought for a moment, then said, "One of them that spent the night there could possibly be that fellow with the Hulda woman, I've heard things like that on the radio, *Death and the Maiden* one was called, and *Dame World, I've Tasted of Thy Wine*, I think. Rudi'd be the one for that, he could drink the Earth dry with his thirst."

"Oma," said my mother with resignation, "would you stop that now? The boy's already completely *meschugge* from all your twisting things around."

"Well, if that Maddyue girl wasn't involved somehow, in the tournament of song," said Grandmother, "I'll eat my hat."

"But that Mireille seems like just Uncle Rudi's type right now," I said, "because of the way Aunt Margarete let him have it."

“Probably another one of those people he meets at the trade fairs, I’ll bet you anything,” said Grandmother.

Pretty nice, that French girl, I thought, but not exactly my type, I was more for Judith, the one that sawed Holofernes’s head off. On one of our class trips to Dresden I’d seen her giant tits in the art gallery and bought myself one of the color postcards on the way out. When Mother found it under my pillow and yelled at me, demanding to know where I’d got that “dirty picture,” I explained that I was planning to study art history. And Gunther Schicho was even there a second time with his parents and reported back that the whole Semper Wing was full of paintings of naked women. I’d missed that on my visit there because after seeing the Dutch and the French painters, with all that dehumidified air, I’d gone to drink beer with Mulei in the historic Italian quarter. Or Charlotte Corday—because French women are supposed to be hot—who stabbed poor Marat in the back as he sat in his bathtub; blonde, it’s true, but her tits were pure cream, sort of a Frau Hulda type (unfortunately, I’d never seen either her good or her wicked daughter topless; Snow White and Rose Red were also not on my list yet). But the best knockers were without a doubt the ones on the hero’s girlfriend in *Orinoco*, the lovely mulatto from Amazonas, full, round, pear-like tits. My buddy Reinhard Krause was a big fan of hers and always said that picture of her in the *Orinoco* book had made our entire generation stand tall.

Charlotte Corday was French too, from Cannes, I believe. But in the case of Judith I wasn’t quite sure where she came from, somewhere in the Bible, and actually, I thought I could have done with all of them right now, as I felt a pleasant straining between my legs. But yes, preferably a French woman, I thought; besides, she’d even know French. I had to hand it to Uncle Rudi, he was on the right track, as always.

“Good Lord, here we are just chattering away,” exclaimed Grandmother, “and that water must be ice cold!”

“Oh no, it’s really not,” I called back, “it’s not even down to lukewarm yet!” I now had two reasons why I couldn’t get out of the water: a spongy cylinder of tobacco in my hand, and a rigid one of my own.

“The boy needs fresh water and then off to bed,” Grandmother announced.

Mother went to the coal stove and dipped up some water with a small aluminum pan and was just coming back toward me when Grandmother called out: “Lord Jesus, look at that, he’s shit himself!”

“No, no!” I cried out. “That’s . . .”

"That's from shock, you poor boy, you must have taken a terrible fall, and we just babble away here!"

"Good gracious," my mother said. "To think we didn't notice right away! But you mustn't let it upset you, these things happen, first your accident and then in here where it's so warm."

"No, it was before that," I said, sensing my chance to escape.

"Lord God above!" cried Grandmother, gingerly fishing out one of the detached tobacco leaves and a piece of the wrapper that by now were floating all over the surface.

"You surely did take a beating," she said thoughtfully. "Even your bowel movement isn't normal. Now then, fresh water and out of that tub!"

I now had reason to hope, unlike Marat, that I might get out of the tub alive, noted with relief that my own cylinder had also gone soft, and stood there impassively for Mother and Grandmother to wash me off and pour warm water over me from both sides as if they would never stop.

"Our hero the Wild Huntsman," said Mother. "But for now, you'll stay home in weather like this."

"Our Apollo," said Grandmother. "He could stand up against anybody, even one-eyed Wotan."

"There you go mixing things up again," said my mother. "Typical."

Right now, sure could, I thought to myself, as the two of them began rubbing me dry with rough, warming towels. I'll have to locate that Judith, find out where she's actually from, see if I can score something with her; in time I'll get her to stop sawing people's heads off. Or maybe—vision of my entire generation—the peace-loving girlfriend from Amazonas would be better, the pears of the Orinoco, where, incidentally, the finest tobacco is grown. Two birds with one stone, I thought. We'll see.

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