

Uncle Eberhard stood beside the chaise, regarding me pensively.

‘I believe you were crying, my girl,’ he said.

And then I remembered all my humiliation, the fact that I had blubbed just like one of the womenfolk, and what would Uncle Eberhard think of me? I was utterly mortified that I, Vega Maria Eleonora Dreary, had proved so pitiful just when I had completed my heroic feat and was on the threshold of showing the world who I really was. I felt a disquieting lump in my throat, but I clenched my fists and opened my eyes wide, and with great effort forced out an angry mumble: ‘Oh no I wasn’t!’

Uncle Eberhard seemed satisfied, grinned and nodded his head repeatedly and earnestly.

‘Well done, my girl,’ he said. ‘No, of course you weren’t, no indeed!’

He said no more, but I understood that he would not reveal my shameful secret to anyone. At that moment, Uncle Eberhard became my friend for life. And when, after many loud exhortations, he induced the shaggy little horse to move and gave a triumphant wave of his whip, my heart jumped for

joy in my breast, my back straightened and I felt I was seated in the finest carriage in the world.

We jolted along the country road, sending up glorious clouds of dust, past fields and meadows and the sweetest little cottages with staring, flaxen-haired children and cackling chickens by the front steps. We drove through pastures dotted with clumps of birches, where the sheep ran around bleating with little white lambs at their heels, and all the leaves gleamed and the trunks shimmered in the afternoon sun. Then suddenly we were in murmuring spruce forest with magical green hiding places, deep shade and cool air, and a pungent fragrance of conifers, marsh flowers and damp moss. My wonderful land opened its arms to me and let me experience its scents and enchantments, let me feel the play of its light and shadow as stabs of delight in my own blood. With all my senses I absorbed the soul of the country, taking in its taste and smell and squirreling them away inside me. We turned down jolly little side roads, bumpy and potholed as such happy byways are, strained our way up stony hills and coasted victoriously down the other side. Time and again we were brought to a halt by gates, and that was perhaps the greatest fun of all. There was always a scrum of youngsters waiting, dirty and bare-legged, and they would throw themselves at the gate like a horde of shrieking savages and then line up on either side of the road, baring their teeth in wolf-like grins. This would greatly agitate and discomfit Uncle Eberhard each and every time, and he would dig about in his empty pockets, look sheepishly at the urchins, stand up in the chaise and shake his coattails as if hoping a few coins would unexpectedly tumble out of them, then finally resume his seat with a thoroughly miserable expression – all to the youngsters' unspeakable joy. They knew very well that Uncle Eberhard never had any money, but this did nothing to detract from their entertainment. Before resolving to move on he would clear his throat portentously, raise his nose in the air and stare straight ahead as he said with great gravitas: 'There will be more next time.'

I simply had to laugh out loud every time he said it. What amused me most of all was the fact that he said it as solemnly and seriously as if making a genuine promise. Nor did he show any signs of realising what it was that caused me to chuckle. He sat there for the most part absorbed in deep thought and I did so wonder what on earth he could be pondering. Sometimes he gave me a genial look and I would think: He's going to say something, but the comical thing was that he never did. We enjoyed one other's company enormously, Uncle Eberhard and I. And just when the enjoyment was at its peak, we unexpectedly turned into a tree-lined driveway and I could tell we had arrived. Sure enough, there on the steps stood a real-life Father Christmas, huge and alarming, with a vast, snowy beard and the rosiest of cheeks. He took me in his arms and planted kisses here and there on my face with his peculiar, soft, toothless mouth, and I knew this must be my grandfather.

'Ah yes, dearie me, welcome!' said the old man, giving me a pat on the bottom.

Naturally I then expected to go inside and drop a curtsy to Grandmother and other old ladies and sit down on a chair and be offered coffee and asked how things were at home and what my plans were for the future and all those things that are part of the standard ritual when womenfolk are gathered together. But there was never any question of that! I was allowed to go with Uncle Eberhard to the stables – oh heavenly splendours! – which were crowded with horses, conveyances and yelling stable hands, and allowed to help unhitch the horse, learn the intricate tricks of dealing with harnesses, pins and straps, and before I knew it, Uncle Eberhard was lifting me up onto the creature and slapping its hind-quarters and off it set at a trot, with me on its back! It was terribly bumpy and I was thrown violently up and down, like a sack, but I held on desperately to its mane. I closed my eyes in terror and thought: I'm going to fall off – but I would not for the life of me show Uncle Eberhard and the stable hands that I was petrified. No I jolly well wouldn't! I pressed the upper part of my body to its withers and my hands clung to the lifesaving, flowing horsehair,

and I boldly opened my eyes. To my surprise I was still on its back, and so the horse and I reached our destination, which was evidently the shore. That was where we stopped, anyway, proudly awaiting Uncle Eberhard's arrival.

Nor was this by any means the end of the sensations. The horse was going for a swim. Uncle Eberhard pushed the boat out and started to row, with me on board hanging onto the horse's halter strap, and off we went. The lake was lovely, as smooth as a mirror, and the horse plunged in with much splashing and whinnying. He swam like some prehistoric animal, giving strange, uncanny grunts that seemed to rise from his belly, his nostrils flaring wildly as the water streamed and fizzed about them. Cold shivers of excitement and fear ran down my spine – our boat seemed to me a seashell that this snorting monster could tip over at any moment. But contrary to my expectations all went well and I was the triumphant one as we ambled serenely to the paddock, Uncle Eberhard, the horse and I.

Before I went in that evening I had made the acquaintance of the stable hands, ridden down to the beach again, this time in the company of all the others, and watched with cries of delight as the lads rode intrepidly out into the water and executed great circles in the lake on the backs of their swimming horses. Back on the beach they set off at a gallop and I could see the horses' white hind-quarters gleaming and the muscles rippling in the tanned bodies of the lads, stripped to the waist – a reckless and brilliant cavalcade in which health, youth and physical beauty combined in a summertime ride across the world.