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First Chapter

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**The Assistant**

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## First Book

### *Henrietta*

#### Chapter 1. May I open this door?

Henrietta's father was a cabinetmaker. He had a small workshop on Lange Strasse (Long Street). Not a happy name for a street, he thought. Perhaps the street is so long that no customer will find his way here. Yet the people wanted his chairs and cupboards, above all his tables, for he had the reputation of being able, within one day and night, to make to order a table to suit any purpose and please any taste. Why wait, people thought, when we can have it done so quickly on Lange Strasse and it doesn't cost any more than at a cabinetmaker's shop located on a shorter street. Paul didn't have to make any great effort; his hands seemed to perform the work on their own, and as he worked he sang: "*Ist dein Herz noch ledig, schick es nach Venedig*" (If your heart's still free, send it to Venice, Italy). But his own heart was not free; it belonged to Luise, the gypsy from the Havelland District. Not that Luise was a real gypsy; Paul Mahlow would have had no use for a real one, but she had black eyes and frizzy black hair in which she wore red and yellow ribbons, and she had been cast out by her family because of her daydreaming, constant singing, and rebelliousness. The village schoolteacher had made giddy eyes at her, and she had struck him with a book nearly killing him; he seemed to recover only gradually. He felt his sense of honor had been wounded. Books were sacred to him. And

so Louise left, setting off on foot, and for days she found herself surrounded by meadows and fog until eventually she saw a sea of houses, a city, on the horizon. Even someone who has never seen such a sea and knows nothing about it, will feel a yearning for it, will want to go there, to go into it and never leave.

Luise supported herself as a basketmaker's helper, but the basketmaker wasn't musical and soon put her back out on the street. She found work as a waitress in a dining hall. There it was so noisy that nobody could hear her songs, so they let her be. And every minute she had free Luise – with a sheer joy in singing – would sing along with organ grinders in the courtyards and on the bridges of the city. This was actually forbidden because to sing in public you needed an official permit. Once a cop tried to take her into custody. Luise tore herself free but slipped on the rain-wet planks of the bridge and was nearly run over by a horse-drawn cart delivering a shipment of wood to Lange Strasse, maybe straight to Paul, but she couldn't have known that, no one could.

One winter morning, Paul looked up from his work, and there was Luise, singing in the pitch-dark snowy courtyard of his workshop. She was singing "*Ist dein Herz noch ledig, schick es nach Venedig,*" and Paul's available heart instantly went out to her. It's true that Paul had made a deathbed promise to his mother that he would never marry a red-haired or a black-haired woman, or worse, a red-haired or a black-haired Catholic woman, for they were all as deceitful as cats, but he could no longer stay his heart, it was already on its way.

One day Paul and Luise are taking a walk in the zoo; it is Sunday. Paul is wearing a hat that he lifts and waves as the Kaiser and his children drive by in the imperial sleigh. Snow is dropping off the trees, and there are snowflakes clinging to Luise's eyelashes. All afternoon Paul has been looking for a tree behind which he might kiss Luise. Now, thanks to the Kaiser, an opportunity arises. Paul pulls Luise behind a maple tree and blows on her eyelashes, the snowflakes melt and slip down her cheeks, it isn't far from there to her lips.

Before that first kiss Luise says: "I knew it." Paul does not understand how she could have known about something before it happens. In the fading daylight Luise holds a pinecone, turning it around and around. "Look," she says, "there are hundreds of small tables." Paul sees no tables in the cone. "A hundred small roofs, a hundred small roof shingles, a hundred shoehorns. Perhaps everything we thought was new and modern has always been here," Luise says. "Even the two of us. It all gets shuffled, but it is always the same." Such are her crack-brained ideas, and Paul lets her think them. That's the way women are. One has to marry them.

Because Luise's family has thrown her out, she has no dowry, instead she has a sweet secret. Paul and Luise have themselves photographed as newlyweds, standing in front of a Roman panorama at Studio Noack. In the photograph, the sweet secret is not yet visible.

Paul, who used to sleep under the workbench in his shop, takes over the apartment of the defaulting tenants who live above the shop – two-and-a-half rooms. The defaulters pull their cart through rain-soggy Lange Strasse; at some point they are just small dots on the horizon. Paul had given them two sugar sticks in exchange for a mirror with duck ornamentation. He builds a table, wardrobe, armoire, chairs, and bed frame out of mahogany and a cradle out of birchwood. He carves a toy bandsman of the Foot Guards for his first son whom he intends to name Wilhelm, in gratitude for the snow and the fact that the Kaiser did not send him to war. The next son will be called Paul.

Singing Luise sweeps up the wood shavings, cooks, washes, and out of the corner of her eye she watches her husband at work. One night as he drifts back from the Kutscher Tavern, trailing dry leaves, she surprises him with some technical drawings. She has sketched his hand movements and work procedures from memory and numbered them. She has an idea how Paul can improve his furniture-making craft, how he can use the nature of the wood more effectively. “It is all in the wood; it is all there already, you only have to make use of it,” she says. Paul is tired and irritable. He lost rolling dice in the pub. The eyes of the dice are still following him; he is quite dizzy. And then, on top of everything, Luise comes along with these numbers and suggests that he perform the sixth step before the fifth one. Paul tears up the drawings. They quarrel. Luise picks up the scraps of paper from the floor. Paul locks Luise out of the house. Let the woman sleep in the yard with the dog. Luise lies down next to the chained dog who watches her through narrowed eyes.

Wilhelm's birth is expected on Christmas Day, but he isn't ready to be born yet. So Paul invites the midwife to have some nuts and wine. New Year's she is back, and again she leaves Paul and Luise with an empty cradle. When Paul goes to get her five days later – by then Luise can't stop screaming because of the pain and her face is beginning to turn blue – the midwife is out assisting at another birth. And the midwife who lived on Grosse Frankfurter Strasse has moved away without leaving a forwarding address. Her neighbors whisper that she herself is expecting a child, father unknown. Paul hurries back to Lange Strasse, hitches up a borrowed horse and wagon and takes the screaming Luise to the Royal Charité Hospital. There he feels he is only in the way, so he goes to the nearest bar. His Havelland wife, she of the wild eyes and the crack-brained ideas, will surely be able to cope.

The bar nearest the hospital is called *Zum Siechen*. Here sick people and medical students united in brotherliness lift their mugs of beer and sing in chorus: "*Das ist der Doktor Dieffenbach, der Doktor der Doktoren, er schneidet Arm und Beine ab, macht neue Nas und Ohren*" (This is Doctor Dieffenbach, doctor of all doctors, he cuts off arms and legs, and makes your nose and ears look new.) The mood, a combination of closeness to death, defiance, and hope is contagious; the hour gets later and later. An aide to the staff doctor has to fetch Paul from the bar. In the women's ward the young doctor on duty and a deaconess come to meet them. "I'm von Leyden," the young doctor says. "She is dead. My condolences."

“But *she* is alive,” says the Deaconess Mariechen Baltuttis, whose upper lip is covered with down. “Congratulations.” The deaconness opens a window. The night outside is ice cold, black and white, not a star to be seen.

By the light of a dark lantern and in a trance state induced by beer, Paul says farewell to his wife: “What can I do, my heart; I couldn’t do anything.” Luise’s dead mouth is wide open. So Paul can’t even give her a last kiss. Doctor von Leyden tries to close Luise’s lips; it isn’t easy; he ends up having to tie her jaw together with a strap.

But the child, Luise’s sweet secret, was alive. Her last crack-brained idea consisted in the fact that it was a girl. What now, Paul asked of the beer glass that a medical student has placed under his reddened nose back in the *Siechen*, without a wife what was he to do with this little worm? The medical student, who was sharing Paul’s pain at Paul’s expense, obtained a wet nurse for the worm in the women’s ward of the Charité in exchange for some money. She was the Duchess of Poland, or was it Italy, in any case a high-ranking foreigner or foreign impostor, who had given birth to a child under a false name and had command of only a single German word: *Warum*, why?

Paul had no choice. At some point he had to get up from his table in the *Siechen* where they so touchingly ministered to him and where the incurables told their sad defiant stories, and go to the Registry to register the worm’s birth. He walked under trees heavy with snow and burdened with memories. At the Jannowitz Bridge a monkey startled him out of his thoughts about bygone days. The monkey was hopping from one

passerby to the next. Only now did Paul notice that it was actually a child in a monkey suit who was attempting to get people to visit a small fair that had outlasted the holidays. Between two sooty houses a merry-go-round and its riderless wooden horses were revolving in a run-down, hellhole lit dimly by a miserable gas lamp. A booth offered crumbly pretzels and sugar candy. A leaky tent promised an encounter with the Three Kings of the Orient, and a Pierrot was balancing on a tightrope over a little pile of blackish snow. Paul caught the monkey by the ear, "Are you a boy or a girl?" The monkey took off its head. "Tell me your name," Paul said

"Henrietta," the monkey replied, "but they call me Du-Nu-Wieda (It's-you-again)."

### **Birth Certificate**

The cabinetmaker, *Paul Mahlow*, residing in Berlin, Lange Strasse 63, of the Protestant faith, came before me today in person - identified by his certificate of apprenticeship – and announced the birth at the Charité in Berlin at six fifteen o'clock on the sixth of January of this year, of a female child to Luise Mahlow, née Wittig, his wife (who died during the birth) and who resided with him. This child was given the name *Henrietta*.

Read, approved, and signed: *Paul Mahlow*.

The Registrar

*By proxy, Bernicke*

It wasn't until after her fifth birthday that Henrietta found her birth certificate behind the mirror with the duck ornamentation, the only piece of furniture that her father had retained from his days as a husband and cabinetmaker. By that time she could already read, had learned to read so rapidly, in fact, that even Privy Counselor Virchow thought it remarkable. It's the milk of the wet nurse, Mariechen Baltuttis said meaningfully, specifically the milk of the Dutchess Galeshka Moravioff, Dutchess of Warsaw. But nobody knew for certain, least of all Henrietta. There was one summer when Henrietta, who was also called Jette, Etta, or "the little Mahlow girl," wanted to go home to the Russian province, the homeland of her right honorable wet nurse. She had scarcely any access to books, and learned to read by playing with the words on the Patients' Medical Records in the 1st Medical Clinic and in the Pathology Department. Letters of the alphabet, whole words jumped into her head and remained there and established families. She didn't even have to try hard.

Luise's remains were cremated. Even in death her family did not want to provide for her. And Paul, who was spending a good deal on the foreign wet nurse and his own sorrow and who cursed God, His churches and His cemeteries, buried the small wooden box containing her ashes in the river embankment by the Jannowitz Bridge. He marked the spot with the bandsman he had carved for his unborn son. But by the time the first snow melted, the bandsman had disappeared.

Paul's skillful hands, which used to do their work as if they had a life of their own, now slowed down. The machines in the new furniture factories did the work faster.

Paul took in night lodgers who contributed toward paying the rent on Lange Strasse. Night after night he roamed through the fog, always along the banks of the Spree River, always down to Humboldthafen, until he could look across the water and see the lantern eyes of the Charité Hospital, could hear the poignant voices of the happy sick people coming from the *Siechen*.

For weeks he planed, hammered, and rasped away at one single dining table ordered by a customer who had long since forgotten about it; then he hacked it to pieces. He sold the furniture he had carpentered for Luise, himself, and his unborn son, keeping only the mirror with the duck ornamentation because, when he held his fidgety, laughing daughter up before the glass, she became calm, absorbed in contemplating her own reflection. She laughed and laughed, the silly child. She laughed on moving days, when Paul loaded the cheap, machine-made bedstead of miserably planed pinewood onto the cart and pulled it to a new abode even darker and damper than the previous one. She laughed while she, the neighbors' children, and their mothers were making decorative fringe by the yard, laughed while Paul got into fights with the foreman in the furniture factory, or fell into ever longer stupors at work in the crockery factory, textile factory, or brush factory, getting dismissed time after time.

In order to improve his situation, he earnestly sought a new wife. But the spirited young women waiting on tables in Molken Strasse quickly caught on to him when they heard Henrietta's laughter coming out of the chest for soiled linen. And the young, romantically inclined governesses pushing the baby carriages of their employers in the

zoological garden looked at his watery eyes, and suspected, sensed, or smelled that he was already under vows, had already given away, forfeited his love. Like a mouse searching for its mouse-hole he made ever-smaller circles around the *Siechen*. Hadn't they listened to him and shown understanding for him in there and helped him? He slipped inside the tavern and for days did not reappear. Otto Buss, their neighbor on Keibel Strasse and father of the children with whom Henrietta sewed buttonholes till late into the night, finally located Paul, but then he also fell victim to the siren song of the sick and those who would one day be their doctors. The pair eventually turned up two days later. By then Paul owed Privy Counselor Virchow's handyman thirty-eight light beers and forty schnapps, and that turned out to be his good fortune.

Finally, and this one time only, his penchant for beer and the slowing down of time to which he had increasingly succumbed after Luise's death, conjured a small smile on Dame Fortune's lips. His remarkably restricted but so-much-the-more profound humanity, his compassion, confined though it was to his fellow lost souls, his spontaneous feel for the nuances of suffering that had been honed in the bars of the city, now stood him in good stead at the "City of the Sick," especially in the auxiliary ward of the 1st Medical Clinic of the Charité. This was the ward full of blood spitting tuberculosis patients, a place the staff shuddered to enter. There he immediately recognized his own dilemma in the wasting away and the last gasps for air, seeing it as privation and degradation. He spoke to these sick people like an old friend, like a companion going down the same road. And once he had performed a number of menial tasks for Privy Counselor Virchow's handyman – equivalent to the value of "thirty-eight light beers and

forty schnapps” – the great man personally took him on as a male nurse, paying him a daily wage of two marks and eighty pfennig.

Henceforth Paul drank only on Saturday nights at the *Molkenritze*, a tavern on the Molkenmarkt, because the Privy Counselor had declared the *Siechen* off limits to him, appealing to his new professional honor. “Mahlow, you now belong to the big family of the Charité, you now have a position in the world.” But the worm continued to be a nuisance for him; she clung to him, clung to his hand, constantly reaching for it. Of course he loved her; she was his own flesh and blood. But even more, she was Luise’s flesh and blood, for with each passing year Henrietta resembled her mother more and more, reminding him of her, and making him think about the pinecone and Luise’s words: “It all gets shuffled, but it is always the same.” And she was forever watching him, this little Luise, questioning him with her black, monkey eyes that inspired little confidence. She even observed him in his sleep.

The few pennies the worm earned with the work she did at home, making trim and buttonholes with the Busses, was scarcely sufficient to pay for the daily meal, the preparation of which Paul found bothersome anyway. So, to have more coins clinking in his pockets on Saturday night, he stopped using the horse-drawn bus and instead started walking to work at six o’clock in the morning, traversing half the city. More and more often he took along his laughing daughter, hiding her in various nooks of the “City of the Sick” and supplying her with soup, porridge, and bread that he took from the attendants’ dining hall table. He soon discovered that she was able to stop laughing just so she could

be near him, that she could transform herself into nothing and nobody, an object, a pillar in the pathology room. And so Henrietta became a stowaway. But then Mariechen Baltuttis discovered the small hat rack with the big eyes in the female attendants' restroom and called Dr. von Leyden, the silent witness on the night of Henrietta's birth. He, in turn, called Director Privy Counselor Spinola, whom Henrietta addressed as "Mr. Spinachcounselor." Privy Counselor Virchow, the secret ruler of the Charité, who couldn't stand Spinola, found this alternate title so amusing that he promoted Henrietta from stowaway to little mascot, to be tolerated with a wink. "But, Mahlow," he said, "please keep her on a short leash." Paul didn't quite know what to make of all this: His daughter – countenanced from on high – was now permitted to follow him around and watch him.

Inch by inch, Henrietta lengthened the leash, the adults didn't even notice it was happening. The huge red masonry "City of the Sick," the entire hospital complex, its rooms and wards, its endless hallways, its dungeons and belfries became her palace. The doctors on duty, her royal household. She picked up a smattering of the palace language, a secret language. "Proof, prove, where is the proof, has that been proven?" These were the watchwords in the palace. The sick people couldn't make head or tail of it. Henrietta's curiosity and interest in watching were greater than any hunger for food. She would rather give up eating her prunes than miss a laryngoscopic examination, the amputation of a leg, or a curettage after a miscarriage. But most exciting for her was the pathology hall where Privy Counselor Virchow, standing under a clock that had stopped ages ago and was losing the numerals on its dial, explained to his students why the naked

dead had died. It was the fault of the cells, time and the cell, he explained. The inscription in the rotten wood under the clock said: *Vulnerant omnes, ultima necat*, but nobody would translate the words for Henrietta, even when she could prove to them that she was able to read the letters aloud, each one for itself, *e* and *c* and *a* – not even a bird could have chirped them more clearly.

Virchow examined her head (The shape of the skull indicated talent, he said, and wrote it into his notebook); he gave her a paintbox that she always carried with her and that became her pillow at night. She was even allowed to call Privy Counselor Virchow “Uncle Rudi”; secretly she dubbed him “cell-dwarf.” But she was not permitted to use his microscopes to observe the sick cells that didn’t exist. She was sure he had invented them just as her father had made up the black dog that had recently been following him home from the *Molkenritze*. She found all this out when she dared to take a clandestine look through the eyepiece of one of his microscopes – and saw nothing, nothing at all. The doctors and professors at the Charité were examining *nothing*. She didn’t speak to anyone about it. It remained her secret. Also uncanny was the room into which Uncle Rudi would disappear to write and think. No admittance.

“Well, little goddess of fate, how was school today?” Uncle Rudi would ask. Henrietta who was now attending elementary school together with the neighbor’s girl Anna Buss; that is to say, Anna trotted along wearily and sullenly, whereas Henrietta with her long legs took big eager steps, for she loved school, the blackboard, the chalk, the primer. She imagined a funnel through which all the knowledge of the world was

being poured into her head, and every morning the funnel got bigger. In no time she learned to write, but the teacher, refusing to believe what he saw, made her stand in the corner as punishment. There she laughed softly. And for that he rapped her across the fingers with his ruler. The other children thought it was fun.

“May I open this door?” Henrietta asked. She was standing outside Uncle Rudi’s workroom, and he was just about to go in. He took off his metal-rimmed glasses and breathed on them.

“Better with me than alone and in secret,” he sighed.

This was the treasure chamber of the Palace. Skeletons, hanging, standing, and sitting, even a grinning one slightly bent forward with one foot up on a stool full of papers. Death skulls of all sizes and shapes, bones stacked on top of bones. What a paradise this would have been for the Keibel Strasse dogs. But “King” Virchow called it his Human Museum to Benefit Mankind, his treasure chamber of knowledge. When anyone in the Palace talked about “mankind,” they always meant “the others” – that’s something Henrietta had discovered, they meant the “haves.” But even *they* ended up as bones for the dogs. And then there were the giant preserving jars not used to preserve stolen pears from Koepenick, but rather dead babies with two heads or four eyes, or sometimes no eyes at all, and way in back, the jar of all jars, containing a tiny creature that had a third hand growing from its navel. Deformities, said Uncle Rudi, they happen in Nature. It has something to do with the cells and the teleological imponderables about which we as yet know too little. Stillbirths happen; it could have happened to you too, given your brow presentation.

A third hand of which no one knew. A good, strong hand, stronger than sabers and pistols. It could accomplish great and good things while the other two hands saw to everyday tasks.

Had Father forgotten to bring the egg coke for the stove and sent her down for the third time? No problem. She was Henry the Hero, possessed of a third hand that would go directly from Henry's navel to the coal dealer. Had Otto Buss dragged the coal rake across poor Anna's forehead? Henry's third hand would break every bone in his body. Had the teacher doled out punishment work, just to torment them? The third hand would do it easily. And it also would turn over additional pages in additional primers that Henry would write down overnight, so that Henrietta could read them during the day.

It is snowing, snowing continually. Henrietta squeezes her eyes nearly shut. If you look at things in a different way, everything looks different. People dissolve into thousands of dots. Pale boats get stuck in the river. With a pointed stone she scratches into the little Spree River wall by the Jannowitz Bridge: "*Ihr werdet euch noch wundern* [You will be surprised one day]. Read, approved, and signed by Henrietta Mahlow (who remained alive after her birth)."

"I have to confess something to you," said Mariechen Baltuttis, who likes making life difficult for Henrietta, yet still gets tears in her eyes whenever she does. It was Henrietta's seventh birthday, and Mariechen confessed that she had taken the dress Henrietta's mother was wearing before her body was cremated. "It was such a pretty blue dress, too good for the oven." She wanted to sell it, but her conscience... and so she

washed it and put it away at the back of her closet. But before washing it she found a scrap of paper in the sleeve, a corner torn off a sheet of paper. Because Henrietta could read so much better than her father, Mariechen handed her the piece of paper, carefully, gingerly holding it with her finger tips, in the same way the Lord Jesus to whom she prays is presented in the form of a wafer. Henrietta compared the writing on the paper with the writing on the back of the wedding photograph. It was the handwriting of her dead mother. Mariechen Baltuttis has promised to give her the blue dress as soon as she grows into it. Henrietta hid the scrap of paper in Uncle Rudi's treasure chamber, in a crack in the wall behind the preserving jar in which Henry with the third hand floats forever and ever. She did not tell her father about the scrap of paper on one of the innumerable Saturday evenings that year when he took her into his boozy confidence and told her about the argument he had with Mama and about the ripped-up drawings.

With the passage of time the wedding photograph had wandered from the shelf next to the bedstead to the board above the mildewy dresser, and finally underneath Paul's two shirts in the cupboard. He had sold the small silver frame. On the back of the photo Paul had written that he loves Luise; his handwriting is scrawly, the letters look like rabbit snares. Luise, who had walked for days through meadows and fog until at some point she saw on the horizon the sea of houses where Paul lived, wrote in her small bird-track-like hand that now she had found happiness.

The Keibel Strasse cats were going at it fiercely. Henrietta woke up, her skin sticking to her. If only you could take off your skin like a smock. It wasn't the cats at all;

it was the sound of sawing down in the courtyard, and she thought: All of this has been a dream. That sound is being made by my father, the cabinet-maker, his spot in the bed is unoccupied, he's working on a new table. Soon Mama will come, kiss me, laugh with me and sing. We will go out on the balcony and look into the distance. She staggered to the window and looked out. Down below an old woman was holding a dead cat by the tail; she threw it over the outhouse into the neighbor's yard. Everyone else seemed still to be sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. Henrietta chewed her fingernails clean. Another Sunday. She could go swimming, submerge, and with only her eyes above water watch as the Spree flowed past.

It had not been a dream. It had all happened. But, as the duchess from Poland would have said, *Why?* Why you and not the dead babies in the preserving jars?

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