

Alma

Born 1797. Died 1877.

Life story by Marcella Maier, translated from the German by Iris Hunter.

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*This life story of Alma is a chapter of the book *The Green Silk Shawl*, written by Marcella Maier about four generations of her female ancestors. The green silk shawl of the title was passed down from mother to daughter. The book was written in 2008, and has been re-printed in German several times. The English translation was undertaken by Cambridge-based Iris Hunter, and was published in 2018. The full book is available from booksellers and on Amazon.*

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The priest had gone. Alma realised it as soon as she entered the kitchen in the morning. Everything was just as it had been on every other morning in the past two years — both kettles had been filled, and the wood on the hearth had been arranged in a way that she only needed to light the fire — and yet, something told her: Don Gerolamo was no longer there. Alma stayed still and looked around. What was it? She could not explain it. Slowly, she went into the anteroom, which was half open towards the garden. She had not been wrong. The bundle of Don Gerolamo's liturgical objects, carefully wrapped in a black cloth, was no longer there.

He had always got up very early, extracted the jug, chalice and the cloths from the bundle and arranged everything on the shelf. Then he celebrated Mass by himself, crossed the garden to fill Alma's kettles in the stream and carried them back to the kitchen, where he prepared the fire. First, he brushed the ash into the old bowl, which he put outside. After that, he carefully arranged some dry twigs, on which he placed the few thin pieces of wood, which he had already prepared the evening before, crosswise. On the top, he put the rougher logs and as soon as a match touched this elaborate tower, a cheerful fire flared up. He performed these tasks with a sort of quiet deference; Alma only lit the fireplace to prepare lunch.

Don Gerolamo then left the house, breviary in hand, walked along the brook all the way down to the footbridge and, having crossed over, walked up into the forest, where he prayed for an hour. Only then did he return to sit down for breakfast with Alma at the freshly scrubbed wooden table.

Alma, too, got up early, but Gerolamo was always up and about long before dawn. They consumed their rye bread in silence, sometimes with a piece of hard cheese, and drank a cup of goat's milk.

Alma stood in the vestibule for a while, lost in thought, before she entered the house again. The familiar kitchen suddenly appeared strange and empty to her. She opened the door to the adjacent storeroom. The spinning wheel was in the corner, with a silk shawl on its cross piece and, next to it, a letter. She opened it and read the few lines: Gerolamo thanked her for giving him shelter for nearly two years. He wrote that the time had now

come for him to go to the people who needed his help and advice. His spinning wheel and his mother's shawl were his gifts to her.

Alma picked up the shawl. She had not seen it before. She wondered whether he had kept it with the liturgical objects — it was made of the most beautiful silk. Gold-coloured ornaments had been woven into the green background and a delicate fringed border finished off the hem. Alma slowly unfolded the shawl, held the pretty cloth to her cheek and then placed it on her head. She went into the kitchen and looked at herself in the small, blurry mirror. It did, indeed, look good on her thick chestnut hair. What would people say if she wore it on Sundays? Alma threw her head back with a softly mocking smile. There would no doubt be whispering. She knew only too well that there was gossip about her — she, a young widow, who now shared a house with a man. This alone caused a stir — but that this man was a catholic priest in this exclusively protestant valley was outrageous and earned her pointed comments and disapproval.

When Alma thought of that, she shrugged her shoulders. It had, after all, been the same with her mother when Don Gerolamo had lived with them. He had arrived in the Val Bregaglia as a refugee and her parents had provided a home for him. In those days her father had still been alive, but the terrible years among the foreign troops had taken their toll on his health. He was already very weak at that time and died in the subsequent very cold winter.

People had probably expected that the priest would leave the house at that time. He stayed until spring, however, a fact that provided ample food for gossip. Just as had happened with Alma now, he abruptly returned to Italy, only to find himself on the run again a few years later, and again living in her mother's house in Soglio for a longer period of time.

Alma helped, like the other children in the village, with work at home — both in the house and in the field; but even when she was still at school, during the summer, she worked as a day labourer for other families, especially for Signora Clementina down in Bondo. She and her husband Corrado, who was a number of years older, had no children. He was a saddler and repaired the tack of the many horses that passed by. There was a lot of traffic in the Val Bregaglia, which was a regular transit route to the much frequented mountain passes of Septimer, Maloja and Julier: many horse carts and trains of pack mules¹ used the road. It was therefore not surprising that torn straps and ropes, loops and buckles had to be replaced as quickly as possible to allow men and horses to proceed the next day. This meant that Clementina, too, had to help in the workshop and therefore she relied on help in the house as well as in the smallholding and the large garden. As she had lived in Italy for many years, she taught Alma many new skills, for example preparing wonderful Italian dishes that were quite different from the simple cuisine of the valley.

After several years in the house of Corrado and Clementina, she met the man who would later become her husband. Giovanni, the son of a family who had immigrated from Italy, had been born in Siena and spoke the beautiful Italian of Tuscany. Although he understood the dialect of the Val Bregaglia, he was not fluent and some people in the village interpreted this as arrogance. Because of his bad health, he had come to the Val Bregaglia to live with his father's sister, his Aunt Clementina. Giovanni was good with his hands and learnt very quickly how to use awl and yarn. He soon proved to be a capable assistant for Corrado. Apart from the leather gear needed by the farmers and the passing tradesmen, Giovanni also produced beautifully crafted bags and pouches, which sold at a

¹ The original German word is 'Saumkolonne', which is unusual, and closest to the old English expression 'sumpter convoy'.

good price. Unfortunately, his health continued to give him trouble, and he was often unwell.

Alma was already over thirty when she married Giovanni. Her uncle and aunt allowed them to live in a small extension to their house, which had been added towards the mountainside. It consisted of a kitchen with fireplace and sleeping quarters above it, as well as a storeroom with an additional small chamber and a wooden shed, which served as a stable.

Her marriage to Giovanni brought Alma unexpected happiness, for he was a kind and sensitive husband, who introduced her to the beauty of his language and the world of books.

After two years they had a little daughter, Lisabetta. They were a small, contented family. Giovanni, however, was increasingly afflicted with a cough. His breath was laboured, he lost weight, and ten months after Lisabetta's birth, he died. Consumption, it was said.

Alma was on her own now. She continued to work for her husband's relatives — ever more frequently, as Corrado and Clementina began to grow infirm with old age. If there was any spare time with all these duties, she helped other women with their cleaning and washing, particularly when they all did their laundry at the village fountain.

Alma shoved the silk shawl, folded into a tiny bundle, into her pocket and turned her attention to the spinning wheel. She took hold of the spokes — a gentle push was enough — and the wheel nimbly whirled round and round. It was a particularly good spinning wheel, much easier to handle than the heavier wheels that were used down in the valley. In contrast to these, it was exquisitely crafted, decorated with chip carvings coloured red, which stood out prettily against the dark green of the rest of the woodwork.

The beautiful spinning wheel had been in Don Gerolamo's possession when he had first looked for a refuge with Alma's mother up in Soglio, over a year previously, but in vain — she had already died, and other people now lived in the house. He had then asked after Alma and was referred to Bondo. Just like her mother before her, Alma had not made a fuss, but simply opened her door for him, unconcerned about people gossiping. He told her that he had had to flee, but without going into details. And Alma had not asked any questions.

She had later learnt — from people travelling past who had come to Corrado's workshop — that he had been accused of disregarding the Roman Catholic dogma and that he had not obeyed the orders of the Church hierarchy, which resulted in his exclusion from the priesthood and all priestly activities. It was said that, by escaping, he avoided the punishments that he would have had to expect.

His post had been in isolated mountain villages on Lake Como, and as far as the unpretentious, hard-working population there was concerned, he was still their pastor: every now and then he disappeared for a few days. Rumour had it that he walked on hidden trails to his parishes to celebrate Mass — in secret — in small, remote chapels. And afterwards, he returned to the Val Bregaglia on secret paths, weighed down by the gifts of the poor farmers: dried meat, cheese, eggs, polenta.

These staples helped to supplement Alma's meagre earnings. It was obvious that Don Gerolamo did not want to be a burden for the widow, though he did not, of course,

have an income himself. However, he was able to spin the wool from Alma's sheep like nobody else, to such a fine and smooth yarn. The fact that a man was spinning wool was unusual and he was mocked in the village, though the best spinners had to admit, not without envy, that they were not able to produce such soft, silky and thin threads of wool.

He left the finished balls with Alma, who could sell them at a good price, because the wool spun by the priest was in demand, and many a woman brought him her wool to be spun. The pay for this work also went towards household expenses, ensuring that Don Gerolamo's stay in her house was not a strain on Alma.

Alma looked at the shelves, which took up one wall of the storeroom. On the top plank there were the neatly arranged balls of wool from her sheep, and on the lower planks those which had yet to be collected by the women in the village.

Don Gerolamo had shown Alma how to spin such fine yarn, how to tread the foot board regularly and not too fast, and how the bundle of wool had to slide through the fingers so that the thread was not too stiff but was, at the same time, twisted in a way that it did not tear easily. She had learnt and practised, but felt that she was not succeeding as well as Don Gerolamo. Nevertheless, her yarn was valued as much as the priest's by the village women.

Don Gerolamo helped with other tasks as well; for example, looking after her goat and the sheep. When he went into the forest, he returned with dead branches and kindling, and there was always enough firewood to cook. He lived in the low, unheated chamber above the open storeroom, which could only be reached from the garden via an external staircase. When he was in the house, he sat in the kitchen at the spinning wheel, working in silence. Little Lisabetta sat, when she was not asleep, next to him on the floor and played with the animals that Gerolamo had carved for her from branches and twigs. They all had their meals together, including the child. There was not much talk. Everyone was lost in their own thoughts.

The malicious insinuations about her and the priest were not mentioned. Just as Don Gerolamo adhered to his clerical commitments, he also fulfilled his pledges. And Alma had her own pride. This man was a guest in her house, a member of the clergy and she respected him, although he belonged to a different denomination, about which she did not know and understand a lot. People might say and think what they wanted to — she stuck to the principles she had learnt from childhood and did not pay any attention to the gossip.

Lisabetta's plaintive voice interrupted Alma's thoughts and she climbed up the stairs to pick up the child so that they could have breakfast together. While drinking her milk, Lisabetta suddenly pointed to the empty chair and asked, 'Where is Lamo?' This was what she called the priest, for she could not yet pronounce his difficult name.

'Yes, where might he be? Where had he gone?' Alma tried to imagine which path he could have chosen. It was, after all, not the first time that he had disappeared for some time, but he had always returned after a short while. This time it was different. The letter made that clear. Might he have found shelter somewhere else, with people who were well disposed towards him? Or had he perhaps confronted his superiors and stuck defiantly to his own position? Had he put himself in danger with this reaction? Alma began to realise that she was worried about him. He was a good man — that she had learnt — but probably someone who did not easily submit to a yoke. She could only hope that he managed to both stick to his principles and keep the office of priest in his parishes.

The winter after the priest's departure was terrible. It was freezing for weeks and the cold was worse when the sun did not rise above the high peaks of the Sciora and Badile mountains. In the frigid shadows of the steep rock faces, the chill crept into the walls and into the houses, and no warming fire could drive it out. Many villagers were not sufficiently prepared for such a long and intense period of cold, and their wood reserves did not last, however thriftily the inhabitants used them. In addition, the chestnut harvest had been bad in the autumn, and chestnuts were the main staple food of the population in the valley. This shortage was felt in all houses, but particularly in Alma's. She, too, had not been able to collect enough wood. It was impossible for Alma, holding the hand of the now three-year-old Lisabetta, to forage for wood in the steep forests, and nor was it feasible to carry home heavy burdens.

Food stocks were also short. Corrado had died in the autumn and his wife Clementina had survived him only by a few months. Alma had thus lost her place of work. It turned out to be impossible to find another job in the middle of winter, as all work in the fields had stopped and also, in effect, most of the traffic across the mountain passes. In order to make sure Lisabetta did not have to go without food, Alma often missed dinner herself and went to bed hungry. If the grocer over in Promontogno had not been such a charitable man, the situation would no doubt have been even worse.

The shop had been in the same family for generations and the owners had become reasonably affluent as a result. The current owner, Gaudenzio, was known throughout the valley for his generosity towards the poor. He jotted down their modest purchases in a notebook and waited patiently until they were able to settle what they owed. This way, he rarely suffered a loss, for those in need felt that their honour was at stake. Alma used to pay for her shopping with the money she earned from spinning and from selling the wool from her sheep. After Corrado's and Clementina's deaths she, too, was forced to take credit from Gaudenzio. Alma found this hard to swallow and her thoughts centred solely around the fact that life could not go on in this way — she did not want to live through another winter like this.

The previous months had been nearly as horrendous as the winter when they had to escape the French — or had it been the Austrians or the Russians? Alma remembered that time only vaguely, but even now, years afterwards, it was spoken about in terms of terror. Foreign troops had marched through the valley. There was talk of 'the Emperor's army and 'the French army', and even of soldiers from Russia. The heavily armed forces marched up the valley, only to promptly return again from Maloja not long afterwards, hotly pursued by units of the enemy's army. They chased each other away. Depending on the fortunes of war, the expelled headed back and chased away those who had previously banished them. They all, however, pillaged, plundered and looted: they took people's livestock, food, hay and firewood, their shoes, their leather and, of course, all money and valuables.

Alma had been very young at that time and was not able to distinguish between her own, personal experiences and what she had heard older people talk about when they shared reminiscences of the horrors.

She vividly remembered the day when there had been great excitement in Soglio. The inhabitants had run over to the open country, to the east of the village, from where they could look down into the valley. Men in colourful uniforms passed along the road — with flashing guns, horse carts pulling strange two-wheeled iron vehicles carrying weird pipes, screams reverberated, and harsh orders were heard. No human being could be seen outdoors down in Bondo, no animal in the fields. All doors and windows were locked and bolted. But the soldiers pushed open the gates and one could see the people fleeing out of their back doors up into the forest.

More than once, the population of Soglio witnessed such events from their high location and each time they trembled at the thought of invaders coming up to their village and wreaking such destruction there, but fortunately it was situated at an altitude way above the valley.

The strongest memories were of the weeks spent in the middle of the winter in one of the huts that belonged to the mountain hamlet², which was normally only used in the summer. Many people, mostly women and children, had moved up from Castasegna to Soglio, and they were bursting with terrible news. Everything was being stolen; 'requisitioned' was the term. The men were apparently forced to serve the officers and soldiers, and they had to slaughter their own cattle for the military kitchens. No woman was safe from this rampant mob of soldiers. In panic, the frightened people pushed further up into the woods. Soglio, too, would no longer be safe, if all houses in the valley had been looted.

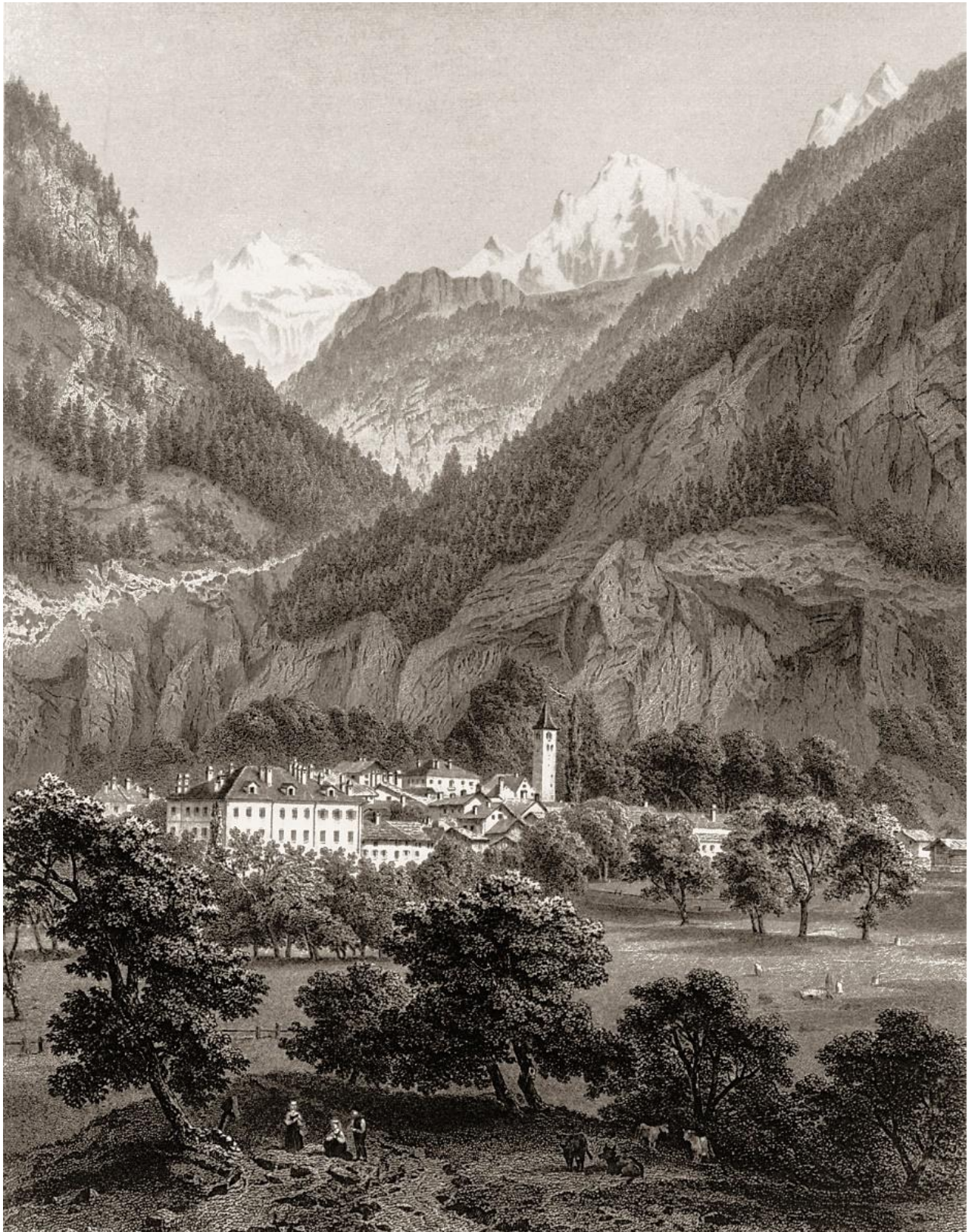
Therefore, the men in Soglio had also ordered the women to escape with the children to the huts high up on the mountain. Alma had never forgotten those days and nights, the terrible cold and the darkness. In the corner of the shack, the villagers prepared a sort of camp bed for the children on a pile of straw, and then covered them up to their necks with everything they could find — old blankets, sacks and material normally used to collect hay from the fields. They were lying in the dark, tightly pressed together, frightened and very hungry, because the little food they had been able to take on their rushed flight had soon been used up. Although some of the fathers managed to come up secretly during the night, bringing with them anything edible they had been able to get hold of, it was not always possible to find food nor to bring it up to the mountains.

These years of war and starvation had become deeply entrenched in the folk memory, and people talked about the events they had experienced then, again and again. During the previous, bitterly cold and long winter, such reminiscences usually ended with the remark that life was obviously bad for everyone, but nevertheless not as terrible as during the time when the French had marched past.

At last the winter was over. The sun climbed again over the high rocky towers and peaks and poured its warmth into the narrow valley. In the meadows surrounding the village there were the first signs of green, and towards the evening deer came out of the forest and grazed near the row of small hay barns on the flat ground to the west of the church.

An indescribable feeling of relief and hope permeated people just as the bright sunrays did. Alma had opened the windows and doors of her little house in order to get rid of the cold and humidity. On a day like this, one should not stay in the house, she thought. She packed all the balls of wool she had spun over the last few weeks into a cloth, took Lisabetta's hand and together they wandered over to Promontogno.

The stream had swollen massively with the meltwater and roared underneath them when they crossed the bridge. The wagtails hopped from stone to stone on the bank, and in the chestnut trees near the caves, the chaffinches blared out their joy of spring into the pleasantly warm spring air. The jays were performing their wedding dances above the old fir trees in the steep meadows behind the village. In rapid flight they spiralled up and up into the air only to plunge down abruptly like a stone. A little above the ground, they caught themselves and promptly started rising again.



Bondo towards the Bondasca Glacier
Engraving by Ludwig Rohbock, before 1861

Lisabetta trotted along cheerfully, singing her own tunes, and pointed to the first flowers; coltsfoot, on the embankment, crocuses and daisies in the meadows, and cinquefoil at the edge of the path. On the other side of the valley, in between the bare beech trunks, there was a scattering of wild cherry trees in bloom and, next to the little walls along the side of the path, blackthorn had adorned itself with bright blossoms.

In the garden of Gaudenzio the grocer, incredibly, the pear tree was already in bloom, and among the beds, cowslips and March bells were nodding in the early wind of spring.

Gaudenzio took the wool that Alma had produced and removed the little booklet from the drawer in which he had noted the amount Alma had spun for him and what groceries she had received from him. He carefully entered the numbers, and then calculated — there was still a small debt that Alma owed. She had hoped so much that everything she had chalked up could be wiped off completely, and she was now disappointed that, despite all her efforts, she was still in Gaudenzio's debt.

He felt for her. Pushing his glasses further up his forehead, he remarked, 'Do not worry. You are not the only one in this position. After this winter, it is hardly surprising. I know that you will pay up as soon as you can. It is not much anymore, after all, so do not let this matter spoil this beautiful day.'

'Thank you. I do not know how I would have survived the last few months if you had not given me credit. My child would have gone hungry, for sure.'

'But you did go hungry', the grocer thought to himself and looked at her silently.

She had, actually, been a strong woman, but now she was thin, and her cheeks were hollow. Without asking, he packed some corn and barley into her cloth. Alma tried to fend him off.

'No, I want to pay up for the rest first, before I buy anything else; you can rest assured that I shall get by.'

'Let go,' Gaudenzio grumbled and added a chunk of cheese, 'Do not tell me that we cannot agree on this.'

Alma allowed him to proceed — the grain was more than welcome, as there was hardly any left in her house.'

'Gaudenzio, I have another request. I have to find work. You are aware that there is nothing more to be done in Corrado's and Clementina's house, and whatever little else there is in the village is simply not enough. Even though the two of us' — she pointed to Lisabetta — 'live very modestly. If you hear of anything, please think of me. You meet lots of people in your shop and you could perhaps ask some of them.'

'Of course. I will think of it. There will definitely be more work towards summer, and I am sure that I shall find something for you.'

Alma left the shop grateful and full of hope. Instead of returning home via shortest route, she took the path along the river and walked in a wide arc through the meadows. She picked grasses and flowers with Lisabetta and threw stones into the stream so that the water splashed up high, much to the child's delight, and they played hide and seek near the huts by entrance to the village.

A week later, when Alma was washing the laundry of a sick neighbour, Alberto, who ran the sawmill in the village, walked past and said, 'Gaudenzio has asked me to tell you that you should drop by.'

Alma was surprised. 'Did he not say anything else?'

'No, nothing.' Alberto was a man of few words.

She rinsed the laundry fast and carried it behind her house, where there was a washing line between the eaves and the walnut tree on the riverbank. In a great hurry, she hung up the sheets, the kitchen towels and the underwear.

She did not even take time to cook lunch, but just sat herself and Lisabetta down for bread, cheese and milk, in order to go to Gaudenzio in Promontogno as soon as possible.

When she entered the grocer's, Gaudenzio looked up from his work. Alma immediately realised that he had good news for her.

'Signora Anna in the Palazzo in Soglio is looking for help. Plinio, who works on the farm, was here yesterday and mentioned it. I thought of you at once.'

'That would be great — but do you believe I would be good enough for this lady?'

'Alma — you are hard-working, you know that yourself. I shall recommend you. When Plinio comes tomorrow, I shall give him a few lines for the Signora. Apart from that, you speak high German, which she will appreciate. Go up as soon as you can and introduce yourself.'

'Good, in that case, I shall go the day after tomorrow.'

Two days later, Alma made her way up to Soglio in her Sunday best, holding Lisabetta's hand. To begin with, the little one bravely marched along with her short legs, but after 30 minutes, not unexpectedly, she started asking how much further it was going to be. Alma could not but agree to a break on the terrace near Plaz, where the 'cascine', the old huts used for storing and drying chestnuts, stood under the trees. Sitting on a rock, they rested and ate the last dried chestnuts, which Alma had been able to save. Dried chestnuts had to be kept in the mouth for a while, until they were soft, and then one could chew them and enjoy their delicate, sweet taste.

Entranced, Alma looked around. There were green shoots and blossoms everywhere; the earth producing new food for humans and animals. On the way home, she would dig out dandelions to make a salad. With an egg — the hens had fortunately also started laying again — that would make a good meal. Near some of the huts, the wild spinach had begun to show its first leaves and in a week's time she could come back to collect spinach.

She sighed with relief — surely the worst was now over. And if the matter of a position with Signora Anna was successful, the future would be brighter, too.

The two took up their path again, as it wound its way towards the mountains with many bends. The white church steeple of Soglio emerged further up between two tall poplars and they soon arrived. Alma stood still and looked at the houses, which stood next to each other in a tight row. The roofs, which were made of heavy stone slabs, and the grey façades, were bathed in the gleaming light of the spring sun, in contrast to the dark brown timber on the upper floors. How well she knew every house, every stable and every garden. It was the village of her childhood. There was still a lot of snow — glistening like

silver — on the mountains across the valley from which the striking ridges and spires of the Bondasca Range protruded into the blue sky. She strode along the lane to the village entrance where granite had been added to the cobblestones to make access for horse-drawn carts easier.

Having pulled the outside bell firmly, she walked hesitantly through the gate of the Palazzo Battista — a grand structure, whose elegant architecture, with its bright windows and outbuildings surrounding a courtyard, was evidence of the power and wealth of the von Salis family. She found herself in a hall with a high, domed ceiling; there were doors on both sides and a staircase at the end.

An old woman rushed down the steps. Alma knew her. It was Caterina, who had been in service in the Palazzo even when Alma was still a child.

When she heard why Alma had come, she looked cold and reserved. Rather reluctantly, she bid Alma to follow her. As they reached the upper floor, Alma looked around astonished: the hall spread over two floors. There were weapons, suits of armour and portraits of very formal gentlemen.

Caterina vanished through a narrow door, but reappeared at once and indicated to Alma that she should follow her, throwing a suspicious look at Lisabetta. The child had observed everything quietly and now shyly snuggled up to her mother, as they stood in the bright room in front of Signora Anna. This slim lady, whose delicate, aristocratic face was framed by light, partly greying hair, sat in an armchair near the window with a book in her hand.

‘So, you are Alma. Gaudenzio recommended you to me. I hear that you are a widow and have worked for Corrado and Clementina. I knew the two well — good people.’

Her duties, Signora Anna explained, would consist in giving a helping hand to Caterina with all the chores, as she had grown too old to cope with all the work in this big household by herself. There might be problems, however, because Caterina would perhaps not be able to get used to the fact that she was no longer in charge of everything on her own.

As was so often the case with the elderly, she would find it hard to hand over some of her duties. Alma would have to be patient and make sure that the old servant did not feel that she was being pushed aside.

‘I have known Caterina since I was a child, and I shall certainly get on with her. Indeed, I have been working a lot with old people over the past few years,’ Alma explained.

‘Is this your child? What is your name?’ The Signora turned to Lisabetta. The little one remained silent and only after a nudge from her mother, did she quietly utter her name.

‘Lisabetta, that is also my name; Anna Elisabeth. How old are you?’

Lisabetta held up four fingers, without saying a word, and the Signora smiled. ‘Let us say, then, this means that you are four years old and no doubt a well-behaved little girl who gives her mother pleasure.’

With this, she addressed Alma. ‘What is the situation with the child? Can you have her with you while you are at work or what were your plans?’

‘Lisabetta is a quiet girl and fortunately she can very easily entertain herself. In addition, I think she is now old enough to be with the other children in the village. If I were ever held up because of her, however, I would catch up on my work in the evening. In any case, my work would not suffer, I assure you.’

This was said in a firm and positive tone, and the Signora smiled.

‘I believe you. You speak High German; where have you learnt that?’² Alma told her about her husband and that they had always communicated in the ‘vera lingua’.³

‘I am very happy about this’, the Signora said, adding, ‘You can move into a room overlooking the garden, and as far as your wages go, I shall set them in line with the current standard — after I have made the necessary enquiries.’

Alma was happy with this, and she also agreed to start as soon as possible.

A few days later, Alma and Lisabetta moved in with their sparse belongings and Alma started her job. There was enough work in the rambling four-storey house with its corridors and staircases and the great number of rooms, even though only few of them were inhabited. Nevertheless, they needed to be aired every now and then, and they had to be kept clean.

Caterina was very reserved towards Alma at first, but was nonetheless glad of her help and increasingly entrusted her with housework and cleaning tasks. The only tasks she would not leave for Alma were serving Signora Anna and looking after her room.

Garden work, too, was soon part of Alma’s duties, as it became more and more burdensome for the old woman, though a young man from the village, whose father had already looked after the Palazzo garden, came in several times a week to maintain the magnificent grounds, which had been laid out in the French style. There were yew hedges surrounding rose beds, brightly flowering peonies, fruit trees and two tall, unusual, redwood trees. When necessary, Alma helped him, and she was also responsible for the upkeep of the vegetable beds in the north-east corner at the foot of the steeply ascending, rocky hillside.

The big, domed kitchen remained part of Caterina’s empire, but she allowed Alma to help her with the stove. Alma knew how to make herself useful without being intrusive. She always allowed Caterina to allocate work for her, helped her when she wanted her to do so, asked her advice and followed her orders in such a way that Caterina soon gave up her negative attitude and good team work started to develop between them.

Signora Anna quickly realised that this was the case and was glad that Alma managed to handle her loyal, old maid so skilfully, particularly in view of the fact that in the past there had often been unpleasant friction with young helpers.

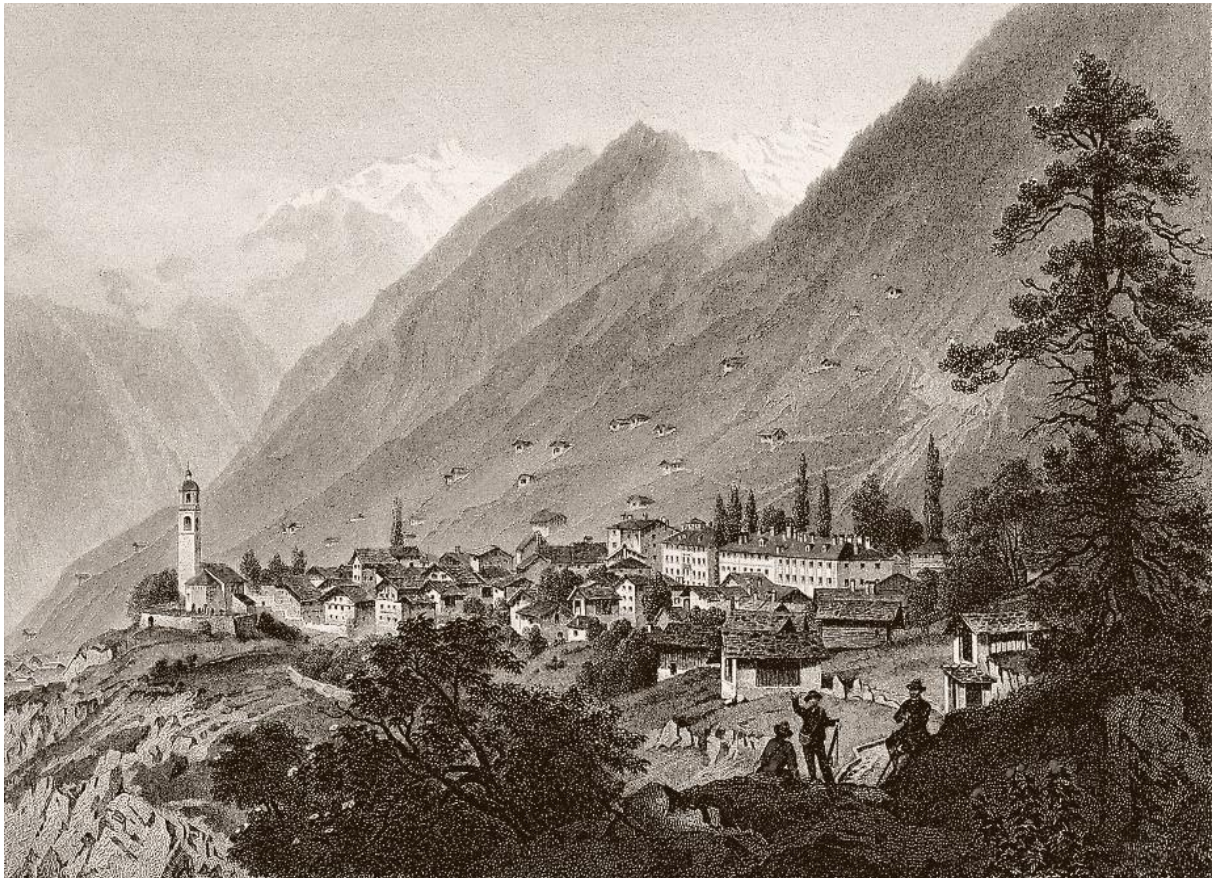
Alma settled in quickly. Lisabetta obviously liked living in the Palazzo, too. While Alma worked, the child played in the entrance hall or on the sunny forecourt. With her quiet manner, she had also won the heart of Caterina, who was only too happy to let her sit in the kitchen with her, at the end of the long table, playing with a pan and a wooden

² The Signora had expected Alma to address her in the local Swiss German dialect. High German would only be used in the written form, on very formal occasions or to communicate with people who were not Swiss German. High German was, and still is, taught to all children in Swiss German areas, when they start primary school.

³ Alma’s husband Giovanni had been born in Siena and was a native Italian speaker — she mentions the ‘beautiful Tuscan Italian’ he spoke and the fact that he understood the local dialect of the Val Bregaglia, but that he did not speak it well and that they therefore communicated in High German.

spoon. In the garden, too, Lisabetta was allowed to play with the long cones of the redwood trees and with pebbles, sometimes even when Signora Anna strolled along the gravel-covered paths with her silk sun umbrella.

One morning, with dawn still in the alleyways, Alma set out from Guiliano's house across the village square and ran hurriedly along the narrow lane to the backdoor of the Palazzo. Quietly, so as not to wake up Lisabetta, she entered her room. Lisabetta was not there. The bed was empty. The shock that hit the mother paralysed her completely. She could barely breathe. Wild fear enveloped her. Where was the child? She ran out to the staircase, through all the corridors and called her little one in desperation. She was nowhere.



Soglio, view from the east
Coloured steel engraving by Ludwig Rohbock, before 1861

Alma ran up the stairs and into Caterina's room; she was getting dressed and initially did not understand at all what was going on, why Alma was asking questions about Lisabetta, and why she was so agitated. Caterina knew nothing. In panic, Alma dashed into Signora Anna's chambers without knocking.

'Lisabetta...', she panted breathlessly.

The Signora sat bolt upright in her bed, and next to her was Lisabetta, sound asleep. Alma sank onto a chair and started to sob violently. She was shaking so badly that she barely managed to regain her breath. Lisabetta woke up, looked around in astonishment, then glanced at Signora Anna and Alma and began to cry, extending her arms towards her mother.

‘Mummy, Mummy’, she cried.

Alma jumped up and put her arms around her, still sobbing.

Signora Anna’s face showed displeasure, even anger, and she said, in a severe tone, ‘Where were you during the night? And leaving the child alone?’

In her confusion, Alma could only say, ‘With Giuliano’. ‘What do you mean, with Giuliano?’ Signora Anna looked at her maid with a frown.

‘Well, actually...no, with Giuliano’s mother. She is ill. I was looking after her.’

Signora’s face was a picture of surprise.

‘So you keep vigil for the sick Celestina at night?’ And after a pause she added, ‘Lisabetta must have woken up and was probably afraid. Whatever it was, she screamed so loudly on the staircase that I woke up. I brought her to my room, but it took her a long time to calm down. I did not know, of course, where I could have found you.’

Alma lowered her head and muttered an apology.

‘Go now and give Lisabetta her milk! We shall talk later.’

Still in a daze, Alma went down into the kitchen, where Caterina had already lit a fire in the hearth. She listened to Alma’s tale of what had happened. She had not heard anything herself, but that was because she did not hear particularly well any more. Downcast, Alma prepared breakfast. What would happen if Signora were to dismiss her? It was only too obvious how indignant she was.

Alma knew how lucky she had been to get the position in the Palazzo. She loved her work and was only too glad that she could always have her child with her, and for this, she was immensely grateful to the Signora.

She could have been so happy, if the thought of winter had not been bothering her all the time. During the cold season, the Palazzo was closed. The high, vast rooms could not really be heated properly, despite the beautifully decorated tiled stoves. For this reason, Signora Anna and Caterina moved into the milder region of the Rhine valley — where the family had another castle — as soon as winter sent its first harbingers. This had always been the case and Alma had been aware of this when she took on the position.

She knew that she could hardly have found another, better position, but she was not able to stop herself thinking about the problem of the winter months without work and without a source of income. Given that there was no other opportunity to find casual work, even in the summer, it was clear that practically nobody would be looking for help in the winter, when the country was under a thick blanket of snow.

It was therefore clear for Alma that she had to plan ahead for the winter. She saved her wages tirelessly and tried not to touch what she had put aside once she had paid off her last debts to Gaudenzio. Granted, she was able to spin the wool from her sheep when they came down from the alp higher up in the mountains, but would that, together with her savings, be enough to survive the winter? In addition, Corrado’s nephews had given her to

understand that they, as rightful heirs, were intending to take over the little house in Bondo. Where should she and Lisabetta go in that case? There was no way for them to be able to stay in their room in the cold Palazzo without heating. During sleepless nights, Alma worried and could not think of a solution.

It seemed like a stroke of fate when her cousin, Giuliano, who lived across the village square opposite the Palazzo, asked her if she could help his wife with the care of her seriously ill mother by looking after the patient overnight every now and then.

At first, Alma hesitated. Could she leave Lisabetta alone at night? But the little girl always slept deeply and never had nightmares like other children. Increasingly, she had made friends with the other children of her age in the village and romped around the whole day — in the lanes and hay barns. She was allowed to join them when they went to the meadows, when the adults were busy harvesting in the fields. As a result, she was really exhausted in the evenings and always slept soundly through the night.

Alma therefore dared to agree to Giuliano's proposal. The nights with the sick patient were not easy. She was restless, in pain, and repeatedly had to be given cooling compresses. She was also often confused, wanting to get up and leave the room, and was difficult to calm down and take back to bed. As Alma was strong and healthy, she usually managed to return to sleep quickly on the narrow bed that had been put into the patient's room, so that her normal day job was not affected. In the evening, when everyone in the Palazzo was asleep, she crossed the village square to Giuliano's house and returned early in the morning to her room. When her patient woke her up, she often sneaked over to Lisabetta in order to check that the child was asleep.

Over the course of weeks her help was needed more often. Care during the day became so demanding that Alma was eventually taking over night duties completely. That, however, turned out to be a big challenge, particularly in high summer when there were many guests in the Palazzo, nephews and nieces and other relations from the various branches of von Salis family. Meals were taken in the dining room on the ground floor, big pots and pans were steaming in the kitchen, beds had to be made and cart loads of bed and table linen had to be washed at the big covered fountain. After such busy days, Alma found it hard to look after Celestina at night, but she told herself again and again that the remuneration she received from Giuliano would come in useful during the winter.

How, though, should life continue after this incident? She was aware that it had not been right to leave the child alone without telling anyone about her nocturnal activities. On the other hand, what should she have done?

She ran over to Giuliano after lunch and told him quickly what had happened. He was concerned and felt guilty about the unfortunate situation. Alma was constantly thinking about it, trying to formulate an explanation that would clarify it all. She finally convinced herself that it would be best to be completely open about her circumstances.

Lisabetta did not leave her side all day, as if she was frightened that her mother would abandon her. Caterina said over dinner, 'You should go to the Signora afterwards.'

Alma's pulse was racing when she entered Signora Anna's rooms. Her mistress bid her sit down and said, 'I think we need to talk.'

Alma accepted that she should have come earlier and apologised.

'I love being here in the Palazzo and I enjoy the work and am very grateful to have this job, particularly because I can have my girl with me. We lack nothing, but I have to

think of the winter, as you, Signora Anna, are going to leave Soglio and I shall not have any work then. I put my wages aside, untouched, but I am afraid my savings will not be enough for the winter. This is the reason why I am glad to get the small salary Giuliano pays me for the night vigils. I am also worried about accommodation. I assume that I cannot stay in the Palazzo over the winter and, though I am currently tolerated in the little house in Bondo, this will not be the case in the longer term. It is also near enough impossible to find any other kind of work over the winter. Apart from spinning my own wool and perhaps taking on some additional spinning jobs from one or two of the other families and, indeed, the night vigils, there are no other opportunities to earn money. Celestina is not going to live much longer, I suppose, and then that income will disappear as well.'

Signora Anna had listened to Alma in silence.

'I know that Giuliano's family needs your help urgently and I don't think you can let them down now. You should talk to Giuliano, however, and ask him whether he could rearrange the room next to the patient — Lisabetta could then sleep with you. It would probably not be good for her if she woke up again and found herself alone in a pitch-dark house. It would be best if you went over to Giuliano now and talked to him. I shall think about everything else and see what can be done.'

Alma, who had expected a reprimand and was now experiencing warm understanding was so relieved that she had to hold back her tears. In a choking voice, she expressed her gratitude and went off to Giuliano. It was obvious that he, too, was extremely relieved about the happy turn of events. The Signora's proposal was put into action and the little pantry next to the sickroom was emptied and a bed was moved in there.

Lisabetta, who had not got over the shock of the previous night, initially cried and fought against the unfamiliar room and the different bed. Alma therefore lay down beside her and pulled the child towards her under the cover, where she cuddled up to her mother and soon fell asleep.

The first pears ripened in the garden, and Alma took them up to the Signora in a bowl.

'Have a seat. I have thought about our discussion,' she said. 'First of all, I am happy with your work. You work hard, and you are diligent and have good manners, and I appreciate that. In addition, you have understood how to live and work with my loyal Caterina. As far as I know, there have not been any conflicts between the two of you and that cannot always have been easy. I would like to be able to count on you next summer, too, and I have considered how this could be done. People have told me that you are particularly good at spinning and that your wool is more delicate and softer than that of other women. I suggest that you could spin the wool from all our sheep.'

'All your wool?' Anna asked surprised, as she pictured, in her mind, the large flock of sheep of the von Salis family.

'Yes, of course. You should also go into the Palazzo regularly and make sure that everything is in order. When I go away, you would scrub the whole house thoroughly, and that would no doubt take two weeks. In the spring, before I move back in, you would air the place and clean it again, because the dust settles on everything when an old house is left empty. You can then prepare the soil in the vegetable garden, too, and start sowing again. And you will certainly be able to do other bits and pieces before I return. I expect

you to write down the hours you work, and then you will be paid. To help you get through the winter, I shall pay you part of your wages in advance.'

Alma got up and, thanking her, seized the Signora's hands.

'Something else,' she said. 'We can let you have the fourth-floor room with the fireplace and the adjoining chamber in the south-western corner of the annex. You could move in there before the beginning of winter.'

Alma felt as if she were dreaming. A wave of joy flowed over her; to have a place to live and a solid income — that was more than she had dared dream.

When the forests turned colour and the chestnuts ripened, Signora Anna and Caterina left Soglio. Alma cleared the little house in Bondo, and Giuliano transported her handful of belongings with his horse and cart to her new lodgings in the tall house next to the Palazzo in Soglio. It gave her great pleasure to arrange the few pieces of furniture, household items and personal possessions in the two rooms. She put the spinning wheel next to the window and already imagined herself sitting there, busy spinning her mistress's wool, while snowflakes fell to the ground outside. With a feeling of reverence, she then unpacked the box with her late husband's books. She remembered the few rare hours when she was reading with Giovanni — those had been happy moments. She still did not have much time to read, but on a Sunday afternoon, when the work had been done, she liked to read and immerse herself in the wonderful world of the written word.

Lovingly, she put the silk shawl, which she had carefully kept in a leather case specially made by Giovanni all those years ago, on the top shelf of a closet. Furnished in this way, the humble but bright apartment, where even in winter the afternoon sun shone, turned into a cosy home for Alma and Lisabetta.

Nine winters had passed. Alma had sat at her spinning wheel every day, had spun all of her mistress's wool, while Lisabetta, who had learnt from her how to twist it into delicate and flexible yarn, had helped her diligently. Indeed, she had been able to take on additional spinning jobs. She did not have her own wool any more, as she had sold her sheep after the first summer in the Palazzo, because she did not have a shed where the sheep could have stayed over winter. Often people called on her to look after the sick and help with their care. She was said to have 'good hands'.

Spring arrived again. The snow down in the valley had not disappeared yet, and the cold winter shadows were still creeping up between the tall buildings, which had been built very closely together. On the sun terrace of Soglio, however, the meadows were free of snow and the alleyways were dry. Houses and stables looked cosy as they were warmed in the spring sunshine. Here and there, the first signs of green dared to show. Flowers, such as crocuses — which resembled little white candles — emerged, and there were coltsfoot flowers with their sun-like faces, as well as the blue stars of spring gentians. Honey and bumblebees were humming around the willow catkins, and on the bare trees, blackbirds sang their tuneful melodies, which floated into the blue sky.

In the Palazzo, the Signora sat in her armchair next to the window in the sunny room leading out to the village square. Alma attended to her, as she needed more and more care. She had grown thin and frail, and she suffered from painful arthritis. Alma treated her with an ointment made of wild herbs, which she had produced by following her mother's recipe. Caterina had died, and Alma was now in sole charge of all work in the kitchen and house. Lisabetta was a great help, as she did not have to go to school over the summer months. There were not many visitors in the Palazzo anymore, because the Signora needed quiet and care. She was keen to have Alma next to her a lot of the time.

When she had done all her household chores, Alma sat in the Signora's room in the afternoons. Her mistress enquired after the villagers, whether they were well or not — she knew them all personally and was still interested in their welfare. Occasionally, she talked about herself, the travels she had undertaken years ago, about her ancestors and her very large family. Mostly, though, she asked Alma to read to her, as her sight had become poorer as well, and reading exhausted her very much. The Signora had been surprised when she had discovered that Alma enjoyed reading. She allowed her to take the odd volume from the bookshelves to read in her spare time. She now appreciated the fact that her ordinary maid was able to help her pass the time, and Alma was only too happy to do so. Indeed, nothing was too much trouble for her to make the old lady's life easier — such was her deep gratitude and loyalty towards her.

While she worked in the house, Alma was lost in her own thoughts and asked herself time and again, how it could have happened that she was no longer able to talk to Lisabetta, not even about an important matter.

On Good Friday, Lisabetta would be confirmed. She had grown into a tall, slim girl, with regular, perhaps slightly severe, features. She had always been a quiet child, and now she had a calm dignity. At school, the teacher had always been happy with her, and at home she assisted her mother without fuss. Apart from school, she helped with household chores and with spinning jobs, which had contributed considerably towards their livelihood. With that, the duties in the Palazzo, and the occasional nursing tasks, they had sufficient income for both of them, so that Alma had never again been forced to run up a tab with Gaudenzio. Two years ago, she had also inherited a 'cascina'⁴ and some chestnut trees from a relative, which were on the terrace near Plaz and which yielded more than she and Lisabetta needed. Gaudenzio in Promontogno took the rest and with this arrangement she had a small credit with him in the autumn, which provided security and the certainty that the times of poverty were behind them.

For weeks, Alma had tried to talk to her daughter about her future, but Lisabetta had always managed to avoid this conversation. She either found an excuse to rush into another room — to check up on the milk, to shut a window, to see who had knocked on the door — or she simply changed the subject. Only on a few occasions did Alma succeed in detaining Lisabetta to talk about job searches. Each time, Lisabetta had declared in a friendly, but firm manner, that she would not remain in the valley, but look for work in the Engadine, more precisely in a hotel. Alma was shocked and protested, 'In a hotel? With people about whom we know nothing? With men? Certainly not, I shall not allow this!'

Lisabetta had retorted that there were hardly any jobs in their valley and that pay was extremely low. In a hotel she would be able to earn more, and she could thus also help her mother. Alma did not wish to hear any of this. She was more than able to cope in their current circumstances and she really did not need more to manage, but no, she did not want to see her daughter in a hotel. Lisabetta had not responded to this.

Alma's final argument, 'What would the people say?' had only received a pitiful smile and the dry remark, 'Since when have you worried about what the people say?'

With that, the mother had to admit defeat.

'Alright then, you go to the Engadine if you have to, but not into a hotel.'

Lisabetta shrugged her shoulders and remained silent. Even so, Alma tried a few more times to influence her. The girl did not answer, was quiet and let her mother talk, and

⁴ A 'cascina' (Italian) is a farmhouse.

Alma sensed that she would not change her mind — she was, after all, cut from the same cloth.

There were not too many opportunities for conversation, because Alma was very much wrapped up in nursing a patient. She had to manage her schedule very carefully to be able to complete her work in the Palazzo as well. Time, however, was pressing now, as Lisabetta finished school at Easter and after that she must surely stand on her own two feet. It was high time to look for a position, and jobs were thin on the ground. She should certainly not leave the search until the last moment.

These worries depressed Alma, even when she went to Giuliano and his sick wife who had been in bed for weeks with a high temperature; no home remedies had improved her condition. Alma spent the night with her, cooked the meals, managed the household and looked after the three small children. In the afternoon, Giuliano took care of the little ones, so that Alma could work in the Palazzo for a few hours, but when he had to attend to the stables in the evening, he was glad that Alma kept an eye on the household.

One evening, at last, the worst of the illness appeared to be over. Ortensia's temperature had gone down, and for the first time she had eaten a proper meal and looked brighter than she had done for some weeks. The children had been taken to bed and the patient had been made ready for the night; Alma and Giuliano sat in the kitchen.

The worst is behind us, Ortensia is clearly improving', said Alma. 'That is very good, because the Signora returns soon, and you know that I shall then be needed in the Palazzo.'

'Yes, I know, but what next? Do you think Ortensia will soon be ready to look after the house and children on her own again?'

'She will not be able to manage that so soon — she is still very weak and will have to take it easy for a while.'

Giuliano sighed.

'What should I do? I have to go up to Grevasalvas before too long. There is not much hay left down here, and up there I have enough to last until the animals can go out to pasture.'

Like several other farmers in Soglio, Giuliano, owned grassland and pasture in the Engadine and a Maiensäss cabin in Grevasalvas high above Lake Sils. This small summer hamlet, as well as those of Blaunca and Bueira, had for a very long time belonged to families from Soglio. Every spring, the farmers moved up to the Engadine with their families, including the whole household, and the animals were allowed out to graze on the meadows there. The livestock spent high summer even higher up in the mountain pastures, while the nutritious grass around the settlements was harvested. When autumn approached, the women returned to the Val Bregaglia with the children. The fathers stayed in the Maiensäss until the hay had been used up. They kept only a small amount as a reserve, in case they needed it if there was late snow the following spring. When the cattle had been 'fed to bursting' by late autumn,⁵ the farmers went back home to the Val Bregaglia, too. At that time, winter had often already begun, and the cows plodded down the Maloja Pass in between high snow walls.

⁵ The author uses inverted commas around the word 'ausfüttern' and adds 'as it was called' — clearly not a well-known term, which could be translated as 'stuffed'.

‘You certainly cannot leave your wife alone yet. Is there nobody among your relatives who could help?’ Alma asked.

Giuliano shook his head, sadly. Then he suddenly asked, ‘Lisabetta? Could Lisabetta not come to us? She is, after all, finishing school now. She has learnt everything that needs to be done here from you. Naturally, I shall pay her a salary.’

Lisabetta — sure, why not, really? Why had she not thought of this before?

‘I shall ask her. She has to decide. I believe that these matters are up to the young — they have to decide for themselves.’

Giuliano seemed a bit bewildered. He probably thought that when the mother had taken a decision, the children had to obey, even if they were already confirmed, but he was also aware that Alma had different views from most other people in many respects, and therefore he only nodded.

When Alma discussed this proposal with Lisabetta, she was surprised to find that she agreed to take on this task.

‘Good, if necessary I shall do this until Ortensia is well enough to get by on her own. After that, however, I am off to the Engadine. And as you have so many misgivings about working in a hotel, I could take a job with a family, if that reassures you. But the Engadine it will be.’

It was July before Ortensia was strong enough to cope without Lisabetta. She had not been idle during that time and had made it known in the grocer’s in Promontogno, which was now run by Gaudenzio’s son, that she was looking for a job in the Engadine.

Not far from the Palazzo was one of the two big village fountains. With three basins and a roof covered by heavy stone slabs, it was the centre of daily village life. Every morning and evening the farmers used it as a watering place for their cattle and the goats gathered there, when they were driven down into the village from the steep hills after sunset. During the day, there were always women doing their laundry, scrubbing pots, milk churns and pails, rinsing vegetables and attending to many other jobs.

Lisabetta was washing Giuliano’s youngest baby’s nappies when Alma came ‘round with the message that a gentleman wanted to speak to her.

A well-dressed gentleman, who introduced himself as ‘Sar⁶ Pol,’ stood in front of the Palazzo. He told her that he had heard she was looking for a job in the Engadine, explained that he lived in Sils, had a farm there, and was looking for a capable and willing maid to work in the house and in the fields. With that, he looked over Lisabetta from head to toe. The inspection appeared to have been to his satisfaction, as he announced, ‘You have been recommended to me and I think you can do the job and will knuckle down. You can therefore start working for me.’

That was how Lisabetta took up her job with Sar Pol’s family when they started harvesting hay.

⁶ ‘Sar’ is a form of address: ‘Mister’ in Romansh, used with the first name.