



The Baroness Elisabeth von und zu Guttenberg, 1932

HOLDING THE STIRRUP

by
Elisabeth von
Guttenberg
as told to
SHERIDAN
SPEARMAN



To Enoch

Elisabeth Güttenberg

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Note

THIS STORY of the life of Baroness Elisabeth von und zu Guttenberg appears at a time when the eyes of the world are turned toward Western Germany as the focal point of a tremendous war of ideas. From the turn of the century to the present moment, the changing history of her country has been reflected in her life. Her story reveals a picture of Germany from a political and cultural aspect unfamiliar to many Americans. It is a story of heroism and courage, a dramatic insight into the lives of people who have been the bulwark of Christianity in Germany and particularly in Bavaria, where for centuries her family and her husband's have been religious and political leaders.

— S. S.

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HOLDING THE STIRRUP

Chapter One

THE MORNING SUN and the shadow of leaves spread a fanciful pattern on the drawn blinds. I had just opened my eyes, a little girl of five, feeling very small in the great four-poster bed. I was back in my beloved old Castle of Tann. What happiness to be in the huge room again, with its deep-set windows and its familiar stuffy odor of ancient wood.

I lay there, half dozing and thinking of the happy weeks which lay ahead. In a few hours life would begin again for me in the big, mysterious house. It was late night when we had arrived from Nürnberg, and I had not been able to hurry as I usually did to my beloved garden nor to see the old housekeeper bent with years and wrinkled as an apple left too long in the sun. Last, but most important in completing this ritual of return, would be to go to the Long Gallery where the portraits of my ancestors hung. Intermingled were my joys and my fears at Tann; but the joys somehow overbalanced the fears which lay hidden in the remote corners of the old castle. Must there always be the

bad with the good? I wondered as I lay there dozing.

What was it that had first made me conscious of the Evil? Since the day I had heard the "voices," my childish soul had been troubled. It had been last year, in this very room, that I had heard the "voices" for the first time. I had been left alone for my afternoon nap; I had not been asleep; it had not been exactly a dream. I had heard the sound of voices, two voices. I would never forget the tone of them although I could not understand what they were saying. The warmth and love of one voice filled my heart with joy. I imagined that it was like the voice of an angel. The other voice was harsh, fierce, and discordant, always trying to drown it out. I dreaded the evil one and the harm which it might do to the possessor of the angelic voice. As they had continued to speak, my whole being had been completely absorbed with this echo from a remote world of strange sound.

My recollections were suddenly banished when the curtains over the windows were energetically opened and Mademoiselle Cécile, my governess, broke the spell. It was just as it had happened on the first day when I had heard the "voices." Now I sat up and sent a quick glance at one of my friends, the beautiful goddess Diana, on a tapestry directly across the room. Diana was trying to kill a boar with a spear; the boar, thank goodness, was half hidden behind my big wardrobe. I wondered if that boar had anything to do with the evil voice.

"Get up, Elisabeth! Take your bath and dress!" Mademoiselle spoke in her crisp, precise French. My governess was a young woman, dark-haired and rather handsome. She tried her best to make a well-behaved

child out of me; but, attributing my quiet reserve to stubbornness, she always handled me with a cold and detached determination. I struggled with ties and buttons while she stood rigid and unbending.

"You must learn to do it alone. Don't think for one moment that you will always be helped in this life."

I thought how wonderful it would be if my mother could dress me. But there was only a short time in the day when I was permitted to be with her. That wonderful time was evening, just before dinner. She would be resting then on a chaise longue, usually in a white tea gown, and I could sit beside her and talk about things that had happened during the day. Mama was small and fragile-looking, and I loved to touch her soft hands and her bright, fair hair. I never tired of making plans with her for my future life.

"One day a prince will come . . . and we will be married . . . and we will live in a great castle . . . and I wish to be just as lovely as you, Mama!"

My mother had been a very young girl when my father, after being a widower for twenty-four years, had married her. My life was almost like that of an only child, for my sister Hilda was ten years older and those ten years put a wide chasm between us. I worshiped her, but as she was "going on sixteen" she considered herself a young lady and only tolerated me.

Immediately after breakfast on this first day of our return to Tann, Mademoiselle thankfully released me with the admonition to go at once to say good morning to my father. It was a long journey through endless halls to his study. Down the stone staircase I went, past the

library filled with that pleasant smell of old books. At the next door I stopped and went into the drawing room. High on the wall was the portrait of my great-grandmother. She was one of my very special friends at Tann, and this morning I wished to pay her a formal visit. From a heavy gold frame, she looked down at me with a trace of a smile. She always appeared to be glad to see me. There was a jeweled tiara on her dark curls, and her elegant white gown swept down to the very edge of the frame. (Years later, there was an even closer bond between us when I discovered, in an old chest, this white satin and net gown with its very low décolletage and tiny waist.) But I was not on the same friendly terms with the likeness of her husband which occupied the opposite wall. He seemed so severe in his high embroidered collar, a glittering star of some order or decoration on his blue coat. Although he had the same fine-shaped head as my father, and the slightly Roman nose of the Tanns, he did not have my father's kind eyes. After my brief visit, I went on down the hall. When I reached the door of my father's study, I entered without ceremony. My father was, as usual, at his desk, which was always covered with papers.

"Good morning, Papa darling!"

He turned, and I ran into his outstretched arms.

"Good to be back, out in the country, isn't it, 'Lissy?"

It was our secret that we two loved the country best, loved to be here in our dear Tann. I had felt the happy bond between us the previous night when my father had lifted me from the old horse-drawn carriage to the stones of the courtyard. As I sat on my father's knees,

I could see out of the window to the stern courtyard surrounded on all sides by the high walls of the castle. There were countless high, narrow windows which looked down upon it and the wide, stately entrance which led to the Great Hall. Beyond the Hall, lay all the silent mysteries of the ancient place. Through the windows on the garden side of the room I could also see the tops of the tall, dark pine trees. One could almost reach out and touch their branches from the windows of this study. I loved to breathe the perfume of those old trees. No trees in the world have ever smelled as sweet to me as the pines of Tann.

I kissed my father, delighted with the tickle of his mustache against my cheek. There was always about him a pleasant, intangible scent, a combination of tobacco, leather, and soap. My father was white-haired, tall and thin; although we was a man over sixty, one would not have guessed it for he was agile and young in spirit. He was at this time Commanding General in Nürnberg, where we spent the greater part of the year. I liked it far better during these days of leave, when he did not wear his stiff military uniform. On this summer morning, he was wearing tweeds, but even in "country cloth" he could not entirely escape the aura of his military life.

"Is my little girl going to be happy? This year you are older, and surely you will no longer be afraid of ghosts."

Why had he spoken of it so soon? Last summer, I had been frightened when I had heard that some of the people in the town refused to work in the castle because of ghosts. It was the first time that I had heard about

these unseen, sepulchral guests. My father resented my fear and was determined that I should overcome it. I had told myself that this year I would be brave. I would not tremble in passing alone through the high-ceilinged rooms; I would not dread being left alone in my room at night. Now I said aloud to assure myself, "This year, Papa, I shall try to be brave. . . ." Then for fear he might press the subject further, I asked, "Now may I go to the Long Gallery?"

He set me down, and off I hurried to complete my ritual of return; first to pay my official visit to my ancestors in the long portrait gallery. Up and down steps I ran, through hallways which connected the numerous wings of the castle. I was so small that when I reached my destination I had difficulty in turning the massive handle of the heavy oak door. At last I stood in the gallery where the walls, up to the ceiling, were covered with the likenesses of ten generations of von der Tanns and their numerous branches. I knew every one of them by sight, if not by name: the knight in armor, looking so fierce; the gentleman in blue velvet with the powdered hair; the ladies with tiny waists and flowing skirts of silk. There, too, were pictures of very old people wrapped in winding sheets and in the agony of their deathbed. When I was alone, I did not dare to look at them. At the far end of the room, standing between two windows, was a large carved Gothic altarpiece. On the center panel was Christ on the Cross, surrounded with saints; on the right panel were knights in armor, kneeling in adoration, and on the left, ladies in medieval costumes. On the table of the altar lay a Bible in which,

my father had told me, were notes written by Martin Luther. Although direct descendants of Saint Elizabeth of Thuringia, the von der Tann family had been ardent supporters of Luther. My mother's ancestors, the Counts of Mikes, were an old Transylvanian (Hungarian) family and strongly Catholic.

Untroubled by these problems, the strange contradictions of the room, or the disapproving eyes of my Lutheran ancestors, I knelt and made a very Catholic sign of the cross. Having completed the ritual I went back through the gallery, flooded now with early morning sunshine, passing rows of arms and banners which early Christian knights had carried in battle.

Franconian nobles had looked upon themselves as little kings: many of them built castles completely out of proportion in grandeur to their actual importance. The Castle of Tann is located in central Germany where in ancient times the land was divided into small, independent principalities. These lands had been ruled over by noble families who had possessed the right to levy taxes to provide for their own small armies, sometimes only amounting to a handful of men. In time of war, these small armies were pledged to the support of the Emperor. Many of these families had held the same lands before any written record of Germanic history existed. The family of von der Tann was one of them. The castle itself dated only from 1400. The family's far more ancient Castle of Roggenstuhl, nearby, had been completely obliterated by time and war.

I went back to my room on that bright summer morning, feeling courageous and happy. I was sure that even if

I were to meet one of the little dwarfs who were reputed to clean the castle at night, I would not be afraid.

Evening came and with it my visit to my mother. Before I left, she said, "Elisabeth, Papa has told me that you are no longer afraid; that has made him very happy. So, like a big girl, you may go all by yourself to say good night to your Uncle Hans and Aunt Magdelaine in the north wing."

That would mean I must walk alone, in the dark, through the long corridor which connected the two main portions of the castle. With a racing heart I set out, a candle in my hand, the meager light casting long shadows into the gloom. I hurried toward the corridor, anxious to have the ordeal over. Without even looking up, I knew when I was passing the terrifying pictures which hung along the walls: a man hanged by the neck, another pinioned to a wall with iron bands, and a brigand having his eyes put out. It was no consolation to know that these pictures had only been warnings to evildoers. Many years ago, before the existence of civil courts, feudal families passed judgment on wrongdoers within their own domain. Now I knew that I had reached the stone staircase and that above me on the wall was the portrait of the old woman in white with the fierce, terrifying eyes. The servants had told me that it was she who walked through the halls at night. I began to run and to pray aloud, "Dear God, please let me reach the door of Uncle Hans's room!"

After a brief respite in the warm and lighted rooms of my uncle and aunt, there was the ordeal of making my

way back across the long corridor. Exhausted and pale, I finally reached the drawing room where my parents were waiting for me.

Hopefully my father asked, "Was my little girl afraid?"

"No." I lied, to please him, well knowing that my lie would mean that I must face other terrifying ordeals. When I could speak, I asked, "Papa, why did our great-grandfathers do such terrible things to the poor men?"

"'Lissy, they hanged the robbers, punished the wicked . . . fought the Evil. . . ."

"What is the Evil?" I asked, my heart trembling with the possibility of some momentous revelation.

"You will understand someday, 'Lissy; the Evil is many things."