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The Blue Flower

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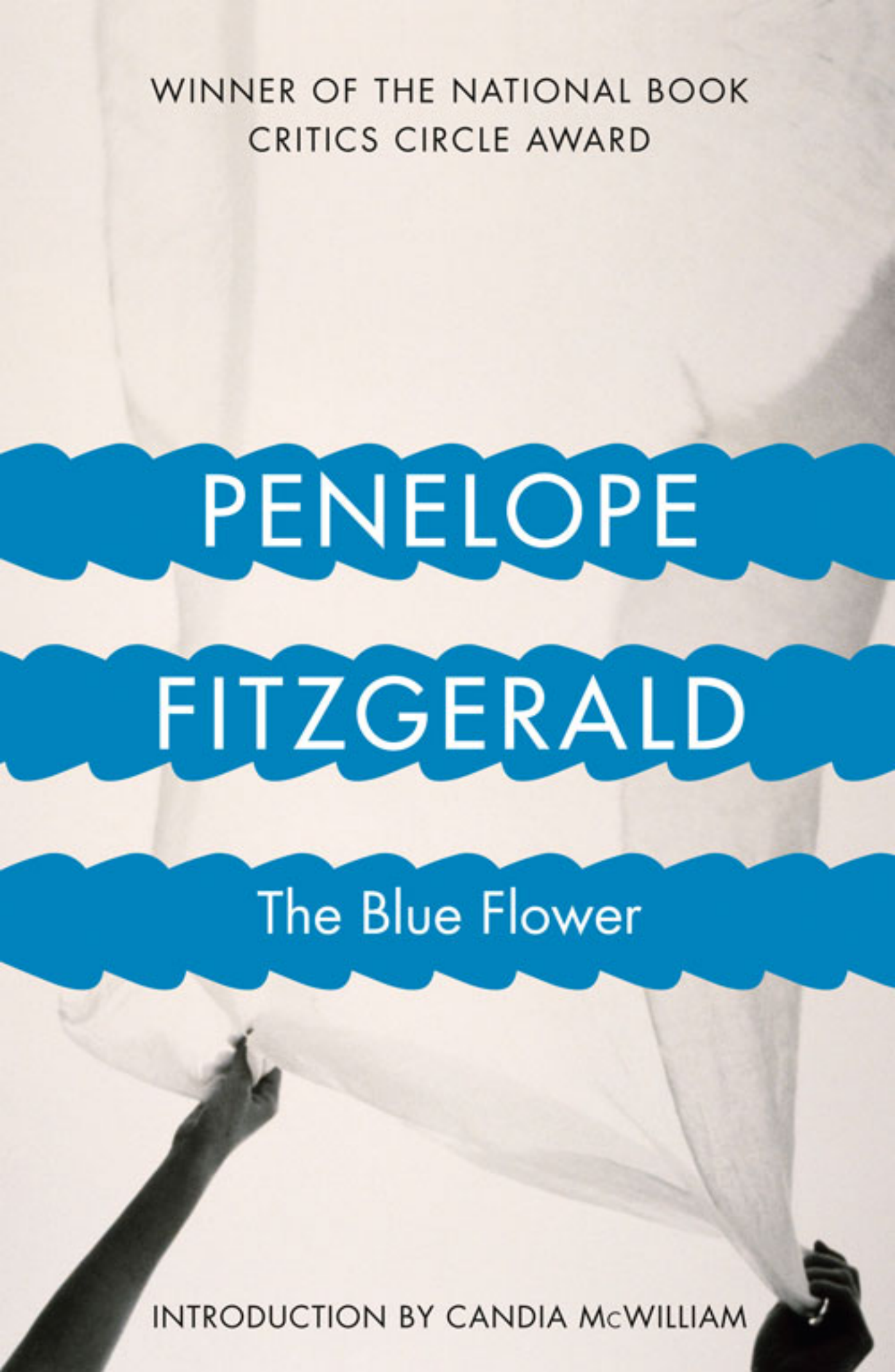

INTRODUCTION BY CANDIA McWILLIAM

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The photographs on page 283 of Novalis's engagement ring are reproduced by kind permission of the Museum Weissenfels/Saale

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Author's Note

This novel is based on the life of Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801) before he became famous under the name Novalis. All his surviving work, letters from and to him, the diaries and official and private documents, were published by W. Kohlhammer Verlag in five volumes between 1960 and 1988. The original editors were Richard Samuel and Paul Kluckhohn, and I should like to acknowledge the debt I owe to them.

The description of an operation without an anaesthetic is mostly taken from Fanny d'Arblay's letter to her sister Esther Burney (September 30, 1811) about her mastectomy.

'Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history.'

F. von Hardenberg, later Novalis,

Fragmente und Studien, 1799–1800

1

Washday

JACOB Dietmahler was not such a fool that he could not see that they had arrived at his friend's home on the washday. They should not have arrived anywhere, certainly not at this great house, the largest but two in Weissenfels, at such a time. Dietmahler's own mother supervised the washing three times a year, therefore the household had linen and white underwear for four months only. He himself possessed eighty-nine shirts, no more. But here, at the Hardenberg house in Kloster Gasse, he could tell from the great dingy snowfalls of sheets, pillow-cases, bolster-cases, vests, bodices, drawers, from the upper windows into the courtyard, where grave-looking servants, both men and women, were receiving them into giant baskets, that they washed only once a year. This might not mean wealth, in fact he knew that in this case it didn't, but it was certainly an indication of long standing. A numerous family, also. The underwear of children and young persons, as well as the larger

sizes, fluttered through the blue air, as though the children themselves had taken to flight.

'Fritz, I'm afraid you have brought me here at an inconvenient moment. You should have let me know. Here I am, a stranger to your honoured family, knee deep in your smallclothes.'

'How can I tell when they're going to wash?' said Fritz. 'Anyway, you're a thousand times welcome at all times.'

'The Freiherr is trampling on the unsorted garments,' said the housekeeper, leaning out of one of the first-floor windows.

'Fritz, how many are there in your family?' asked Dietmahler. 'So many things?' Then he shouted suddenly: 'There is no such concept as a thing in itself!'

Fritz, leading the way across the courtyard, stopped, looked round and then in a voice of authority shouted back: 'Gentlemen! Look at the washbasket! Let your thought be the washbasket! Have you thought the washbasket? Now then, gentlemen, let your thought be on *that* that thought the washbasket!'

Inside the house the dogs began to bark. Fritz called out to one of the basket-holding servants: 'Are my father and mother at home?' But it was not worth it, the mother was always at home. There came out into the courtyard a short, unfinished looking young man, even younger than Fritz, and a fair-haired girl. 'Here, at any rate, are

my brother Erasmus and my sister Sidonie. Nothing else is wanted while they are here.'

Both threw themselves on Fritz. 'How many are there of you altogether?' asked Dietmahler again. Sidonie gave him her hand, and smiled.

'Here among the table-linen, I am disturbed by Fritz Hardenberg's young sister,' thought Dietmahler. 'This is the sort of thing I meant to avoid.'

She said, 'Karl will be somewhere, and Anton, and the Bernhard, but of course there are more of us.' In the house, seeming of less substance even than the shadows, was Freifrau von Hardenberg. 'Mother,' said Fritz, 'this is Jacob Dietmahler, who studied in Jena at the same time as myself and Erasmus, and now he is a Deputy Assistant to the Professor of Medicine.'

'Not quite yet,' said Dietmahler. 'I hope, one day.'

'You know I have been in Jena to look up my friends,' went on Fritz. 'Well, I have asked him to stay a few days with us.' The Freifrau looked at him with what seemed to be a gleam of terror, a hare's wild look. 'Dietmahler needs a little brandy, just to keep him alive for a few hours.'

'He is not well?' asked the Freifrau in dismay. 'I will send for the housekeeper.' 'But we don't need her,' said Erasmus. 'You have your own keys to the dining room surely.' 'Surely I have,' she said, looking at him imploringly. 'No, I have them,' said Sidonie. 'I have had them

ever since my sister was married. I will take you all to the pantry, think no more about it.' The Freifrau, recollecting herself, welcomed her son's friend to the house. 'My husband cannot receive you just at this moment, he is at prayer.' Relieved that the ordeal was over, she did not accompany them through the shabby rooms and even shabbier corridors, full of plain old workmanlike furniture. On the plum-coloured walls were discoloured rectangles where pictures must once have hung. In the pantry Sidonie poured the cognac and Erasmus proposed the toast to Jena. '*Stosst an! Jena lebe hoch! Hurra!*'

'What the Hurra is for I don't know,' said Sidonie. 'Jena is a place where Fritz and Asmus wasted money, caught lice, and listened to nonsense from philosophers.' She gave the pantry keys to her brothers and went back to her mother, who was standing at the precise spot where she had been left, staring out at the preparations for the great wash. 'Mother, I want you to entrust me with a little money, let us say five or six thaler, so that I can make some further arrangements for our guest.' 'My dear, what arrangements? There is already a bed in the room he is to have.' 'Yes, but the servants store the candles there, and they read the Bible there during their free hour.' 'But my dear, why should this man want to go to his room during the day?' Sidonie thought that he might want to do some writing. 'Some writing!' repeated her mother, in utter bewilderment. 'Yes, and for that he

should have a table.' Sidonie pressed home her advantage. 'And, in case he should like to wash, a jug of water and a basin, yes, and a slop-pail.' 'But Sidonie, will he not know how to wash under the pump? Your brothers all wash so.' 'And there is no chair in the room, where he might put his clothes at night.' 'His clothes! It is still far too cold to undress at night. I have not undressed myself at night, even in summer, for I think twelve years.' 'And yet you've given birth to eight of us!' cried Sidonie. 'God in heaven spare me a marriage like yours!'

The Freifrau scarcely heeded her. 'And there is another thing, you have not thought – the Father may raise his voice.' This did not perturb Sidonie. 'This Dietmahler must get used to the Father, and to the way we do things, otherwise let him pack up and go straight home.'

'But in that case, cannot he get used to our guest-rooms? Fritz should have told him that we lead a plain, God-fearing life.'

'Why is it God-fearing not to have a slop-pail?' asked Sidonie.

'What are these words? Are you ashamed of your home, Sidonie?'

'Yes, I am.' She was fifteen, burning like a flame. Impatience, translated into spiritual energy, raced through all the young Hardenbergs. Fritz now wished to take his friend down to the river to walk up the towpath and talk of poetry and the vocation of man. 'This we

could have done anywhere,' said Dietmahler. 'But I want you to see my home,' Fritz told him. 'It is old-fashioned, we are old-fashioned in Weissenfels, but we have peace, it is *heimisch*.' One of the servants who had been in the courtyard, dressed now in a dark cloth coat, appeared in the doorway and said that the Master would be glad to see his son's guest in the study, before dinner.

'The old enemy is in his lair,' shouted Erasmus.

Dietmahler felt a certain awkwardness. 'I shall be honoured to meet your father,' he told Fritz.

2

The Study

It was Erasmus who must take after his father, for the Freiherr, politely rising to his feet in the semi-darkness of his study, was unexpectedly a small stout man wearing a flannel nightcap against the draughts. Where then did Fritz – since his mother was no more than a shred – get his awkward leanness from, and his height? But the Freiherr had this in common with his eldest son, that he started talking immediately, his thoughts seizing the opportunity to become words.

'Gracious sir, I have come to your house,' Dietmahler began nervously, but the Freiherr interrupted, 'This is not my house. It is true I bought it from the widow of von Pilsach to accommodate my family when I was appointed Director of the Salt Mining Administration of Saxony, which necessitated my living in Weissenfels. But the Hardenberg property, our true home and lands, are in Oberwiederstadt, in the county of Mansfeld.' Dietmahler said politely that he wished he had been fortunate enough to go to Oberwiederstadt. 'You would have seen

nothing but ruins,' said the Freiherr, 'and insufficiently fed cattle. But they are ancestral lands, and it is for this reason that it is important to know, and I am now taking the opportunity of asking you, whether it is true that my eldest son, Friedrich, has entangled himself with a young woman of the middle classes.'

'I've heard nothing about his entangling himself with anyone,' said Dietmahler indignantly, 'but in any case, I doubt if he can be judged by ordinary standards, he is a poet and a philosopher.'

'He will earn his living as an Assistant Inspector of Salt Mines,' said the Freiherr, 'but I see that it is not right to interrogate you. I welcome you as a guest, therefore as another son, and you will not mind my finding out a little more about you. What is your age, and what do you intend to do in life?'

'I am two and twenty and I am training to become a surgeon.'

'And are you dutiful to your father?'

'My father is dead, Freiherr. He was a plasterer.'

'I did not ask you that. Have you known what it was to have sad losses in your family life?'

'Yes, sir, I have lost two little brothers from scarlet fever and a sister from consumption, in the course of one year.'

The Freiherr took off his nightcap, apparently out of respect. 'A word of advice. If, as a young man, a student,

you are tormented by a desire for women, it is best to get out into the fresh air as much as possible.' He took a turn round the room, which was lined with book-cases, some with empty shelves. 'Meanwhile, how much would you expect to spend in a week on spirits, hey? How much on books – not books of devotion, mind you? How much on a new black coat, without any explanation as to how the old one has ceased to be wearable? How much, hey?'

'Freiherr, you are asking me these questions as a criticism of your son. Yet you have just said that you were not going to interrogate me.'

Hardenberg was not really an old man – he was between fifty and sixty – but he stared at Jacob Dietmahler with an old man's drooping neck and lowered head. 'You are right, quite right. I took the opportunity. Opportunity, after all, is only another word for temptation.'

He put his hand on his guest's shoulder. Dietmahler, alarmed, did not know whether he was being pushed down or whether the Freiherr was leaning on him, perhaps both. Certainly he must be used to entrusting his weight to someone more competent, perhaps to his strong sons, perhaps even to his daughter. Dietmahler felt his clavicle giving way. I am cutting a mean figure, he thought, but at least he was on his knees, while Hardenberg, annoyed at his own weakness, steadied himself as he sank down by grasping first at the corner of the solid oak table, then at one of its legs. The door

opened and the same servant returned, but this time in carpet slippers.

'Does the Freiherr wish the stove to be made up?'

'Kneel with us, Gottfried.'

Down creaked the old man by the master. They looked like an old married couple nodding over their household accounts together, even more so when the Freiherr exclaimed, 'Where are the little ones?'

'The servants' children, Excellency?'

'Certainly, and the Bernhard.'

3

The Bernhard

In the Hardenbergs' house there was an angel, August Wilhelm Bernhard, fair as wheat. After plain motherly Charlotte, the eldest, pale, wide-eyed Fritz, stumpy little Erasmus, easy-going Karl, open-hearted Sidonie, painstaking Anton, came the blonde Bernhard. To his mother, the day when he had to be put into breeches was terrible. She who hardly ever, if at all, asked anything for herself, implored Fritz. 'Go to him, go to your Father, beg him, pray him, to let my Bernhard continue a little longer in his frocks.' 'Mother, what can I say, I think Bernhard is six years old.'

He was now more than old enough, Sidonie thought, to understand politeness to a visitor. 'I do not know how long he will stay, Bernhard. He has brought quite a large valise.'

'His valise is full of books,' said the Bernhard, 'and he has also brought a bottle of schnaps. I dare say he thought there would not be such a thing in our house.'

'Bernhard, you have been in his room.'

'Yes, I went there.'

'You have opened his valise.'

'Yes, just to see his things.'

'Did you leave it open, or did you shut it again?'

The Bernhard hesitated. He could not remember.

'Well, it doesn't signify,' said Sidonie. 'You must, of course, confess to Herr Dietmahler what you have done, and ask his pardon.'

'When?'

'It should be before nightfall. In any case, there is no time like the present.'

'I've nothing to tell him!' cried the Bernhard. 'I haven't spoiled his things.'

'You know that Father punishes you very little,' said Sidonie coaxingly. 'Not as we were punished. Perhaps he will tell you to wear your jacket the wrong way out for a few days, only to remind you. We shall have some music before supper and after that I will go with you up to the visitor and you can take his hand and speak to him quietly.'

'I'm sick of this house!' shouted the Bernhard, snatching himself away.

Fritz was in the kitchen garden patrolling the vegetable beds, inhaling the fragrance of the broad bean flowers, reciting at the top of his voice.

'Fritz,' Sidonie called to him. 'I have lost the Bernhard.'

'Oh, that can't be.'

'I was reproving him in the morning room, and he escaped from me and jumped over the window-sill and into the yard.'

'Have you sent one of the servants?'

'Oh, Fritz, best not, they will tell Mother.'

Fritz looked at her, shut his book and said he would go out and find his brother. 'I will drag him back by the hair if necessary, but you and Asmus will have to entertain my friend.'

'Where is he now?'

'He is in his room, resting. Father has worn him out. By the way, his room has been turned upside down and his valise is open.'

'Is he angry?'

'Not at all. He thinks perhaps that it's one of our customs at Weissenfels.'

Fritz put on his frieze-coat and went without hesitation down to the river. Everyone in Weissenfels knew that young Bernhard would never drown, because he was a water-rat. He couldn't swim, but then neither could his father. During his seven years' service with the Hanoverian army the Freiherr had seen action repeatedly and crossed many rivers, but had never been put to the necessity of swimming. Bernhard, however, had always lived close to water and seemed not to be able to live without it. Down by the ferry he was forever hanging about, hoping to slip on board without paying his three pfennig

for the crossing. The parents did not know this. There was a kind of humane conspiracy in the town to keep many matters from the Freiherr, in order to spare his piety on the one hand, and on the other, not to provoke his ferocious temper.

The sun was down, only the upper sky glowed. The mist was walking up the water. The little boy was not at the ferry. A few pigs and a flock of geese, forbidden to go by way of Weissenfels' handsome bridge, were waiting for the last crossing.

4

Bernhard's Red Cap

For the first time Fritz felt afraid. His imagination ran ahead of him, back to the Kloster Gasse, meeting the housekeeper at the front door – but, young master, what is that load you are carrying into the house? It is dripping everywhere, the floors, I am responsible for them.

His mother had always believed that the Bernhard was destined to become a page, if not at the court of the Elector of Saxony, then perhaps with the Count of Mansfeld or the Duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. One of Fritz's duties, before long, would be to drag his little brother round these various courts in the hope of placing him satisfactorily.

The rafts lay below the bridge, close into the bank, alongside piles of gently heaving, chained pinewood logs, waiting for the next stage in their journey. A watchman was trying a bunch of keys in the door of a hut. 'Herr Watchman, have you seen a boy running?'

A boy was supposed to come with his dinner, said the watchman, but he was a rascal and had not come. 'Look, the towpath is empty.'

The empty barges laid up for repair were moored at their station on the opposite bank. Fritz pelted over the bridge. Everyone saw him, coat flying. Had the Freiherr no servants to send? The barges wallowed on their mooring ropes, grating against each other, strake against strake. From the quayside Fritz jumped down about four feet or so onto the nearest deck. There was a scurrying, as though of an animal larger than a dog.

'Bernhard!'

'I will never come back,' Bernhard called.

The child ran across the deck, and then, afraid to risk the drop onto the next boat, climbed over the gunwale and then stayed there hanging on with both hands, scrabbling with his boots for a foothold. Fritz caught hold of him by the wrists and at the same moment the whole line of barges made one of their unaccountable shifts, heaving grossly towards each other, so that the Bernhard, still hanging, was trapped and squeezed. A pitiful cough and a burst of tears and blood were forced out of him like air out of a balloon.

'How am I going to get you out of here?' demanded Fritz. 'What a pest you are, what a pest.'

'Let me go, let me die!' wheezed the Bernhard.

'We'll have to work our way along forward, then I can pull you up.' But the instinct to preserve life seemed for the moment to have deserted the child, Fritz must do it all, dragging and shuffling him along, wildly protesting,

between the two gunwales. If they had been on the other bank there would have been passers-by to lend a hand, but then, Fritz thought, they'd think murder was being done. The boats grew narrower, he saw the glimmering water idling beneath them and hauled the child up like a wet sack. His face was not pale, but a brilliant crimson.

'Make an effort, do you want to drown?'

'What would it matter if I did?' squeaked the Bernhard. 'You said once that death was not significant, but only a change in condition.'

'Drat you, you've no business to understand that,' Fritz shouted in his ear.

'My *Mütze*!'

The child was much attached to his red cap, which was missing. So, too were one of his front teeth and his breeches. He had on only long cotton drawers tied with tape. Like most rescuers, Fritz felt suddenly furious with the loved and saved. 'Your *Mütze* has gone, it must be on its way to the Elbe by now.' Then, ashamed of his anger, he picked the little boy up and put him on his shoulders to carry him home. The Bernhard, aloft, revived a little. 'Can I wave at the people?'

Fritz had to make his way to the end of the line of barges, where perpendicular iron steps had been built into one bank and he could climb up without putting down the Bernhard.

How heavy a child is when it gives up responsibility.

He couldn't go straight back to the Kloster Gasse like this. But Sidonie and Asmus between them would be equal to explaining things away during the before-dinner music. Meanwhile, in Weissenfels, he had many places to get dry. After crossing the bridge again he walked only a short way along the Saale and then took two turns to the left and one to the right, where the lights were now shining in Severin's bookshop.

There were no customers in the shop. The pale Severin, in his long overall, was examining one of the tattered lists, which booksellers prefer to all other reading, by the light of a candle fitted with a reflector.

'Dear Hardenberg! I did not expect you. Put the little brother, I pray you, on a sheet of newspaper. Here is yesterday's *Leipziger Zeitung*.' He was surprised at nothing.

'The little brother is in disgrace,' said Fritz, depositing the Bernhard. 'He ran down onto the barges. How he came to get quite so wet I don't know.'

'*Kinderleicht, kinderleicht*,' said Severin indulgently, but his indulgence was for Fritz. He could not warm to children, since all of them were scribblers in books. He went to the very back of the shop, opened a wooden chest, and took out a large knitted shawl, a peasant thing.

'Take off your shirt, I will wrap you in this,' he said. 'Your brother need not return it to me. Why did you cause all this trouble? Did you hope to sail away and leave your father and mother behind you?'

'Of course not,' said the Bernhard scornfully. 'All the boats on that mooring are under repair. They could not sail, they have no canvas. I did not want to sail, I wanted to drown.'

'That I don't believe,' replied Severin, 'and I should have preferred you not to say it.'

'He loves water,' said Fritz, impelled to defend his own.

'Evidently.'

'And, indeed, so do I,' Fritz cried. 'Water is the most wonderful element of all. Even to touch it is a pleasure.'

Perhaps Severin did not find it a pleasure to have quite so much water on the floor of his bookshop. He was a man of forty-five, 'old' Severin to Fritz, a person of great good sense, unperturbed by life's contingencies. He had been poor and unsuccessful, had kept himself going by working very hard, at low wages, for the proprietor of the bookshop, and then, when the proprietor had died, had married his widow and come into the whole property. Of course the whole of Weissenfels knew this and approved of it. It was their idea of wisdom exactly.

Poetry, however, meant a great deal to Severin – almost as much as his lists. He would have liked to see his young friend Hardenberg continue as a poet without the necessity of working as a salt mine inspector.

For the rest of his journey home the Bernhard continued to complain about the loss of his red *Mütze*. It

was the only thing he had possessed which indicated his revolutionary sympathies.

'I don't know how you got hold of it,' Fritz told him. 'And if Father had ever caught sight of it he would in any case have told the servants to throw it on the rubbish heap. Let all this be a lesson to you to keep yourself from poking about among the visitors' possessions.'

'In a republic there would be no possessions,' said the Bernhard.