

Heidenröslein

FELIX MORLEY

AS TIMOTHY GREW OLD he slept less well, but also dreamed more frequently.

These dreams, he noticed, were following a curious pattern. Almost without exception they reverted to the time when he had been a boy of about ten, growing up with his two brothers: Robert five years younger than himself and Phillip, four years older. And always the repetitive dream focused on one or other of four familiar toys.

There was a bond to tie these toys together. All of them had been brought back from Germany by Mrs. Morrow when, with her mathematician husband and the older boys, she had lived for nine months in the university town of Göttingen. For Professor Morrow that was a year of sabbatical leave from the Pennsylvania College where he taught, during which he sought to complete his professionally important book on *Inverse Geometry*. For Tim and Phil it was an opportunity to broaden childish horizons by life in a foreign environment. For Eileen Morrow, an accomplished violinist, the prolonged stay meant merger in the active musical life of the little town and release from household cares because of the generous hospitality of the elderly German couple with whom the visitors stayed as paying guests.

Christmas in Göttingen was a memorable occasion. Though only four at the time Timothy, at age 80, could still recall the snowy streets, the horse-drawn sleighs, the huddle of old houses and the exhorting

churchbells that called the family to a service which had to be endured before a present was opened or a candle lit on Frau Schultze's magnificent Hartz Mountain fir tree. And it was those presents, or four of them in particular, which recurred to Timothy, three-quarters of a century later, in his dreams.

Eileen Morrow was a thoughtful woman. It was her idea that the *Gemütlichkeit* of a German Christmas, where toy-making was an art, could be protracted by selecting good specimens as family rather than individual presents. These would not be allowed to lie around for certain breakage but would be collected and repacked right after Christmas, taken back to America and there produced again as each December 25 rolled around. Such periodic reincarnations promised not only that the toys would retain freshness and glamour, but also would carry with them an association with a culture worth cherishing. There would be four of these special toys, Mrs. Morrow decided, because she hoped to have four children, to each of whom, for their children, one toy might eventually be given outright.

Professor Morrow, when once persuaded that he should regard the outlay as a sound investment, developed his own enthusiasm for the idea. "But we must select with great care," he told his wife. "The children will all be different and one may have no interest in the toy that appeals deeply to another. Already you can see that Phil and Tim have quite dissimilar tastes. It will be

the same with the little Whatzits, provided I get my full professorship and can afford to be as profligate as you propose. And let me warn you that it would be tempting Providence to get a doll. That would be quite enough to guarantee a quartette of boys."

So Mrs. Morrow reluctantly passed over the display of flaxen-haired little maidens who, in pinafores and rompers, smiled perpetually from their places on a long counter in Göttingen's seductive toy store. Instead, she chose two toys which seemed suitable for children of either sex. One was a puppet theater, with the stage settings and dramatis personae for *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Sleeping Beauty* all ready to be set up. If ever these favorites palled, it would be easy to enlarge the repertoire with more sophisticated designs. The second heterosexual toy was a charming little music box. It played only one tune, "Heidenröslein" but this with a very winning tinkle. Eileen had always like the words of Goethe's touching poem thus set to music. It could be a good way, she thought, to introduce a daughter to melodic German poetry.

Selection of the other two presents required less foresight. One could scarcely go wrong with something appropriate for the boys already here. Phil seemed to have a mechanical bent. At least, whenever they travelled he insisted, regardless of inconvenience, on examining the locomotive that pulled the train. So with him in mind Eileen purchased a beautiful brass steam engine, with a piercing whistle, an alcohol fuel lamp and a grooved flywheel which could be used to transmit power to auxiliary mechanisms.

Timothy's tastes were harder to identify. He had less active curiosity than the average four-year old and seemed content to sit in the window and watch the horse-drawn traffic in the busy Beënderstrasse just be-

low. Therefore he would probably be interested in a magic lantern and colored slides of the Rhine that came with it. All the places known to every tourist were included—the Lorelei Rock, the Mouse Tower, the Pfalz, the Siebengebirge, Cologne Cathedral from the river, vineyards, ruined castles, even a noble picture of the pure white steamer on which one made the trip. Timothy liked ships, as Phil did engines, so the magic lantern made the fourth and final package.

Around Frau Schultze's decorated tree, on Christmas night of 1898, the display was most impressive. Herr Professor Schultze complained, a little enviously, that salaries in a German university would never permit such munificence. But as a lifetime investment, he agreed, the outlay would be much less extravagant. And his close to the surface nationalism was flattered by the selection of German toys for such a project. Phil and Timothy, living like all children in the present, were undisturbed by admonitions that these ostensible gifts were on loan only. With novelty worn off, it was no great sacrifice when they were withdrawn to their original boxes.

In part the scheme worked out as Eileen had anticipated. When the Morrow family returned to America the Göttingen presents went *mit* and Christmas after Christmas they reappeared briefly to sublimate the holiday spirit. The setting changed, since in 1900 Professor Morrow was called to head the department of mathematics at Johns Hopkins University and they moved to Baltimore. But there, as earlier, Yuletide festivities seemed to center on the German toys. These were so varied that the children could turn from one to another without ennui. Time took some toll. There came a dent in the tarnished boiler of the steam engine and on a sad occasion Timothy's butter fingers dropped the slide of Cologne Cathedral, shattering it more completely

than was accomplished by bombs in World War II. Yet the presents endured, like the strong country from which they came, and gradually the annual revival became as ritualistic as Santa Claus himself.

The families changed also, as families do. The desired daughter arrived, was christened Rose Heather, but lingered only a few months before becoming a perpetually sleeping beauty. She was survived by twin Robert, five years younger than Timothy, who was precocious, adapted quickly to the toys and became most helpful in doing chores, such as fetching water for the steam engine. With Robbie to assist the older brothers did not know how much they missed the little sister. Only the mother realized that the child who grows to adolescence, having none of the opposite sex for daily association, is severely handicapped.

What changed most was the interest of the children in the particular gifts. Nobody took strongly to the music box, with its decorative cover showing a blond Germanic lad plucking a briar rose on barren heathland. Every Christmas morning the toy was wound up and responded faithfully with repetitions of the plaintive little melody. Then before being put away the clockwork would receive a drop or two of oil, against the long months of hibernation. But nobody was led to Goethe by this modest allure.

Phil, however, in his early teens gave much improvisation to the puppet theater. The fairy tale settings were scornfully discarded and in their place an elaborate staging of several Sherlock Holmes stories was fabricated. For the initial scene in these a faithful reproduction of the great detective's sitting room at 221B Baker Street was laboriously constructed. One other setting could generally conclude each drama and in *The Speckled Band* the descent of the poisonous snake, down the bell cord, was handled in masterly fashion by the ingenious producer-playwrite. The success of

these performances was such that a season running until Epiphany was permitted and neighborhood children maintained full audiences.

The magic lantern was Robert's particular delight. Long before he could handle it himself he clamored to see the "pickchures" and knew the downstream order in which they should be shown. The obliteration of Cologne Cathedral was a misfortune but still there were eleven other slides of river scenery. In proficiency of description Robby, after a time, could have given points to Baedeker. He was particularly effective in recounting the dreadful story of the Mouse Tower and grasping Bishop Hatto.

There remained the stationery steam engine, for which Timothy developed a curious affinity. He kept the axle of the flywheel oiled and it was always thrilling when the head of steam built up to set it in slow motion. As momentum increased one could blow the shrill whistle without decreasing speed perceptibly. Phil was perhaps a little too inclined to supervise the operation but made up for that one Christmas by presenting Timothy with a miniature flour mill. This had a big paddle wheel, in a trough of real water, which could be attached to the flywheel of the engine by a belt made from a leather shoelace. It took a lot of steam to make the contraption work but eventually the belt stretched tight, the water wheel rotated and a glorious splash went spattering all over the table top. Domestic ecology demanded that a bath towel be laid down before this industrial enterprise got underway.

Somewhere little Robbie had picked up the expression R.P.M. "How many revolutions per minute is the flywheel making?" he asked of Timothy as the trio stood around the spluttery mechanism one Christmas night. "You can't count them," replied the latter. "It's going too fast."

"Maybe you can't count them," said mas-

terful Phil, standing by in supervisory capacity. "But you can work it out as a simple proportion. The rotation of the small wheel is to the rotation of the big wheel as the diameter of the big wheel is to the diameter of the small wheel. Surely you can see that?"

Robbie saved Tim the embarrassment of admitting that he didn't see it at all. "Phil is the big wheel," observed the youngest, "and Tim is the little wheel."

"Now get out your new watch and time the revolutions of the water wheel," continued the older brother. "It moves slowly enough. Here give me the watch and I'll tell you when to start and stop counting."

Mystified but intrigued Timothy handed over his precious Ingersoll and obeyed instructions. Fifty revolutions a minute was the result, confirmed by a second trial. Phil then slowed the engine to a halt, removed the fuel lamp and with a footrule measured the diameters of the two wheels. "Exactly four inches for the waterwheel," he announced, "and $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches for the flywheel. It would be easier if we used the metric system but I suppose you can work the decimals. Just put down $x:50::4:1.125$, multiply means and extremes and you have $1.125x=200$. Now you tell me what x is and you'll have R.P.M. for the flywheel."

Doubtfully Timothy sat down with pencil and paper. "But it doesn't seem to come out," he complained after a long interval. "I get x equal to .177. That means the flywheel takes about six minutes for one revolution. It's absurd!"

Phil glanced at the untidy calculation. "No wonder," he growled. "You've made $1\frac{1}{8}$ a whole number-1.125. And you the son of a mathematician! Move your decimal point three digits to the right and you'll have the answer—177.7 revolutions to the minute with the 7 recurring to infinity. Say 180 R.P.M., to allow for a little slippage in the belt, and you're close enough for any

but an engineer, which you certainly will never be. Now you'd better paint my scenery for 'The Five Orange Pips.' We're going to present that tomorrow evening."

The years rolled by. Phil, Timothy and eventually even little Robbie went away to college. Perhaps the character of Christmas did not change but its observance in the Morrow family did. The symbolic tree became miniature and then, in 1914, the German toys failed to appear. They were outgrown, Eileen Morrow said, but actually her English emotions resented anything that savored of the now enemy country. She did think it a little extreme, however, when somewhat later the City Council changed the name of German Street and forbade any public rendition of Beethoven's music in Baltimore. If the municipal fathers had realized that "Maryland My Maryland" had usurped the old German tune of "O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum" that would probably have been expurgated also. But Professor Morrow continued to consult his Teutonic sources and to Timothy, who volunteered when the United States entered the war, it seemed that the world had gone thoroughly crazy.

He came through unscathed, became a newspaper reporter because his only talent seemed to be an interest in writing, and in time worked up the ladder to be a well-known editor. Then came another war, even crazier than its predecessor and ending with an atomic bomb that sounded a solemn warning to quit this foolishness, or else. Meantime, his parents had died. His brothers, both more literary than himself, were at least equally successful. At last Timothy, happily married and with his own quartette of grown children, felt able to retire. In their country home they gathered their grandchildren at Christmas now. And so, one Christmas night, those curious dreams began.

He was back in Göttingen, sitting at the

foot of the candle-lit tree with the four delightful presents spread out on the floor before him. Only this time there were three children beside himself; not only Phil, operating the steam engine, and Robbie, examining the Rhineland slides, but in the background, half shadowed by the tree, a dainty little girl, also about five, who held the music box and listened enraptured to its tinkling tune. Presently the door to the kitchen opened and motherly Frau Schultze summoned this maiden to the kitchen, calling her Röslein, to bring some cookies to the group.

That was all of the dream, which vanished quickly but left a vivid memory when Timothy heaved his arthritic legs out of bed next morning. A few nights later, however, the same illusion recurred, with slight alterations. Phil was now setting up the puppet theater, complete with a ferocious wolf in bed for a presentation of *Red Riding Hood*. Robbie had the steam engine in charge and Tim himself had the magic lantern. But still in the background was little Röslein, this time quietly singing Goethe's words to the music box accompaniment: "Sah ein Knab' ein Röslein stehn, Röslein auf der Heiden."

The repetition was unusual, to say the least. So Timothy thought he would share it with his practical wife, as she prepared his bacon and egg next morning. "What is the Freudian explanation," he inquired?

"I don't think you need to go to Freud," she said. "It seems pretty obvious, even without additional evidence, that you're entering your second childhood."

Timothy was not annoyed. At 80 the verdict was one that could scarcely be denied. And as the dream kept coming back he found himself pleasurably anticipating the small variations that kept it from becoming monotonous. Each time the little girl sang a line or two more of the German poem. It appealed to the old man. Even his waking

hours were now more and more directed towards the past. Most of his old friends were dead and current events, to which he had devoted a lifetime of painstaking analysis, seemed to become more and more meaningless. Christmas in Göttingen, 75 years ago, had been significant. To return there, even in dreamland, was pure enjoyment. It was no longer tiresome to go to bed.

What impressed him most, however, was the increasing dominance of the music box in these visions. It had been the least imposing of the four original presents, yet gradually was taking precedence over the steam engine, the puppet theater and the magic lantern. And with it Rose Heather, whose features were never quite clear, came somehow to be more vital than his brothers or his parents. Soon she was singing not just a snatch but all of "Heidenröslein" in melodious German. Its poignancy seemed somehow to reveal the abiding reality of unreality. Timothy was not a poet, as brother Phil had been, but after a time he set himself to put Goethe's haunting little song into English verse, as follows:

By chance a young lad found a flower
A wild rose in the heather.
Fresh from a gentle morning shower
She drew him to her sheltered nook
Where he could get a closer look,
Thus adding to his pleasure.

Said the lad: "I'm going to pick thee,
Wild rose in the heather."

Replied the rose: "Then I will prick
thee,

So that no matter where you hide
The thought of me will still abide
And stay with you forever."

Then his rude fingers broke the stem
Of wild rose in the heather.
In self-defense she scratched at them;
Gave pain he thought was nothing then
Yet lingers in his memory when
He dreams they are together.