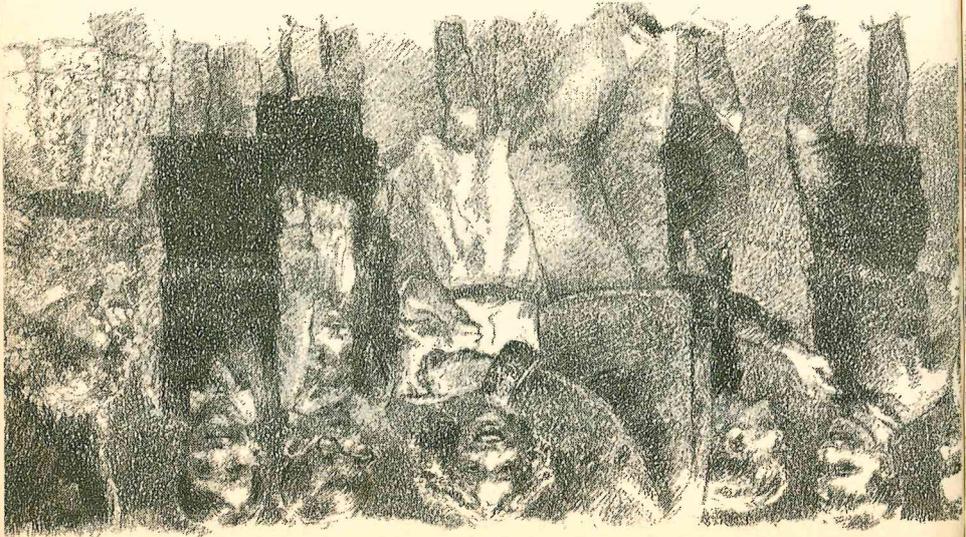


neither was Tiny. They didn't hide their disappointment.

The lucky ones were hustled away into the café, which had been taken over by the Wardrobe Mistress. Here they were to be transformed into rats of all shapes and sizes. Soon after, they emerged, "ratted-up" and giggling. The Director hushed them with a wave of his hat saying he would have no noisy rats in Niki's film. Instantly, they were silent.

The Director turned to Roxanne and the others, who were still waiting miserably. "The rest of you will be the children," he declared.



A few heads turned towards me and smiled sheepishly. I smiled too. The Director pointed at Tiny, "Can you limp?"

"Good, good," the Director went on, "Now I need someone to limp..."

"A bit," said Roxanne. "We all can."

"You can, can't you, Roxy?"

"Roxy can," he said. "You should hear her."

me.

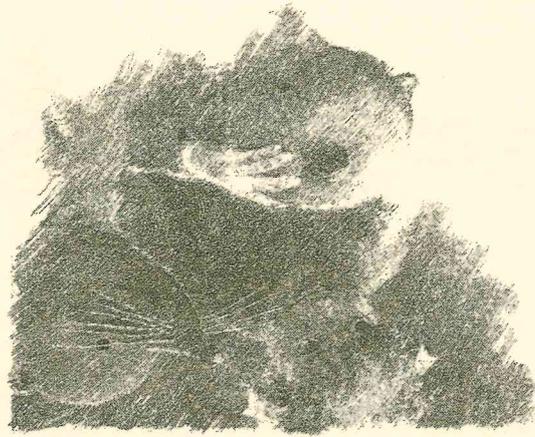
I was about to speak up, but Tiny did it for

"Can any of you sing?" asked the Director.

everyone laughed.

Niki laughed, and when Niki laughed,

"We already are," said Tiny.



"I think so," said Tiny, and he walked up and down, limping first on one foot and then on the other.

"I'll teach Tiny," I said. "I do it quite well."

The smiles turned to laughter.

"Magic, magic!" said the Director, a bit flustered now. "This boy can be the little one

who gets left behind."

It was indeed to be the story of the Pied Piper!

"Eva!" The Director shouted to the

Wardrobe Mistress, a handsome woman with a mass of red hair - too red to be real - "Eva, this one will be the wair. You can get him kitted out. You can get them all kitted out. Now, I need a Mayor."

Of course, everyone looked at Monsieur

D'Arblay.

"Hmmm," said the Director, looking him up and down. Clearly *our* Mayor wasn't exactly what he had in mind. "I suppose you'll do. A bit of make-up here, and a bit of padding there. We'll make a proper Mayor of you."

The Mayor didn't look too happy at this, but he accepted the part eagerly enough.

"Now," said the Director, "I want to see all the ladies. I'll need ladies who can scream - about half a dozen will do. And you've got to be able to pick up your skirts and run."

It turned out they could all scream and run well enough, so they were all chosen except

Madame D'Arblay, and she was cast as the Mayor's wife so she was happy.

After that, the Corporation chose itself, for there were only a few of us willing to be dressed up in long flowing robes trimmed with fur. I was one - and so was Roxanne's grandfather. It was better than nothing. Of course, Niki was to be the Pied Piper so any hopes of stardom were dashed.

Most of the children were prettied and preened to look like dolls. But Tiny, who was usually so tidy, was transformed into a grubby beggar, complete with crutch. His mother kept trying to smarten him up, so the Wardrobe Mistress had to be very firm with her. "I want

him to be mucky," she insisted. "He has to be

mucky."

Tiny was clearly delighted to

be mucky, and together we

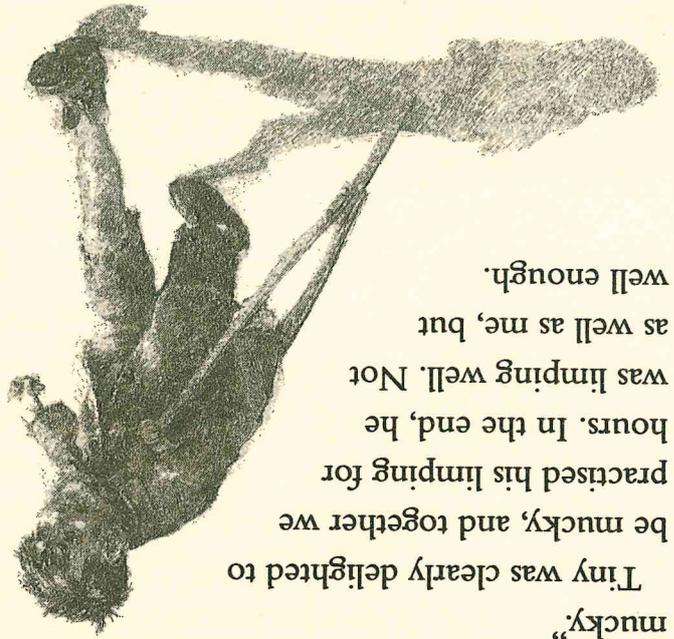
practised his limping for

hours. In the end, he

was limping well. Not

as well as me, but

well enough.



Roxanne had never much bothered about what she looked like. Now she emerged from the café in a light-blue chiffon dress with a garland of eglantine roses in her hair. For a few moments everyone stopped and stared. She was a princess - a country girl turned into a princess in ten minutes! Yet she seemed so sad and preoccupied. She wandered over towards Bruno's cage.

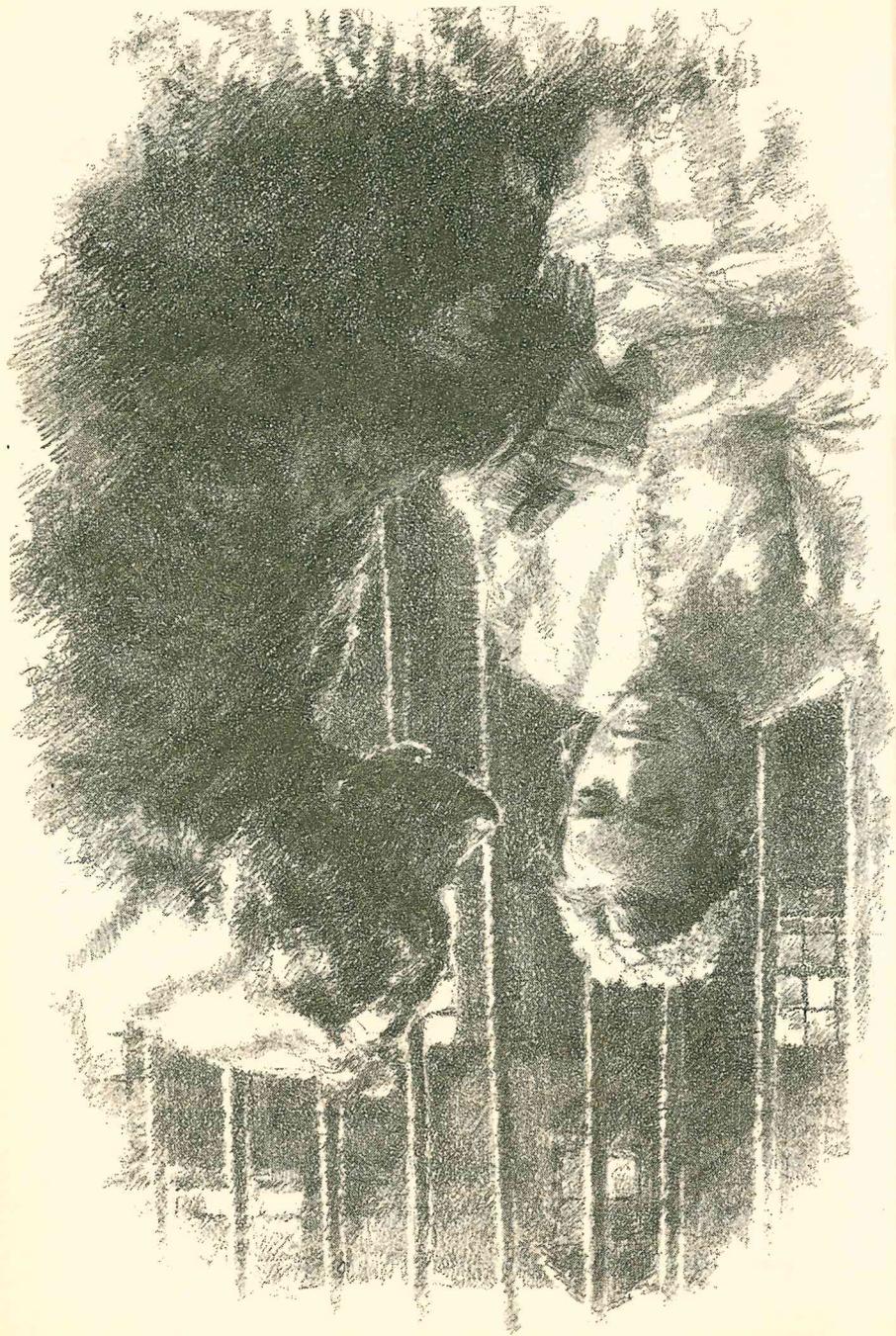
I was about to go over to her when her grandfather came scurrying out of the café. "Roxanne," he called, "they want the bear spruced up. You've got to brush him, comb him out."

She looked up at him with open dislike. "I won't make him dance. I won't," she said. "You know I never make him do anything he doesn't want to. You know he hates being laughed at."

"What's a little dance here and a little dance there?" said the old man, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Puts money in the bank, doesn't it? That's what counts in this life and don't you forget it!"

Roxanne opened the cage and stepped inside. "Money doesn't grow on trees, you know," her grandfather went on. "Mind you have him looking his best."

And the next day, Bruno was indeed looking his best for rehearsals. We all were. But from the start, things went wrong. The carnival mood of the auditions and costuming had gone.



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The children learned Niki's song and sang it well enough but they would not behave as he wanted them to. They would keep looking at the camera and giggling. The rats were no better, falling over each other because they

the beginning of the Director's troubles. didn't even look interested. And this was just their arms at him to encourage him, but Bruno They wanted him to dance and kept waving and looked the other way, scratching himself. Niki sang his song but Bruno sat stock still

wouldn't listen.

that you couldn't treat Bruno like that; but they threateningly. Roxanne told them, we all did, when they jerked on his chain, he reared up chained in all his life. He would not move, and the village square. Bruno had never been Bruno's neck so that Niki could lead him into dancing bear. Someone put a chain around unknown to me, the Pied Piper had to have a worst problem of all. For some reason yet problems became arguments. Bruno was the One by one, difficulties became problems and



couldn't see properly through the eye-holes in their costumes. Tiny's limping went to pieces. He *would* limp on different legs. And the more the Mayor and the Corporation rehearsed, the more self-conscious and stiff we all became.

The Dancing Bear

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The Director blamed everyone: the cameraman, the sound man, the weather - even, at one point, Niki. By late afternoon he was talking of abandoning the whole project, packing up and going home. Eva, the red-headed Wardrobe Mistress, was in tears because he shouted at her once too often.

We rehearsed for five minutes and stood around for five hours waiting. Filming, I decided, was hard on the feet, mostly boring and definitely bad on the nerves. We all went home thoroughly fed up and dreading doing it all again the next day.

After supper, I was just going out for my evening stroll when I heard someone singing. It could only be Roxanne. No one sang like she did. She often sang to Bruno in the evenings before she said goodnight to him. The sound of her singing drew me down towards the village square. Roxanne was sitting in the cage with Bruno standing beside her, and she was singing Niki's song. I looked across the square. Niki was listening outside the café, the Director behind



him. The entire film crew was there too. Roxanne saw none of them. As I watched, Bruno began to sway from side to side. Then Roxanne was on her feet and dancing too.

The Dancing Bear

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When it was over, Niki started to clap loudly, and then everyone did. I did too - I couldn't help myself. Roxanne was caught quite unawares. She was embarrassed, even a little afraid, I thought.

"That girl's magic!" exclaimed the Director as he hurried past me. "Pure magic." He liked that word.

"Did you see? He was dancing!" said Niki. "The bear, he was dancing!" Niki grasped the Director's arm and they stopped close by me, "I have an idea," he whispered.

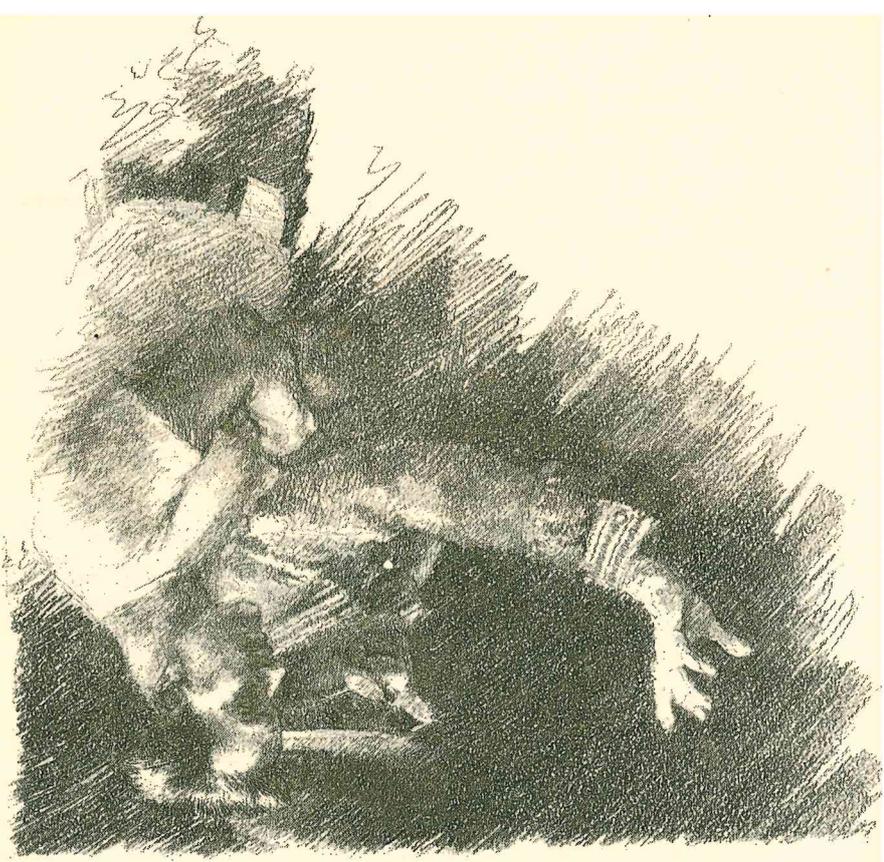
"So have I," said the Director. "And if your ideas the same as my idea, then it's brilliant."

"We sing it together, right? Her and me," said Niki.

"Her and you together," said the Director. "We'll hardly need to change a thing. You come to the village, just like we planned - a wandering minstrel with your bear - but you've got a girl with you, your girl. You do the song together. The bear dances. The children come out and dance, then the rats too. They've got to

The Dancing Bear

dance. They can't stop. The Mayor and Corporation see what's happening and ask you to rid them of their rats. You and the girl, with the bear behind you, you lead the rats out of the village and drown them. And then the beggars won't pay you. So you and the girl start singing again and the bear starts dancing and the children dance and they follow you both out of town and up into the mountains."



"Do you think she'll do it?" said Niki.

The Director laughed. "Do it? Of course she will. What girl wouldn't, eh? The chance to

sing with Niki. And think of the publicity! Niki and his shepherdess fresh from the

mountains and a bear that dances. I'm telling

you, it's a winner, Niki, a winner. Sell millions.

Go on, you go and ask her; and don't take no

for an answer. I'll see to the grandfather. He's a

tight-fisted old goat, but I'll make him an offer

he won't refuse."

I stood and watched from the shadows as Niki

walked over to the cage. Roxanne was just

closing the door behind her. She turned and

saw him. "You startled me," she said.

"With a voice like that," said Niki, "you

shouldn't be stuck away up here."

"What do you mean?"

He reached out and took her hands in his. "I

want to ask you a favour," he said, his voice

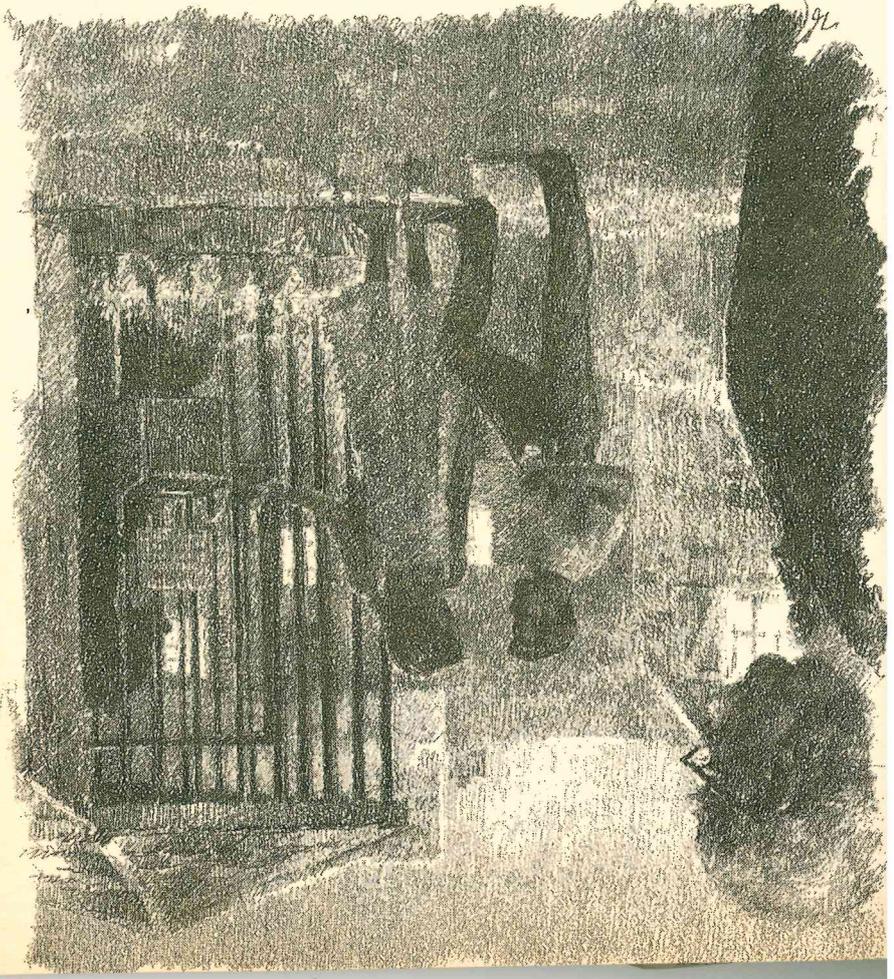
silky soft. "I want you to sing with me - you

know, in the video."

"Me?" said Roxanne.

“When you sing,” Niki went on, “everyone listens. When you sing the bear dances. I must have a dancing bear, and he only dances for you, doesn’t he? I need you to sing with me, Roxanne. I need you.”

“I don’t know,” she said shaking her head.



Bruno was pacing up and down frantically in his cage behind them. He understood me?"

"Love me?" she said. "Will they really love you?"

"Of course you can," he said. "Someone else could look after him. You can't live your life for a bear. There's a whole big wide world out there waiting to hear your voice. They'll love you. I'm telling you, Roxanne, they'll love

"No," she said turning away from him. "I can't leave Bruno; I won't."

this behind."

You could be the same. You could leave all anything I want. I can go anywhere I please. I've got four cars. I've got a plane. I can have the world: Paris, California, south of France. Everyone knows me. I've got houses all over big, the biggest. Look what it's done for me. "You could be a star, Roxanne. You could be chin so that she could look him in the eyes. you did just now, but with me." He lifted her "It's easy," Niki went on. "You sing it like

every word, I knew he did.

She smiled nervously at Niki. "I'm not sure,"

she said. "I live here. I belong here."

"No one belongs anywhere," said Niki. "And

who wants a little place like this when you

can have the whole world? I tell you what.

You come with us when we leave, and if you

like you can always come back. But I'm telling

you, you won't want to. There're things out

there you never even dreamed of and they'll all

be yours. What do you say?"

"And I can have all I've ever dreamed of?"

said Roxanne.

"All of it," said Niki.

If there was a moment I should have spoken

up, it was then, but I hadn't the courage to

do it.

I lay awake all that night telling myself I had

to warn her - I *had* to stop her from going. I

had to tell her. She mustn't leave. She couldn't

leave. She'd be like a fish out of water. I made

up my mind: I would not let her leave.

screamed as they should, the rats ran in packs
lunchtime they were already filming. The ladies
Now rehearsals went like clockwork. By
At least, that was what I told myself.

It was too late. There was nothing I could do.
dancing as she sang.

everyone's delight, Bruno was swaying and
already rehearsing with Niki and, much to
determined to say my piece, Roxanne was
wearing my Corporation cloak, and still fully
But when I arrived at dawn in the square,



along the streets and didn't trip over, the children sang and danced just as children do, and the Mayor and the Corporation looked suitably scheming and smug. (Madame D'Arday's chins wobbled wonderfully.)

Niki and Roxanne and Bruno led the procession of singing children into the hills never to return. And when Tiny came back, limping just the way I'd taught him, and told everyone that the children had gone for ever, it brought real tears to our eyes.

That last evening, there was a spontaneous party outside the café, brought on, I think, by relief that the film was finished, but also by a genuine friendship that had grown up between ourselves and the film crew. The children, some still in costume, were cavorting to raucous music with a thunderous pulsating beat, which the Sound Engineer had contrived to blast all around the village.

The Mayor, determined to show them that there was another kind of music, went off to



fetch his pipes. Someone pulled the plug on the amplifier and the Mayor struck up a country dance. It wasn't long before the film crew, under Madame D'Arblay's instructions, were dancing our way. They were very good at it, Niki in particular. But then, of course, we had to return the compliment and I found myself dancing with Eva, the red-headed Wardrobe

The Dancing Bear

Mistress, who proceeded to teach me to dance their way. I think she'd taken a bit of a shine to me. I swear I moved parts of me I never even knew I had and I'm afraid I made a bit of a spectacle of myself. I told her of my passion for the Director's purple fedora and she laughed and ruffled my hair - no one had done that to me since I was a boy.



The dancing, ancient and modern, alternated all evening. For all that time, Niki hardly left Roxanne's side. I ate too much and I drank far too much. As night fell, I went off for my usual walk. I was going back towards the square, when I saw Bruno pacing up and down in his cage as he always did when he was upset. I went over to him and sang a little, trying to calm him down. He stood by me, breathing hard, and I scratched his

I would have enjoyed it all a great deal more, but all the time I could see Roxanne sitting in Bruno's cage. She was grooming him and talking to him. I knew then what she was telling him.

I was sitting at a table trying to get my breath back, when I saw Niki leave the party and go over towards her. They talked earnestly for some moments, through the bars of the cage. Then he brought her back into the café and danced with her. There was a new light in her eyes as she looked up at him, and she was more radiant than I had ever seen her.

tummy where I knew he liked it.

And then Roxanne was beside me. She put a

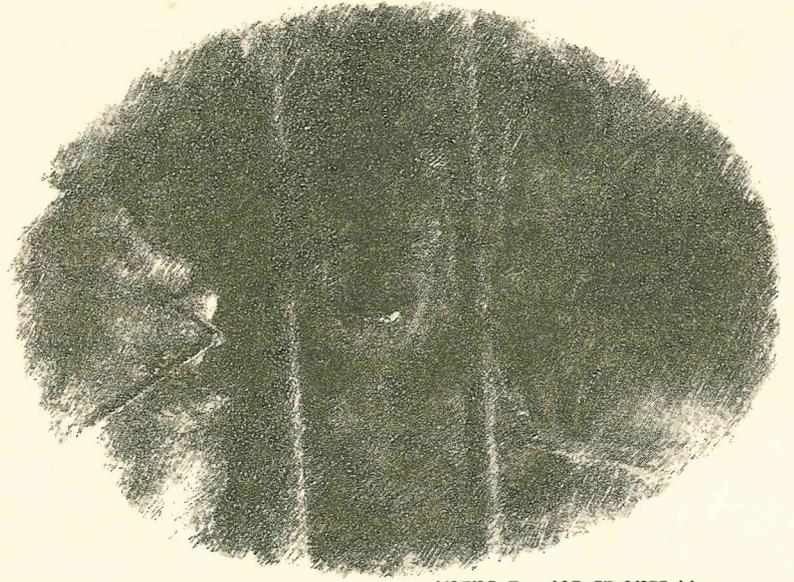
hand on my arm.

"I need you to tell me what to do," she said.

"There's no one else I can ask, there's no one

else I can trust."

"What is it?" I said.



"When they go tomorrow Niki wants me to go with him. I'm going to be a singer. Niki says I sing well enough to be famous. Do you think I do?"

"Of course you do," I said. It was an honest answer.

"I think I want to go, but I'm not sure. Grandpa says I should go because I'll be rich. He says that with the money I'll make, he could buy the farm next door. It will make all the difference, he says. And I do like singing. I do. You've always helped me, ever since I was little. Tell me what to do. Please."

Now I could speak out. Now was my chance. I could not believe the words I found myself uttering.

"You must do what you want, Roxanne," I said. "You're old enough to know what you want. I can't tell you what to do any more. No one can. It's your life."

She was looking at me - trying to drag the truth out of me. She wanted me to tell her to stay. She wanted me to stop her - I know she did. Then the moment passed.

"If I went," she said, "would you look after Bruno for me? And would you take him for walks sometimes? Would you?"

"If that's what you want, Roxanne," I said. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

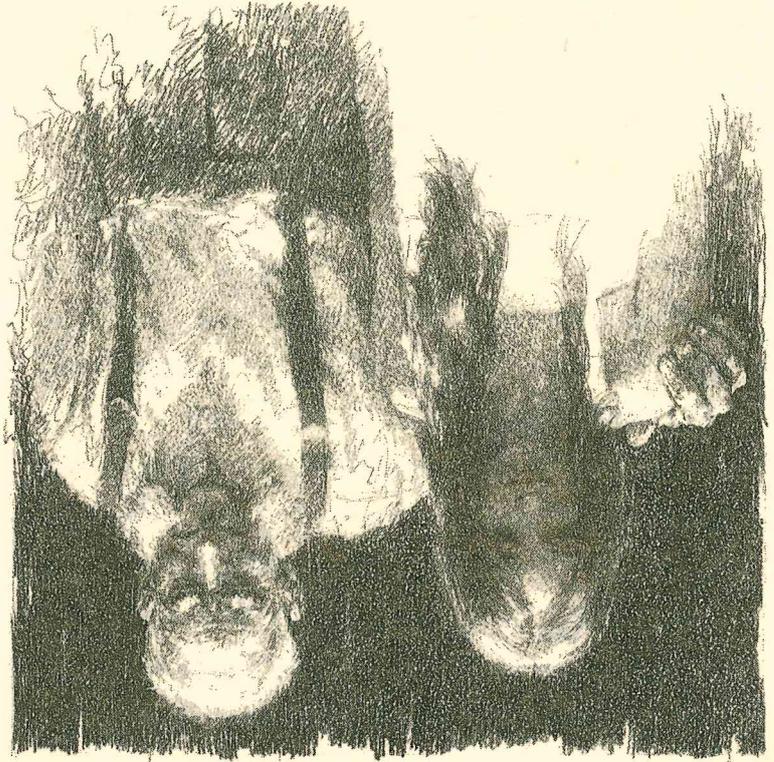
"I knew you would," she said. "Then I shall go. I've talked to Bruno. I've told him. He understands." She turned to the bear. "You understand, don't you, Bruno? And anyway, Niki says I can come back whenever I want. And I'll come back often, honest I will. He says he'll take me to the sea. I've never seen the sea. We'll go up in planes. We'll fly. Can you imagine that?"

And then she was gone away from me, back towards the light of the café, back to Niki.

It was very late when Niki hushed everyone and told them the news I already knew. Roxanne stood beside him, looking down at her feet. Her grandfather had his arm around her and he was smiling like a cat that's got the cream. I think Niki expected applause when he had finished - he was rather used to applause - but the villagers were numbed to silence. The Mayor stood up and spoke for us because someone had to say something.

“Roxanne is a daughter to all of us,” he said, “and no one likes to see a daughter leave. But we are proud of her, very proud; and we hope that wherever she goes, wherever she sings, she won’t forget us or the place she belongs to.”

It was Tiny who managed inadvertently to bring some smiles back. “Send us a postcard,



Roxy," he called out, and everyone laughed with relief. But there was no more dancing that night.

We were all there early the next morning and said our goodbyes to the film crew and to Roxanne. The Wardrobe Mistress kissed me fondly and said that she wished she'd had a teacher like me when she was at school. That was kind of her, I thought. Roxanne crouched down by Bruno's cage, a battered brown suitcase beside her. She clung to the bars.

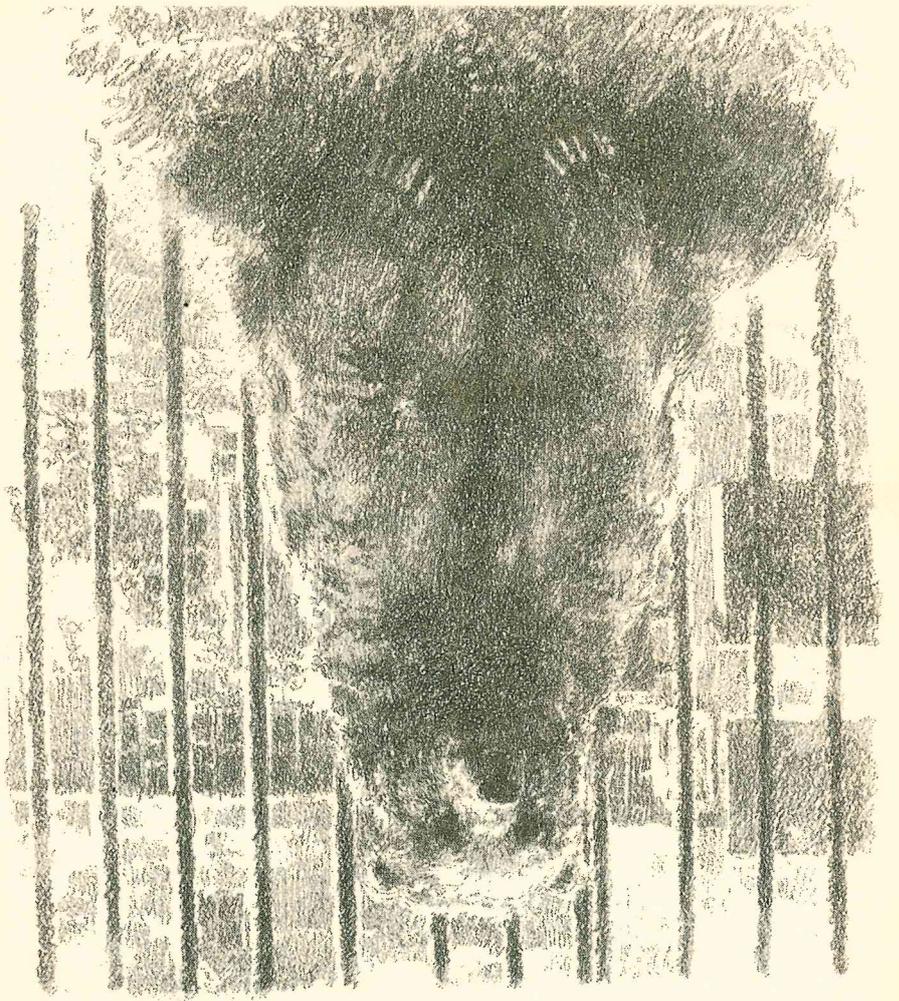
"I'll be back," I heard her whisper. "I promise!"

And then she got up and came over to me, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Look after him for me," she said. Then she was gone.

They were all gone and we were left once more to ourselves, to the silence of our mountains.

Some time later that morning I went to give Bruno his breakfast. He was sitting back against

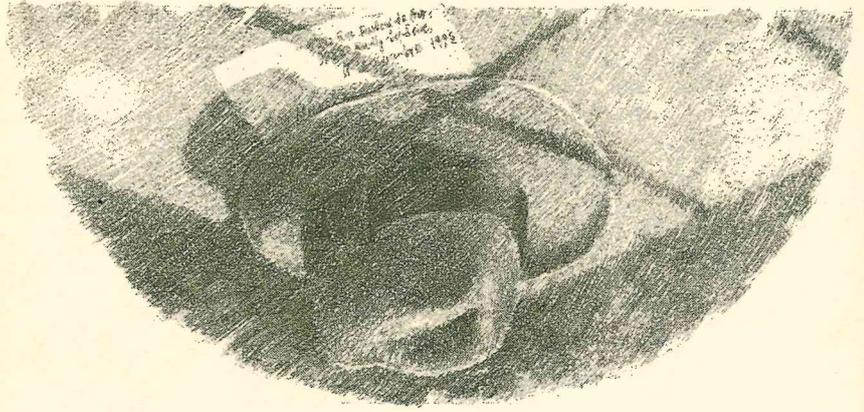


the bars of the cage where Roxanne had left him, still gazing after her. I opened the door and poured his meal into his trough. He never moved. He never looked. It was only when I went to stroke him that I realised he was dead.

The Dancing Bear

No one comes here much any more since Bruno died. From time to time I hear Roxanne singing with Niki on my radio, and I've seen her on the television too. She's almost more famous than he is, now. I feel proud and sad at the same time. She still sings like the angels. I wrote to her telling her about Bruno. She never replied. I'm sure she never even got the letter.

Some time ago, I received a parcel from the Wardrobe Mistress, and there was a note with it. She said she had told the Director of my passion for his purple fedora hat. Here it was, she said. It came with her love. It would be just right for me. I tried it on, but it did not fit.



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