

Pallieter

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A Fine Morning in May

The spring was in a poor way those first days of May. The sun sulked behind clouds, only looking through now and then just to let a few golden streaks fall on the yellow buttercups.

The bright young green that had rushed out on all sides to meet her, in the grass, the trees and hedgerow, now waited impatiently for her caress.

Pallieter was quite put out of temper.

“It looks as if the game’s up.”

But the same evening the moon rose, breaking through the clouds ruddy as an apple; a thin mist lay on the river and meadows like a bit of delicate gauze. When Pallieter saw that, he wet his forefinger and held it up! it cooled to the south, and he laughed and rolled in the grass and sang with joy, his voice floated across the river through the quiet evening air:

“I know who’ll wake me from my sleep,
O nightingale that sings so sweet
The whole night long.
And down the valley I’ll take my way
To greet the flowers at break of day...!”

And next morning the sun shone!

Half the night he had lain awake, his window wide open, and watched the clouds break up till the heavens became a clear blue strewn with pale stars and filled to the brim with moonlight. Into the pure and quiet splendor, while the dew dropped slowly down on the earth, up rose the throbbing notes of a young nightingale. Pallieter quivered, he thought of the sun now at the other side of the world among the Chinese and dusky folk. To-morrow it would shine again on the fair valley of the Nethe and put new life into the trees and plants and make the flowers swell and smell richly, the woods would be quivering with the piping, twittering and caroling of birds – and he, Pallieter, would grow a foot in stature. He bounded in his bed till the clothes slipped off his limbs; then crept under again and fell asleep with a smile on his face.

When the first glimmer of daylight showed through the eastern sky and a cock crowed, Pallieter sprang out of bed, threw off his shirt, and ran down to the river mother-naked. A gray mist hung over the ground and shrouded the trees, the air was quiet as death, the barley was still weighed

down with a heavy dew, and large drops were pattering off the trees.

Pallieter took a run and jumped straight into the deep water, dived, and came up in midstream panting, gleaming wet, and happy. The cool water made his blood surge vigorously and he laughed uproariously.

He swam against the stream and let himself drift back; he swam dog-fashion, turned over and splashed, threw out his limbs till the water swirled and rippled and the reeds and rushes bent and quivered.

Gradually, with the increase of daylight, the mist had grown thicker and whiter and swallowed up the ground unperceived. The trees were now alive with the twittering of birds, and the reviving scent of flowers filtered through the mist. There yonder across the Nethe rose up the great sun red as a tomato flashing into all the whiteness like a sudden burst of fire.

Pallieter's heart leaped at the sight and he shouted, with tears in his eyes, "It will be a glorious day to-day," and he spattered a thousand drops into the air! Then he dived once more as if in search of a treasure to bring away with him, and then set off shining and ruddy through the white mist, trolling out:

"An ox goes through my vineyard –
Steady, steady Jadam,
Adam he had seven sons,
Seven sons had Adam."

He was in his bedroom again when the convent bell rang out clearly over the white fields and he heard Charlot stumble hurriedly down the stairs.

Charlot always stayed in her room till she heard Pallieter back in his own, for once she had caught sight of him coming in, stark naked, and with a shriek of horror she had rushed back into her bedroom. That she could not stand; she would even rather be late for mass, or miss it altogether, than meet a man bare as God made him, in God's own daylight.

When Pallieter was dressed he went downstairs, lighted the stove, and set the brass kettle on the fire, and ground the coffee. When the water began to steam and rumble, he made the coffee. What a blessed smell! It did the heart good! Its fragrance was absorbed into the spring air that filled the room, and Pallieter snuffed it up like a dog.

The sky cleared. A streak of sunlight crept cunningly through the open window and danced glittering on the brass pans and the gilded bright-colored mantle of a wax image of the Virgin on the chimney-piece.

Pallieter thrust out his finger into the splash of gold and said, "'Tis brighter than honey!" He cut slices of bread and spread them half an inch thick with the good butter, and fetched out of the cellar a dish full of snow-white cheese.

He went into the garden, still wet with dew and flecked with splashes of sunlight, to pluck some radishes. Loebas with her four pups rushed out of the kennel and yelped round his legs. He gave them each a lump of sugar and they shuffled like mad over the wet grass plot.

While he was washing the radishes, Peter, the stork, came flying to his nest with a silvery fish in his beak for his mate, who was sitting on her eggs.

When all was ready for breakfast he went and stood at the back door and watched the sun spreading out over the landscape. What a feast it was for sight and smell and hearing, the pale green wholesome earth with the silver thread of the Nethe wandering through it and the voices of the birds, the cuckoo and the cock crowing! What could be better than this?...

Pallieter opened the front door as well, so that a cool breeze rushed through the passage, and he could see the just-awakened world through both openings.

At one end the far stretch of fields and meadows with purple woods, and windmills on the horizon – and through the front door the rampart, the convert beyond, blossoming orchards, and irregular

roofs, and the yellow tower of St. Gommarus Church, that was just chiming the quarter.

Its clear notes seemed to proclaim the land's well-being.

"It doesn't ring long enough," said Pallieter, and he seized the bell rope in the passage and pulled at it so lustily that the bell in the little tower hardly had time to swing up and down and the mighty clang rolled booming over the morning landscape. He pulled and pulled as if to send the sound to the other side of the world, and he laughed and watched the convent and the meadows.

After that, in honor of the fine weather, he hoisted a big white flag in the front garden; the wind ruffled it and the sun caressed it.

It was overwhelming, the outpour of bird song, whistling, twittering among the big trees on the ramparts. And there was Charlot coming from mass, her face full of peace and her prayer book under her arm. Pallieter sang out as he saw her:

"Will you dance, little nun? Will you dance?"

"It's going to be a fine day, my lad."

"Such weather's thrown away on nuns."

"I'm not a nun."

"You're a deal too fat for that. Why don't you eat less?"

"Why should I?" she said angrily, and flounced into the kitchen to change her dress. She came back in a blue woolen skirt and red bodice, her arms bursting out of the tight sleeves, plump and shiny.

They drank their coffee, spreading the soft cheese an inch thick on the long slices of bread, dipped the pungent radishes into the cheese and salt, and sipped and slobbered like a pair of infants.

While eating, Pallieter kept his eyes on the shoulder of the hill, from behind which the sun was climbing into sight; they were already at work there in the fields. The red sails of the windmill were being set in motion by the fresh wind that dispersed the mists and sent a single white billow of cloud afloat in the heavenly blue, while the scent of the white and crimson carnation in front of the window wafted over the breakfast table.

Pallieter swallowed the last of his food, waved his arms, and called out, while Charlot let her eyelids fall and murmured a paternoster: "O Lord, my belly jumps with joy like a grasshopper. It is as if thou hadst placed a concertina within me."

He went out of doors, set open the dovecotes and the fowl house, and scattered maize, rice, oats, and corn. There was a flutter, clattering, cackling, and flapping of wings; all sorts of fowls were there – pouter pigeons and fantails, cocks and hens, geese, turkeys and a splendid peacock.

Greedily they packed up the food; they pushed and crowded and spread themselves out and pecked at the sparrows that swooped down on the heaving mass in flocks.

What a fine sight it was in the silvery sunlight, the gleaming necks on which brown, green, blue and red gold flashed incessantly; the white-brown gray speckling of the wings; the red and yellow beaks and feet; the vermillion combs; the arching waving tails glancing and shimmering like the iridescence of seashells! Pallieter watched it all with half-shut eyes and said, "Even Rubens... couldn't paint it!"

When the best part of the food that had been pecked up the birds dispersed each their own way, to the dung heap, the stable, or the bleaching – ground. The pigeons flew off to the dewy fields in flapping crowds, and the peacock stepped proudly and delicately down the path into the sweet-smelling garden and unfolded his wide-spreading tail in all its glory of many colors.

Pallieter stood admiring him, so beautiful among the delicate young green under the white and rosy blossom of the fruit trees, and how the sunlight made it all look as rich and rare as a fairy-tale. All at once the peacock flew up and alighted in the top of an apple tree, his tail falling over the blushing blossom like a green flame, and he rent the quiet air three times with his hideous screeching.

Pallieter turned on the water tap and immediately a little fountain sprang up out of the blue pond where the goldfish were darting about. Then he filled his pipe and fetched an enormous goat out of the stable. It was a coal-black he-goat with a blue shimmer on its skin; it had yellow horns and

light-gray eyes, and was called Lucifer.

As the beast came outside it snuffed up the fresh air and began to caper off, but Pallieter seized it by the horns, threw his leg over its back, lighted his pipe, and, firmly seated on Lucifer, who tossed and jerked his head, rode out of the yard. Pallieter clapped his hands and the five dogs came rushing out, scrambling and running on ahead of them. The goat carried Pallieter through the back gateway that came out on the banks of the Nethe, and followed the winding river path.

And on all sides of them the splendor of the earth was spread out, steeped in sunshine, bright with the vivid green of May, melting away into the horizon in silvery blue mists. It did a man's soul good to look at it. Everywhere the scene was painted with green and brown patches, with here and there brilliant splashes of yellow turnip flowers.

The fields of barley were swept white by the light wind, and through it all wound the Nethe's silver thread of swift cool water.

The air, jubilant with the trilling of birds, was filled with delicious fragrance, and the trees along the riverside looked as fresh and bright as if they had just risen out of the ground. On the broad leaves of the plantain by the water's edge, big dewdrops shone and sparkled like diamonds. Pallieter plucked a leaf as he passed, put it to his lips, and let the drops roll into his mouth.

"Good!" he said. "It tastes of heaven!"

All around the mighty earth was yielding up her treasures, plants, flowers, beans, and carrots, all kinds of fruits; everywhere creatures awakening to life, others pairing; the air smelled like honey, and a manure cart was dripping into the ground.

This was life, forever giving, forever reproducing; as the one thing bursts into life, another is already being formed. Forever moving forward in circles, one thing making room for another, and though you may have the Ten Commandments at your finger ends, and you may think about it till your hair turns gray, you'll never find out the why and wherefore of it.

"But that's no matter," said Pallieter; "it's beautiful! let's enjoy it all..." And with the taste of apple pie and cherries still in his mouth, he looked at the pink-and-white blossoming trees. His heart overflowed with well-being. Nothing was to be heard but now and then the singing of some young farmer or the neigh of one of the white or brown horses. The blade of a plow flashed in the sunlight and a fisherman on the river bank jerked up his net with the silver fish sparkling in it. A swallow swooped from one side of the river to the other; the dogs frolicked through the meadows, jumped over the brooks, and rolled about in the fresh grass, nibbling off the tops as they ran. Their barking resounded through the air with the crow of cocks and hum of bees, and up in the blue heavens there hung a delicate plume of little white clouds.

Pallieter muttered to himself, "Why, the earth has gone crazy like a love-sick maid" and he, too, was moved by this same fierce rush of up-welling life. He took his ebony flute out of his pocket and played a gay tune that went tripping away over the meadows as if Spring herself was singing.

Pallieter's heart was light. He broke off a handful of sorrel and chewed it as he rode along, he blew a few notes on his flute, and so they came to the Hofke van Ringen. This was an old Flemish castle built in red brick with bands of white, with a sloping slate roof and slender turret made steep to throw off the rain easily. It was surrounded by a wide green moat with water lilies and rushes in it, and beyond was a garden with tall trees all alive with birds. There it stood as if it had grown out of the ground, like a flower that had blossomed out of the beauty, the fierce vigor, and the elemental virtues of the Flemish race.

Pallieter stepped off the goat, which rushed away, capering through the meadows, nibbling at the tenderest grass and leaves, and drinking out of the clear brooks. Pallieter lay down on the bank to watch the lusty exuberance of the spring. After that he went picking daisies and buttercups to please Charlot. When he had gathered an armful he shouted to the dogs and Lucifer and began to run as hard as he could. That started a wild game. Loebas rushes on ahead, the goat skipped beside him, and the puppies came shuffling along behind. They jumped over ditches and every now and then one of the puppies plumped in to the middle of the water. They rand and tumbled and rolled

along all the way back to the Reinaert.

Then, mounted backward on Lucifer, his arm full of flowers, his face all smiles, Pallieter rode into the sweet-smelling garden.

"Oh!" cried out Charlot as he gave her the flowers, "I must set these before Our Lady! I'll put them into vases just now." And for the moment she put the enormous bunch into a brass milk pail; there they made a perfect picture, ready to paint.

"But listen here," she said, her voice full of importance, "Father Nollekens has been here to say that we must bake two more cakes; he has three cousins coming to visit him, barefoot friars from Dendermonde; two won't be enough for them."

"Yes," said Pallieter, "the fasting is over and by the time it begins again they'll be as fat as snails, full to the brim. O holy St. Francis, whose ribs stuck out with hunger!"

Charlot mumbled something to herself, and Pallieter went off to grind corn in his mill. It stood next to the garden on a little steep mound so as to catch the wind on all sides.

Tybaert came with tail erect, rubbing against his legs, and jumped at once on to the floury woodwork to look for mice.

The sack of corn was nearly empty; he shook out what there was into the hopper. He could fetch more presently. He fixed the stay of the mill against the wind, the sails began to turn, the stones revolved and ground the corn to flour. He put his head through the loophole and looked down over the land. He lighted his pipe, and the blue smoke waved like a feather in the clear air, while the mill cracked and creaked in the wind; verily, you could see the things with your own eyes growing in the new warmth of the sun. The green shoots pushed forth as if trying to make up for lost time.

When Pallieter looked on all this and the fine show there was for fruit and the good things of the earth, he said to himself,

"Who would ever want to die?" And he chanted out:

"Cold winter has left us,
The sweet spring is here;
On tree and on meadow
Her blossoms appear.
And thro' the green valley
With Molly I rove;
A nightingale warbles
Sweet hymns to my love."

Just as he was on to the second verse, Charlot called out excitedly:

"Brother, Father Nollekens is waiting for you; he hasn't much time, he says."

"Tell him to come up to the mill."

"What! Do ye think the father with his best cassock on 'll come and make it dirty in your mill?"

"Better a sack of flour on a black coat than a speck of sin on a soul."

But there came the priest of the convent – a short oldish man with a good-natured face and a cone-shaped head fringed with white hair. He offered his snuff box.

"What d'ye think of the sun, Pallieter?"

"That it's the cream of life."

"It makes my throat dry."

"A man can always find a reason to give himself a treat. Come, let's have a glass."

They went into the sunny sitting room, where Pallieter fetched a gallon of beer and a cobwebbed bottle of wine. The priest drank the red wine and Pallieter the golden beer; the sun flickered over the table and dropped little warm beads of light into the brown and red liquid.

"Pallieter," said the priest, "Charlot will have told you about the two cakes?"

"If she lay a-dying she would come to life again to tell me. You people know how to turn the women

round your finger. Wish I could do it."

"Nothing easier! Be a priest, too!"

Pallierter winked and said jokingly:

"They might like me better as I am!"

So saying, he poured out another glass, first holding it up to the sun, then pitching it down his throat till he gasped for breath, and said:

"Here is the spirit of the earth; let it pass into my body." And he drank another pint.

"Look, look at the glorious earth!" cried Pallierter, pointing to the sloping fields. "I could kiss you for pure joy. Come! let's have a dance!" He seized the priest's hands and pulled him round, singing:

"To-day it is St. Margaret's feast;
Let us be merry, come let us be gay.
To-day it is St. Margaret's feast;
Those who won't keep it had best stay away."

"There, there, that'll do," said the priest, laughing, "I've no time for that. I must read my breviary."

Pallierter let him go and called out:

"I'll send you some ripe strawberries."

"That's right! the very thing I dreamed of last night!" and away went the old priest back to the convent. He opened his breviary and began to read. Splashes of sunlight flickered through the tall trees on to his black coat and his shining headpiece, and a spark now and then caught the gilt edge of the prayer book.

As Pallierter looked at all this he was moved to sing the praises of the blessed weather.

He opened the old Bible, took it up to the window, and read out aloud:

"Blessed is the man whom thou choosest and causest, to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house even of thy holy temple... Thou visitest the earth and waterest it, thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God which is full of water, thou preparest them corn when thou hast so provided for it.

"Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly, thou settlest the furrows thereof; thou makest it soft with showers, thou blessest the springing thereof.

"Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and they paths drop fatness.

"They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness; and the little hills rejoice on every side.

"The pastures are clothed with flocks;

"The valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing...

"O God who coverest thyself with light as with a garment, who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain,

"Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters, who maketh the clouds his chariot, who walketh upon the wings of the wind...

"He sendeth the springs into the valleys which run among the hills.

"They give drink to every beast of the field;

"The wild asses quench their thirst.

"By them shall the fowls of the heaven have their habitation which sing among the branches.

"He watereth the hills from his chambers;

"The earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works,

"He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man that he may bring forth food out of the earth;

"And wine that maketh glad the heart of man and oil to make his face to shine...

"The trees of the Lord are full of sap, the cedars of Lebanon which he hath planted;

"Where the birds make their nests, as for the stork the fir trees are her house;
"The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats, and the rocks for the conies.
"I will praise the Lord, I will sing praises unto him all the days of my life."

Pallieter closed the book.

While reading he had noticed the smell of honey, so he ate some spread on a brown biscuit.

What magnificent weather! Over there two children were plucking flowers in the meadow where the horses grazed; two nuns were walking side by side along the Nethe dyke, reading their paternoster aloud in turns, and the three old blind men who lived in the convent poorhouse sat side by side on the grass laughing.

Pigeons were flying round, a water-wagtail flew past, and Pallieter's heart overflowed with happiness. It melted like wax, and he murmured in the words of the blessed Mary:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord."

He lighted a candle before her image and said:

"If it's you that gives us the fine weather, then you deserve it."

Then he went on with his grinding till Charlot called him in to dinner.

First she served up chervil soup with asparagus; they each had two plates of it. Then came a joint of roast pork with spinach and potatoes like fine flour, fresh and tasteless. They took mustard with this to rouse a good thirst. Then they each ate about half a dozen little pancakes that smelled of eggs and cinnamon; they put butter and syrup and sugar on top. For a taste of something fresh they ate up a dish of strawberries till the juice ran off their chins. Their faces sweated with the good feeding, and Pallieter said:

"O Lord, the pleasure is now ended. Give it us another time."