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The Rose Cloud

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## The Rose Cloud

### Translator's Introduction

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Gisela von Arnim's "The Rose Cloud" is a product of the *Kaffeterkreis*, a female conversational salon in the great tradition of the French *salonières* and the German Romantics. Gisela (1827–89), the daughter of Achim and Bettine von Arnim, was a founding member in 1843 of the circle comprised of young women from Berlin's monied intellectual aristocracy. They met weekly during Berlin's dreary winter months to present anonymously submitted art work, literary and musical compositions, as well as to perform their own fairy-tale plays to the likes of the Prussian monarch Friedrich Wilhelm IV and the Prussian Minister of Justice Friedrich Karl von Savigny. The *Kaffeterkreis* met for the last time on 14 March 1848, while Berlin was in the throes of the '48 Revolution. Attempts to revive the society failed, and the original members concluded "The *Kaffeter* was a creature of the pre-Vormärz era." Although reports from Johannes Werner indicate that the protocols of the *Kaffeter* survived into this century, they were mysteriously lost between the two World Wars; today only fragments remain in archives in Germany.

The authorship of "The Rose Cloud" remains somewhat speculative because, in keeping with the group's adherence to the code of anonymity, no author is noted on the copyist's manuscript on which I base the translation. And, since texts regularly made their way into the hands of the *Bardua* sisters, the club's secretaries, for copying and inclusion in the *Kaffeterzeitung*, the handwriting does not betray the author. There is, however, good reason to assign the work to Gisela von Arnim. The manuscript, written on the long, white paper used for *Kaffeter*-protocols, is part of her literary estate in the *Hessisches Staatsarchiv* in Marburg. As was her habit for many of her other writings, numerous marginal notes in Gisela's hand are scattered throughout the forty-five-page document and suggest her involvement with the text. (See the afterword to *Das*

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Leben der Hochgräfin Gritta von Rattenzuhausbeiuns for additional information on Gisela's writing habits.) And yet, although I have read most of her diary material, I have been unable to find direct reference to this work.

The text, if rightly assigned to Gisela or to another member of the Kaffeterkreis, displays the characteristics of works created for the conversational salon. These tales were intended primarily for a listening, rather than a reading audience, and members frequently read them aloud over several weeks. That explains the often chatty, conversational style in "The Rose Cloud," the informal and sometimes juvenile word choice, and the cliffhangers at the end of many chapters: "My goodness, what could possibly be in this apron?" "And what was in this little chest?" "Just guess what she saw!" "What could that be? A flower, a bird, a star?" The oral tradition this tale evinces is a culture lost to modern society that finds its entertainment in magnetic media and not in face-to-face encounters.

In addition to its significance as a document from the Kaffeterkreis, "The Rose Cloud" is important as part of a much larger female fairy-tale tradition in the German-speaking lands. Despite what much scholarship would have us believe, women, including canonically received ones like Bettine von Arnim, Fanny Lewald, and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, played an important formative role in the German fairy-tale tradition. Between 1845 and 1900, women published over two hundred fairy-tale collections, probably even more, although the trail is difficult to trace because many of their books have yet to be satisfactorily catalogued. In the nineteenth century, women writers far outnumbered male authors of fairy-tale books. A reading of this literature as a body of work provides insights into early attempts by women to explode the paradigm of male-authored texts and to explore new modes of human interaction. "The Rose Cloud," like many other feminist tales, speaks to themes and issues that are still very modern: the quest for meaning and purpose in life, for self-fulfillment, and for understanding between the generations.

### Further Reading:

For an in-depth study of this particular work and its connection to the female-penned fairy-tale tradition in Germany, see my article: "Trivial Pursuit? Women Deconstructing the Grimmian Model in the Kaffeterkreis" in *The Reception of Grimms' Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions*, ed. Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993) 102–26. For a biography of Gisela von Arnim, see Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, "Gisela von Arnim," *Töchter berühmter Männer: Neun biographische Portraits*, ed. Luise F. Pusch (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1988) 209–38; my afterword to *Das Leben der Hochgräfin Gritta von Rattenzuhausbeiuns*, by Gisela and Bettine von Arnim (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1986); and Johannes Werner, ed., *Maxe von Arnim: Tochter Bettinas, Gräfin von Oriola 1818–1894* (Leipzig: Koehler und Amelang, 1937). For a discussion of Gisela von Arnim's connection to other German female writers, see the foreword and notes to Shawn C.

Jarvis, *Märchenbriefe an Achim* (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel; Leipzig: Edition Leipzig, 1991). Ingeborg Drewitz's *Berliner Salons: Gesellschaft und Literatur zwischen Aufklärung und Industriezeitalter* (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1979) has a somewhat cursory, but entertaining, treatment of the Kaffeterkreis and its members. And finally, for those who would like to read more fairy-tale texts by German women authors, I am currently preparing (together with Jeannine Blackwell) a volume in English translation of original texts, covering 150 years of the female fairy-tale tradition in the German-speaking countries.

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Catharine had three sheep to tend. She couldn't yet write nor read, but she understood how to chat quite pleasantly and was a kind-hearted girl—only a bit too curious and capricious, but that shows at least that she wasn't headstrong.

A short time after the New Year her three sheep presented her with three lambs. Two of them were very strong and healthy, but the third was so small, it could have been taken for a small rabbit. Catharine's momma, who was named Sylvia, despised the poor tiny lamb and said that it would have been better never born, since she couldn't afford to raise it, or else it would remain so wretched that it wasn't even worth the grass it ate.

These words wounded Catharine, who found the little creature much sweeter, much more to her liking and her size than all the others. She resolved to take really special care of it, and gave it the name Bichette, because it was a female lamb. She took such good care of her she practically loved her to death. She doted too much on her, petted her incessantly, carried her around, and put her to sleep on her lap. Puppies and kittens love it when they are attended to and spoiled; but sheep prefer, if they've eaten well, to live just as they please, to sleep whenever they desire, to run or lie down wherever they see fit. Sylvia said to her daughter that she was just keeping Bichette from growing with all her petting, but Catharine wasn't hoping Bichette would get bigger. On the contrary, she wished Bichette were even smaller, so that she could carry her around in her pocket.

Every day she led the ewes out to pasture, two hours in the morning and three in the afternoon. The two big lambs bore their mothers' absence very reasonably; they seemed to understand that is how they brought home the milk for their own nourishment. Bichette, on the other hand, was much less patient, or perhaps just hungrier, because as soon as she heard her mother returning, her bleating sounded so pitiful that it broke Catharine's heart and she herself almost burst into tears. She was forbidden to take the lambs out for a walk. They were still too young and the grass too tender, but she begged so long to take Bichette, that Sylvia finally said to her: "Do whatever you want.

If she dies from it, it's no great loss, and I would actually be glad to be rid of her. She's making you completely crazy, and you don't do anything but worry about her. You lead the sheep home too early and take them out too late—just so your Bichette won't be separated from her mother. So take her along, and what will be will be."

So Catharine led Bichette out into the open and the whole time she was outside, she carried her under her apron to protect her from the cold. That went well for two whole days. But already on the third she was tired of being a slave to an animal and she began to play and run as always. Bichette was no worse off, but also no better, and remained a tiny cripple.

One day Catharine thought more about looking for nests in the bushes than watching out for her animals and towards evening she discovered a blackbird nest with three chicks in it that already had tufts of feathers. They didn't seem shy at all, because when she showed them the tip of her finger and imitated the cry of the mother blackbird, they opened their yellow beaks so that she could see into their wide red throats. Catharine was so charmed that, as she was driving her animals home from pasture, she did nothing but chat with the birds and fondle them, and not until the next morning did she notice the great disaster. Bichette was not in the sheep pen. She had been forgotten outside, had spent the night in the open; no doubt a wolf had devoured her. Catharine cursed her blackbirds, who were to blame for her being cruel and careless. Her great affection for Bichette reawakened in her heart and she ran crying out into the pasture to find out what had happened to her.

It was in the month of March. The sun was not yet up and a thick white fog lay over the bog in the middle of the pasture. Catharine, after she had looked all around and had searched every gully and hedge, finally approached the bog with the thought that poor Bichette had perhaps fallen in. She spied something that very much astonished her, since this was the first time in her life she had been there at such an early hour. The fog, which had lain like a great tablecloth over the water, was being rended with the coming of the sun, and it had formed little orbs that were trying to take to the air. Some of them appeared almost to cling to the twigs of the willow trees and to be held there. Others, weighed down and jostled about by the morning wind, fell back onto the sand or seemed to shiver with cold on the damp grass. For a moment Catharine imagined she saw a flock of white sheep. But she wasn't looking for a flock, only Bichette, and Bichette wasn't there. Catharine was still crying and put her head on her knees and her apron over her head like a lost soul.

Fortunately, a child can't just cry. As she sat up again, she saw that all the little white orbs had risen over the trees and disappeared into the sky as lovely rosy cloudlets, so that it almost seemed as if the sun had lured them and carried them off, to absorb them all. Catharine watched for a long while how

they scattered and disappeared, and as she finally lowered her gaze again to the ground, she saw on the shore, quite far in the distance, since the bog was very large, her Bichette—lifeless, either asleep or maybe even dead. She ran to the spot and without even considering that she could be dead, because children never think of things in advance that could hurt them too much, she put her in her apron and hastily ran off to bring her home. But, while she was running, she was surprised that her apron felt so light. She could have sworn she had nothing in it.

“How poor Bichette must have suffered that she grew so thin in just one night?” she said to herself. “It seems like my apron is totally empty.” She had pulled it tightly together and didn’t dare open it for fear that the small animal would catch a new chill, just when she wanted to warm her up.

Suddenly, at a turn in the road, she saw little Peter, the son of Shoemaker Lustig, who ran up to her, and in his arms—guess what? Bichette, alive and bleating loudly!

“Here,” said little Peter to Catharine, “I’m bringing your lamb back. Last night she ended up among my animals, as you were heading home and showed me your blackbird nest. You didn’t want to give me a single one of your little birds, even though I would have loved to have had one. But I’m better than you. When I noticed back at the sheep pen that Bichette had followed one of my sheep, because she had taken her for her mother, I let her nurse as much as she wanted and she spent the night well cared for. I’m bringing her back to you this morning, because I can imagine you were really worried about her—you thought for sure she was lost, didn’t you?”

Catharine was so happy, she threw her arms around little Peter’s neck and took him home with her to give him two of her nestlings. The good boy was so pleased that he sprang about like a little nanny goat on the way home. After she had seen how joyously Bichette and her mother greeted one another, she finally thought about opening her apron, and only now did she remember she had put something into it; or at least had believed she had put in something she had taken for her little lamb. But what in all the world could it be? “I don’t know,” she said to herself, “but it’s just not possible that I picked up something that wasn’t there.”

She started to feel frightened and at the same time she was plagued by curiosity. She climbed up on the roof of the sheep pen that reached to the ground. It was completely covered with moss, and here and there bunches of small flowers the wind had strewn there sprang up, and even tender green ears of grain that were already fully formed. The roof was small, but very pretty and very warm, because it was made of aged straw and completely lit by the morning sun. During the summer Catharine had more than once missed the time when she was supposed to go to the pasture and instead had sweetly slumbered to

lengthen her night's repose, which always seemed too short to her. She climbed up to the highest timber of this tert, which is what they call the shelter for the flock in this area, and opened her apron with great care. My goodness, what could possibly be in this apron?

## 2

It was an apron of blue cotton, made from an old apron of her mother Sylvia and neither new nor pretty. But I believe, if, at this moment, someone had offered Catharine heaps of silver for it, she would not have taken the offer, so curious was she to discover what might actually be in it. She finally opened it and saw—absolutely nothing. She shook it with all her might. Nothing fell out. But it was as if a white mist surrounded her, and in less than a minute a small cloud formed over her head in the shape of an orb, at first as white as snow, then, the higher it climbed, golden yellow, then pale pink, and finally, as soon as it had ascended over the tops of the walnut trees and junipers that surrounded the sheep pen and was in full sunlight, as deep pink as the most beautiful of all roses.

Catharine was not all that astonished she had picked up a cloud and had brought it home. She only thought how pretty it was and how sad that it had flown away so quickly. "Ah, you little ingrate," she shouted after it, "so that's the thanks I get for sending you back to the heavens?" Then suddenly she heard a small voice coming out of the rose cloud, singing barely audible words, but oh, what words.

## 3

Catharine did not understand a single syllable of it. She continued watching it, and as it ascended, it grew bigger and bigger, until finally it evaporated and scattered into several small rosy cloudlets. "See," said Catharine, "how foolish that you're leaving to let yourself be lapped up by the sun, like she finished up all the others in the field. I, on the other hand, I would have kept you in my apron, where you wouldn't bother me at all, or I would have brought you out in the open in our garden, under the biggest apple tree or else to the washing pond, since you love spending the night on the water. I've never taken care of a cloud before, but I would have learned, and you would have stayed in one piece with me, but now Mr. Wind will drag you along with him as nothing but little crumbs, or Mrs. Sun will slurp you up."

Catharine waited for the cloud's answer. Then, all of a sudden, instead of one sweet voice, she heard a great crowd of little voices that sang much more quietly, just like warblers. But it was impossible even to guess what they were saying. These voices grew weaker and weaker the farther they withdrew, and



"But it was as if a white mist surrounded her, and in less than a minute a small cloud formed over her head. . . ." Illustration © Jean Gralley. Reproduced with permission.



finally Catharine could hear nothing at all. She also saw nothing more than the clear blue, completely cloudless sky.

"Momma," she said to her mother, who had called her to breakfast, "I'd like to know something."

"What's that, my child?"

"What the clouds say, when they sing."

"Clouds don't sing, silly; they only grumble and curse, when thunder settles in."

"Oh, dear me," said Catharine. "I hadn't thought of that at all. If only he wouldn't settle into my little rose cloud."

"What rose cloud?" asked Sylvia, utterly puzzled.

"The one I had in my apron."

"Hold your tongue," Sylvia said. "You know I can't stand it when people jabber all day long, saying stupid things without rhyme or reason. That's all right for two-year-olds, but you're a bit too big for such foolishness by now."

Catharine didn't dare reply and rushed out into the field as soon as she had eaten breakfast. She only had one little blackbird left that she took with her, and for an hour or two the little bird amused her. But since she had got up earlier than usual, she fell asleep in the middle of the meadow. She didn't need to worry about Bichette anymore, because she had left her in the sheep pen with the other lambs.

When Catharine awoke again, she found herself stretched out on her back and saw nothing but sky and, directly above her head, the little cloud that had reshaped high up in the sky and that now floated all alone against the clear blue of a beautiful day and glistened like rosy silver.

"It really is charming," thought Catharine still half asleep, "but it's so far away! If it sings again now, I won't be able to hear it. I would like to be up there, where it is, then I could see the whole world and could go walking through the heavens without tiring. If it weren't such an ingrate, it would have taken me along, and then I could have stretched out on it as if on eiderdown, and I could watch the sun close up and would know what it is made of."

The wrens sang in the bushes while Catharine let her mind wander, and it seemed to her as if the little birds were making fun of her and laughing: "How curious she is; for shame!" But shortly thereafter they fell quite silent and crept fearfully under the fallen leaves. A great sparrow-hawk was scanning the skies from high above and circled directly under the rose cloud.

"Oh," thought Catharine again, "they may make fun of me and scold me for being curious. I'd simply love to sit on the back of that big bird of prey. Then I would be much closer to my rose cloud and maybe could fly up to it."

By now she was fully awake and remembered that a person wasn't supposed to say stupid things and therefore also shouldn't think foolish thoughts. She

took her distaff, spun as well as she could, and tried as hard as she could not to think of anything, but try as she might she unwittingly raised her head and watched the sky. The sparrow-hawk had disappeared, but the rose cloud was still there.

"Why do you keep looking up there all the time, little Catharine," asked a man coming over the field. It was Father Kempf, who had just cut down a dead tree on the neighbor's field and was carrying the boughs home on his shoulder. He was straining under the load and leaned against a willow to rest for a moment.

"I'm watching the cloud up there," Catharine answered him, "and since you've traveled so much and are so learned, I'd like to know from you why it's all alone and isn't moving from the spot."

"That, my child," answered the old man, "I would have called in my sailing days a thunderhead [ein Wetterkorn]. And it would have been a bad omen for me."

"An omen of what, Father Kempf?"

4

"A portent of a great storm, my child. As soon as people see this omen at sea, they say: 'There's work ahead, hard work.' At first it looks like nothing at all and is often no bigger than a small lamb and just as white; you could imagine you could carry it off under your arm. But then it gets bigger and bigger and blacker and blacker, it finally completely covers the sky, and then Lord have mercy on you! Then comes the lightning, thunder, wind gusts, and the whole devil's kitchen! You struggle not to succumb and escape only with good fortune."

"Oh, my goodness," Catharine said, completely horrified, "but my rose cloud wouldn't be so treacherous?"

"In this part of the country and at this time of year it's rare to see thunderheads, and I don't believe there's any real danger inland. Nonetheless I find it odd, your rose cloud."

"Why odd, Father Kempf?"

"Upon my soul," replied the old seafarer. "I think it's strange, and I believe I'd be well advised to hurry up and finish my work before nightfall. I still have three loads of wood to carry home."

He went off, and Catharine tried to spin again, but she kept looking up—that was, however, not the best way to progress in her task and her spindle did not grow fuller. It seemed to her as if her cloud were gradually getting bigger and changing color. She wasn't mistaken: it turned blue, then slate gray, and finally black, and slowly but surely it spread out farther and farther, until it had covered the entire half of the sky. Everything grew dark and foreboding, and thunder began to roll.

At first Catharine was happy that her cloud had become so dense, so large, and so massive. "That's good," she said, "Now anyone can see that it isn't an ordinary cloud like the others. The sun couldn't consume her, and now it even looks as if she will gobble up the sun. And to think that this morning I carried such a cloud in my apron!"

She was very proud about it all, but lightning struck in quick succession out of the awful cloud, so that she was afraid and hurried to lead her sheep home.

"I was worried about you," her mother said to her, "that's some crazy weather. I've never seen such a storm brew up so fast this time of year and be so threatening."

The storm was indeed awful. Hail smashed the windows of the house, the wind blew the shingles from the roofs, lightning struck the big apple tree in the garden. Catharine was not all that brave; she would have preferred to hide under her bed and could not stop loudly repeating: "Oh, you terrible rose cloud, if I had known how mean you are, I would never have carried you in my apron!"

Sylvia started to scold again, but the child couldn't stop talking.

"Dear Lord, my child has lost her mind," Sylvia said to her neighbors.

"Oh, go on, that's nothing," they answered. "It's just her fear of storms that went to her head. Tomorrow it will all be over."

The next day everything was indeed over. The sun rose cheerily. Catharine did likewise and climbed with the sun onto the straw roof of the sheep pen. The house had been damaged, but the sheep pen, which was lower and better protected, hadn't suffered a bit. The little blossoms on the roof, bowed from the rain—the sweet celandine, the mossy stonecrop, and the hens and chicks—once again raised their little heads, and as they turned their little faces to the sun, they seemed to say to her: "Are you finally back? Good day, dear mother, please, don't go away again. We don't know what would become of us if you hid yourself."

Catharine also wanted to tell Mother Sun good day, but she was afraid she would be angry with her, because she had let the cloud that had argued with her the evening before slip away. She didn't dare ask her mother, who was walking through the garden below, if you could make the sun mad at you and then make up to her. Sylvia couldn't stand such daydreaming, and Catharine, who was an obedient child, decided to forgo such fantasies.

She succeeded, too. All the following days she was completely occupied with her blackbird, until it ate too much white cheese and died. Catharine was very sad about it and raised a sparrow that the cat got. A new sorrow! She finally lost all her appetite for pets and begged to go to school, and finally she learned to love her distaff and as she grew up, she became a charming little girl and a very adept spinner.

When she was 12, her mother said to her: "Would you like, my daughter, to travel a bit or see new places?"

"Oh, yes," Catharine replied, "I've always wanted to see the blue lands."

"What are you babbling about, little one?! There are no blue lands."

"Oh, yes, there are. I see them every day from the roof of the sheep pen. All around our green countryside there is another vast land that is completely blue."

"Oh, now I know what you're trying to say. That just looks like that to you because it's so far away. Well, now you can satisfy your desire. Your Great-Aunt Colette, who lives far from here in the mountains and whom you don't even know, because she hasn't been to see us for over thirty years, wants to see us again. She is very old and completely alone, since she never married. She is not rich, and you have to be careful not to ask her for anything; on the contrary—we have to do whatever she may bid of us.

"I'm afraid that she may be lonely in her solitude and could die from lack of attention. Let's go and see her, and, if she wants to come back with us to this region, I'm prepared to oblige her, as is my duty."

Catharine vaguely remembered her parents occasionally speaking of Aunt Colette. But she had never really understood what they said about her, and she had never tried to find out any more details. Her head grew very hot thinking about leaving her homeland and seeing something new. Because, although she had become so level-headed, the wrens had been right to call her "curious." She still was, but not in a bad sense; she loved learning new things.

So she rode away with her mother in the post carriage. They traveled for a day and a night, and when they finally reached the mountains, they were full of astonishment. Sylvia didn't like it at all, and Catharine didn't dare tell her she thought it was very beautiful.

As they left the carriage and asked the way to the village where Aunt Colette lived, they were shown a path that was as steep as the roof of Catharine's sheep pen and they were told: "There's no other path; just follow it."

"Well now!" Sylvia said, "That is a strange path. The world here is topsy-turvy. You'd need four little hooves like a goat to make headway in this country. Well, here's your blue country, Catharine! Is it to your liking?"

"I told you that it's blue," replied Catharine. "Just look up there at the mountain peak, Momma. Now do you see that it's blue?"

"That's snow you see there, you poor child; close up it's completely white."

"Snow, in the summer?"

"Yes, because it's so cold up there the snow never melts."

Catharine thought her mother was confused, but she didn't dare contradict her. She was impatient to prove the truth to herself, and she climbed up the

mountain like a little goat, even though she didn't have four little hooves at her disposal.

When they finally reached the village, Sylvia very tired and Catharine somewhat out of breath, they were told that Aunt Colette didn't live there in the summer. But her house was not far away in the same parish. They were shown a small board roof, on which lay great stones and which was surrounded by fir trees, and told: "It's that one. You only have a little less than an hour to go, and then you've arrived."

Sylvia almost lost heart. It was again as far to climb to reach that house as they had already climbed to the village, and the path was even steeper and more forbidding. She feared Catharine's energy wouldn't last long enough to reach it, and the entire place seemed so uncivilized and so loathsome, that she was already contemplating climbing down again and returning home quickly, without letting her aunt know that she had been to her village. But Catharine, who was neither tired nor put off, encouraged her dear mother anew, and as soon as they had breakfasted, they began the ascent once again. They didn't need to find a good path, since there was only one, and so they had no need of a guide. It wouldn't even have been a pleasant diversion for them to chat with one, because most of the people of this area knew only a few French words. They speak a dialect, which neither Catharine nor her mother could understand.

Despite the truly treacherous foot path, they finally reached the little house roofed with boards without incident. It was encircled by gorgeous fir trees, through which one could glimpse a sort of gently rolling pasture, which formed a hollow in the middle, showed no ditches or fences, but which was protected from avalanches by colossal stone walls. Immediately above the walls began the snow, which seemed to touch the sky. At first it almost formed real white stairways that rested on the black cliffs, then there were ice crystals of a beautiful greenish blue, and finally everything vanished into the clouds.

"Now we're finally and definitely in the little blue country," Catharine thought joyfully, "and if we climbed a bit higher, we'd be in Heaven." At that moment she thought of something she hadn't thought of in a long time. She recalled that it was possible to climb up to the clouds, and she remembered her rose cloud like a dream she had once had. The child was so enchanted and enraptured at the sight of the glaciers, that at first she hardly gave a thought to Aunt Colette. Nonetheless, she was curious to meet her, and more than once she had asked herself during the trip what kind of a woman she might be.

## 6

She was a large, pale woman with silver hair and a face that was rather pretty. She was not very surprised at all to see Sylvia. "I fully expected you," she said

as she embraced her. "I had dreamt of you and your daughter. Let's see if she looks like the image in my dream."

Catharine drew closer. Aunt Colette looked at her with her large, exceptionally clear gray eyes which seemed to peer into the depths of her soul, and then said, hugging her: "That's good, very good! I'm happy this child came into the world."

As soon as the travelers had rested a bit, she showed them her entire household. The house, which looked much smaller from afar, was actually quite large close up. It was constructed completely of wood, but of such beautiful fir, and so well built, that it was in fact quite sturdy. The rough stones that lay on the roof prevented the wind from blowing away the rafters or rocking them too violently. Inside of the house everything was absolutely immaculate. It was a joy to admire the shiny furniture that had been polished till it shone. There were all sorts of dishes and copper utensils; the beds were wooden frames, filled to the brim with wool and horse hair, and over that were spread beautiful white linens and fine coverlets, because here one never suffered from heat. The entire summer long there was a fire in the stove, and there was no lack of wood. Both the pasture, and a major portion of the trees surrounding it, belonged to Aunt Colette, and in the very large pasture grazed lovely cows, a few goats and a little donkey that was used to transport things. A young man-servant took care of the animals and a young maid the household and the shopping and, because Aunt Colette appreciated a nice lifestyle, she sent down twice a week to the village to have meat or bread fetched. In a word—she was rich, really very rich for a farmer, and Sylvia, who had had no inkling of it, but rather had come with the intention of helping out if need be, was wide-eyed and intimidated by her, as if she stood before a woman who was far superior to her. Catharine was also somewhat tongue-tied, but not because she was more or less poor than her aunt, but because she felt her aunt was far superior to her in education.

Despite that, because her aunt was also so kind and charming, Catharine soon settled down and even felt a familiarity with her as if she had known her forever. That was also the reason she asked her aunt all sorts of questions from the first day without much ado; and so she discovered that this housekeeper had been with an old woman, whom she had tended until her death, and who had bequeathed her as much as she needed to live on. "But my mistress was not very rich," Aunt Colette added, "and it wasn't with what she could leave me that I have created the comfort you see here. This is the fruit of my labors and my diligence."

"Did you achieve it with the beautiful livestock you are expert at raising?" asked Sylvia.

"My farm sustains my livestock," answered Aunt Colette. "But with what

could I have bought the land to feed and house them? Can you guess, little Catharine?"

"No, Aunt dear, I can't guess."

"Can you spin, my child?"

"O, yes, Aunt dear. If I couldn't spin at my age, I would certainly be very clumsy!"

"Can you spin a very fine thread?"

"Well, yes, pretty fine."

"She's our best spinner," said Sylvia with pride. "You could bring anything to her to spin, she'd manage to do it."

"Could she also spin spider webs?" asked Aunt Colette.

Catharine thought Aunt Colette was jesting and answered with a laugh: "Well, I've never tried that."

"Let's see how you can spin," replied her great-aunt and placed a distaff of ebony and a silver-rimmed spindle at her side.

"Oh, what charming utensils," Catharine said and admired the delicacy of the distaff, which was straight as a reed, and the spindle that was as light as a feather. "But in order to spin, Aunt dear, you need something on the distaff."

"You'll always find something, if you are inventive," answered her aunt.

"But I don't see anything at all here," replied Catharine. "Although you spoke of spider webs before, your house is far too clean for anyone to be able to find even the tiniest one."

"And outside, Catharine? Since you're standing on the doorstep, don't you see anything at all that you could spin?"

"No, Aunt dear. Tree bark must first be pounded and the wool of sheep carded; and if you don't plan to spin the clouds up there high above the glacier, which look almost like great balls of cotton . . ."

"And who told you that you can't spin clouds?"

"Forgive me, I didn't know that," said Catharine, who had become quite thoughtful and confused.

## 7

"You surely see," Sylvia said to her, "that your great-aunt is poking fun at you?"

"And nevertheless," replied the aunt, "the two of you undoubtedly know what they call me in these parts?"

"I don't know," answered Sylvia, "We don't understand the mountain dialect, and you can tease us as much as you please."

"I'm not teasing. Call Benedikt, my little servant, who's over there serving up the food in the summer porch. He understands French. Ask him what they call me."

Sylvia called Benedikt and very politely posed the question to him: "What do they call my aunt, Madame Colette, around here?"

"Well, my goodness," replied Benedikt, "They call her the great Spinner of Clouds."

They also asked the little maid, who without hesitation gave the same answer.

"Well, that really is astonishing," Catharine said to her mother. "Spinner of Clouds! So, Aunt dear, I'm finding out only now something from you that I have long suspected—that these things really can be held. When I was still very small, I once . . ." She interrupted herself because she saw her mother was signaling her with her eyes, as if she wanted to say: "Don't start with that nonsense again!"

But Madame Colette wanted to know everything, and Sylvia said to her: "Please forgive the foolish child, Aunt dear. She is still so young. It's not her intention to make fun of you, as you just did of us. You have a perfect right to do it, but she knows that it wouldn't be appropriate for her to do so."

"But," retorted the old woman, "then I won't find out what she wanted to say."

"My dear Great-Aunt," Catharine said, tears welling in her eyes, "I would never make fun of you, and Momma still believes that I'm not telling the truth. But I am; when I was small, I once put a little white cloud into my apron."

"Oh, how nice!" said her aunt, and it didn't seem as if she were either angry or astonished. "And what did you do with it, my darling? Did you try to spin it?"

"No, Aunt dear, I let it slip away, and then it turned rose red and even flew away singing."

"Did you understand the singing?"

"Not a word. Goodness me, I was still so little!"

"And after it flew away, didn't it turn into thunder?"

"Yes, it happened just like that, just like you said, Aunt dear. It pummeled our roof and knocked over our big apple tree that was in full bloom."

"That's what happens when you trust ingrates," Aunt Colette replied in complete earnest. "We must mistrust everything that is fleeting, and clouds are the most fleeting of all things. But I imagine you must be hungry, and lunch is ready. Help me fix the soup, and let's sit down to eat!"

The meal was very good, and Catharine ate heartily. The cheese and the cream were excellent, and there was even something for dessert, because their aunt had a goblet of macaroons made of honey she herself had prepared and they were exceptional. Neither Sylvia nor her daughter had ever eaten so well.

Night had fallen by the time they finished the meal. Madame Colette lit her lamp and carried in a little chest, which she placed on the table.

"Come over here," she said to Catharine. "You shall find out why they call



me the Spinner of Clouds. You come over here, too, Sylvia, so that you can see how I achieved my small fortune.”

And what was in this little chest, whose key Aunt Colette was holding in her hand? Catharine was consumed with curiosity to find out.

## 8

Inside lay something white, soft, and airy that looked so much like a cloud, Catharine let out a little cry of amazement, and Sylvia, who imagined her aunt to be a fairy or sorceress, paled with fright.

It was, however, not a cloud, but rather a large tuft of strands of a fine yarn, but so fine—so fine—that a hair would have to be split into ten parts to gain something equally delicate. It was so white one didn't dare touch it, and so fragile, they were afraid to snarl it with just a single breath.

“Oh, Great-Aunt dear,” Catharine cried with rapture, “If you spun that, then you are rightfully called the foremost spinner in the world and compared to you the rest are only twine twisters.”

“I spun this,” answered Madame Colette, “and every year I sell several such chests. You probably didn't notice on your way here that all the local women produce very delicate lace that sells for very high prices. I, of course, can't supply all of them with yarn, and there are many spinners who work very well. But nobody has rivaled me yet, and people pay ten times as much for my thread than that of the others. They all aspire to get some of mine, because you can make things with it that will no longer be possible when I'm no longer on this earth. Well, I am quite old, and it would really be a shame if my secret were lost, don't you think, Catharine?”

“Oh, Aunt dear,” Catharine exclaimed, “If only you wanted to give it to me! Not because of the money, but I would be so proud to be able to work like you. Tell me your secret, I beg you!”

“Just like that, on the spot?” Aunt Colette laughed. “Well then! I told you that it had to do with spinning clouds.”

She shut the little chest again, and after she had hugged Catharine and Sylvia, she retired to her room. The two of them slept in the same room in which this conversation had taken place, and in which a third bed for the servant girl Renate stood. Because her bed stood right next to Catharine's, they gossiped very quietly with one another before they fell asleep. Sylvia was so tired she had no time to listen to them. Catharine asked Renate, who was just about her age, a thousand questions. One single thing swirled incessantly around in her head: she absolutely wanted to know if Renate knew her aunt's secret to spinning clouds.

“There's no secret to it,” Renate answered her, “other than having lots of patience and skill.”

“But, to hold a cloud, to place it on the distaff, to keep it from slipping through your fingers, to draw it into a thread . . .”

“That’s not the hardest thing about it. The main thing is to make the cloud in the first place!”

“What do you mean? Make the cloud?”

“Well, to card it.”

“Card the cloud! With what?”

Renate didn’t answer; she’d fallen asleep.

Catharine also tried to fall asleep, but she was too agitated. Sleep would not come. The candle had been extinguished and a few coals still glimmered in the fireplace. Besides that, Catharine noticed the ceiling of the room was dimly illuminated. She stuck her head out of bed and saw that a strip of light was coming through the door crack at the top of the stairs Aunt Colette had climbed. She couldn’t stop herself and, creeping carefully on bare feet, she reached the stairway. It was made of wood, and Catharine was very afraid it would creak under her tread. But she was so light she managed to reach the top step without making any noise and to look through the tiny crack in the door into her aunt’s room. Just guess what she saw?

9

She saw nothing more than a very tidy little room illuminated by a small lamp hanging in the fireplace. There was no one in the room, and Catharine withdrew utterly flustered, because she was aware she was about to commit a great injustice inasmuch as she was attempting through stealth to get hold of a secret she did not deserve to know. She returned to her bed, all the while reproaching herself, which in turn caused her bad dreams. Upon awakening she vowed never again to be so curious and to await her aunt’s pleasure.

Renate took her along to milk the cows they drove out to pasture, if the naturally grassy and untended outcropping of the mountain could be called a pasture. It was, nonetheless, a very pretty place. A beautiful, very cold stream trickling down from the glacier wended by, following the rocks, and created a waterfall at the base of the pasture. Catharine, who had never before seen a waterfall other than a mill stream, thought this one so beautiful that she fixed her gaze on the glistening drops sparkling in the sun as it plummeted, until she was dazzled. Nevertheless, she still didn’t dare cross it, leaping from stone to stone, as Renate did. But soon she got used to the idea and, in the course of the next two hours, it became a game for her, too.

Now she also wanted to climb the glacier. Renate showed her how far one could risk going without danger of running into crevasses, and taught her the way to move on the ice without slipping. By the end of the day, Catharine was quite cheery and even already understood a few words of the dialect

spoken in the mountains. Since everything was new to her, it was a source of endless fun. She developed such a feeling of closeness to the mountains that she felt real pain when Sylvia spoke the next morning of returning home. Aunt Colette was so gentle, so understanding! Catharine loved her even more than the mountains.

“So, my daughter,” Sylvia said to her, “there would be a way to satisfy you, and that would be for you to stay here. Your Great-Aunt would like to keep you, and has promised me to teach you to card and spin as well as she can. But that requires time and patience, and since I know you and know how lively and capricious you are, I said ‘no.’ Nevertheless, if you think you are capable of learning to spin as well as you aunt—just as you’ve already learned to spin as well as I—then I won’t stand in your way of becoming rich and happy. You’ll have to make up your own mind and give the matter a lot of thought.”

Catharine’s first impulse was to throw her arms around her mother and to assure her she would never leave her. But the next morning, after Sylvia told her that it would be a great injustice to pass up the opportunity to learn something, she began to waver. On the following day Sylvia said to her: “We are not wealthy. Your married sister already has three children and your oldest brother five. As a poor widow I worry about my old age. If you became wealthy and skilled, you could help out the entire family. Stay here; Aunt Colette loves you. Your little failings don’t bother her and I’ve even noticed she tends to spoil you. You like it here; in three months I’ll come to get you, and then, if you choose to go home with me, we’ll do so. If the opposite is the case, you shall stay here, and who knows if your aunt won’t will you everything she owns?”

Catharine was still weeping at the thought of parting from her mother. “Stay with me,” she said to her, “I promise I’ll learn to card and spin exceedingly well.”

But Sylvia was already homesick. “If I stayed here,” she said, “I’d either die or go insane. Can that be what you want? And, on the other hand—think about if you can turn down the chance to help all of us to riches.”

Catharine went to bed sobbing, but she promised her mother to do everything she asked of her. The next morning she was not awakened by Renate and slept until 9 o’clock. When she awoke, she saw Aunt Colette at her bedside, who hugged her and said: “Little Catharine, I hope you’ll be brave and reasonable. Your mother departed early this morning. She kissed you sweetly while you slept and instructed me to tell you that she will return in three months. She didn’t want to wake you, for fear the leave-taking would be too difficult for you.”

Catharine wept bitterly, all the while begging her aunt to forgive her tears, and she replied: “I see absolutely nothing wrong with you missing your mother. That’s perfectly fine, and you wouldn’t be a good daughter if you felt otherwise. But I ask you in your own interest, my dear child, to gather as much courage as

you possibly can, and I promise to do my best to make your life here with me a happy one. Don't forget to tell yourself that the separation is just as hard on your mother as it is on you, and that only one thing can console her, namely when she discovers that you willingly submit to her wish."

Catharine tried to regain her composure, and hugged her aunt, promising her to be very diligent. "Today," replied her aunt, "you should enjoy yourself and go for a stroll. We'll begin tomorrow."

## 10

The next morning Catharine really did get her first lesson, but it was certainly not what she had been expecting. No great secret was betrayed to her; her aunt gave her a distaff with flax and said in doing so: "So, spin from this the finest thread you possibly can." First off, that was hard enough, because where Catharine came from, hemp was spun only for coarse linen. She didn't do badly, but it was so much less than she had imagined accomplishing, she was actually afraid to show her work. She was prepared for criticism, but, on the contrary, her aunt praised her and said that it had been quite successful for the first day, and that it would certainly go even better the next. Catharine wished she could stay home, because she would have loved to see how her aunt actually worked.

"No," said the latter, "I can't work when somebody watches me. Besides, I work only in my room, and at your age you can't just sit indoors. You can work while strolling or looking after the cows, however you like. I oblige you to nothing, since I see you're no lazybones and that you'll do your best."

Catharine actually was not lazy, but she was impatient, and this manner of learning on her own didn't fit with her idea of a great secret that she had thought of discovering like one gulps down a cup of sweet milk. She did, indeed, make progress every day and every evening brought home a thread on her spindle that was finer than the one the day before. But she herself noticed little change, and at the end of a week she felt bored and irritated with her aunt, whose encouragement only made her impatient, and even Renate, as lovable and agreeable as she was, bothered her with her steady calm and composed nature. She was supposed to tend the cattle and attend to the milk production, and she wasn't interested in anything else. Benedikt was almost never home; he lived completely in the forest, and as soon as he had a little time on his hands, he went hunting, preferring the company of his dog to all others. Catharine therefore often felt quite lonely, since even her aunt she saw only at meals. And in the evening Madame Colette retired very early to her room to work. As soon as Renate's head hit the pillow, she started to snore. Catharine, on the other hand, abandoned herself to her dreams, brooded, and sometimes even cried. She thought given the way Madame Colette was handling the matter, her hair would be just as white as hers before she had learned to spin as well as she, and

upon thinking of her mother, she was truly terrified of her criticism, if after the passage of three months she didn't find she had made any more progress than in the first few days.

One morning Catharine set out very early. She was determined to spin so exceptionally today that her aunt would have to betray her secret to her. She looked for a spot among the boulders so as not to be distracted by anything that could draw her gaze, but then how could she look around at all? Completely against her will she did glance up and saw the glacier towering up above her, and the tip of the mountain standing in plain sight. Up to this very moment Catharine had never seen it, since it had been hidden by a cloudy haze until now. The sky was also completely clear, and she admired the beautiful snow peaks that stood out gleaming white against the blue air, and the old longing to reach the top reared up again. But now she knew how dangerous that would be. Renate had warned her, and Aunt Colette had even forbidden her to try, and had said that was something only for boys.

Catharine resigned herself with a sigh to just observing these beautiful things that she would so have liked to touch and that looked so close to her when they were really so far away. She noticed for the first time something she had never before seen in the sky of her new home: little, fluffy golden cloudlets collected around the highest peaks of the glacier, so that it almost looked as if a necklace of large pearls encircled it.

"Oh, how charming," she thought to herself, "and how I wish I could spin so fine a thread that one could string such delicate pearls on it!" As she was thinking this, she noticed something very small but shimmering at the peak of the glacier—a red dot that moved in the sunbeams directly above the necklace the small clouds created. What could that be? A flower, a bird, a star?

## 11

"If only I had my aunt's silver glasses," she thought to herself, "I could surely make out what that is, because she told me that with those glasses, you can see everything you can't see with the naked eye."

But she had to make do with her own eyes, and as she continued to watch, she noticed that the little red dot was drawing in all the golden cloudlets, until they shrouded it so completely it became totally invisible. All the little clouds that had joined together now created a single large cloud that shone like a golden orb on the highest peak and turned to and fro like the rooster of a weather vane on a church steeple. A moment later this cloud rose, climbing higher and higher, and growing smaller and smaller, until it appeared completely rose-colored, and now Catharine heard it singing in a crystal clear voice the sweetest melody in the whole world:

"Good day, Catharine. Catharine, do you recognize me?"

"Yes, yes!" Catharine called back, "I recognize you. I carried you in my apron. You're my little friend, the rose cloud, the same one that can talk and that I understand now. Dear little cloud, you are a bit unpredictable! You split my beautiful blooming apple tree in two. But I forgive you. You are so rosy red, and I'm so fond of you!"

The cloud answered: "That was not me, Catharine, who smashed your blooming apple tree; that was the thunder, a villain who nests in my heart and forces me to play naughty tricks. But just look how gentle and serene I am when you look at me in that friendly way. Aren't you going to come up to the peak of the glacier sometime soon? It's not nearly as hard as they told you. It's actually quite easy; you just have to want to. Besides, I will be around, and if you fall, you'll fall on me, and I will hold you in my arms so you won't get hurt. Come early tomorrow, Catharine. Come right after sunrise. I'll wait all night for you, and if you don't come, I'll dissolve in tears of grief, so that tomorrow it will rain all day long."

"I'll come," called Catharine, "I'll come, for sure!"

Hardly had she finished answering, when she suddenly heard a noise that sounded like a cannon shot followed by the exploding of case shot. She was so frightened she ran off, believing that the nasty cloud had once again betrayed her and once again wanted to repay good with evil. As she rushed up to the house, completely beside herself, she ran into Benedikt, who was quite calmly heading out with his dog.

"Did you make that thunder clap with your gun?" she called to him.

"Do you mean that sound just a moment ago?" he replied laughing. "That wasn't thunder or my gun. That was an avalanche."

"What is that supposed to mean, an avalanche?"

"That's the ice that melts in the sun, cracks, and then rolls down into the depths, taking stones, earth, and sometimes even trees, if any happen to be in its path. Of course people can also be caught, if they're unlucky and happen to be around and haven't gotten out of the way. But such misfortune doesn't happen often, in fact extremely rarely, and you have to get used to this spectacle. When spring comes around you can hear it daily, sometimes even hourly."

"I'll get used to it. But since I ran into you, Benedikt, tell me something: would you climb up to the big jagged peaks of the glacier? You're a boy, after all, and not afraid of anything."

"No," replied Benedikt, "you can't climb those jagged peaks, but I've been very close to the base. But now's not the time of year to do something like that. It's way too warm for it, and crevasses can open up at any moment."

"But can you tell me, perhaps, what that red thing is you can sometimes see on the tip of the large peak?"

"So, you've seen the red dot!?! You really do have good eyes! That's a flag

climbers planted about a month ago on the highest peak of the mountain, to show spectators below that they'd succeeded in reaching it. A strong wind gust forced them to climb down in a hurry, and they left their flag there; storm winds whipped it onto the highest peak of the glacier, where it's stuck and will be stuck until a new storm tears it free again."

Catharine had to make do with Benedikt's explanation; but a thought ran through her head that came back to her as she saw Aunt Colette in the distance with her red wool hood over her head and shoulders, strolling at the foot of the glacier. She was not so far away that Catharine couldn't recognize her, and although the poor child hadn't spun even three measures of thread this day, she ran toward her, unconcerned that she left behind her distaff full of flax and her spindle empty.

## 12

As she drew closer to her aunt, she noticed that she was distracted, but now it was too late to slip away unnoticed. She therefore resolutely directed a question to her: if she wasn't worried about tiring, climbing around on the glacier like this.

"At my age," replied Madame Colette, "you no longer tire, you move by willpower, and your feet obey, without you really thinking about them being there. But I'm not coming from the glacier, dear child. At this time of year it isn't safe up there. I'm staying on the safe paths, and if you know your way around here, you'll always find them."

"But weren't you, Great-Aunt dear, up there about an hour ago? I saw your red hood."

"Up there, Catharine? What do you mean, up there?"

"I'm not sure," Catharine said, taken aback. "I thought I saw you in the sky above the clouds."

"And what made you think I am able to climb so high? Do you take me for a fairy perhaps?"

"You know, Aunt dear, if you really were a fairy, what would be so astonishing about that anyway? They say there are good and bad fairies, and you, of course, are one of the good ones. People in the village who come up here once in a while and who I am now starting to understand, rightly say that you work like a fairy."

"I've been told that often enough to my face," answered Madame Colette, "but that's just an expression and doesn't make me a fairy. I see, though, that your little head is filled with curious daydreams. But that's because of your age, and I certainly wouldn't like to see you as sensible as I am—it would be much too early. Nonetheless, a bit of common sense wouldn't hurt you, my darling. I see you didn't make much progress with your spinning today."

"Goodness, Aunt dear, you could say I didn't spin at all."

"Don't cry, my dear, it will come, just be patient. In time it will come."

"Oh, you always say that," shouted Catharine peevishly. "You just have too much patience, Great-Aunt dear. You treat me like a little child. You think I'm unable to understand things quickly, but if you wanted to . . ."

"Look," said her aunt, "you're criticizing me as if there were a secret that could replace resolve and persistence. I assure you that I know of none and that none has ever been told to me. You're pouting? You have some idea in your little head I don't even want to guess. Don't you want to open your heart to me and let me read it like a book?"

"Yes, I want to," said Catharine, sitting down on a large mossy stone next to Madame Colette. "I want to tell you everything, because I have a guilty conscience and I think it's making me crazy."

Then Catharine confessed her curiosity and related how she had peered through the crack in her aunt's door. "I didn't see or hear anything," she said, "because you weren't even in the room. But if you hadn't just gone out, I would have seen you working and would have discovered your secret."

"You wouldn't have discovered anything," retorted Madame Colette. "I'm telling you again that I possess no secrets. If you had come into my room, you would have been able to climb up into my workshop that's directly over it. There I card what people here call 'the cloud,' and since it's unhealthy to do it in the house because of all the tiny particles you'd breathe into your lungs, I've chosen the uppermost room in my little house for it, where the air passes straight through and carries away all the tiny particles that could harm you and the others."

"But you still haven't told me everything, Catharine! What do you imagine the clouds are that you constantly talk about? Are you confusing the clouds in the sky with the fine, white material I make from flax and that people here in the land of talented spinners call 'cloud' to describe something especially airy?"

Catharine was very embarrassed that she had so naively confused the meaning of a word and had built thousands of castles in the air upon nothing more than a metaphorical expression. But all that couldn't explain the wondrous visions she had seen, and since she wanted to get everything off her chest, she returned to her rose cloud and told how she had fared with it.

Madame Colette listened to her, without commenting or making fun. Instead of scolding her and telling her to be quiet, as Sylvia would have done, she wanted to find out everything about the daydreams flitting around in this little head, and when Catharine finished, she became very thoughtful, remained silent a few minutes, and then said: "I see that you have a great hankering for the fantastic and that one must pay attention to that. There was a time when I was a child like you and dreamt of a rose cloud. And then I grew into a young



lady and encountered her. She was wearing a gold embroidered skirt and a great white feather boa. . . .”

“What are you talking about, Aunt dear? Your cloud wore clothes and a feather boa?”

“You don’t have to take that so literally, dear. It was a radiant, indescribably radiant cloud, but it was nothing more than that. It was inconstancy, it was nothing more than a fleeting dream. This cloud, too, brought a storm and insisted that it wasn’t to blame for it, because lightning resided in its heart. And one fine day, or actually one terrible day, I was almost smashed to smithereens like your blooming apple tree. But that cured me forever of believing in clouds, and now I don’t see them anymore. Don’t trust clouds, Catharine, that pass by you, especially rose clouds. They promise sunshine and bring rain. So now,” she added, “fetch your distaff and spin a little more or take a nap. You’ll be able to spin all the better after. One must never lose heart; dreams evaporate, but we’ll always have work to do.”

Catharine tried to spin as she chatted with her aunt, but her eyes dropped shut and the spindle fell out of her hands. Suddenly she felt a great heaving like an earthquake. She saw Aunt Colette standing upright next to her, for the first time gesturing wrathfully. She had thrown her red cape over shoulders and her white hair fluttered like a halo about her beautiful pale face.

“You’re sleeping, you good-for-nothing!” she said, looking incensed. “I gave you the choice, and you have chosen. And now you’re daydreaming instead of working. Quick, get up and follow me. I see that I have to betray my secret to you. You’ll find out. . . .”

Catharine stood up and followed half asleep behind Aunt Colette. But it became very difficult for her to keep up, because the old lady moved faster than the wind and climbed a tall staircase of sapphires and emeralds with amazing agility. Catharine found herself in a magical diamond palace where she strolled among crystal columned corridors on carpets of ermine. Soon she had reached the top of the highest gable of this fantastic building.

“Now we’ve reached the top of the glacier,” said her aunt with a terrifying laugh. “You have to gather up all you courage and follow me to the big peak. Hang onto my dress and let’s go! This calls for fearlessness. The rose cloud is waiting for you, and you’ve given her your word.”

Catharine hung onto her aunt’s skirt, but she slipped and couldn’t climb higher. Her aunt shouted to her: “Grab the rope and don’t be afraid!” With that she handed her the end of a thread that was so fine, so indescribably fine, that one had to strain even to see it. Catharine gripped it nonetheless and, although she tugged hard and slipped with every step, it did not break.

Thus she finally reached the tip of the ice needle, where her aunt ripped the distaff out of her hand, placed it in the snow, and said to her in a terrible voice:

"Since you don't know how to work with that, see here the tool that suits you!" And thereupon she handed her a broom that was as long and bushy as a great pine tree. Catharine grabbed it with determination and found it strangely light.

"Now," said her aunt, "there's sweeping to be done." And with that she shoved her so hard that she flew into the nothingness.

### 13

Catharine thought she had been flung down from the mountain onto the plain, but that wasn't the case at all. She felt herself suspended in the air by the thread her aunt had wrapped around her arm, and she walked on the clouds with the same ease as if below on the meadow.

"Start sweeping," called Madame Colette. "Sweep all these clouds together for me. I need them all, all of them. Don't miss a single one!"

Catharine swept and swept, but not nearly as well or as fast as her aunt wished, who kept calling to her: "Let's go: faster and better! Keep going! Even more! Maybe I should send for an oxcart for you to lead all these clouds home for me?"

Catharine ran all about the heavens and with her great broom swept all the clouds together into one pile. In a split second she had swept the heavens clean.

"Bring the piles over here to me," Madame Colette kept calling. "Push them along! Over here! I have to make them into a single one I can hold in my hand."

Catharine pushed them over, swept everything together, and Colette piled it all into a huge stack that covered the entire peak of the glacier.

"Now come over here," she said to her. "You have to help me, but just wait until I've put my glasses on! Then she placed her great silver glasses upon her classical nose. "What do I see?" she shouted. "You've forgotten the rose cloud! Did you think that I would spare your charming friend? Run quick and fetch it, and don't let it get away."

Catharine had to chase after the rose cloud for a long time. The wind whisked it away, and it nearly disappeared. Catharine tossed it the thread that had held her fast in the air, and at the same instant the cloud crept into her apron and sang in a soft and plaintive voice: "Dear little apron! You saved me once, save me again now! Catharine, dear Catharine, take pity on me and don't hand me over to the spinner!"

Catharine returned to her aunt. She had picked up her apron and knotted it together, in the hopes that Madame Colette would not notice. She was, indeed, very busy. She had piled up her stack nicely and had carded it well, and now, armed with a very fine wool comb, began to comb the clouds. She did it so fast, it was all over in a flash, and as Catharine bent over to pick up a load of this splendid fleece, her apron opened and the rose cloud rolled into the remaining pile.

"Ah, look there, you bad thing," said her aunt and grabbed it with her carder, "You thought I wouldn't find it. Put it on the big pile. It'll meet the same fate as the others."

"Aunt dear, Aunt dear! Have mercy, just on this one!" cried Catharine, "Have mercy on my little cloud!"

"Put it on your distaff," answered Madame Colette, "It's been combed. Spin it now, but hurry, hurry! I command you!"

Catharine picked up her distaff and spun, but she closed her eyes in order not to see the death struggle of the poor cloud. She heard soft, plaintive cries and was almost about to toss the distaff away. Her eyes darkened, and she suddenly found herself lying on the mossy stone next to her aunt, who had also fallen asleep.

#### 14

She got up and shook Madame Colette, who hugged her and then said: "Well, both of us were lazy and both of us fell asleep. Did you dream anything?"

"Oh, yes, Aunt dear. I dreamt that I could spin as beautifully as you. But what I spun was, sadly, my rose cloud!"

"Well, my dear, let me tell you it was long ago when I spun mine. The rose cloud was my whim, my imagination playing tricks on me, my evil destiny. I put her on my loyal distaff, and the work, the beautiful work, spun my enemy such a fine thread that I couldn't even feel it between my fingers. You will do as I did. You won't be able to prevent the clouds from passing by you. But you've gathered a reserve of strength. You will take hold of them, will card them, and spin them so well, they will no longer be able to conjure up a storm around and inside of you."

Catharine did not yet understand much of this lesson, but she never saw the rose cloud again. When her mother arrived after three months to see her, she was already spinning ten times better than at the start, and after the passage of some years she was as skilled as Aunt Colette, whose rich heiress she became.

*Translated by Shawn C. Jarvis*