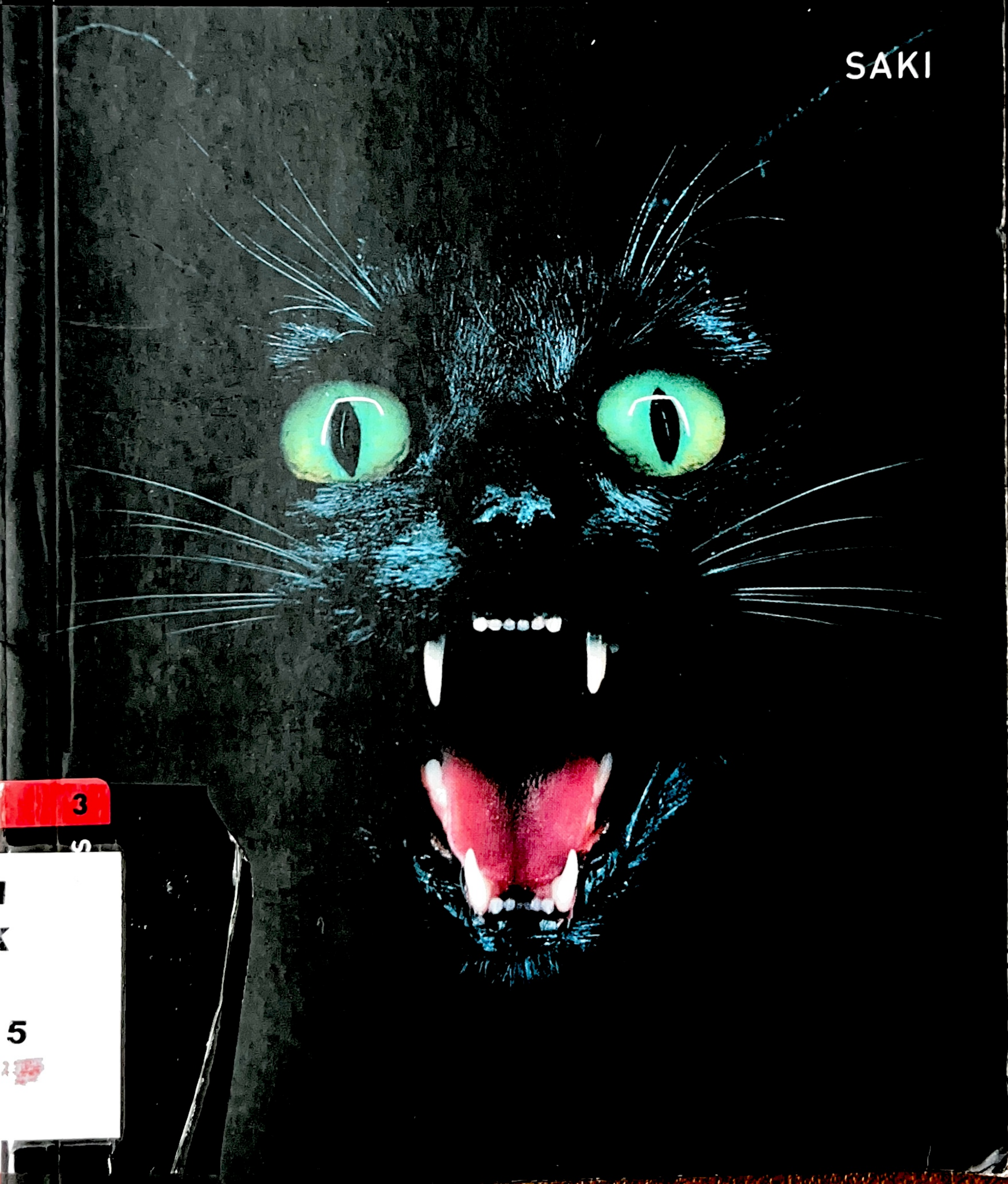


Tooth and Claw

Short Stories

SAKI



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Sredni Vashhtar

Conradin was ten years old and was often ill.

‘The boy is not strong,’ said the doctor. ‘He will not live much longer.’ But the doctor did not know about Conradin’s imagination. In Conradin’s lonely, loveless world, his imagination was the only thing that kept him alive.

Conradin’s parents were dead and he lived with his aunt. The aunt did not like Conradin and was often unkind to him. Conradin hated her with all his heart, but he obeyed her quietly and took his medicine without arguing. Mostly he kept out of her way. She had no place in his world. His real, everyday life in his aunt’s colourless, comfortless house was narrow and uninteresting. But inside his small, dark head exciting and violent thoughts ran wild. In the bright world of his imagination Conradin was strong and brave. It was a wonderful world, and the aunt was locked out of it.

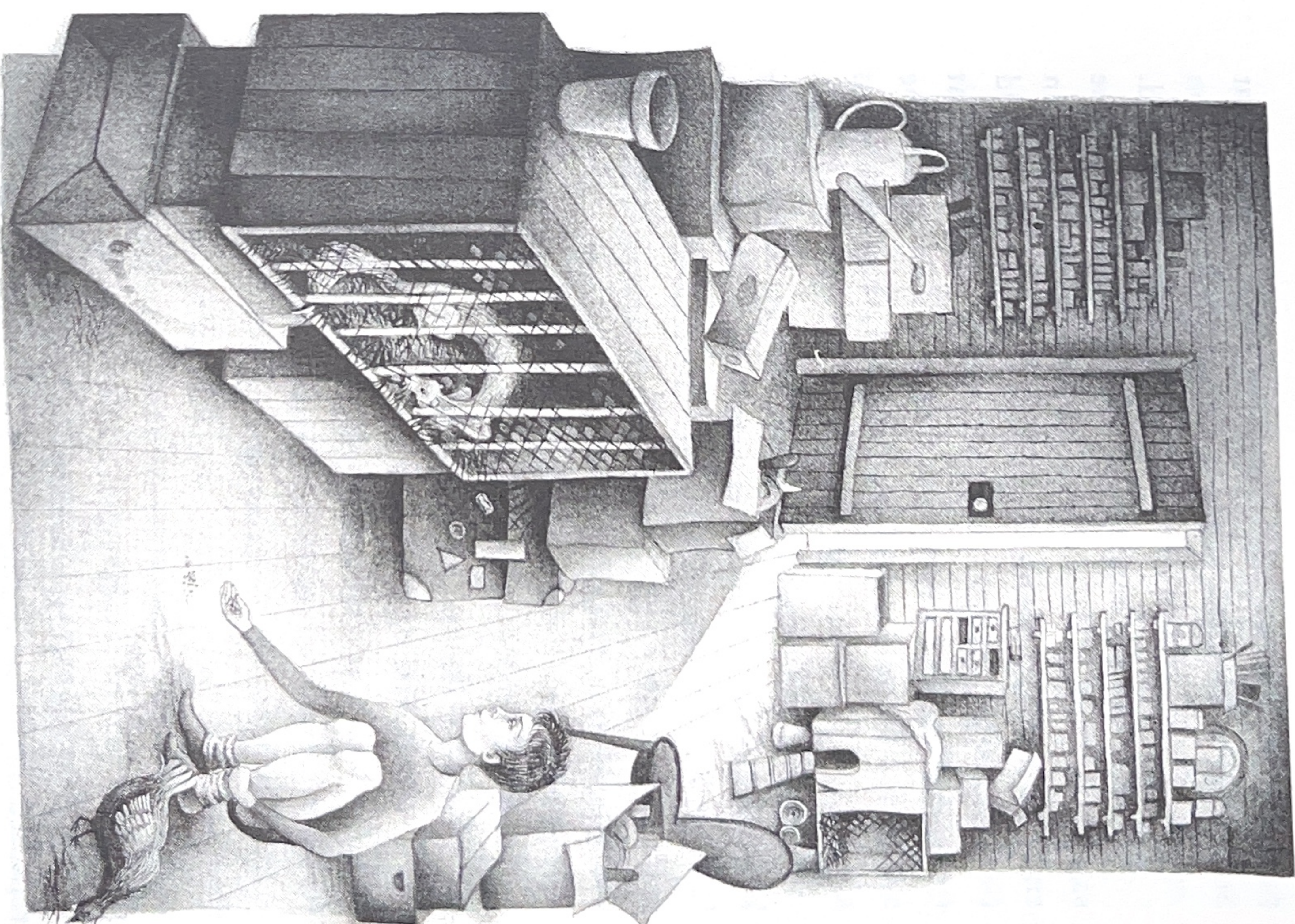
The garden was no fun. There was nothing interesting to do. He was forbidden to pick the flowers. He was forbidden to eat the fruit. He was forbidden to play on the grass. But behind some trees, in a forgotten corner of the garden, there was an old shed.

Nobody used the shed, and Conradin took it for his own. To him it became something between a playroom and a church. He filled it with ghosts and animals from his imagination. But there were also two living things in the shed. In one corner lived an old, untidy-looking chicken. Conradin had no people to love, and this chicken was the boy's dearest friend. And in a dark, secret place at the back of the shed was a large wooden box with bars across the front. This was the home of a very large ferret with long, dangerous teeth and claws. Conradin had bought the ferret and its box from a friendly boy, who lived in the village. It had cost him all his money, but Conradin did not mind. He was most terribly afraid of the ferret, but he loved it with all his heart. It was his wonderful, terrible secret. He gave the ferret a strange and beautiful name and it became his god.

The aunt went to church every Sunday. She took Conradin with her, but to Conradin her church and her god were without meaning. They seemed grey and uninteresting. The true god lived in the shed, and his name was Sredni Vashhtar.

Every Thursday, in the cool, silent darkness of the shed, Conradin took presents to his god. He took flowers in summer and fruits in autumn, and he made strange and wonderful songs for his god. Sometimes, on days when something important happened, Conradin took special presents. He stole salt from the kitchen and placed it carefully and lovingly in front of the ferret's box.

One day the aunt had the most terrible toothache. It continued for three days. Morning and evening Conradin



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put salt in front of his god. In the end he almost believed that Sredni Vashtar himself had sent the toothache.

After a time the aunt noticed Conradin's visits to the shed.

'It's not good for him to play out there in the cold,' she said. She could always find a reason to stop Conradin enjoying himself. The next morning at breakfast she told Conradin that she had sold the chicken. She looked at Conradin's white face, and waited for him to cry or to be angry. But Conradin said nothing; there was nothing to say.

Perhaps the aunt felt sorry. That afternoon there was hot buttered toast for tea. Toast was usually forbidden. Conradin loved it, but the aunt said that it was bad for him. Also, it made extra work for the cook. Conradin looked at the toast and quietly took a piece of bread and butter.

'I thought you liked toast,' the aunt said crossly.

'Sometimes,' said Conradin.

In the shed that evening Conradin looked sadly at the empty corner where his chicken had lived. And, for the first time, he asked his ferret-god to do something for him.

'Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar,' he said softly.

He did not say what he wanted. Sredni Vashtar was a god, after all. There is no need to explain things to gods. Then, with a last look at the empty corner, Conradin returned to the world that he hated.

And every night, in the shed and in his bedroom, Conradin repeated again and again,

'Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar.'

So Conradin's visits to the shed continued. The aunt noticed, and went to look in the shed again.

'What are you keeping in that locked box?' she asked. 'I'm sure you're keeping an animal there. It's not good for you.'

Conradin said nothing.

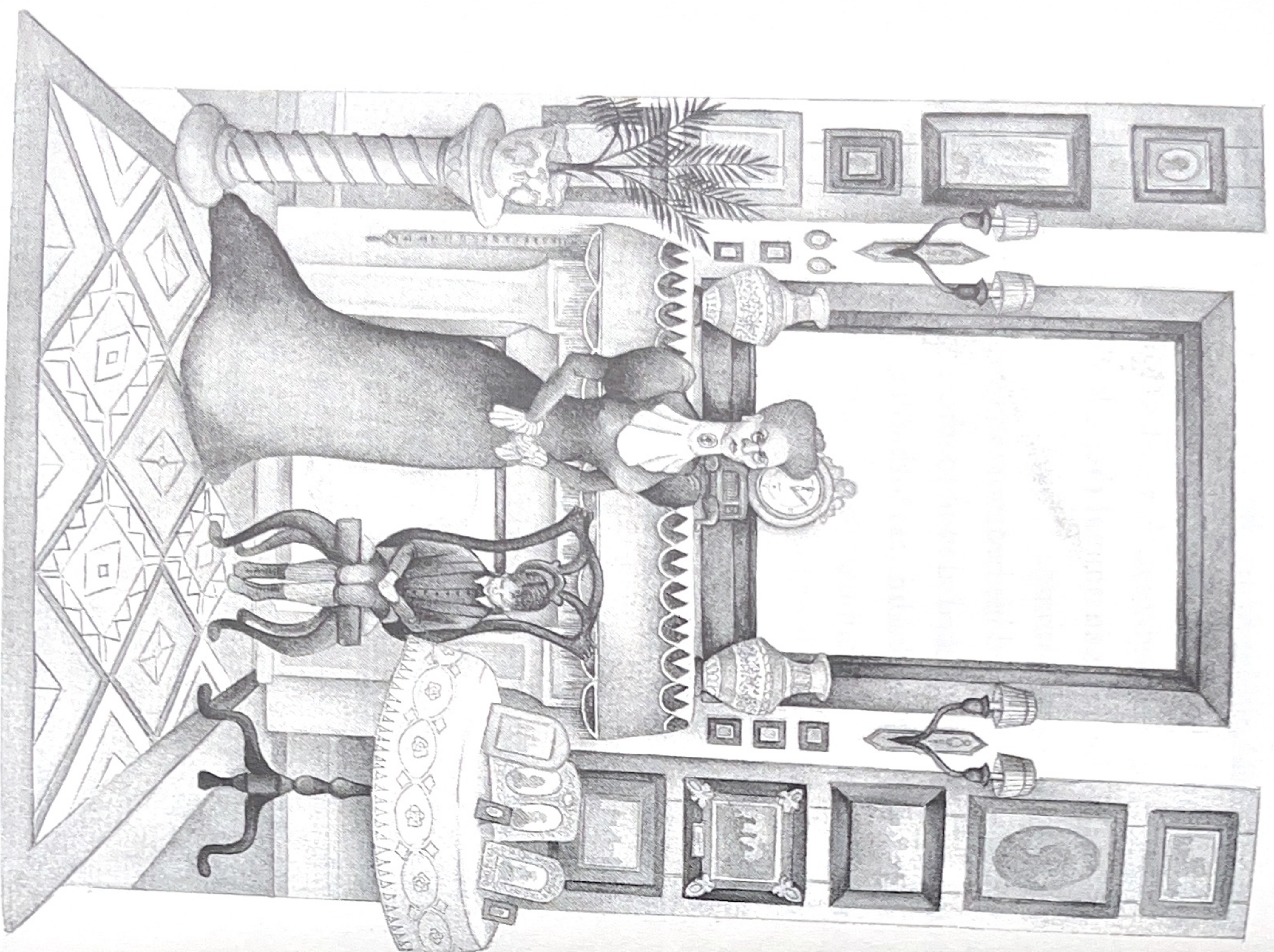
The aunt searched his bedroom until she found the key to the box. She marched down to the shed. It was a cold afternoon, and Conradin was forbidden to go outside. From the window of the dining-room Conradin could just see the door of the shed. He stood and waited.

He saw the aunt open the shed door. She went inside. Now, thought Conradin, she has found the box. She is opening the door, and feeling about inside the box where my god lives.

'Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar,' said Conradin softly. But he said it without hope. She will win, he thought. She always wins. Soon she will come out of the shed and give her orders. Somebody will come and take my wonderful god away – not a god any more, just a brown ferret in a box. Then there will be nothing important in my life . . . The doctor will be right. I shall sicken and die. She will win. She always wins . . . In his pain and misery, Conradin began to sing the song of his god:

Sredni Vashtar went into battle.

*His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white.
His enemies called for peace but he brought them death.
Sredni Vashtar the Beautiful.*



'What are you keeping in that locked box?' the aunt asked.

Suddenly he stopped singing and went nearer to the window. The door of the shed was still open. Slowly, very slowly the minutes went by. Conradin watched the birds on the grass. He counted them, always with one eye on that open door. The unsmiling housekeeper came in with the tea things. Still Conradin stood and watched and waited. Hope was growing, like a small, sick flower, in his heart. Very softly he sang his song again, and his hope grew and grew. And then he saw a very wonderful thing.

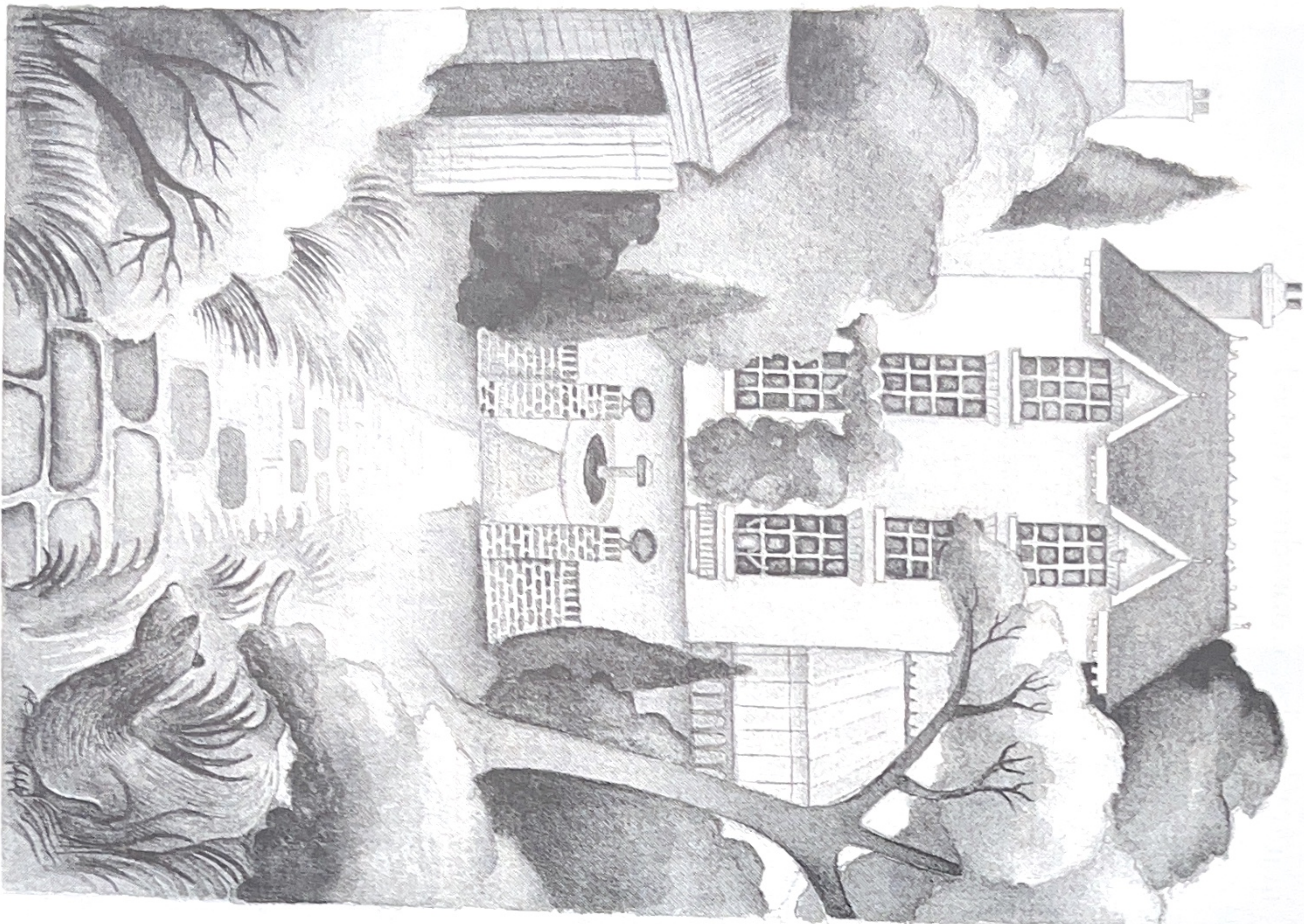
Out of the shed came a long, low, yellow-and-brown animal. There were red, wet stains around its mouth and neck.

'Sredni Vashstar!' said Conradin softly. The ferret-god made its way to the bottom of the garden. It stopped for a moment, then went quietly into the long grass and disappeared for ever.

'Tea is ready,' said the housekeeper. 'Where is your aunt?' 'She went down to the shed,' said Conradin.

And, while the housekeeper went down to call the aunt, Conradin took the roasting-fork out of the dining-room cupboard. He sat by the fire and roasted a piece of bread for himself. While he was roasting it and putting butter on it, Conradin listened to the noises beyond the dining-room door. First there were loud screams – that was the housekeeper. Then there was the cook's answering cry. Soon there came the sound of several pairs of feet. They were carrying something heavy into the house.

'Who is going to tell that poor child?' said the housekeeper.



Out of the shed came a long, low, yellow-and-brown animal.

'Well, someone will have to,' answered the cook. And, while they were arguing, Conradin made himself another piece of toast.

The Story-Teller

It was a hot, airless afternoon. The train was slow and the next stop was nearly an hour away. The people in the train were hot and tired. There were three small children and their aunt, and a tall man, who was a bachelor. The bachelor did not know the little family, and he did not want to know them.

The aunt and the children talked, but it was not a real conversation. It was more like a battle with a small housefly which will not go away. When the aunt spoke to the children, she always began with 'Don't . . .' When the children spoke to her, they always began with 'Why . . .' The bachelor said nothing aloud.

The small boy opened his mouth and closed it again. It made an interesting little noise, so he did it again. Open. Close. Open. Close.

'Don't do that, Cyril,' said the aunt. 'Come and look out of the window.' The boy closed his mouth and sat next to the window. He looked out at the green fields and trees.

'Why is that man taking those sheep out of that field?' he asked suddenly.

'Perhaps he's taking them to another field where there is more grass,' said the aunt. It was not a very good answer, and the boy knew it.

'But there is lots of grass in that field,' he said. 'The field is full of grass, Aunt. Why doesn't the man leave his sheep in that field?'

'I suppose the grass in the other field is better,' answered the aunt.

'Why is it better?' asked Cyril at once.

'Oh, look at those cows!' cried the aunt. There were cows in nearly all the fields along the railway line. Cyril did not look at the cows. He wanted an answer to his question.

'Why is the grass in the other field better?' he said again.

The bachelor gave them an angry look. The aunt saw him.

He's a hard, unkind man, she thought. He doesn't like children. She searched for a suitable answer to Cyril's question, but could not find one.

The smaller girl began to say some words from a song: 'On the road to Mandalay, where the happy children play,' she began.

Then she stopped. She could not remember any more words, so she said the first words again, quietly but very clearly. Then she said them again. And again. And again.

The bachelor looked angrily at the girl, and then at the aunt.

'Come here and sit down quietly,' the aunt said quickly to the children. 'I'm going to tell you a story.'

The children moved slowly towards the aunt's seat. They



Cyril did not look at the cows. He wanted an answer to his question.

already looked bored. Clearly, the aunt was not a famous story-teller.

The story was horribly uninteresting. It was about a little girl. She was not a beautiful child, but she was always very, very good. Everybody loved her because she was good. Finally, she fell into a lake and her friends saved her because she was so good, and they loved her so much.

'Did they only save her because she was good?' asked the bigger girl. 'Shouldn't we save bad people too, if they fall into a lake?' The bachelor wanted to ask the same question, but he said nothing.

'Well, yes, we should,' said the aunt. 'But I'm sure the little girl's friends ran specially fast because they loved her so much.'

'That was the stupidest story that I've ever heard,' said the bigger girl.

'I didn't listen after the first few words,' said Cyril, 'because it was so stupid.'

The smaller girl was already quietly repeating the words of her song for the twentieth time.

'You're not very successful as a story-teller,' the bachelor said suddenly from his corner.

The aunt looked at him in angry surprise. 'It's not easy to tell stories that children can understand,' she answered coldly.

'I don't agree with you,' said the bachelor.

'Perhaps you would like to tell them a story,' said the aunt. She gave him a cold little smile.

'Yes – tell us a story,' said the bigger girl.

'A long time ago,' began the bachelor, 'there was a little girl called Bertha, who was extraordinarily good. She always worked well at school. She always obeyed her teachers and her parents. She was never late, never dirty, and always ate all her vegetables. She was polite, she was tidy, and she never, never told lies.'

'Oh,' said the children. They were beginning to look bored already.

'Was she pretty?' asked the smaller girl.

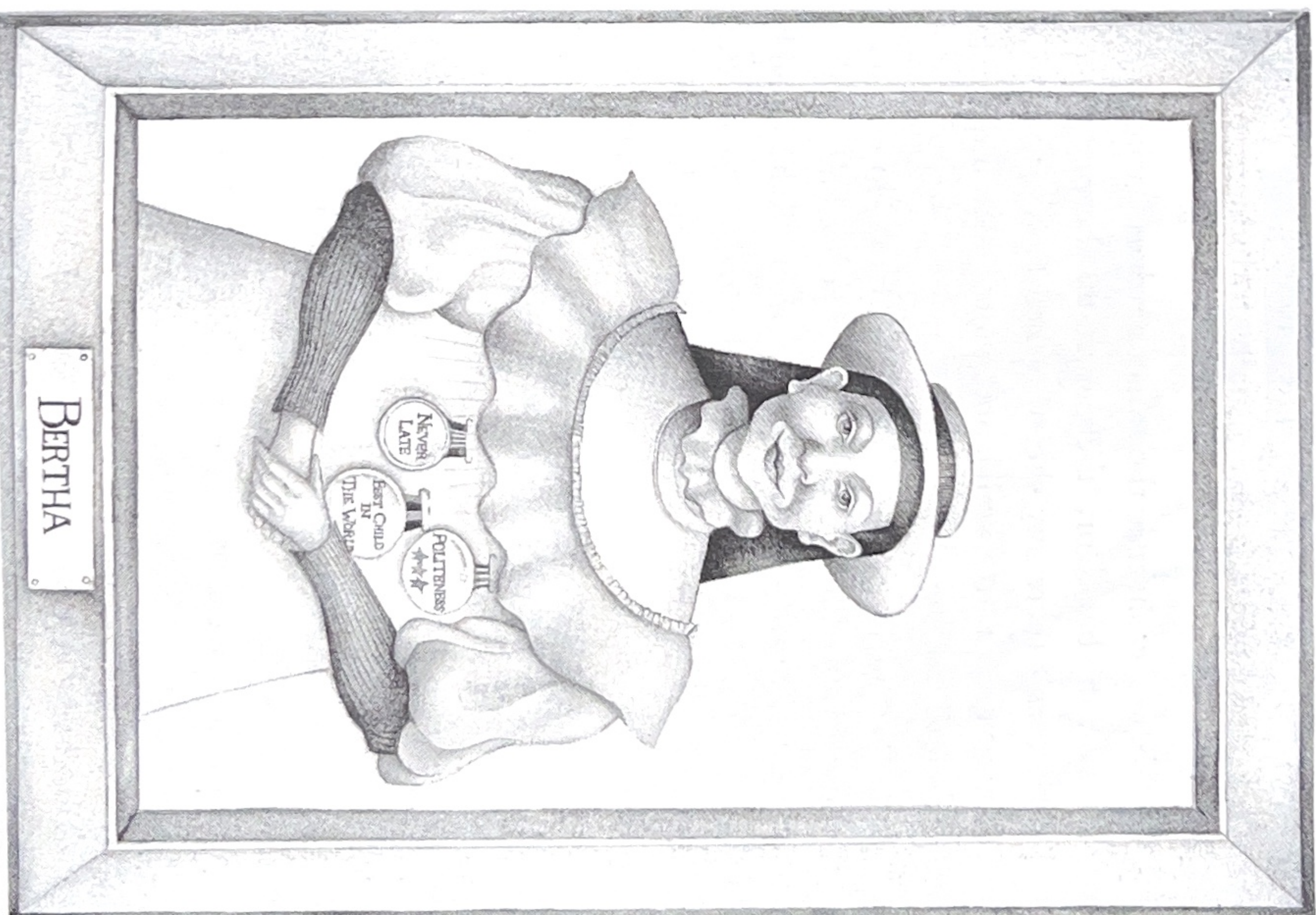
'No,' said the bachelor. 'She wasn't pretty. But she was horribly good.'

'Horribly good. I like that!' said Cyril. The children began to look more interested. The words 'horrible' and 'good' together was a new idea for them, and it pleased them.

'Bertha was always good,' continued the bachelor. 'Because she was so good, Bertha had three medals. There was the "Never Late" medal. There was the "Politeness" medal. And there was the medal for the "Best Child in the World". They were very large medals. Bertha always wore them on her dress, and they clinked as she walked along. She was the only child in her town who had three medals. So everybody knew that she must be an extra good child.'

'Horribly good,' repeated Cyril happily.

'Everybody talked about Bertha's goodness. The king of that country heard about her, and he was very pleased. "Because Bertha is so good," he said, "she may come and walk in my palace gardens every Friday afternoon." The



'Bertha wasn't pretty,' said the bachelor, 'but she was horribly good.'

king's gardens were famous. They were large and very beautiful, and children were usually forbidden to go in them.'

'Were there any sheep in the palace gardens?' asked Cyril.

'No,' said the bachelor, 'there were no sheep.'

'Why weren't there any sheep?' asked Cyril at once.

The aunt gave a little smile, and waited with interest for the bachelor's answer.

'There were no sheep in the king's gardens,' explained the bachelor, 'because the king's mother had once had a dream. In her dream a voice said to her, "Your son will be killed by a sheep, or by a clock falling on him." That is why the king never kept a sheep in his gardens or a clock in his palace.' The aunt thought secretly that this was a very clever answer, but she stayed silent.

'Was the king killed by a sheep, or by a clock?' asked the bigger girl.

'He is still alive,' said the bachelor calmly, 'so we don't know if the dream was true or not. But, although there were no sheep, there were lots of little pigs running around everywhere.'

'What colour were the pigs?' asked the smaller girl.

'Black with white faces, white with black faces, all black, grey and white, and some were all white.'

The bachelor stopped for a moment, while the children's imaginations took in these wonderful pictures. Then he went on again,

'Bertha was sorry that there were no flowers in the palace



'There were lots of little pigs running around the palace gardens.'