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The Parent Trap

Written by

Erich Kastner

Illustrated by

Walter Trier

Published by

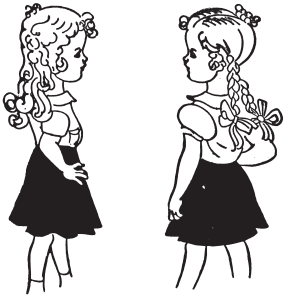
Pushkin Children's Books

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The Parent TRAP



ERICH KÄSTNER

Translated by Anthea Bell • Illustrated by Walter Trier

PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Pushkin Children's Books
71–75 Shelton Street, London WC2H 9JQ

The Parent Trap first published in German as *Das doppelte Lottchen* in 1949 by Atrium Verlag AG, Zürich

Text and illustrations © 1949 Dressler Verlag, Hamburg

English language translation © Anthea Bell 2014

This translation first published by Pushkin Press in 2014

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The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut which is funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs

ISBN 978 1 782690 55 9

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Set in Berling Nova by Tetragon, London

Proudly printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall on Munken Pure 120gsm

www.pushkinchildrens.com

Chapter One

Seebühl on Lake Bühl · Summer camps are like beehives · A bus bringing twenty new girls · Ringlets and braids · May one child bite off another child's nose? · The King of England and his astrological twin · How do you get laughter lines?

Do you know Seebühl? The mountain village of Seebühl on Lake Bühl? No? Are you sure you don't? How strange – whoever you ask, no one knows Seebühl! Perhaps Seebühl on Lake Bühl is the kind of place known only to the people you *don't* ask? I wouldn't be surprised. These things happen.



Well, if you don't know Seebühl on Lake Bühl, then you won't know the summer camp in Seebühl on Lake Bühl either, the well-known camp for little girls. That's a pity, but never mind. Summer camps are as like each other as two large loaves or two dog violets; when you've seen one, you've seen them all. And if you walk past any of them, you might think it was a gigantic beehive. Those summer camps buzz with laughter, shrieking, whispering and giggling. They really are beehives full of happiness and merriment, and however many there are, there can never be enough of them.

In the evening, to be sure, the grey dwarf Homesickness sometimes sits on the beds in the dormitory, takes his grey arithmetic book and his grey pencil out of his bag, and with an earnest expression on his face he counts the tears of the children all around him, the tears that have been shed and the tears that haven't.

But by morning, you may have noticed, he has always left. Then there's a clattering of cups of milk and a chattering of little mouths, each trying to talk louder than the next child. Then hordes of little girls run back into the cool, bottle-green lake to bathe, splashing, shouting, screeching with delight, crowing and swimming, or at least trying to look as if they are swimming.

It's just like that in Seebühl on Lake Bühl, where the story that I am going to tell you begins. It is a rather complicated story, and you will have to concentrate hard if you're to understand everything properly, exactly as it happened. At the beginning, however, everything is still quite easy. It doesn't get complicated until the later chapters. Complicated and rather exciting.

So for the time being, all the girls are bathing in the lake. Playing more wildly than anyone else, as usual, is a little girl

aged nine with her hair tumbling down her back in ringlets. Her name is Luise, Luise Palfy, and she comes from Vienna in Austria.

Then the sound of a gong booms out from the house. The gong is struck again, and then a third time. Those of the children and the supervisors who are still bathing climb out on to the shore of the lake.

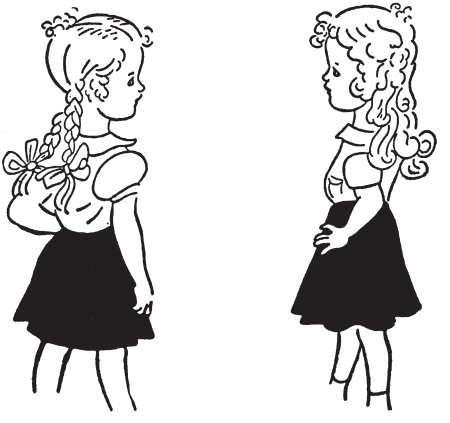
'The gong means everyone has to come in!' calls Miss Ulrike. 'Even Luise!'

'Just coming!' shouts Luise. 'An old man like me isn't an express train.' But then she comes out of the water as well.

Miss Ulrike drives her cackling flock into the hen-house – sorry, I mean into the dining room. It will be lunchtime at twelve noon on the dot. And then the girls will be looking forward to the afternoon, full of curiosity. Why the curiosity, you may ask?

Because twenty new girls are expected in the afternoon. Twenty little girls from southern Germany. Will there be any stuck-up children among them? A couple of chatterboxes? Perhaps some dignified old ladies of thirteen or even fourteen? Will they bring any interesting toys with them? With luck someone will have a big rubber ball! Trude's ball has gone flat because all the air went out of it, and Brigitte won't let anyone else play with hers. She's locked it safely up in the cupboard, in case anything happens to it. Such things as that have been known, too.

So in the afternoon Luise, Trude, Brigitte and the other children are standing at the large iron gate, which is wide open, and waiting excitedly for the arrival of the bus that was going



to pick up the new girls at the nearest railway station. If their train came in on time, they ought to be ...

The bus driver hoots his horn. 'They're on their way!' The bus comes along the road, turns carefully into the drive and stops. The driver gets out, and is kept busy helping little girl after little girl out of the bus. And not only little girls; he also unloads suitcases and portmanteaux, dolls and baskets and bags, stuffed toy dogs and scooters and parasols and thermos flasks and raincoats and rolled-up rugs and picture books and botanical collection cases and butterfly nets, a wonderful jumble of all sorts of things.

Finally the twentieth little girl appears, with her possessions, in the doorway of the bus. She is a serious-looking little thing. The driver puts out his arms to help her down.

The little girl shakes her head, and her two braids swing in time with each other. 'No, thank you,' she says politely but firmly, and she clambers down to the running-board, safe and sound and perfectly sure of herself. Once down on the ground, she looks shyly at all the other girls. Suddenly her

eyes widen in surprise. She is staring at Luise! Luise's eyes are wide open, too. She is equally surprised as she stares at the new girl's face.

The other children and Miss Ulrike, who is in charge of them, all look at each other, baffled. The bus driver pushes his cap back, scratches his head, his jaw drops and stays dropped. Why, you may wonder?

Because Luise and the new girl are as like as two peas in a pod! It is true that one of them has long ringlets, and the other has neatly plaited braids – but that really is the only difference!

Then Luise turns round and runs into the garden as if lions and tigers were chasing her.

'Luise!' calls Miss Ulrike. 'Luise!' Then, shrugging her shoulders, she takes the twenty new girls into the house. Last of all, hesitantly and in astonishment, the little girl with the braids walks through the doorway.

Mrs Muthesius, the head of the summer camp, is sitting in her office discussing the menus for the next few days with the old cook, a lady who knows her mind.

There's a knock on the door. Miss Ulrike comes in and announces that the new girls have all arrived and are healthy and cheerful.

'I'm glad to hear it. Thank you.'

'There's just one thing ...'

'Yes?' The head of the camp, who is extremely busy, looks up for a moment.

'It's about Luise Palfy,' Miss Ulrike begins, with some hesitation. 'She's waiting outside the door ...'

'Show the little rascal in!' Mrs Muthesius can't suppress a smile. 'What's she been up to this time?'

'Well, she hasn't been up to anything,' says the assistant. 'It's just that ...'

Cautiously, she opens the door and calls, 'Come in, both of you! There's no need to be frightened!'

The two little girls walk into the room. They keep well away from each other.

'Well, I never!' murmurs the cook.

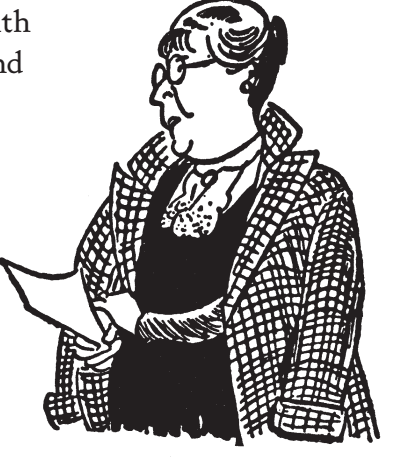
While the astonished Mrs Muthesius looks the children up and down, Miss Ulrike says, 'The new girl is Lottie Körner, and she lives in Munich.'

'Are you two related to each other?'

The two girls shake their heads very slightly, but with great conviction.

'They never set eyes on each other before today!' says Miss Ulrike. 'Odd, don't you think?'

'What's so odd about it?' asks the cook. 'Why would they have set eyes on each other? I mean, what with one of them living in Munich and the other in Vienna?'



Mrs Muthesius says, in kindly tones, 'Two girls who look so like each other are sure to become good friends. Don't stand so far apart, children! Come along, shake hands!'

'Won't!' cries Luise, clasping her hands behind her back.

Mrs Muthesius shrugs her shoulders, thinks about it for a moment, and finally says, 'Very well, you can both go.'

Luise runs to the door, flings it wide open and storms out. Lottie bobs a little curtsy and begins to leave the room more slowly.

'Just a minute, Lottie,' says the head of the camp. She opens a big book. 'I'll enter your name in the register right away. And when and where you were born, with the names of your parents.'

'I just have a mummy,' whispers Lottie.

Mrs Muthesius dips her pen in the inkwell. 'Very well, first your date of birth, then.'

Lottie goes along the corridor, climbs the stairs, opens a door and finds herself in the room containing the girls' wardrobes. Her case hasn't been unpacked yet. She begins putting away her clothes – shirts, pinafores, socks – in the wardrobe that is to be hers. The distant sound of children's laughter drifts in through the open window.

Lottie is holding the photograph of a young woman. She looks lovingly at the picture and then hides it carefully under the pinafores. When she is about to close the wardrobe, her eyes fall on a mirror inside its door. She looks gravely and inquiringly at her reflection, as if she had never seen herself before. Then, with a sudden decisive movement, she tosses back her braids and strokes them in a way that makes her hair look more like Luise Palfy's.

Somewhere a door bangs. Lottie quickly lets her hand drop to her sides as if she has been caught out doing something naughty.



Luise is sitting on the garden wall with her friends. There is a cross frown on her forehead, just above her nose.

'*I* wouldn't put up with a thing like that,' says Trude, her school friend from Vienna. 'What a nerve, turning up here with your face!'

'What can I do about it, though?' asks Luise crossly.

'Scratch her face for her!' suggests Monika.

'You'd better bite her nose off!' Christine advises Luise. 'Then you won't get any more trouble from her!'

'Fancy ruining a person's holidays like that!' mutters Luise, full of righteous indignation.

'She can't help it,' chubby-cheeked Steffie points out. 'If someone turned up looking just like *me* ...'

Trude laughs. 'You don't think anyone else would be daft enough to go around with a face like yours, do you?'

Steffie sulks. The other girls laugh. Even Luise smiles.

They hear the gong being struck.

'Time to feed the wild beasts!' calls Christine. And the girls jump off the wall.

In the dining room, Mrs Muthesius is telling Miss Ulrike, 'We'll sit our little doubles side by side. Perhaps drastic remedies are needed!'

The children stream noisily into the dining room. They pull up stools. The girls on supper duty carry steaming soup tureens over to the tables. Other girls fill the plates being held out to them.

Miss Ulrike comes up behind Luise and Trude, taps Trude lightly on the shoulder and says, 'You go and sit next to Hilde Sturm, will you?'

Trude turns round, about to protest. 'But I ...'

'And no buts.'

Trude shrugs her shoulders, stands up and moves over, grumbling.

Soup spoons clatter. The place next to Luise is empty. It's amazing how many eyes are attracted to an empty place at table.

Then, as if by common consent, all eyes go to the door. Lottie has come in.

'There you are at last,' says Miss Ulrike. 'Come along, I'll show you where to sit.' She takes the quiet, serious little girl with her hair in braids over to the table. Luise does not look up, but goes on spooning soup into her mouth. Lottie obediently sits down beside Luise and picks up her spoon, although her throat feels too tight for her to swallow comfortably.

The other little girls steal surreptitious glances at the strange couple, fascinated. A calf with two heads couldn't have been

more interesting. Plump, chubby-cheeked Steffie is so excited that she keeps her mouth open.

Luise can't control herself any longer. She doesn't want to, either. She kicks Lottie's shin under the table as hard as she can!

Lottie flinches with pain, and squeezes her lips firmly together.

At the grown-ups' table, Miss Gerda, one of the assistants, shakes her head and says, 'Who'd have believed it! Two girls, total strangers, looking so like each other!'

Miss Ulrike says, thoughtfully, 'Perhaps they're astrological twins?'

'What are those?' asks Miss Gerda. 'Astrological twins?'

'There are supposed to be people who look just like each other, even though they're not related at all. But they were born at the same fraction of the same second!'

'I see,' murmurs Miss Gerda.

Mrs Muthesius nods. 'I once read about a gentlemen's tailor in London who looked exactly like King Edward VII of England.



They were like as two peas in a pod, and they looked even more alike because the tailor had a pointy beard like the King. King Edward summoned the man to Buckingham Palace and talked to him for a long time.'

'And had they both really been born at the same second?'

'Yes, as it turned out, and it could be proved beyond doubt.'

'How does the story go on?' asks Miss Gerda.

'The gentlemen's tailor had to shave off his pointy beard at the King's request!'

While the others laugh, Mrs Muthesius looks thoughtfully at the table where the two little girls are sitting. Then she says, 'Give Lottie Körner the bed next to Luise Palfy! They'll have to get used to each other.'

It is night, and all the children are asleep. Except for two.

Those two have turned their backs to each other, and are pretending to be fast asleep. But really they are lying there with their eyes open, staring straight ahead.

Luise looks crossly at the silver squiggles of light cast on her bed by the moon. Suddenly she pricks up her ears. She can hear quiet crying, controlled with difficulty.

Lottie presses her hands to her mouth. What did her mother tell her when they were saying goodbye? 'I'm so glad that you'll be spending a few weeks with lots of happy, cheerful children! You're too serious for your age, Lottie! Much too serious! I know it's not your fault, it's mine. It's because of my career. I don't spend enough time at home, when I do get home I'm tired, and meanwhile you haven't been playing like other children, you've been washing the dishes, cooking and laying the table.

Please come back with a face full of laughter lines, my busy little housewife!' And now here she is lying in a strange place beside a cross girl who hates her because they look the same. How is she supposed to get laughter lines here? Lottie sobs.

Suddenly she feels a small, strange hand awkwardly stroking her hair! Lottie lies stiff as a poker with shock. Shock? Luise's hand goes on shyly stroking.

The moon looks through the big window of the dormitory, greatly surprised. It sees two little girls lying side by side, not daring to look at each other, but the one who was crying just now has put out her hand, and is very slowly feeling for the other girl's stroking hand.

Good, thinks the silvery old moon. That's all right. Now I can set with my mind at rest. And so it did.

