“Has it got any sports in it?”


“Sounds okay,” I said, and I kind of closed my eyes. “I’ll do my best to stay awake… but I’m awful sleepy, Daddy…”

Who can know when his world is going to change? Who can tell before it happens, that every prior experience, all the years, were a preparation for… nothing. Picture this now: an all-but-illiterate old man struggling with an enemy tongue, an all-but-exhausted young boy fighting against sleep. And nothing between them but the words of another alien, painfully translated from native sounds to foreign. Who could suspect that in the morning a different child would wake? I remember, for myself, only trying to beat back fatigue. Even a week later I was not aware of what had begun that night, the doors that were slamming shut while others slid into the clear. Perhaps, I should have at least known something, but maybe not; who can sense revelation in the wind?

What happened was just this: I got hooked on the story.

For the first time in my life, I became actively interested in a book. Me, the sports fanatic, me the game freak, me the only ten-year-old in Illinois with a hate on the alphabet wanted to know what happened next.
Prince Humperdinck was shaped like a barrel. His chest was a great barrel chest, his thighs mighty barrel thighs. He was not tall but he weighed close to 250 pounds, brick hard. He walked like a crab, side to side, and probably if he had wanted to be a ballet dancer, he would have been doomed to a miserable life of endless frustration. But he didn’t want to be a ballet dancer. He wasn’t in that much of a hurry to be king either. Even war, at which he excelled, took second place in his affections. Everything took second place in his affections.

Hunting was his love.

He made it a practice never to let a day go by without killing something. It didn’t much matter what. When he first grew dedicated, he killed only big things: elephants or pythons. But then, as his skills increased, he began to enjoy the suffering of little beasts too. He could happily spend an afternoon tracking a flying squirrel across forests or a rainbow trout down rivers. Once he was determined, once he had focused on an object, the Prince was relentless. He never tired, never wavered, neither ate nor slept. It was death chess and he was international grand master.

In the beginning, he traversed the world for opposition. But travel consumed time, ships, and horses being what they were, and the time away from Florin was worrying. There always had to be a male heir to the throne, and as long as his father was alive, there was no problem. But someday his father would die and then the Prince would be the king and he would have to select a queen to supply an heir for the day of his own death.

So to avoid the problem of absence, Prince Humperdinck built the Zoo of Death. He designed it himself with Count Rugen’s help, and he sent his hirelings across the world to stock it for him. It was kept brimming with things that he could hunt, and it really wasn’t like any other animal sanctuary anywhere. In the first place, there were never any visitors. Only the albino keeper, to make sure the beasts were properly fed, and that there was never any sickness or weakness inside.