

Rowan Farm

Margot Benary-Isbert



by the same author

THE ARK
THE SHOOTING STAR
THE WICKED ENCHANTMENT
CASTLE ON THE BORDER
THE BLUE MYSTERY
LONG WAY HOME
DANGEROUS SPRING
A TIME TO LOVE
UNDER A CHANGING MOON
THESE VINTAGE YEARS

Rowan Farm

BY MARGOT BENARY-ISBERT

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First Edition

For my husband, Ben, whose infinite patience and understanding made it possible for me to write this book.

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Rowan Farm

Now Be Sensible, Margret

ON A JANUARY MORNING in the year 1948 a small cart drawn by a pair of slate-gray ponies came down the highway from the woods. In the driver's seat was Margret Lechow, dressed in her old windbreaker and ski pants, her hands protected by heavy wool gloves and her legs wrapped in a warm woolen blanket. A little red cap was perched on her short hair. The ponies trotted along at a gay pace and the girl hummed softly. The snow glistened on the road, and smoke from the village houses rose straight upward into the pallid blue of the winter sky. The sun was still feeble and without warmth, but its light had a brilliant clarity, so that all the features of the landscape stood out, finely drawn against the sky—the black, bare trees lining the roadside; the farmsteads of Hellborn with their high-gabled barns; the fields, showing the soft brown of earth here and there where the wind had swept away the snow; the forests upon the distant blue hills, and beyond them the magnificent sweep of the mountains.

In front of Margret the smooth gleaming backs of the two little mares bobbed up and down as they trotted. Bernd Almut, the son of the owner of Rowan Farm, groomed them until they shone on Fridays, for that was when they took the cart into the city to fetch meat scraps from the slaughter house. The meat was needed for Mrs. Almut's kennel of Great Danes.

As the cart went past the smithy, the blacksmith's young wife waved to Margret to stop. "This is the new schoolmaster, Margret," she said, indicating the man who stood beside her. "Would you mind taking him in to Fulda with you?"

Margret nodded and straightened the cushion on the wooden buggy seat. "Come on up," she said. Not until she had spoken did she notice that he had only one arm and that there was also something wrong with his left leg. He handed his cane to the blacksmith's wife, leaned on her shoulder and skillfully swung his good leg up on the hub of the wheel. In one lithe motion he took Margret's extended hand, was up on the foot-rest and settled himself beside Margret. "Thank you, Mrs. Vogel," he said. "Grand to be driving off in a carriage. I'm ready, Miss Margret."

Margret laughed. "Not the grandest kind of carriage," she said. She pulled part of the blanket over to his side of the seat. "It gets awfully cold driving," she said, and clucked to the ponies. They pricked up their ears, tossed their heads high and set off at a trot.

As she drove, Margret looked at her passenger out of the corners of her eyes. He was a frail-looking fellow, not much older than twenty, she guessed. His face, with its prominent cheek bones, was so lean it was almost ugly. And a war cripple

besides, Margret thought in alarm. How would he ever manage to control that gang of crazy youngsters? What with the war and then postwar troubles, the village children had gone almost completely wild. Most of them had not had their fathers around for years, and their overworked mothers hadn't had enough time or strength to devote to the children's upbringing. And on top of that there were the refugee children. Many of those had not had any regular schooling for two years and longer. Poor fellow, Margret thought—he's going to have a tough time teaching school.

"It's lovely here!" he said abruptly. "Wasn't I lucky, getting the job right after I finished my state examination?" He had tucked his cold left hand under his right armpit, and his teeth were chattering a little. But he looked so cheerful that it was impossible to feel sorry for him. Margret threw him a surprised glance. She found herself looking into a pair of clear, intelligent brown eyes which seemed to register serene acceptance of the world. On looking into those eyes you forgot about his nose, blue with cold, his prominent ears and haggard face.

"Yes, it is lovely," she said, smiling at him.

Now it was his turn to look her over. He saw a round, firm chin, a rather childlike mouth, a small and not exactly classical nose. Upon that nose was a sprinkle of delightful freckles shaped like a crescent moon. Her gray eyes were flecked with gold.

"So you're the young lady of Rowan Farm?" he asked.

Margret laughed shyly. "Bad guess. We're refugees from Pomerania. Any church mouse would be a millionaire compared to us. No, I'm just the kennel maid and stablehand—the hired girl, so to speak. Rowan Farm belongs to Mrs. Almut,

who raises Great Danes, ponies and milk sheep. How long can you have been here without hearing about Anni Almut?"

"Just one day."

"Are you living at the blacksmith's?"

"Yes. I've been lucky there too. A nice room looking out on the Rhön Mountains, and friendly people."

"If only everybody around here were like them!" Margret said.

"Yes, if we were all angels. But I don't suppose that was God's intention, or he would have created us all with wings to make it quite clear."

"It wouldn't be bad, though, if people were a bit more on the angelic side, do you think?"

The schoolmaster shook his head. "I imagine there's a reason why things are as they are and not different. Contrast is what makes life. Brightness and darkness, light and shadow, good and evil. The ancient Chinese called it Yin and Yang."

Margret cried out in surprise. "Oh, are you interested in old Chinese philosophy too? You must meet our professor."

"Your professor? I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure."

"He has been living on Rowan Farm since 1944. He was bombed out of Frankfurt and his wife died in a concentration camp—she was Jewish. Before the war he used to live in China—he was there for twenty-five years."

"That sounds exciting. I'd certainly like to meet him. If I may, I'll call on him some time."

"Then don't forget to visit Noah's Ark."

"Noah's Ark? Hold on a minute. That sounds like the Old Testament to me. Quite a jump from the Chinese to Noah's Ark."

"You have to be on the jump if you're to keep up with

things on Rowan Farm. Noah's Ark is the name of our house. It's an old railroad car that my brother Matthias and his friends fixed up for us."

"And now I suppose it is filled with every beast after its kind, a male and a female of each?" the schoolmaster asked with interest.

"We haven't got quite that far yet. We do have a cat and a dog and a milk sheep of our own, though it's really only a lamb yet. And in the spring we're getting chickens. Our two youngest boys are dying to have a raven, though why they want a raven nobody knows. Besides that they want angora rabbits and will be getting some for their birthday, but that's a deep dark secret. As yet there isn't any dove with the olive branch."

"I haven't seen any sign of that dove either," the schoolmaster said. "Incidentally, I suppose the two youngest children of Noah's Ark are the section of the family I shall be dealing with?"

"Poor man!" Margret said feelingly.

"Afraid you can't scare me. Are those your kid brothers?"

"Just one is my brother—his name's Joey. But the second belongs to us too. He's Hans Ulrich—we call him Ull. He doesn't know where his father is. His mother was badly burned in the first big fire-bomb raid on Hamburg. They brought her to Fulda because all the hospitals in Hamburg were swamped. Since she remained unconscious until she died she wasn't ever able to give the child's name. That happened to so many people—the cemetery has rows and rows with just the word 'unknown' on the crosses. The little boy knew his name was Hans Ulrich, but no more than that. Now he's staying with us. Mummy thought one child more or less in the family didn't really matter. Besides, the two of them

aren't bad. It's just that they haven't much angel in them."

"I don't know as I'd care for boys with a strong streak of angel," the teacher said. "It wouldn't be healthy."

"They're healthy enough, thank goodness, as you'll find out."

They looked at one another and laughed. They were getting on splendidly.

"And who else does Rowan Farm harbor?" the teacher inquired.

"I'll start at the top," Margret said. "First of all there are the people in the main house. Mrs. Almut is just a little thing to look at, but she has brightness and energy enough for two. She's wonderful, and there isn't anything she doesn't know about animals and plants. Then there's Kathrin, her housekeeper, who's a real old dragon. But if you treat her right she can be quite nice. You'll find the fire she puffs is mostly smoke. Then there's the professor. He stays pretty much in his big room which is full of all sorts of beautiful Chinese things. Luckily he sent them to Rowan Farm before everything in Frankfurt was bombed and burned. He has a Chinese servant whose name is Ling. Ling looks after him and makes sure nobody disturbs the professor while he's working. The professor is writing a book on the first rulers of the Chou Dynasty. And finally, there's Mrs. Almut's son Bernd, who came home from a prisoner-of-war camp last summer."

"Now tell me about the Ark."

"Well, first there's Father. He came back from prison camp in Russia just before Christmas. We hadn't seen him for four years, and now we're getting to know him all over

again. Back home in Pomerania he used to be a doctor, but we have no idea what he's going to do in the future. Right now, we're just awfully happy to have him with us again. Then there's Mummy. She takes care of us, and all by herself she got the four of us safely here from Pomerania. Now she sews and knits for people—she kept our heads above water with her sewing all this long time. She's so clever she gets more work than she can manage. Just recently she hired two refugee women in the village, and city people are eager to buy the stuff she makes. Then comes Matthias—he's the oldest of us children. He's the gardener's apprentice and general farm hand around Rowan Farm, and at night he studies the stars—the professor got him a telescope from Frankfurt. Then there's me and then Andrea, my sister. She goes to the Ursuline Sisters' School in town. By a miracle she got a scholarship. Of course we couldn't afford the tuition. She's eleven and wants to be an actress—she thinks of nothing else. Nowadays she takes the bus into town every morning and isn't back until evening. She's always pretending she's somebody else, anybody but Andrea Lechow, and sometimes it's hard to guess what she is at the moment. Then come the two youngest I've mentioned—Joey and Ull. They're eight years old and you'll soon meet them.”

“I feel as though I already know everybody at the farm,” the teacher said.

They had reached the first houses of the town. Ruins rose into the clear winter air like broken teeth. Every time she saw the hopeless misery of these streets, Margret shuddered. To the left was the cemetery, torn up by bombs; to the right the ruins, over which the silvery seed-pods of the fireweed

hung like phantom flags. Suddenly Margret became aware that she was practically frozen. "Where shall I let you off?" she asked.

"Anywhere convenient for you. I have to go to the School Board and the Ration Office and to the Refugee Commissioner for a residence permit. You know how it is—if it weren't for the red tape, life would be too easy."

"I'm on my way to the slaughter house where I pick up the meat scraps for my dogs. I have a lot of other errands, too. Shall I drop you off at St. Martin's Church? It isn't far from there to the town hall, and if you're done with everything by twelve I could pick you up there again."

"Many thanks," he said. "That would be grand. With my leg I don't look forward to a two-hour walk on this slippery road. Good Heavens, I haven't even introduced myself. My name is Hühnerbein, Christoph Hühnerbein. I suppose you're thinking, what a name on top of everything else! Eh?"*

Margret felt herself blushing. She blushed much too easily, like most fair-complexioned people. It was a trait which caused her great woe.

"There you are!" He smiled good humoredly. "No matter. It's just as well the kids will have something to laugh at right away. That breaks the ice quicker."

He clambered down, waved up to her once more and limped off down the street, favoring his game leg.

A nice fellow, Margret thought. What a rough time he is going to have!

At the slaughter house Margret had to wait, since the inspector who always gave her the meat scraps was not around. He was an old acquaintance of Mrs. Almut's. Every

* Hühnerbein means "chicken leg."

summer his wife received a crate of berries for canning from Rowan Farm. There was no getting anywhere without “connections” these days, because nothing could be bought for money. Even the meat scraps were getting scarce now though the animals brought in to the slaughter house were mostly old, sick or injured beasts.

Margret found a spot where the ponies would be sheltered from the wind, tied on their feed bags, covered them with their blankets, and then set out to look for the inspector. She found him at last in one of the stalls, talking with a shabby-looking man who was holding a tiny, wretched pony by the halter.

“I been fleeced on this critter, sir,” the man was complaining. “I bought her fair and square—word of honor. There were these here circus people who said they didn’t have no more feed for her. Told me she was a genuine Shetland pony. I thought she would do to pull my cart—I have to travel out in the country a lot, you know. But they sure cheated me—you can’t trust nobody nowadays. The miserable beast ain’t worth her keep—she’s lazy and sick. My wife, she says to me—take her to the slaughter house before you pay out any more good money for hay.”

“What a horrible shame!” Margret’s angry voice suddenly interrupted the men’s conversation. She took the pony’s head in her hands and stroked its forehead. It had a wound on its withers that was oozing pus. Its hide was filthy and dull, its mane a mass of tangles, its big eyes weary and lusterless. Suddenly its legs sagged and it collapsed to the floor of the stall. “Letting an animal get into such shape,” Margret said, glaring furiously at the man. “You ought to be reported to the police.”

“That’s a fine one, miss,” the man growled, offended. “Now you wish me trouble with the police into the bargain.”

Margret paid no attention to him. She ran outside, hastily pulled the nosebag of oats away from fat little Mimi and returned to the pony. She knelt down beside it on the filthy floor of the stable. But the pony turned its head away; it was too exhausted or too sick even to eat. Carefully, Margret tried to push a few grains of oats into its mouth.

“All right,” the inspector said to the man. “We’ll take care of it. You can come around day after tomorrow and we’ll settle up.”

With an ugly glance at Margret, the man shuffled out, muttering curses at his bad luck. As soon as he was out of the door, Margret said to the inspector, “How much for it?”

The inspector raised his hands in protest. “Don’t be a fool, Miss Margret. What would Mrs. Almut say if you brought a dying bag of bones like this out to the farm?”

“Do you think Mrs. Almut would turn away a sick animal! I’m taking it—there’s no question about that. I make twenty marks a month. I’ll bring my wages to you until it’s paid for.”

As she spoke Margret thought: I have ten left. Soles for my shoes cost five, and I wanted to use the other five to buy father a shirt if he gets a priority. The shoes will have to wait...

“The creature isn’t worth ten,” the inspector said. “Please be sensible. It will be best for the poor animal to be put out of the way quickly.”

The inspector was a giant of a man. He patted Margret on the shoulder with his huge hand, while she knelt on the floor of the stable holding the head of the almost lifeless pony in her lap.

“How much?” Margret asked, sensing that he was weakening.

“What about Mrs. Almut?” the inspector repeated, making one last feeble attempt to reason with her.

“How much?”

“The man would have to pay the slaughtering charges on it. He’ll be lucky to get ten.”

“All right,” Margret said. She spoke to the pony. “You’re going home with me. Don’t worry, we’ll make you well again.”

The pony was smaller than the dog Fury at the farm. Tiredly, it licked a few grains of oats from her hand. “Come, get up,” she said coaxingly. It obediently tried, but its legs gave way again.

“We’ll have to put straw in the cart and load it on. We’ll tie its legs loosely and cover it with the horse blankets. Please help me, Inspector.”

Shaking his head, the inspector complied. How foolish, to take a dying animal with her! Most likely it would be dead before she got home. But what could he do when the girl had made up her mind?

“Tell Mrs. Almut I advised you against it,” he said as a last word. But Margret did not answer. She was busy making a bed of soft straw behind the seat of the cart where there would be least draft. Carefully, they lifted the pony and placed it on the bed. Its little head dropped weakly into the straw; the tiny hoofs kicked out once or twice and then it lay motionless. And as she had done last year when her pups fell sick, Margret prayed: “Don’t let it die, God! Please don’t let it die.”

She drove slowly through the town, so that the springless

cart would not jolt the pony. Beside her on the seat, wrapped in newspaper, lay her work shoes, their soles still unattended. She had intended to leave them with the village shoemaker on the way back, but now she did not give them a thought. At St. Martin's Church the schoolmaster was waiting for her. She jumped down from the cart, raised the blanket and showed him the pony. His eyes darkened as he looked at it. He himself had once come to the very limit of pain and hopelessness; he would know for the rest of his life what suffering meant. He said nothing and asked no questions, and Margret was grateful to him for that. Silently, they drove through the town—a small cart with a heavy burden: two young people who had learned early not to make much of a fuss about what happened to themselves, and an animal which had been abused to the point of death.

At the blacksmith's Margret dropped the teacher off. "I hope you'll like it here in Hellborn," she said, shaking hands with him. He responded with a nod at the wretched little pony in the cart: "Good luck, Miss Margret. And thanks again for the ride."

Slowly, Margret drove up the hill. Black snow clouds were billowing down from the mountains. The sun was entirely hidden; an icy wind had come up and snowflakes pricked at her face like needles. But she hardly noticed them; her mind was entirely on the sick pony. Was it warm enough in the cart? Here, at last, was the forest, where there was some shelter from the wind.

If three crows fly across the road it will get better, Margret thought. If my head brushes against a twig three times...

When she drove into the yard at Rowan Farm, she began to feel a little nervous. Hay was short after the dry summer,

and oats were even scarcer. Bernd Almut, who had heard the cart, came out of the stall to unhitch the horses and to carry the heavy tub of meat scraps to the dog's kitchen. "I've laid the fire under the cauldron, Margret," he said. "All you need do is light it."

"Thank you, Bernd," she said. He helped her whenever he could. He would even scold Kathrin when she put too much work on Margret.

"I've brought something home, Bernd," Margret said timidly, raising the blanket. Bernd looked at the pony, ran his hand over its flanks and shook his head. "A Shetland pony!" he said. "It takes some pretty harsh treatment to bring one of them down like that. They're tough as iron—we used them up North in the war."

"It must get well," Margret said, and gave him such an imploring look that he hastily busied himself about the cart so that she would not see by his expression what he thought of the pony's chances. A moment later Matthias came up. He threw a glance at the pony, another glance at his sister, and swallowed what was on the tip of his tongue to say—that they already had more than enough hungry mouths to feed on the farm. Matthias knew that expression of determination on his sister's face. When Margret looked that way, there was nothing to be done. Besides, the poor animal would not be eating much more—you could see it would be dead in a few hours. And then, Matthias was a Lechow; his heart could not help melting at the sight of such a pitiful beast.

"Take it to the sheep shed!" Margret commanded. "There's room in the lambs' box stall."

Carefully, Bernd and Matthias carried the pony on the

blanket. Its head dangled lifelessly, but its legs twitched now and then. Margret spread out fresh straw and they bedded it down. Over in the kennel the Great Danes barked longingly because they had heard her voice. But Margret had no time for anything but the pony now. The sheep came in from outside and peered inquisitively over the slatted wall. Rachel, Margret's own lamb, pushed the door open and tenderly rubbed her head against Margret. From the hayloft a huge black tomcat leaped gracefully down and twined himself around Margret's legs, rubbing his head against them and purring. "Look, Caliph, look, Rachel," Margret said. "A new animal for Noah's Ark. You must be nice to it."

"Tell Father to come!" Margret said to Matthias. How lucky that he was here now. He would help her. And in five minutes he came hobbling along. His feet were still sore from the long trek home from prison camp. Margret did not have to say anything; he knew instantly that once more she had picked up a helpless creature and wanted to drive death away. As a child in Pomerania she had often done that. All at once the strangeness between father and daughter, that strangeness that had come with long years of separation, vanished and their old intimacy was back. He was Father, to whom you brought all your problems, who understood everything and had an answer for everything. And Margret was once more his little girl with an unquestioning trust that there was no limit to his powers.

He knelt in the straw and bent over the pony. The skilled doctor's hands felt its back, legs, belly, and the region around the ugly wound. He laid his head against the pony's laboring chest and listened for a while. "It's very weak, child," he said.

“See whether Mrs. Almut will give you a little real coffee and some brandy.”

Mrs. Almut, herself, was just coming into the barn. As soon as she heard Dr. Lechow’s words she turned around on the spot and ran across the yard to her stone house. She could run like a weasel. Margret tore out after her.

“Are you angry with me, Mrs. Almut?” she called out as she ran. “It’s a mare and it must really be quite young. We can’t just let it die, can we, Mrs. Almut?”

“My precious coffee!” the little woman said, and her tanned face crinkled in a wonderful smile. “Of course we can’t let it die. If it can’t be saved without the coffee, coffee it shall have, and I imagine we can find some brandy too.”