A war ends and another begins. The Confederacy lies in ruins and those who survived struggle to rebuild homes and lives in this triumphant conclusion to the saga of the Becker and Richter families in the Texas Hill Country. This is Book Three of the Adelsverein Trilogy. See also Adelsverein: The Gathering - Book One of the Adelsverein Trilogy and Adelsverein: The Sowing - Book Two of the Adelsverein Trilogy.

Adelsverein: Book Three - The Harvesting

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Book Three of the Adelsverein Trilogy

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Prelude: A Time of Portents and Wonders

The rain continued all of that afternoon and into the evening, falling from dreary and sunless skies. It wrapped the world in a shroud of grey, flattening piles of fallen leaves into sodden masses and pattering on the roof of the mansion on Turner Street—sometimes lightly and sometimes in a full-throated roar—as the gutter downspouts spurted like fountains. The world outside was in shadow, in more ways than one, as was the downstairs parlor where Magda Vogel Becker dozed in the largest armchair as she waited for her youngest daughter to return home. The mantel clock chimed a musical half past, and Magda's eyes opened. Mouse, the fat little Peke, was sleeping on the footstool by her feet with his blunt muzzle dropped across her ankle. He started awake.

"Half-past eleven, Mauschen," the old woman remarked, disapprovingly. "She's very late tonight." The little dog merely yawned, stretching luxuriously, before regarding her with bulging eyes liquid with adoration, then laying his head across her ankle again. "It's just as well I sent the cook home. It's not as if we are helpless without servants! She will want something to eat, even if she will not admit it at first. Health, Mauschen, it's a precious thing …."

Magda sighed; here she was, ninety-five years of age and waiting up, hovering like a mother hen over Lottie, the youngest and last of her chicks; and that chick being a woman in her fifties and a grandmother to boot! Ruthlessly she evicted Mouse from his position on the footstool. Setting her feet to the floor, she rose and moved to the largest window, drawing the heavy curtains aside.

Outside the rain poured down with increasing vigor, casting a halo of silver around the street lamp opposite. The wind tossed the dark branches of the oak trees in the garden across the way. Along Turner Street there were a few lights burning in upstairs windows—doubtless those households in which someone lay ill of the influenza. This was a dreadful epidemic, coming as a bolt of thunder out of nowhere.

Magda regarded the lights, knowing very well what was going on in those rooms. Behind every window was a sickroom, sickrooms where someone labored to breathe and someone else watched tirelessly, while the wings of the angel of death whispered in the darkest corners. Magda knew this very well for she had often tended the sick and dying herself, during her own life. There had been such ravages of sickness when she was a girl and a young woman. It had been confidently assumed such things had been banished, defeated, driven back into the shadows by such great advances in medicine. Her own younger brother, Johann, was a doctor and had talked proudly of such miraculous advances. No more did thousands die ugly deaths from cholera, from the yellow fever, from agues and diphtheria, since science and medicine had entered the fray. And yet now they seemed as powerless as they had ever been before—so many stricken so suddenly that the hospitals overflowed. Her daughter had volunteered to nurse at the Army camp, for there were many young soldiers fallen—not by bullet or shell, but to something which had seemed at first to be nothing more than the grippe.

Magda would have volunteered herself. "I have often tended the sick," she had insisted to her daughter and son-in-law, "and I have already had the grippe this year. I am not made of spun glass." But Lottie instantly forbade her to even contemplate such a thing. And perhaps she was right to do so, for Magda walked with a cane most days and could not lift and carry anything heavier than Mouse's food dish.

There were lights at the end of the street, a pair of lights that flickered as they moved, accompanied by the roar of an engine; one of those new-fangled motor cars. Magda watched with interest as it came down Turner Street, slowing to a stop before the window where she waited for Lottie to return. "A noisy thing, "she remarked to Mouse, "noisier than horses, but not quite so prone to run away … and certainly not as much of a mess."

Lottie's husband was thinking of buying one. Magda's younger son, Samuel, had bought a Hudson Touring car eight or nine years before, a marvelous thing with padded seats as comfortable as a leather sofa in a gentleman's study. Once, Samuel had taken her,

Lottie, Lottie's children and his own—all crammed in together—to an exhibition of a flying machine. It was a gossamer thing of wires and delicate wings of canvas stretched over an intricate framework of wood; a tiny, fragile machine, lifting off the ground, soaring like a bird and circling the oval parade ground at Fort Sam Houston, to the wonder of the crowds watching underneath. "*Fancy that, Mama!"* Samuel had cried. "*Heavier than air, and powered by an engine—what will they think of next*!" Such marvels and wonders as this new century had brought—and such horrors, also!

Magda could hardly bear to read the news in the papers. It seemed that even those tiny, fragile airplanes had become instruments of war. She found it disheartening to see the evidence that her new country and her old one were deadly enemies in a battle to the death. Her grandsons and great-grandsons went eagerly to the war, little recalling that those enemies they were so eager to slaughter were their cousins, their second cousins, those grandsons and great-grandsons of the friends and kin that her family had left behind when first they departed their ancestral village of Albeck on a bright autumn day over seventy years before. All that time, Germany had still been home in their minds, "the old country." Truly they had come a long, long way from Albeck, farther than Magda had even comprehended when she and Hansi and her sister Liesel had arrived. And her new country had been torn by a dreadful war, one part pitted against the other. War was nothing new to Magda Vogel Becker, who had lived for most of a century.

A woman emerged from the back of the automobile, a woman in a long pale coat, holding an umbrella over her head. Her face could not be seen for the darkness, the rain, and the distance from the window where Magda watched, but there was no need for that; a woman knew her own child. The automobile rolled away, setting a tidal wave of muddy water splashing over the sidewalk. The woman hurried up the sidewalk towards the porte-cochere and around the side of the mansion. A moment or two later, the sound of a door opening and shutting echoed in the hall outside the parlor.

"Lottchen … don't forget to bar the door," Magda called from the parlor. There was the sound of a heavy latch falling into place, and

a few seconds later, Magda's daughter Lottie appeared in the doorway.

"Honestly, Mama, you were sitting up waiting for me, with the door unbarred?" Lottie had shed her coat and umbrella in the hallway, and now began unpinning her hat and motoring veil. She was a tall and fair woman, whose pale-blond hair was fading imperceptibly from the color of ripe wheat into white.

"I had Mauschen and … other means to defend myself," Magda answered. "You look tired, my dear little duckling. How bad was it today?"

Magda's daughter let her hat and veils fall onto a chair by the parlor door, and dropped into the chair nearest the fire, pressing her hands to her face.

"Dreadful, Mama," she answered at last. "They are so ill. Our best, and strongest and bravest young men, and yet . . . they die, and nothing can be done for them! They suffer so, Mama. One of Onkel Johann's old friends is the senior surgeon. He tells me that they drown, from this dreadful plague. They drown on dry land, as their lungs fill up with fluids, in a matter of hours. None of his colleagues can find a reason why. All we can offer to them is to tend and comfort them in their last hours."

"And hold their hands," Magda nodded, acknowledging in sad resignation. "At the end, perhaps that is all we can offer. To know there is someone near, who cares for them . . ."

"And to write a letter to their mothers," Lottie added. "That is why I am so late, Mama, I was writing letters. It would mean something, I think, that their mothers hear something of their last moments, and be reassured that they were tended as lovingly as they would have been in the bosom of their own families."

"One does what one can," Magda offered dryly. "And I assume that, such have been the miracles of this age, even in an emergency as this, I presume the hospital is tidy and adequate to the needs of the sick?"

"It is, Mama." Lottie smiled sadly. "It offers every suitable convenience but that of a sure and certain cure. Every other comfort than that!"

"That is good." Magda nodded. "At least, you have something! For your cousin told me once or twice of his experiences in hospital. They had no drugs at all, when they cut off his arm. And nothing could be done at all for him, but that—"

"Oh, Mama," Lottie gasped, "Cousin Peter—but that was so long ago!"

"No, "Magda shook her head, "it was not that long ago at all. A mere blink of time, to me!"

Chapter One: *Homecoming*

In the late summer of 1865, Peter Vining came home from the War. Hatless and thin to the point of emaciation, he was a tall and fair-haired young man with a drooping mustache of which he was still rather vain. He had a pleasant and open face marred by a thin straight scar that slashed down across his forehead and cheek, courtesy of a Union officer's saber. When he thought about it at all, he was only grateful that it hadn't cost him the sight in that eye. Still, the scar pulled his left eyebrow up in a permanently skeptical expression. Like many another, he was clad in the ragged remnants of Confederate motley. The newest thing anywhere about his person was his shoes, which had been the gift of a kindly surgeon in a Union hospital that had been set up outside of Richmond to care for the human wreckage left in the wake of the fighting.

"Take them," Major McNelley, the Union surgeon, had urged Peter as he looked down over his spectacles. "After all, you cannot walk all the way home to Texas barefoot. The sutler will not miss them, after all. Take them. I would hate to see my good work wasted."

"I expect not," Peter had replied, accepting the brogans with mixed feelings. He had lain raving with wound-fever in a rough Confederate hospital, a hospital that seemed to be short of everything except the sick and dying, and had woken in a Union one, on clean sheets. There had been plenty of medicines, and a surgeon who probed the bandages crusted on what remained of his left arm had informed him that he would most likely live. And that the war was over. So far, he hadn't been able to feel much beyond numbness about either of those pieces of information.

Still, he had needed shoes, and Major McNelley was right. He couldn't walk barefoot from Virginia to Texas, and his old boots were more hole than leather. He came as far as Galveston with a straggle of Texan survivors, men of Hood's Brigade and Terry's cavalry. Most of them had been in hospitals or Yankee prisoner compounds when the fighting ended, too sick to travel with the ragged remnants of their

units when the Armistice was signed. Peter, bone-thin and pale from the hospital stay and months of semi-starvation, had gotten as far as Houston, where he fell sick again, fevered and shivering with the ague. The family of one of his friends had looked after him for a few weeks. When he had recovered somewhat, he wrote to tell his mother that he was on his way home, but had never gotten an answer. Not that he expected one, the way that things had fallen apart during the death throes of the Confederacy.

When he was able, he had bidden his friend's family goodbye and taken to the road like all the other grey-clad stragglers returning home in ones and twos, halt and lame and heartsick. It had taken him some days, but folk were kindly inclined towards returning soldiers, and he had not had to walk very much of the way.

The last few miles to town he had gotten a ride in a half-empty dray. The teamster who had given him the ride was a dark-haired and bullet-headed Dutch lad, a little younger than Peter, who understood just enough English to tell Peter that he was from the Hills and had driven wagons for the army in Texas for the past two years.

"*Nicht soldaten*," he had offered, shrugging ruefully. Peter let it go without comment, being only too glad for the ride.

When they reached town, Peter jumped down from the back of the wagon, waved casually by way of thanks to the driver, and hitched up his bedroll, haversack and canteen for one last march.

He trudged wearily along the road from town. His eyes were fixed on a line of low hills above Austin. A rambling white house ringed by apple trees, like a castle in its moat, sat on the nearest of the hills, that grove of trees his grandfather had planted years before. And now he took those last few steps slowly, along the graveled drive beside the row of apple trees, their boughs heavy-hung with hard green fruit. He was so very glad to be home at last. It had been a long way, to get to the roof that his grandfather built and his mother had extended every which way ever since.

Old Alois Becker came to Texas with his wife Maria, his two sons, and a daughter, following the promises of Baron de Bastrop who was looking for settlers, back when all of Texas belonged to Mexico and the wild Indians. Alois built his home place on a tract of land near

a settlement called Waterloo, on the upper Colorado River. When Texas won independence and President Lamar insisted on building a new capitol there, Alois and his neighbors had willingly sold their holdings. Well, actually, the neighbors sold up willingly; Alois Becker didn't give a damn one way or the other. His wife and one of his sons were dead, the other son gone, and his son-in-law lay dying of consumption by then. He sold all the property but for a few acres around the home place and the apple trees, and spent the last few years of his life sitting by the kitchen hearth, a lost and broken man, venting spitefulness on anyone who came within reach.

His daughter Margaret ignored it pretty much, letting it roll off her like water from a duck's back. She was a capable and busy woman, Margaret Becker Vining, running a boarding house to support her boys, her bedridden husband, and the father who sat by the fire and stared gloomily into it.

"You mustn't mind your Grandfather," she said once to Peter, when he was about four years old. "He always thought he was the monarch of his world, that everyone obeyed his slightest wish and that he could order everything to his liking. It broke his heart to find out he wasn't, and turned him sour and bitter. Everyone that he really loved either died or went away . . . your grandmother, your uncles. And he can't bear thinking on that and it makes him angry."

"*You're* here, Mama," Peter had answered, much baffled. "Doesn't he love you? And Horace and Jamie and Johnny?" He was afraid of his grandfather, who scowled at him from under great, hairy frowning eyebrows and barked abrupt commands at him in the old language. His older brothers took every opportunity to escape the old man's baleful eye. His mother had sighed and flashed a wry little smile as she hugged him to her in a rustle of lavender-smelling fabric, the black widow's weeds that she wore for the burying of her husband the year before.

"Oh, I think he loves us when he thinks about it; he just doesn't think about us much, Peter-my-chick. It's the grief that makes him sad and distracted. Pay no mind to it." Then she had tousled his hair and added, "We're stuck in the world that we are given, Peter. No use breaking your heart over what we wish we had. We're happiest in

the long run if we adapt to what we are given, rather than yearning after what has been taken away from us. I was grateful to have your dear Papa for the time I did."

Practical words. Peter wondered now just how much strength it took to hold to such generous thoughts and words. His mother was a strong woman. She ran her household like a general at the head of an army and always had, but now she had buried two husbands and three of her sons lay far away in hasty graves dug into the soil of a wheat field in distant Pennsylvania. Which was irony if you like, for that was where Alois Becker and his kin had come from, all those years ago.

A general at the head of an army; well, he was done with armies and generals now. He had his certificate of parole from the Union Army tucked into his near-empty haversack to testify to that, and an empty left shirt-sleeve pinned up above the elbow to prove it also. He twisted his shoulders under the blanket-roll and the faded grey uniform jacket slung over his shoulder, shifting the sweat-making burden just a little. His trousers were military issue, but also worn to colorlessness. They had been light blue once, taken off a dead Union cavalryman, but good stout cloth at that. Peter hadn't much cared for taking clothes off a dead man, but he and his brothers were tall and fitting garments hard to come by. By the last desperate year of the fighting he had gotten to be a lot less particular.

At the top of the drive he paused to catch his breath and rest for a moment, sitting on one of the great stones that set the gravel drive apart from the trees and the meadow below. He was thinking it was very strange there was no one about the place. His mother's house—he could not think of it as anything other than hers—had always been as busy as a beehive, a bustle of boarders, visitors and Doctor-Papa's patients, his friends and his older brothers coming and going at nearly all hours. Now hardly anything moved at all, save a light breeze stirring the tree leaves. The window shutters were tightly closed against the midday sun, patterned with a shifting shadow-brocade of leaves. Nothing stirred. The home-place was as somnolent as an old dog, curled up and dozing in the sun. Well, he didn't much mind a quiet homecoming, but the unaccustomed silence sent a

prickle of unease down his back. Still, Peter told himself, the war had changed a lot of things; why should he expect his mother's house to be immune?

He hitched up his blankets and haversack again and climbed the steps to the front door, his footsteps echoing hollowly in the covered porch that ran the length of the house. But when he lifted a hand to try the door, it was locked, and that was a surprise to him. Never, since Austin had become a settled and safe place, had Margaret Becker Vining's door been locked during the daytime.

He rapped tentatively with his knuckles on the panel, and called, "Hello! Is there anyone at home?" No answer came from within. He sighed and came down from the porch; may as well go around the back to the stables and the kitchen yard.

There must be someone about, he told himself. The door brass was as polished as it had always been and someone had scythed the grass under the apple trees not long since. He followed the graveled drive around the side; oh yes, there was a drift of smoke coming from the kitchen chimney at the back, and the smell of food cooking. He paused abruptly as he came around the veranda at the side of the house, for there was someone watching him with wary blue eyes. A small boy had half hidden himself behind a white-painted turned-wood post and a brightly glazed urn full of geraniums, and stared at Peter as if he were something rightly to be feared. At least someone was around, Peter thought with relief. Several of the French doors on the lower floor stood open to the light breeze that fanned the shaded side of the house. The child wore a black knickerbockers suit, much disarranged with dust, which Peter thought with sympathy must have been uncomfortably hot for the boy.

"Hello there," Peter ventured tentatively, and tried to gauge the child's age. Not ever having had much to do with children, he guessed about four or five years of age, and the round little face bore some slight resemblance to his own. Maybe this might be Horace's boy. His older brother had married Miss Amelia Stoddard in a splendid but hurried wedding, during that breathless interval between Lincoln's election and the firing on Fort Sumter. He had got a son on her, before the Vining boys all went to join Hood's Brigade. Flushed

with the excitement of great doings, they were. No one could tell them any different, although one had tried to warn them about what they were getting themselves into. Peter remembered Horace's quiet happiness at hearing of the child's safe birth. Where had they been when the letter caught up to them, and how long after? He made himself smile at the child and added, "Are you the only one about, then? I'm Peter. I would be your uncle, I guess."

The child's mouth rounded into an "o" of astonishment. Without a word, he turned and scampered into the nearest door, crying, "Mama, come quick! There's another sojer outside!"

A woman's impatient voice answered from the dim room inside, "Oh, Horrie, don't shout like that. Be a good boy! I expect he's hungry. Tell him to go around to the kitchen and ask Hetty for something to eat." That was Amelia's voice, weary and not sounding so sweet and tinkling as she always had when she spoke to Horace's brothers. *So that must be Horace's son and a damn cold welcome from his sister-in-law,* Peter said to himself and shrugged wryly. He'd always thought Amelia to be a bit of a shrew, for all her finishing school prettiness. No reason for the boy to recognize him as family, since he hadn't been home in four years.

The boy Horrie appeared in the doorway just as Peter hitched up his blankets and haversack one more time. "Mama says to go around to the kitchen," he said somberly.

Peter answered, "So I heard." He didn't expect the child to hop down from the verandah and follow after him, but the boy did, as cheeky as a sparrow once curiosity overcame his fear.

"Are you really my uncle?" Horrie questioned, breathlessly. He had to take four steps to match two of Peter's as they strode around towards the kitchen yard and the stables.

"If you are Horace Vining Junior, then I am," Peter answered.

Horrie looked dubious. "Mama calls me that when she's angry," he ventured, with an air of someone making a confession. He craned to look up at Peter as they walked, adding "But most everyone else calls me Horrie. You don't look much like Gran-Mere's pitchers of you. You have a long m-m-m'stashe. Are you *sure* you're my uncle?"

"Positive," Peter answered dryly. "Hetty will surely tell you so, and so will your Ma and Daddy Hurst."

"If you say so," Horrie conceded. And then with the frankness of the very young, he asked, "What happened to your arm?"

"A big piece of Yankee lead happened to it," Peter answered. "And there was nothing to be done but have the surgeon cut it off before the gangrene set in."

Horrie's mouth rounded into that "o" of astonishment again. He seemed torn between sympathy and curiosity when he asked, breathlessly. "Did it hurt?"

"Not much," Peter answered, which was a lie. It had hurt like the devil, and he was still plagued by phantom pains; pains in his hand and wrist, and in the forearm that was gone. How he could feel pain in a limb that wasn't there any more was a mystery to him, and also to the kindly Major McNeeley, although he had told Peter it was not, as he put it, an "unknown phenomenon."

Peter thrust away a memory of amputated limbs, piled up like shucked corncobs by the field hospital after one or another of the battles in Tennessee; and the sound of men screaming under the surgeon's saw because there was no laudanum, nor even any whiskey. He was one of them, at the end. No, he couldn't speak of that here, not to Horace's little son, or Miss Amelia. Maybe to Mama; Mama was uncommonly strong-minded for a woman. She had heard tell of practically everything in her time, no frail little magnolia flower like Miss Amelia.

Horrie looked up at him, with a child's open sympathy already writ plain on his face, and a touch of boyish hero worship, too. "I'm glad you're home to take care of us, Uncle Peter," he said and then he dashed ahead of Peter as they rounded to the back of the house. The sprawl of outbuildings, the stables and the smokehouse, the summer kitchen and the woodshed—all were baking in the summer noonday. A single horse dozing in the pasture beyond the stable switched its tail moodily; that and the boy running ahead were the only things moving. Behind them, Amelia anxiously called for Horrie again, but he had dashed up the stairs to the back porch and flung the door open with a crash.

"Hetty, Uncle Peter is here and Mama says you're to give him sommat to eat!"

From around the side of the house, Amelia called faintly, "Horrie! Where are you going? Who is that?"

Peter followed his nephew into the old winter kitchen. It was the room in the oldest part of the house, dominated by the enormous fireplace, where Alois Becker had finished out his last sullen and defeated years raging at the fate which had taken away his wife and sons. Now it was the domain of Hetty, his mother's Irish cook and aide-de-camp in the business of running a boarding house. The fireplace had long since been stopped up and replaced with a patent iron stove. Once the kitchen had been as familiar to Peter as it now evidently was to Horrie, but Peter felt awkward, an alien and a stranger. He hesitated in the doorway until Hetty looked over her shoulder and dropped the skillet she was lifting from the stovetop with a ringing like an iron bell.

"Oh, 'tis himself at last!" Hetty cried incoherently. "Oh, to look at you! What have they done! Hurst, 'tis the young master himself, creeping in like a beggar . . . oh the wickedness of it all! Hurst, take his things!" and she swept him into an embrace, which he suffered gladly. This was more like it, and he gave himself over to much-anticipated enjoyment. Hetty wept like a fountain and fussed over him, while Horrie jigged with excitement.

Daddy Hurst beamed all over his dark African face and quietly divested him of his haversack, canteen and blankets. "Oh, seh, seh! Such a sight for sore eyes you be, now you set yoursef down. We 'bout gave up hope of you, Marse Peter. Hetty, give the po' boy a plate w' some proper supper on it, he sho'nuff 'pears like he needs it mor'n you or me." He patted Peter on the shoulder with enormous affection—that shoulder with a whole arm still attached to it—though he had to reach up a good ways. The old man seemed terribly moved for all that he tried to sound so stern to Hetty.

Daddy Hurst had been his mother's coachman and man of all work for as long as Peter could remember. Technically a slave and owned by old Mr. Burnett, Daddy Hurst had worked for wages in Margaret's household for years. Peter could not remember a time

when the man had not been there, gnarled and brown like a chestnut, patient and stern with him and his brothers. There was nothing the least servile about Daddy Hurst. Peter supposed he was a free man now, although what difference that would make he could hardly imagine. But it was enough that he was still here, he and Hetty both, wrangling over the reins of authority.

Predictably, Hetty fluffed up like a banty hen. "And who do you think you are to be giving orders? Listen to him, the black heathen savage that he is!"

"Give the po' boy some food," Daddy Hurst scowled. Just loud enough to be heard, he mumbled, "Po' shanty-Irish trash." At the stove, Hetty muttered some obscure Hibernian curse in his direction and Daddy Hurst made a warding-off gesture. Watching this familiar by-play between old and fond adversaries, Peter felt something tight and hard within him loosen. Oh, yes, he was home, and Hetty and Daddy Hurst still feuded.

He noted that there were two places laid at the long kitchen table. At distant ends, of course, which was only right . . . but still. Peter wrenched his mind away from the thought that they were like an old but contentious married couple. That wouldn't do at all.

Hetty set out another place, as Horrie chimed in, "Isn't it grand? I saw him first, you see!"

"You hesh up, child," Daddy Hurst chided him.

Amelia stepped into the kitchen, rounding the door from the hallway, her voice raised in annoyance, "Horrie, if I have said it once, I've said it a hundred times, a proper young gentleman should not consort with—oh!" Her delicate fingers went to her mouth, in a pretty and dramatic gesture.

The voices of her son, Hetty and Daddy Hurst rose in chorus, "It's Uncle Peter, Mama!" Horrie had no compunctions about shouting, "Didn't you see him? Ain't it grand?" He had gone over entirely to admiration of his uncle, it seemed, standing at his feet and looking up worshipfully.

"*Isn't* it grand," Amelia corrected him, and her own eyes overflowed, very prettily. But then, Amelia always did things very prettily. His brother's wife was as delicate as a porcelain flower, and

widow's weeds made her appear elegantly frail. She reached out her hands to Peter, saying, "I am so terribly sorry for this poor welcome, Brother Peter, when we had been looking for your return for so long! You must forgive us—Horrie, child, please, remember your manners."

"No matter." Peter kissed her hand with a flourish and said, "I am glad to be home, Miss Amelia. I've no complaints about my reception. It was my fault for not sending word to you all."

Amelia dabbed at her eyes with a lacy handkerchief, as she appeared to take in Peter's appearance for the first time. "Oh . . . your poor arm," she said mournfully.

Peter replied with wry humor, "Look at it this way, 'Melia—what it'll save on the making of shirts. I'll only have to pay for a sleeve and a half, now. Think of the money I'll save."

Which was exactly the wrong thing to say for Amelia's tears redoubled and Hetty exclaimed in horror, "Oh, sor, how can you make such light of it? What would your dear sainted mother say?"

"I'm sure Mama will get out her account book and work out the savings to the penny," Peter answered lightly. "I have no doubt of it." It annoyed him, that Amelia and Hetty made so much of the loss of his arm. It wasn't something that he wanted to dwell on, and he wished that people would not notice it. He couldn't bear the look of pity in their eyes when they did. He thought that Daddy Hurst would be at least a little amused, but instead the old man looked nearly as weepy as the women.

Something was wrong, he realized. Horribly wrong. At last, Daddy Hurst whispered, dolefully, "Marse Peter . . . you don't know?"

"Know what?" Peter asked, although in his heart he thought he already knew. "What's wrong, Daddy? Where's Mama?" Amelia began to sob in earnest and so did Hetty. Horrie looked in bewilderment from her towards the other adults, and Peter absently patted his nephew's head.

At long last, Daddy Hurst answered, in tones of deepest compassion, "I'se sorry to be the one telling you, Marse Peter. We buried Miss Margaret in the East Avenue burial ground three weeks

ago. Miss Amelia, she did write you a letter." He shrugged helplessly as Peter stared at him in shocked disbelief. "She was that sick, Marse Peter, but she jus' didn't want anyone to know. You know how Miss Margaret was . . . a proud woman." To Peter's horror, it looked as if Daddy Hurst might join the women in weeping.

No, it couldn't be, he told himself, in that first shock of disbelief. Margaret Becker Vining Williamson was vital, strong, a force of nature. As irresistible as one of those Texas thunderstorms which swept in and lit up the night sky for seeming hours with incessant bolts of lightning, tossing the branches of sturdy trees and bending the grass against the ground. An indomitable monument before whom strong men made obeisance and lesser women gave way; imperious and intelligent, worshipped, feared and loved in about equal measure. She had been here before Austin began, when the capitol was a scattering of hastily constructed, ramshackle buildings just east of the river, a friend and hostess to everyone who mattered over the three eventful decades since. Death would not presume… and yet her last living son acknowledged to himself that it had. Daddy Hurst and Hetty would not be grieving so. Her house would not be so empty, so dreadfully silent, were it otherwise.

Peter did not recollect how he came to find himself in the room which his mother kept as the family or private parlor, sitting in the chair which had been his stepfather's favorite seat, with his head bowed to his remaining hand. He supposed that Amelia had led him there, for she was fluttering and fussing over him, Horrie staring like a basket of owls, and him feeling as stunned as he had been when a Yankee bullet smashed his wrist during the fight at Rice's Station early in April. He'd been foolish and not quite taking it in, the blood and the mess and him staring and thinking it wasn't really real. This was his own left hand; he must be able to move his own fingers. And now, his mother must be alive, with her particular and enduring mixture of practicality and affection.

But no; his left arm ended now in a scarred stump a couple of inches below the elbow. He had begun to deal with the limitations and all the tricks and strategies that a one-handed man must learn or work

out for himself, to cope with the world and the tasks that it asked of him. He would have to deal with his mother's absence. He had not realized until then how much he had counted on Margaret's cool and common sense, an anchor in a world where everything had come adrift, gone sour, flown apart.

Amelia was talking at him, sweet fluttery nonsense, while Daddy Hurst hovered in the doorway. After some considerable time, he made his voice to work, asking in deceptively calm and level tones that they leave him alone for a bit. They did just that, Amelia shooing out her son. Horrie left with seeming reluctance, looking over his shoulder as his mother chided him in her implacable soft voice. The quiet of Margaret's parlor settled around her youngest son, as lightly as motes of dust swirled in a narrow blade of sunshine which had managed to slip between the drapes.

Nothing much was out of place in the room, although it seemed not to have been frequented much. Margaret's desk was closed, her account books neatly lined up on the shelves above the desk. Her sewing table and mending basket also seemed empty. Always, her basket overflowed when he and his brothers had been about. The hinged cover of her beloved piano was drawn over the ivory keys. It had been a Christmas present and wedding gift to her from her second husband, whom Peter and his brothers had always called Doctor-Papa.

How Doctor-Papa and his brothers and Uncle Carl had plotted, to smuggle the piano into the house without his mother knowing! Today he could have brought in a circus with a calliope and a brass band, too, and no one would have ever noticed—the house was that empty. Peter leaned back with a sigh, absently rubbing away the ache in the stump of his arm with his remaining hand. Here he was, home at last, but it hardly seemed worth the trouble of the journey. Two elderly servants in an empty house, a sister-in-law who set his teeth on edge, and a small boy he didn't know at all. His eyes fell on the little cabinet where his mother had kept her small collection of curiosities and treasures: some china figurines, a delicate arrangement of wax flowers under a glass dome, a Chinese fan carved of sweet-smelling pale wood. There were family portraits and daguerreotypes

among them and a miniature on ivory of her first husband, the father of Peter and his brothers, with a locket of his hair under glass. There was a portrait of Horace and Amelia in their wedding finery, and one of himself, Jamie, and Johnny. He smiled, defying the dull pain in his throat, to think of how they had put on their uniforms and tried to look so earnest and martial.

Uncle Carl would have shaken his head over that, for sure. There was his picture, framed in an especially ornate case, in Margaret's cabinet of treasures. He sat stiff and unsmiling with his family, his mother's younger brother, with his three children and that slim, black-haired woman he had married in the German settlements. They must have had that daguerreotype done when they came to Austin for Horace and Amelia's wedding. That had been so very awkward, that visit. Uncle Carl's wife barely spoke English at all and he was a stiff-necked Unionist, which hadn't gone without comment, given how high feelings had been running in the spring of 1861.

Peter remembered with another pang that he had spoken heatedly, indeed had been unforgivably rude to his uncle. His mother had been furious and he had been rude to *her* as well; he cringed at the memory. Someone had draped a bit of black ribbon over Uncle Carl's picture frame, which meant that he must have fallen on the field in spite of his Unionist principles. He had been a soldier, too—and a Ranger, one of Jack Hays' men. Peter didn't doubt that his uncle must have taken up service one more time, and that was just another sorrow piled upon all the rest. He racked his memory, trying to recall when his mother had written to them, and what she had said when she wrote to tell them of Uncle Carl's death. Not much, Peter thought . . . just a brief postscript in a letter to Horace, which he shared with his brothers. So it must have been in the second year of the fighting. Peter dully wondered where. Was it in some great fight, or maybe some piddling little raid or ambush somewhere? Not that it mattered much; dead was dead. And the Vining brothers and their brigade had much more pressing matters attending them at the time. Home had seemed very remote, and its people quite unreal, by the second year of fighting in the East. Even Doctor-Papa dying of camp-fever had not seemed quite real.

That depressing recollection was interrupted by someone tapping lightly on the door. After a moment it opened and Hetty put her head around it to say, "Mr. Peter, Miz Amelia said we was to bring you something on a tray. We thought sure you'd be hungry, after coming all that way."

"I am," Peter answered. "But you don't need fuss, Hetty. I'll eat in the kitchen like always."

From behind Hetty came Daddy Hurst's voice. "Oh, but Miz Amelia, she says that ain't fitting." Hetty opened the door to let him pass, and he entered carrying a wooden tray and a folding stand. "You look tahrd, Marse Peter, an' that ain't no mistake. You jes' set youself in that chair. Miz Hetty an' I, we'll fix you right up." He set up the stand with a flourish, and Hetty proudly placed a folded napkin on it, with a setting of silverware.

As she bustled out, Daddy Hurst winked broadly at him and whispered, "I got me a bottle of fine sipping whiskey set aside jus' for you. Saved it special an' I'll bring it later!"

"And I'll drink a health to you for thinking of it, Daddy," Peter answered, touched with the care they were taking of him. The old man winked broadly at Peter, hearing Hetty call from the kitchen.

"Jes' you sit easy an' rest," Daddy Hurst advised. "Miss Amelia, she did say we was to make your ol' room ready, air out the beddin' an' sech. I put yore things up there, as ever. Might I ast a question, Marse Peter? Why ain't they no buttons on yore jacket, now?"

Peter gave a snort of disgust. "When we came into Galveston, the Yankee provost marshal met us on the dock, and told us to cut all them Army buttons off. It was a condition of our parole, he said."

"My, my, my." Daddy Hurst clicked his tongue and shook his head in commiseration. "Seems lak they didn' want y'all to be in no doubt as to who won out, didn' they?"

"No, I guess they didn't," Peter said indifferently.

Hetty returned with another tray, this one laden with covered dishes and a tall glass of lemonade. "Don't you worry none," Hetty added. She set out the dishes with a flourish: a plate of ham, all neatly cut up so that he could manage it one-handed, some little boiled

potatoes, a dish of greens cooked with fatback, warm cornbread wrapped in a clean napkin, and a smaller plate with a slab of chess pie on it. "I'll take it and find some new buttons for it, don't you fret. Miss Amelia might not take the same care your Mama did."

"Thank you, Hetty," Peter answered in gratitude, for his mouth was already watering at the good smells rising from the plates at his side. "I am forever more grateful. I'm hungrier than I ever recall being, all the time I was away. Don't worry 'bout that old jacket. I'm sure my brothers and I left enough clothes behind."

"Bless you, sor, so they did indade," Hetty adjusted the placement of the plates on the tray more to her liking, while she and Daddy beamed at him with expectant approval. "Oh, the pity of it, that you weren't able to see your dear mither one last time! But still an' all, you're home at last, an' that's a blessing. I've been sayin' a prayer just for ye, every day since we heard that your regiment was away to home, safe enough."

"Let the pore chile eat, Miss Hetty," Daddy rumbled. "'Sted a tawkin' an tawkin' over 'im, like one 'o dem mockin'-birds."

"Heathen sauce," Hetty snapped, without any particular heat. "Don't worrit yourself!" And she and Daddy went away, closing the parlor door after themselves, although he could hear their voices as they wrangled cheerfully in the hallway, and then distantly in the kitchen.

So empty, the house was now. He could hear Hetty and Daddy quite well, with his nephew's voice chiming in now and again. He ate and his appetite revived with every bite of Hetty's excellent cooking. When he had finished the last scrap, even the crumbs in the napkin wrapped around the cornbread, he sat back with a sigh, replete with good food for almost the first time since . . . he couldn't remember. He wondered what he should do next and told himself he ought to get up. He ought to go find his sister-in-law, ask for an accounting of what his mother had left. He ought to have *some* notion. What was it Horrie had said, about him being back to take care of them all? Look after them all; that was a joke. He barely felt able to take care of himself, maimed and tired, half-starved and weak as a half-drowned kitten, after the exertion of walking up the hill and around the house.

Well, Major McNelley had advised that he wouldn't be fit for much for quite some time. He had looked over his spectacles at Peter and advised, "Something outdoors in the clean air of the country. Nothing terribly strenuous, mind you. Had you trained for any such profession before the war?"

"I was reading law," Peter replied.

Major McNelley sighed and said, "You probably won't be allowed to continue at such for a while, having been a Rebel and all. Look to doing something vigorous, which keeps you out of doors. You're one of the lucky ones, after all." Major McNelley had sighed again and lifted his glasses so that he could rub the tired eyes underneath. Peter sniffed a bitter laugh as he looked at his stump. Major McNelley let his glasses slip back over his face and added sternly, "You're young, lad. And you've lived through this murderous stupidity, which is more than can be said of many another. You've got the rest of your life and more of your limbs and faculties than most of the other poor lads in this place. Now sort out what you can do, and want to do, and go home and do it."

At the time, Peter had wondered if Major McNelley—fat, grizzled and by repute the fastest and most adept operating surgeon in several armies—had ever met his mother. They both possessed a ruthless talent for discouraging self-pity in others.

Someone tapped on the door. Before he could answer it Daddy Hurst put his head around the doorframe and asked, "Yo' finished, Marse Peter? Miz Hetty, she wants dem dishes, if yo' done wid 'em."

"I am," Peter replied, and Hetty bustled into the parlor. Peter thought that he ought to get up, but he still felt tired from the day's journey in the heat, and so much food had left him sleepy. Doctor-Papa's chair was extraordinarily comfortable. No wonder his stepfather fell asleep in it of an evening. Something nagged at him as his eyes fell again on Margaret's cabinet. Almost idly, he asked, "Hetty, Daddy Hurst, do you recall if Uncle Carl's family came to Mama's funeral?"

"They did not, I must be fair to say," Hetty answered carefully as she gathered the dishes together. "There were ever so many mourners; the church could scarce hold them all."

"Onliest fambly was Miz Amelia and young Horrie," Daddy Hurst added.

Hetty sniffed, disdainfully. "But I don't b'lieve young madam even wrote to Mr. Carl's wife until *after* the funeral," she said. "They were left in a poor way, too. Remember, Hurst? Their oldest boy stayed for a wee while, before he went off with Colonel Ford's company. A fine tall lad." Hetty neatly assembled the dishes, and Hurst folded up the tray-table. "With such a look of your brothers and yourself about him, too! Miss Margaret remarked on it, so she did! Did he not tell us that Mr. Carl's property was taken by the Army, and Mrs. Carl and the children all had to go and live with her family?"

"They what?" Peter sat up, all drowsiness banished in an instant.

"Burned them out." Daddy Hurst nodded sadly. "Miz Margaret, she was that riled up 'bout it. Pow'ful sorrowed, too, 'cause she couldn't pull no strings to get that prop'ty back fo' them, an' then she was too sick, an' ever' friend she ast for he'p had too much on they plate. Miz Margaret, she regretted that mo' than anything elst."

"That's the first I heard of this, Daddy! Why would they have confiscated Uncle Carl's land?! He had that for service with the Rangers, I remember—who would do such a wrong to his family? Uncle Carl was one of Jack Hays' men, too! Who would dare, and by whose law—some damned politicking scoundrel, I'll be bound!"

"Lordy, Lord, I dunno." Daddy Hurst shook his grizzled head. "There was po'ful evil bein' talked of, Marse Peter, po'ful evil . . . of such goings'on as most white folk would'n believe."

"It was the martial law, sor. They declared martial law, when General Hebert said that all the German towns were in resistance; such a to-do there was." Hetty added dolefully, "We never knew what to believe at the time. The lad . . . your cousin would not say a word about it. A right cagey one he was. Miss Margaret, all she would tell me was that Mr. Carl had been murdered and the property confiscated for his sympathies. And she could find no one what would lift a

finger, for all the true men of honor were away in the fighting. All that were left, sor, were weak men using the war to score off old enemies or profiteers feathering their own nests, that and bullying lickspittle politicians. That was her very words!"

"Miz Margaret had a way wit' dem," Daddy Hurst added. Although he didn't specify which he meant, he continued with an oblique look at Peter as he capably folded up the stand and tray and tucked them under his arm. For the life of him, Peter couldn't read Daddy Hurst's expression; it seemed to be something halfway between genuine sorrow and a grim kind of satisfaction. "They say dat men wid masks, they come to de door, take away *dis* man, *dat* man, dis *other*. Dey hang dem all from an ol' oak tree, fo' disagreein' 'bout de Confederacy. Dey say, 'Dis man, he a Union man. Cain't have dat, when our boys at de fightin' in Virginny or some sich place,' so . . ." Daddy Hurst shrugged. "Men wid masks, dey pay a call at midnight. Most white men, dey ain't useta guard dey tongues like dey black folk do."

"No, I guess not," Peter said. His voice was calm, but inside a cold unreasoning rage was building in him. Curious that when Hetty quoted his mother, about lickspittle politicians and profiteers, he should so suddenly think of Miss Amelia's father, Mr. Stoddard of Mayfield and his plantations of rice and cotton in Brazoria. Stoddard, who had been such a fire-eater for secession, had cheered the march of grey-clad volunteers and raised a toast to the Confederacy at his daughter's wedding. Aye, he was keen to serve the Confederacy with his mouth, and maybe some of his money, but not—as far as Peter knew—with his own body. The rage sat in him like a cold lump of lead. Politicians; politicians and cowards; Peter silently damned the whole lot of them. They had roused the whirlwind of secession, encouraged it with torrents of words, shouted down men like old General Sam Houston who counseled against it. And now, if what Hurst and Hetty had to say was true, while true men of honor paid in blood, such low men had spitefully beggared his own kin; that after murdering Uncle Carl in cold blood for being a stiff-necked and stubborn Dutchman, unwilling to take any part in the madness.

Peter said some words then, words which had probably never been uttered in his mother's parlor. He recovered control of his own tongue with some effort after a moment, ruefully acknowledging the truth of what Daddy Hurst had said, and realized that the old man and Hetty had quietly gone, closing the parlor door behind them. Again he wondered what he should do next.

A war ends and another begins. The Confederacy lies in ruins and those who survived struggle to rebuild homes and lives in this triumphant conclusion to the saga of the Becker and Richter families in the Texas Hill Country. This is Book Three of the Adelsverein Trilogy. See also Adelsverein: The Gathering - Book One of the Adelsverein Trilogy and Adelsverein: The Sowing - Book Two of the Adelsverein Trilogy.

Adelsverein: Book Three - The Harvesting