

1951

Constant Interval

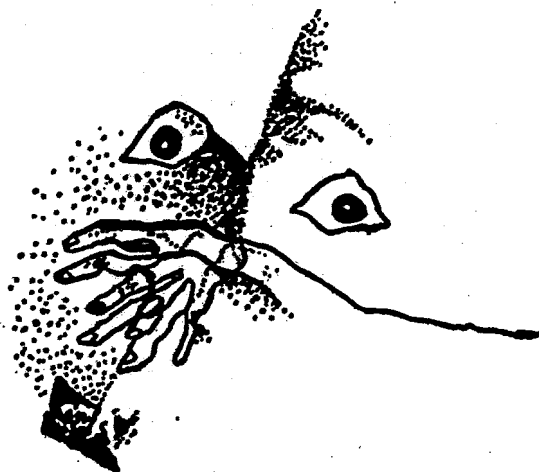
Mary Baum

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Mary Baum

CONSTANT INTERVAL

SHE TOSSED hat and gloves aside and made for the window at the foot of her bed—her own window, with its absurd little balcony outside; she could stand on it, that was all. Swinging her feet over the sill, she thought angrily that this was the closest to herself she could get. The view was everyone's, but from here it was her own: the hillside garden atremble with pink and white blossoms; enclosing a row of stiff dark pines, then the stone wall. Beyond, outside, fugitive—the street, the town, the world. For instance, who was that man flinging himself so joyfully along the Avenue du Léman? Why did he toss back his head to whistle like a bird? Far to the left, past tiered vineyards asleep in the languorous sun-filled air, she could just see a little boat, drawing away from Pully. The daily "tour du lac." Over yonder, across the lake, in France, mountains were still white-topped, though it was now the middle of May. Oh, to *be* out there somewhere for the afternoon, anywhere at all, but *alone*!

"Attendez! I'll be right with you!" Carolyn, in the room below, was calling to someone in the garden.

Holding herself tight against the intrusion, Clara realized that very soon now Margret would be up. If Margret were only anybody, but Margret was worse than that. She didn't merely push to fill a vacancy you wanted left that way for a little while; she

came and wanted you all to herself. Small intangibles, isolated, not worth mention: a look, a touch, a remark, a choice, a request. "Les Pins" battled idle hours; it wasn't difficult to keep their times alone together to a minimum. Hurry, hurry, hurry in the morning to make the dining room by the second bell. Between supper and hymns, everyone took sewing or knitting to the Petit Salon and attended (or it was assumed they did) Miss Harbroke's rambling Gothic tale. After "Lapin" had turned out the lights with her "Bonne nuit !Dormez bien!" Clara would lie still in the dark, feigning sleep. Hard to believe that she and Margret, last fall, had crept from bed night after night to listen to Danish records played with a fingernail!

There was nothing to be done about this afternoon. Two weeks before, rain had made their promenade impossible. Last week she had found excuse in a headache. Soon now Margret would bounce in with her harsh staccato: "We go now, oui?" She would never agree to sitting out by the tennis courts. How she hated the English girls and their eternal matches! No. Somehow or other, Margret would see that they took that long promised promenade today.

Clara held her breath and listened. Hesitating steps outside the door, then their quick determined one-two, one-two down the hall. A door opened, closed, definitely. What did "Lapin" do there in her room, alone, Sunday afternoons? What did anyone do alone, in a room of their own? She'd already forgotten. Later, "Lapin" and Signorina would dress up and go off laughing to take tea in town. Clara had never been in "Lapin's" room. It was not permitted. But she had knocked on the door once to ask for cough syrup and had seen that it was little larger than a closet, with bed built under the eaves. Bright, intimate, with women's things.

Clara and Margret called Mademoiselle "Lapin" between them. Something about her very round eyes, the way she wriggled her nose, had suggested the name. After Christmas, Clara had brought back from Gstaad two tiny gold rabbit charms. Mademoi-

selles fastened one to the chain she always wore around her wrist. The other had been fixed to Clara's watch. She often wondered how long after June, when school was over, before "Lapin" would put the charm away in a drawer somewhere. The next day? The following week, perhaps? As for herself, she could only imagine that hers might someday get lost.

The bell from Pully church rang out. Flinging my time, our time, everybody's time to the winds, thought Clara. The walk back that morning had been as unsatisfactory as ever. Two by two, two by two, and at the end of the very pensionnat procession, "Lapin" and herself. Just the required three feet ahead of them were Berthe and Toinette. And so there never was the hour, the place, nor would she ever find words nor courage to declare (for what else would it be?) to "Lapin" all the unspeakables wanting to burst from her. The road was long and uphill; the sun hot, and she'd been a little faint from hunger. She could think of nothing at all to say, nothing casual, amusing. After a long while Made-moiselle turned to her, half smiling, "Eh bien?"

She had felt herself redden to the ears, and yet—nothing.

Where was that girl? Turning from the window with a sigh, she saw Margret standing still, watchful, behind the door. White-gold hair hung heavy and without lustre around her pale pointed face. Clara knew it was futile to do anything about this angry sense of betrayal. She dropped down upon her bed, kicked off her shoes.

Margret came over to her, holding out a white tissue wrapped parcel. "A present for you, kaere."

"Pourquoi?" The cold little "why" escaped her in spite of herself, despite the desperation she sensed in the girl's voice. One sweater was green, the other yellow angora. This is no gift, thought Clara, tossing the crumpled wrapping into the basket.

"You like it?" Margret's cheeks were flushed and her eyes, ordinarily so strangely empty of light, were warm and moist. "You wear the yellow this afternoon, please?"

The long climb to the upper road was excuse enough for sil-

ence. Clara, hot now in the yellow sweater, damned Margret, determined to yield none of herself for the two long hours. That ugly nasal chatter she would simply ignore. A yes, no, if necessary (rather, "oui," "non.") And she could even remind Margret to stop speaking English.

They were in the suburbs here; small self-contained houses, with each its own hedged garden. A woman sat in the sun drying her long brown hair. Farther on, beneath a white-flowering tree at the roadside, a girl and boy stood hand in hand, staring at them as they passed.

"... and in the summer I go with Ivar on bicycles. We sleep in a tent. Our friends, too, boys and girls together. We have a good time. It is nothing wrong. We do so in Denmark. . . ." Everything reminded Margret and she always hurried to put it into words.

From an open window, the sound of a piano and a girl's singing. A tinkling little tune, a mediocre voice, but the song, light upon the air, followed them far up the road. At the crossroads they could see out over fields and vineyards, beyond the roofs of the town. There was Lac Léman below, blue, still, on a Sunday afternoon. The little church here was not quaint and heavy with centuries like the one at Pully, but high-flung to the sky, austere in its gray and black paint. Margret wanted to rest on the steps a minute.

"... so I never am in Protestant church. Maybe some day I go. Did I tell you about confession last Sunday? I take French-Danish dictionary like Madame de Chavannes tell me. The father—he is young, I think—is very good with me. He wait while I find my sins in French. Some I don't say right and he tell me how. I laugh. He laugh a little, too. He is very good with me." She stopped, crossed her hands over her knees. "At home, in Köbenhavn, the father is also very good with me." She smiled disarmingly at Clara, who permitted herself a little curiosity.

"Do you tell him *everything*?"

"Everything? And why not? Ivar say I *must* tell him every-

thing." Margret stood to go, took Clara's hand to help her up. She suggested they descend to Pully and the lake by the Rue des Chevaliers. "It is an old road, you think so? Chevaliers, chevaliers—what you say in English?"

Where the Rue des Chevaliers suddenly, inexplicably, became the Rue des Vendanges, there, set far back among old trees, was a dreary group of brown buildings. A wide stone wall enclosed the grounds. The gate was shut, perhaps locked. High above it, an ornate script from which Clara made out "Bon Repos. Asile des Vieillards." Yes, there they were, strolling slowly under the trees or sitting motionless on benches set out in the sun. One old couple stood quite near the wall. The man, who wore a round velvet cap and had a splendid beard, was leaning toward the woman as if he were whispering to her. Bent, sear and fragile, she reminded Clara of an autumn leaf. Then the old man straightened up and pointed out to his companion some spot far off in the mountains. Clara hoped desperately that Margret wouldn't notice, would leave them to themselves. Just before Christmas, Madame de Chavannes had taken the pensionnat to an old peoples' home in Lausanne to put on an entertainment. Their audience had crowded around afterwards, tremulous, eager to get near, touch them. Clara had been uncomfortable and glad to leave. Afterwards, however, she'd written right home about the place and how happy they had evidently made the poor souls. Now, strangely, she felt that she might find something she wanted if she could only slip in here for a little while and sit down by herself under a tree.

"*Funny* old people! What they talk about?" Margret's voice knew no modulation and harshly scored the moment.

Clara frowned and glanced at her watch. "Come on. You want to stop for chocolate, don't you?"

They had often been here at Madame Marot's Confiserie. Today, as always, Madame hurried to them, blooming in her inevitable apron with flamboyant red roses. "Bonjour, mesdemoiselles!" and she rushed off for chocolate and gâteaux.

The tiny shop, down three stone steps from the street, was earth cool and green; green gauze curtains, pale green walls, with tables, chairs and floor a deeper shade. Surely everything was as it had always been—for a hundred years, probably. Yet Clara, as she sat there beside Margret, felt uneasy. She could hear Madame moving about in an inner room, but here there was no sound. Even Margret, hot and tired, was oddly quiet. It had never seemed so before, but today it was strange—the vacant, waiting chairs and tables crowded into this little space. Madame, never deviating from her pattern of service, color moving according to custom across the cool flat green and back, to fold hands and sit ready by the window—Madame might be playing a rôle, or had she been always a part of the décor? What was she? Did she know about this tenuous, hovering suspense? Clara looked out to her. Madame smiled and nodded. What did she mean?

Margret, bent over her plate, was devouring a rich confection of chocolate and cream. Margret is greedy, thought Clara. She had always known Margret liked to eat, but today it struck her that the girl was unbearably gourmande. She told her to wipe the chocolate off her upper lip.

When they had nearly finished, a man and his wife with two small boys came in. Madame hurried to them, smiled and spoke to the little ones—just enough, not too much. The stiff silence, the tension were broken. Clara took a few coins from her skirt pocket, played with them on the table.

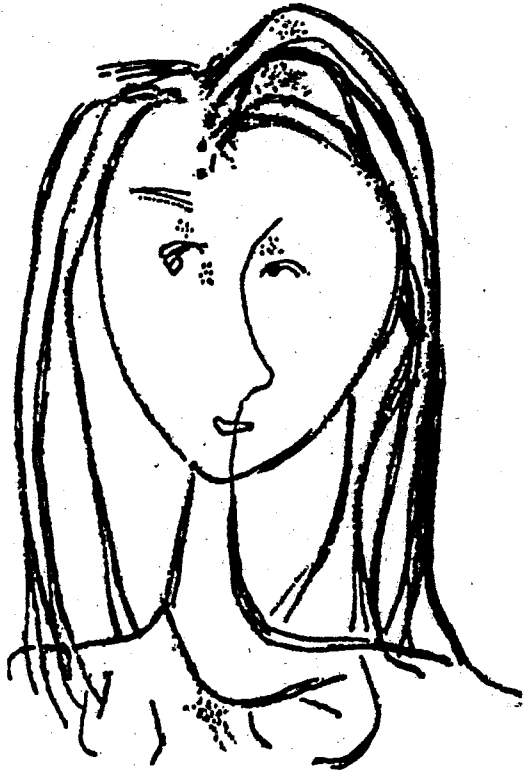
Margret, considerably revived, had found herself. "It is too bad, kaere, you learn not much Danish, but you write me Danish letters this summer and I write English. So, we don't forget. Only three weeks, we go home, oui? Mama write me we go to Paris after." Margret leaned her chin on her hand and smiled. "We buy clothes, we go to the cafés. You *like* Mama. She laugh much, amuse herself. She is going often to Paris for the weekends. I wish you can go with us. . . ." She lingered on the suggestion with a nasal discontent which had once amused Clara.

"But your mother doesn't know English or French, you told me." Clara wondered what Margret would hope for from such an unlikely situation.

"Oh, Mama, she speak good German. She smiles—everyone know what Mama want!" She carefully collected the few scattered crumbs on her plate, popped them into her mouth. Then, with a sigh, she drew herself up, and laughing a little awkwardly, unfastened the tight belt around her waist.

As Margret so often had before, she reminded Clara, that last short block to "Les Pins," of their first promenade together. Clara hadn't forgotten, but now, forcing it upon her seemed an imposition—trying to recreate something which no longer existed. Lately exasperated by constant pointless chatter as they undressed for bed, she would lie awake in the dark wondering what had happened to the charm she had sensed in Margret that day.

... A bright gold September afternoon and "Lapin" accompanied three of them, the first to arrive, on a walk around the lake. Fat Sonja from Amsterdam, "une ancienne," chose to walk with Mademoiselle, leaving Margret and herself, no language in common, to get along somehow. She'd tried a little halting French, but Margret had only stared at her, shrugged her shoulders. She'd begun to feel sorry for the girl, wondering how she would ever manage for nine months. When a round bit of the lake's brightness was just visible through heavy trees, a troop of Spanish or Italian



boys burst suddenly at them from a side lane. The boys had laughed and called out something before turning up towards town. Margret had smiled at her, then immediately had loosed a flood of Danish, guttural, incomprehensible. "Köbenhavn," again and again, was clear, and when finally Margret had murmured "Ivar! Ivar!" clasping her hands over her heart in mock anguish, Clara knew the girl was homesick, lonely, in love. After that, by trial and error, they hit upon a polyglot method of communication, in which gestures played a large part. An hour later they were running hand in hand up the drive to "Les Pins."

"That was the *best* time, oui?" Margret's white face and pale eyes were turned toward her now. It was too honest an appeal.

"Oui," replied Clara, steadily.

Hymns that night went on and on. Clara was so tired she didn't think she could remain standing from one song to the next. Only her favorite, "Le cri de mon âme s'élève vers toi," she sang with any feeling at all, and prayed that it be the last. Then, they must line up, shake hands with Madame de Chavannes, curtsy and "Bonne nuit, Madamel" Four long flights to the fourth floor before Clara finally gained her room.

She had scrubbed her face and tied her hair back for the night when a quick light tap sounded at the door. "Come in!"

"Lapin" looked in and around. "Where is Margret?"

"Down the hall talking to Signorina."

Soft and chic in bright silk with black pumps and wide brimmed straw hat, "Lapin" had just come back from town. Clara felt she knew her even less than the woman who went around school all day in a brown skirt and sweater. And now here was this Mademoiselle, sitting on her bed, drawing the new yellow sweater to her knees, fingering it, inspecting the label. There was in her silence—a *held* silence—in the very movement of her fingers, the way she shook her head and bit her lower lip, something that warned and frightened Clara. The girl stood still, waiting.

After a long minute "Lapin" looked up. "Is it yours, Clara?" She held out the sweater with the question.

"Oui. Margret gave it to me today. A present."

"Is that all? Nothing else?"

"There was a green one, too."

"I heard you were wearing this today. You know, Carolyn bought green and yellow sweaters yesterday afternoon. She put the package on the bench in the lower hall and somebody took them. Did you know?" She spoke slowly and distinctly, but the words came to Clara isolated, senseless. Only afterwards, did the meaning reach her in one sharp thrust. Leaning heavily against the lavabo she shook her head. Through tears she couldn't control she watched "Lapin" throw back the bed covers, shake the pillow. "I am so sorry, so terribly sorry. Go to bed now, try to go to sleep. I'll find Margret and talk to her." She put her hands on Clara's shoulders and kissed her lightly. Then she left, the sweater over her arm, and softly closed the door behind her.

Clara heard her go up the hall toward Signorina's. Then other footsteps, voices, came between. Without thinking she poured more water into the bowl, washed her face and hands again. A sudden glimpse of herself in the mirror, and "Lord! Is that me?" she whispered. Her lips alone had moved; the rest of her features were rigid. Afraid, she turned quickly around. Margret's bed was ready for her. Her pyjamas, comb and pins lay waiting. On the bedside table was Ivar's last letter and a book her father had sent her. Yet Clara knew she would never really come back. Of the Margret who would come back, in a few minutes perhaps, Clara was afraid. Even more, she feared the wave of tumultuous feeling against Margret within herself. She jumped into bed, feeling a little sick, and turned to the wall.

She shunned early memory of Margret. She didn't want to believe any more in those first few months. Instead, she remembered now how at Christmas, in the mountains, the possessiveness had first become apparent, suffocating. Margret had been skiing since

she was seven; she did Telemarks and Christies as well as the instructor. It was Clara's first attempt; she spent most of her days on the beginners' slope, where she would be uncomfortably aware of the watching figure at the edge of the wood. Once in a while she'd casually wave to Margret who would immediately turn and glide off through the trees. Clara'd know she'd be back again, presently, and that evening, too, would be spoiled by her moroseness, her accusing manner. Of course they had, both of them, gone to Gstaad with bright anticipation of Danish lessons—at least an hour after dinner, they had promised each other. Margret had written her father for the books. But somehow Clara became involved in a series of nightly bridge games with some of the English. Margret was invited to join them, too, but she disliked cards nearly as much as she disliked the English. Then, for the first time, Clara began to feel this friendship onerous, found it necessary to apologize for Margret in one way or another.

About a month after their return from Gstaad, Margret had begun to make pointed remarks in Danish about people at the dinner table. Most often, Clara, embarrassed, pretended not to understand. "Jeg kan ikke forstå dig," she'd mutter. Finally, "Lapin" had asked her to tell Margret to stop. It was impolite, and furthermore, they were supposed to speak French. When she had repeated this to Margret they had had their first out and out quarrel. Details were vague now, but it was something about "Lapin"—Margret was jealous of Clara's affection for her. For two days neither she nor Margret had said one word to the other.

And so it had gone through the long spring. This, however, that had just happened, Clara could not encompass. Everything had burst, somehow, with strange dark unknowns coming to the surface. Margret, her eyes set like pale opaque stones in a white face, what *was* she that she could laugh and chatter all afternoon so frighteningly unaware of a very fundamental "mine" and "thine"?

... She felt Margret running after her, calling her. The road

was steep, the top of the mountain far off, and there in the woods stood the old man in the velvet cap urging her on. She glanced back at Margret stumbling behind, head down, clutching something to her. Clara pretended not to hear her call, not to understand. "Jeg kan ikke forstaa dig!" she tried to shout in Danish but it came forth a thin whisper. Margaret was very close now. Clara knew she was going to throw that red Danish-English dictionary at her. The face, inhuman, stiffly passionate, was at her shoulder. Clara fell to the ground in terror. . . .

She awoke, aware then, of a knock at the door.

"Lapin" had returned alone. "Were you asleep then?" she asked.

Clara rubbed her eyes. "I had a nightmare. She caught me! I—"

"That won't do, Clara," and "Lapin" gently shook her head. The girl sat up, hugging herself. With the fright of the dream still lingering, she listened to what "Lapin" had to tell. It didn't take long: after an hour or so, Margret had admitted her guilt. Madame de Chavannes revealed that there had been other small "incidents." "Do you know what it is, kleptomania?" Madame had known about it when Margret had come in the fall, had expected something like this before now. "They will wire Margret's mother tomorrow to come for her. Until then, she'll have a room downstairs, next to Madame. For tonight—" Clara wondered at her faint smile. "As for tonight, would you like to sleep in my room? I think you'd better. I'll stay here with Margret."

A light was on in the little room; the bed had been made ready; the window opened to the stars. It was late; after eleven by the cuckoo clock on the wall. But "Lapin" saw Clara to bed, then sat down in the low rocking chair to darn a stocking. "We wore black cotton stockings and our dresses ten inches from the floor where I went to school—a convent, it was. Yes, and all our letters were opened, except those from our parents." She laughed as she rocked and glanced up at Clara. "We had to have written permission to correspond with any boy, unless he were a brother. My

young cousin goes there now and it is not so different today." Clara had never heard her talk about herself like this. Somehow, here in this room which was all she had, she was no longer just "Mademoiselle," or merely "Lapin." Clara realized that now she was seeing the woman, Susanne, calm, complete. She resolved to call her henceforth by her given name.

"You know, Clara," she went on, "perhaps that is why it is such fun for me to wear fine stockings, put on a silk dress, go out with a man. Do I now, for a while, enjoy it too much? Who knows?" She made a little mou and shrugged her shoulders. "What then? As you think of Margret don't hate her, don't be afraid of her, of what she is. She is what she is, voilà! Margret has no family like yours. Her father and mother have been divorced since she was very small. You may not know that? Her mother likes a gay life, and leaves the children to her servants. The little Margret's been able to get for herself she holds to grimly—Ivar, you, even her own language." She stopped, held the darned stocking up to the light. "Possess oneself—then it makes no difference where one is, what one is doing, what is done to one. Sometimes I have to remind myself that neither love nor hate must possess me—rather they must be contained, in their proper place, within the whole that is me. You understand?" She took her sewing scissors and snipped the thread. "Well—that's that! Bonne nuit, Clara. Dormez bien." She was gone.

Clara opened her eyes to a sunlit room. What *had* she been dreaming? But then, content to dismiss it, she jumped from the bed. The push of the day had roused voices and footsteps in the hall. But the door was shut. No one knew she was here; no one had any thought of her here. Over the back of the rocking chair hung her clothes, with brush and comb near by, shoes upon the floor. Susanne had been in then already, before she was awake.

She dressed quickly and stood at the window a moment until she should hear the breakfast bell. It was another wonderfully bright warm day. Below, in the garden, bent over his hoe, was

Guillaume. And there Isabelle, the cat, fastidiously picked her calico way towards him. Guillaume stopped to light his pipe, looked down at her, ruffed her head in play and returned to his work. Clara could see little of the lake, but from here the wide sweep of mountains was plainly visible, crisp, proud, erect against the morning sky.

All this, too, belongs, she thought. Then, at last, she let herself consider Margret. If they should meet, pass close, on the way to breakfast, it would be all right. On the other hand, if she were not to see her again, it would be easier for Margret. In a few weeks, she could write. . . .

She saw that it was nearly half past seven by her watch. The tiny gold rabbit swinging there—well, she wouldn't take it off until after she'd left "Les Pins."