The only thing to do when you’re chased by wolves is to throw them something tasty, and hope you get away while they eat it. Baron Stelgratz knows this. He’s just firing his last bullet. He knows that too.
to find some lonely huntsman or woodcutter, and compensate their family later on. But not a single human being came into view. Behind Prince Otto, the little child, wrapped in furs, was huddled alone on the bouncing seat of the sledge, stiffening, growing colder, changing back into a machine minute by minute. Occasionally the movement of the sledge would shake a little song out of him, but he spoke no more.

Finally they arrived at the mines of Schatzberg, and the house of the clockwork-maker.

And there was only one solution. Prince Otto realized that he had to sacrifice himself, and he was ready. The dynasty was more important than anything else: more important than happiness, than love, than truth, than peace, than honour; far more important than his own life. Prince Otto would give up his heart, cold, fanatical, and proud as it was, for the sake of the future glory of the Royal House.

‘You’re quite sure this is what you want?’ said Dr Kalmenius.

‘Don’t argue with me! Take out my heart, and put it in my child’s breast! It doesn’t matter if I die, as long as the dynasty lives!’
The problem now was not the heart, it was the return: how could the child drive back on his own? So, for an extra payment, Dr Kalmenius agreed to animate the dead body of Prince Otto with a small degree of purpose just enough to drive the sledge back to the palace.

The operation was performed. Prince Otto’s heart was detached from his breast with subtle instruments, and transferred into the weak and failing body of the silver boy. Instantly, a bright flush of health took the place of Prince Florian’s metallic pallor, his eyes opened, and a lively vigour spread through all his limbs. He was alive.

Meanwhile, Dr Kalmenius prepared a simple piece of clockwork apparatus to put in the breast of Prince Otto. It was very crude; when it was wound up, it would make his body drive to the palace. That was all it would do. But it would do it for a long, long time. If Prince Otto’s body had been taken to the other side of the world, he would have set off at once for home, though the flesh rotted and fell off his bones, and would never stop until many years later, when his skeleton drove the sledge into the courtyard, with the clockwork ticking in his ribs.
So Dr Kalmenius placed the sleeping body of Prince Florian in the sledge, well wrapped up against the cold, and put the whip into the hand of his dead father, who began at once to lash and lash and lash; and the horses, foaming with terror, began their mad gallop homewards.

And a strange homecoming they had of it. You might have heard the tale of how the sledge drove in at the palace gates, and how the Royal Physician found the clockwork heart. The servants whispered about the dead man whose arm wouldn’t keep still, and rumours and guesses flew through the palace and the city like shuttles in a loom, weaving a story of corpses and ghosts, of curses and devils, of death and life and clockwork. But no-one knew the truth.

So time passed. They searched for the baron, they mourned for Prince Otto, Princess Mariposa wept very fetchingly in her widow’s black, and Prince Florian grew. Five more years went by, and everyone said how handsome the little prince was, how merry and good, how lucky they were to have such a child as the heir of the family!

But as the winter of the prince’s tenth year set in, the dreaded symptoms returned. Prince Florian
complained of pains in his joints, of a stiffness in his arms and legs, of a constant chill; and his voice lost its human expressiveness and took on the tinkling sound of a musical-box.

Just as before, the Royal Physician was baffled.

‘He has inherited this disease from his father,’ he said. ‘There can be no question about that.’

‘But what disease is it?’ said Princess Mariposa.

‘A congenital weakness of the heart,’ said the physician, sounding as if he knew. ‘Combined with inflammatory oxidosis. But if you remember, Your Highness, we cured that last time by means of healthy exercise in the forest. What Prince Florian needs is a week at the hunting lodge.’

‘But last time he went with his father and Baron Stelgratz, and you know what happened then!’

‘Ah, medical science has advanced wonderfully in the past five years,’ said the physician. ‘Have no fear, Your Highness. We shall arrange a hunting trip for the little prince, and he will come back glowing with health, just as he did before.’

But it seemed that the courtiers had less faith in the advance of medical science than the physician, for they all remembered what had happened last time,
and none of them wanted to risk a journey through the forest, even if it was to save Prince Florian. This one had gout, that one had an urgent appointment in Venice, another had to visit his aged grandmother in Berlin, and so on, and so on. There was no question of the physician himself going; he was needed every moment at the palace, in case of an emergency. And Princess Mariposa could not possibly go, because the winter air was so bad for her complexion.

Finally, because there was no-one else to do it, they called up one of the grooms and offered him ten silver pieces to take little Prince Florian to the hunting lodge.

‘In advance?’ the man said, because he had heard the story of what had happened before, and wanted to be sure of his money if anything went wrong.

So they gave him the silver in advance, and the groom tucked Prince Florian into the sledge and harnessed the horses. Princess Mariposa waved from the window as they drove away.

When they had gone some way into the forest, the groom thought: I don’t think this kid can last another day; he looks pretty bad to me. And if I go back and tell them he’s died, they’re bound to punish
me. On the other hand, with ten silver pieces and
this sledge I can make my way over the border and
set up in business on my own account. Buy a little
inn, maybe find a wife and have some children of
my own. Yes, that’s what I’ll do. There’s nothing that
can save this little fellow; I’m doing him a kindness,
really; it’s a mercy, that’s what it is.

So he stopped the sledge at a crossroads and put
Prince Florian out.

‘Go on,’ the groom said, ‘go on, you’re on your
own now, I can’t look after you any more. Have a
good brisk walk. Stretch your legs. Off you go.’

And he drove away.

Prince Florian obediently started to walk. His legs
were very stiff, and the snow lay thickly on the road,
but he kept going till he turned a bend and looked
down at a little town silent under the moon, where a
bell in a church tower was chiming midnight.

A light was glowing in the window of an inn, and
an old black cat watched from the shadows. Prince
Florian struggled up to the door and opened it.
Being unable to speak, he politely began to sing his
one remaining song.