

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Auguste Supper (1867-1951)

1. Father and Son (p.1)

2. The Witch of Steinbronn (p. 11)

Father and Son

(from *Leut'*. *Schwarzwaldersählungen*. 'Folk. Tales of the Black Forest.'

Heilbronn: Eugen Salzer, 1907.)

Every child knew them, the two. The one of them was "Frieders Michael," the other "Frieders Michael's Boy."

When people saw them striding out along the bumpy roads between the stony ploughed fields, they never could tell from a distance which was Frieders Michael and which was Frieders Michael's Boy. They resembled one another so greatly, the two, in figure, posture, and gait. Their faces were also almost the same. Two deep brown, angular faces with noses as if carved from hard wood, with a scanty surround of hair. The hair was snow-white on Frieders Michael, only streaked with grey on the boy: that was the difference.

The wives of both father and son had died in their first lying-in. The old man had been able to keep the newborn boy at that time, the younger man's baby had been carried away with its mother. That was the second difference.

That had been water under the bridge for many moons. Nobody in the village thought of it any more or even had any idea that the two had once had wives, that they had not always lived in such isolation and gone

their own way from one day-job to the next, keeping to themselves.

Did the people in the village like them? Who's to say? When work was pressing and every hand that could pitch in was desired, then Frieders Michael and Frieders Michael's Boy enjoyed favour and honour. At those times, the path to the two men's house was almost worn away.

This small, miserable house, which stood behind the communal bakehouse, had tiny window-panes green with age and a shingle roof, and feet seldom stepped inside in quiet times, unless it was the priest's feet, which entered that village house every now and again.

Father and son played no further role in other ways. Neither of the two was ever seen in 'The Lamb,' the stately inn. So how could they play a role? And they were not to be seen in church, where everyone who was at the fore in village life in some way or other wanted to be seen. The two upright, scrawny, hard figures were only seen doing heavy work on other people's fields, and they looked as if all their living juices were dried up, but they worked with a vigour, nevertheless, that was a joy to behold.

And then all of a sudden, in the middle of the pressing harvest, the word was: Frieders Michael is going to die!

"Hell fire!" rich John Pfrommer cried furiously, "But he's engaged to cut mi barley just next week."

"Stupid tittle-tattle!" cried another, "t' old 'un helped load sheaves for mi yesterday."

"And's goin t' help hoe mi cabbages for mi."

"And hill mi late potatoes for mi."

"And tek aht manure for mi."

Such was the babble, and in every voice there lay serious disapproval, in every word an ill-humoured reproach for the man who dared just now, when everyone had their hands full, to think of dying.

It was already evening when the disagreeable news came, late, darkening evening after a long work-filled day. Everyone was really tired and pressed homewards, otherwise one or the other of them would probably have made the small detour past Frieders Michael's house and would have looked and seen what truth there was in the story. But as it was, they put that off to the next day.

Over the little cot of father and son lay the muggy summer night. The windows facing the communal bakehouse stood open. And if anyone had walked past under them, he would have been able to hear a heavy breathing, with groans from time to time.

But nobody walked past, except for the mayor's black tomcat, who alone was authorised to lie in wait in the bakehouse for the communal mice. He crept soundlessly past, the black one, and Frieders Michael's Boy, who walked up to the window just then, saw the cat's eyes shining through the darkness like phosphorus.

The gaunt man drew his head back. A sudden horror flashed through him.

Now he believed what he had not wanted to or been able to believe up to this minute: that the old one was nearing his end. He could not be clear in his mind how the eyes of fire in the black night out there should be connected with his father's death; but all the same, the certainty had just that moment dawned upon him that this night must bring something bad.

He sat down at the table, where an oil-lamp burned, an ancient, smoking thing which made the air in the low parlour thick and foul-smelling, in defiance of the open windows. Silently, his brown, bony hands clasped on the table, he looked over to his father's bed. His grey-streaked hair fell on his brow, his large, beardless mouth was slightly open, and keen and tense was the look from his deep-set eyes.

"Michael," the sick man now murmured, "Michael, open t' winder!" "It's open, favva!" quietly replied the son, who had already given the same answer to the same demand so many times this evening. A while later, "Michael," he heard, "tomorrow George's cabbages mun be hoed."

"Aye, aye," muttered the boy at the table, and he did not take his eyes off the old man. The breathing became heavier. Now and then it sounded like a rattling, which was followed by a short cough.

"Michael, a little milk, if tha cud gi mi!"

The son ponderously stood up from the table and fetched the milk. Slowly he carried it over, slowly and clumsily he gave it to the old man, who spilled a little.

"Shame abaat that!" he said with difficulty.

It seemed that the sick man was now sinking into sleep. Short, snoring sounds came over from the bed. The boy sat at the table again. He had his head resting on his hand now. In this way, he stared straight before him at the grimy tabletop, on which half-burned moths and midges lay around the lamp. "Aw'll be blowed, aw'll be blowed!" he murmured to himself a few times, as if he were surprised at something quite unbelievable. Then the old man over there stirred again.

“Michael,” he said, “Pfrommers John’s sure t’ curse if aw doan’t help im cut is barley.”

“Doan’t fret, father, aw’ll cut it,” murmured the son at the table.

“An’ aw hev t’ spread manure for Semme.”

“Aw’ll do that too,” the boy consoled him.

Again all fell dead quiet in the parlour. But outside in the black, sultry night one could hear that wind awakening which comes before a storm.

The gaunt man at the table had a great sense of uneasiness all of a sudden. Today, it was a completely different night from usual. It seemed to him that he must do something, somehow intervene in the course of things.

“Favva,” he said, “shouldn’t t’ doctor hev a look at tha?”

The old man propped himself up, almost quickly, in his pillows.

“What tha blabbing about,” he reproachfully rejoined, “tomorrow int Wednesday!”

The man at the table lowered his head. Certainly, the doctor did come to the remote village only on Wednesdays. But then something else occurred to him. “Ha! Tha know, he came to Mayor John’s wife in the night one time.” The old man laughed, as well as he could. “Am aw a woman in childbed? Ha ha.” And then he grew serious, lifted up his withered, leathery hand, and murmured, “For mi wife, Michael, and for thi wife, who came, eh? Fool, a doctor at night-time, that int for t’ poor!”

The son was silent and stared straight ahead. Perhaps he realised how foolish his plan had been.

“Fava,” he said, a long time later, “appen aw should fetch t’ priest?”

At first, the old man seemed not to hear. He lay there breathing heavily, then he coughed a few times and murmured, “Nay, Michael! Let im sleep, t’ priest, he has enough t’ trouble him during the day.”

Again it became quiet. The boy let his hands fall, as if he had run out of good advice, and the old man slumbered. A distant thunderbolt flashed behind the roof of the bakehouse, and the leaves of the nearby walnut tree rustled more loudly in the rising wind.

The son now slowly walked over the loudly crunching sandy floor to his father’s bed. He did not know what he actually wanted there. He was just so used to always being by the old man’s side. During the day, at work in field and acre; at night, in the double bed which the father now occupied alone.

A distant, muffled thunder rolled towards them, rumbling through the night. “Is t’ Mayor heving wood chopped already?” Frieders Michael murmured half-unconsciously, perhaps reminded of felled fir-trees in the wintry wood by the resounding crashing and rolling.

“It’s a storm,” the son answered briefly.

The old man opened his white-lashed eyes wide. “Aw hope it waint be hail – there’s still so much fruit outside, and t’ lovely fruit –” he anxiously gasped out.

“We have ahrs at oam!” said the son, and around his large mouth there twitched the beginning of a meagre smile, born of bitter poverty which does not have anything for hail to ruin.

“What tha blethering about,” the old man reproachfully replied,

sinking back. "Go, fetch thi book!"

But the son's angular limbs felt heavy as lead this night. He did not want to go for the old, well-thumbed little book which contained the prayers to be said during storms.

"It waint come so reet soon," he murmured, and he himself did not know if he meant the distant thunderstorm or something else by this.

"Favva," he said all of a sudden, and he bent over the old man, "favva, us two hev always been toge - -"

Nothing more.

Sweat appeared on the broad, angular forehead of the old man in his heavy, hot bed. There were clear drops even in his snow-white hair which nobody wiped away for him.

All his life, Frieders Michael had wiped his sweat away himself.

"Boy, boy," he said with difficulty, "when tha sow, tha mun take small steps, and when tha thresh, not cut so wrongly down from t' top, and in Pfrommers John's hop-garden tha hev t' begin hoeing at t' top end, and next year George's field needs sheep-folding,¹ and - -"

A tormenting cough interrupted the old man's words, forcing him to swallow the rules of conduct for his boy and struggle for breath.

The son stood helplessly and watched his heavy tribulation. Two, three times his brown hands twitched, as if they would reach out – but what then? What? Frieders Michael had coughed alone all his life also. After the fit, the old man lay motionless on his full pillows.

¹ The manuring of a field by turning sheep into it.

The storm now approached quickly. Claps of thunder rolled incessantly, making the green windows rattle in their rotten frames.

The rain poured down onto the shingle-roof in splashing streams.

The old man did not move.

With weary steps, the son fetched the grimy little book which contained the prayers to be said during storms. He leafed through it a long time beside the smoking lamp, and then he found something different: "Words one can call to one who is dying," was written there.

Frieders Michael's Boy gave a start, and his eyes slowly widened. As if the stifling oppression that had been tormenting him were leaving him, that was how he felt.

Running his finger along the lines and quietly moving his lips, he read. His head was reeling, like a man's who does unaccustomed, hard mental work. Where should he begin?

Hard and rough came the words out of his dry throat: "O God, I feel shame before you for the life I have led. Much evil have I done, much good neglected." – He stopped. It seemed to him that he was not at the right place. His searching finger slid onwards, and now it said:

"O God, Father, I am a great sinner and have not earned Heaven but Hell."

"Michael," sounded very weakly over from the double-bed, "who dost tha mean?"

The reader lost the thread. His feeling finger slid down off the book. Yes, who did he mean?

"It's writ here," he said quietly and in consternation.

The old man raised his tired head a little.

“That’s just for storms,” he murmured hoarsely.

“Aye, but what else?” Michael asked helplessly.

A last, fleeting smile flickered across the pale, emaciated face in the double-bed. “Nothing but my mother’s verse: ‘Be ever true and righteous too, until your chilly grave’”² –

The old man did not finish speaking. The words had died in his mouth.

*

*

*

At the crack of dawn, when people saw that the new day would be a good day for work, the messengers came from three, four farms, wishing to get Frieders Michael and Frieders Michael’s Boy to work for them for the day’s wages. But Frieders Michael did not join in any more. He was on strike, the old one. Long, stiff, angular, he lay in the double-bed and let his leather-hard hands rest on an actual workday. And the boy could not work today either.

He had to wait for the priest.

The priest looked at the old man a long time. Unusually long.

“How did he die?” he then asked quietly.

Michael scratched at his grey-streaked hair and said nothing.

“I mean: did he die peacefully?” pressed the priest.

“Aye, aye,” murmured Michael.

Again the clergyman looked at the stiff old man.

² The first two lines of Ludwig Hölty’s (1748-1776) poem, ‘Der alte Landmann an seinen Sohn,’ (‘The Old Farmer to his Son’).

“Why didn’t you fetch me?” he then asked, without taking his eyes off the rigid face.

Frieders Michael’s Boy was glad that he had an answer to this at least.

“He didn’t want to. He said tha had troubles enough during the day – us should let thi sleep.”

The priest stroked the leathery hands very softly,

“Did he still want to pray?” he asked a long time later, looking into the dead face all the while.

“Not exactly as such,” replied Michael, slowly and reluctantly, “he only recited t’ verse from is mam: ‘Be ever true and righteous too, until your chilly grave.’”

The priest turned round to Michael; but nothing did he say.

*

*

*

Frieders Michael had a big and a fine funeral. It fell on a Sunday.

Even rich John Pfrommer was there in person, and he said, quite audibly, “Aw’d as lief have had mi barley cut first, but at least t’ funeral has fallen on a Sunday.”

The priest spoke much and spoke long, there’s no denying that; but there was one thing that surprised Michael: he said the dead man had passed away to the peace of the people of God with the most beautiful prayer on his lips.

And yet Michael had told the priest so clearly that his father had only recited an old verse.

The Witch of Steinbronn

(*Die Hexe von Steinbronn*. Hamburg-Großborstel: Verlag der Deutschen Dichter-Gedächtnis-Stiftung, 1911)

The people of Steinbronn had always believed, like other Christian souls, that only the manifold vices of mortal men originated from the detestable Devil's arsenal.

It was Samuel Dorn, the tailor from other parts and recent immigrant, who first brought them to the suspicion that many things which were commonly called virtues must also have a dark origin and have planted their finest roots in those regions where boiled pitch and sulphur make the shining asphalt for that broad road which leads to damnation.

Was it not the Devil's doing that this reticent, wizened old tailor never, ever lost his patience, even when his life was as doggone lousy as could be?

Was it not the Devil's doing that Samuel Dorn remained calm even when his yellow-faced wife with the piercing bird's-eyes lay idly in bed for days on end and had her old husband carry water, light the fire, make the soup, indeed, even wash the wretched linen, without bestirring herself?

Would a single Christian man of Steinbronn ever have done that without directing the bitter question at God the Omniscient, why in the name of three devils had he got married?

It came to light that the tailor was Catholic. On top of that, an Austrian. Or a Slovak. In short, a dubious character. He spoke about the Danube now and then. And the rich baker's son, Fritz, who had been

around pretty much everywhere, he said that the banks of the Danube were a region for mousetrap dealers and related trades.

The people of Steinbronn were enlightened enough to know that the Devil, who was behind the uncannily patient little tailor, was not the fiend with a long, shaggy tail, short horns and a cloven hoof in person. They knew for certain that the Prince of Darkness, just as well as the dear Lord or the King, has his men to do his work.

And it did not long remain hidden that Seph – that very bed-ridden, yellow-faced wife with the piercing and restless eyes – was the instrument of darkness.

The tailor danced to Seph's tune. He read his orders in her eyes, from her radiated the subjugating power which held all the Austrian's manliness, all his willpower, in its grip like boys grip a cockchafer.

Who can blame the people of Steinbronn for avoiding the strange woman, indeed, for hating her and making a detour around her? It is not known who was the first to say that Seph was a witch. But it was as if what was tangible in the air had simply been expressed. It was only the last, light push which shattered the crystal. And like every true, actual witch, Seph avoided everything that could have thrown a light on her real nature. She kept far away from the people whose ruin she plotted, she averted her piercing eyes when one looked at her, she went on her way in almost sneaking silence and timidity, and she gave a greeting when nobody else would think of giving one.

Because witches know everything by themselves, she showed no curiosity. And because witches hold all power and victory in everything in

their hands, she never argued and always pretended to yield.

Can Christian people stay calm when Children of Darkness walk around among them disguised and veiled? Is it not as if the air were filled with sultriness, as if invisible tinder were being heaped up by dastardly hands? Tinder, which can suddenly, at any hour, make the roof over your head go up in flames!

Those of Steinbronn would almost have preferred the infernal power of this strange woman to forcefully break out the once in some scandalous deed, rather than for each and every one of them to be under the spell of expectation. However, pale Seph crept wearily through the alleys searching for the sun, while the unfortunate tailor had to do the work at home.

Then spring came. Gale-force winds violently shook the forests around Steinbronn and broke down all that was no longer young or healthy enough to suffer life to well up anew.

At the same time, Seph suffered a stroke which paralysed her left side and her tongue.

It was a remarkable coincidence that on the very night when this happened, the rich baker's wife, mother of widely travelled Fritz, had prayed on her knees: "Deliver us from evil, dear Lord." She had of course prayed in her chamber behind locked doors. Nobody but God alone could have heard this, for at that time her husband and her son were down below in the bakehouse making the dough for the fifteen loaves of rye-bread which the landlord of The Horse Inn had ordered for the day-labourers who were to plant hop-poles for him on the warm mountain-slope.

The rich baker's wife had not always been pious. But now she made up for what she had failed to do in her youth. And like almost every late-found piety, hers also was too full to be able to slip quietly and naturally into the bare spaces, the voids, and the shortcomings of this life, to happily even everything out and make all smooth.

Clumsily and voluminously, the piety of the baker's wife stood on its short feet. When it moved, all the boards creaked; when it tried to sit down, every chair was too narrow; and there was absolutely no possibility to hide.

And so that nocturnal, unwitnessed praying came to light. Each and every one in the village knew about it and fortified their faith in God from the fact that the Lord of Heaven will, like a good hunting dog, seize the right prey at once when one cries to him, "Take hold!" without further instruction.

So the strange, timid woman lay struck down and rendered harmless in her wretched bed, beside which the tailor sat on his worktable and patched potato sacks in which seven cats could no longer have caught a mouse.

In earlier days, it had not been the custom in Steinbronn to have such sacks patched. There was no tailor far and wide who would have accepted the hopeless work. But to the Austrian, whose strings were pulled by the yellow witch, one could carry anything, whatever it might be. He sat with his wife, sewed, kept silent, and did not grumble about the spell he was under.

In spring, the people of Steinbronn have a festival which dates back to ancient times. It begins early in the morning with a cannon salute. It

ends in the late evening in the inn with noise and shouts.

The garlands of pine-twigs which are necessary for this festival are bound several evenings before by the single young men and women in the former mayor's wide courtyard, the back of which adjoins the little house in which the tailor couple lived.

This work was never done quietly, and at that time was perhaps done more loudly than ever. The baker's son was talking big, telling tales of abroad, of his journeys and his adventures with foreign girls.

Twilight fell, and the laughter and shrieking grew louder. Behind the mayor's apple-tree, which had reddish flower-buds but not yet any leaves, the full moon rose grinning.

"Yes," Fritz the baker's son boasted, "I know what's what with women. And the ones with black hair, with flashing eyes, they're the fieriest. I once flirted with one..."

He was going to continue talking, his tongue was in full flow, when all of a sudden the old tailor was standing, as if he had grown up from the ground, in the midst of the wreath-binders.

The moon shone on his small face, which twitched strangely.

"Ssst," he said, stretching out the sound, while putting a finger to his mouth as if he would urge them to be silent, "Ssst, Seph, Seph..."

The youths around him fell silent. Astonishment stopped their tongues. What was the miserable little fellow doing in their midst?

"Hey, tailor, what's the matter?" one of them asked.

The little man turned towards him. Very humbly, he murmured in his strange dialect. "A litt'l quiet, if ye could be, ladees un' genulmen, a litt'l

quiet –” It seemed that the surprised youths were thinking of an answer, but the tailor had already withdrawn, and the old back steps in the little house could be heard creaking under his steps.

Now the cool-headedness of the much-travelled man came in useful for Fritz the baker’s son. “Say,” he shouted after the little man, “did your yellowface send you? Tell her she should come herself.”

And from the steps, from a corner into which the moonlight was not able to shine, a voice cried back: “Is right – I won’t f’rget –” They then disputed, with much laughter, whether it had been the voice of the tailor or of his mistress.

“She’s lying in bed, Yellowface, and can’t move,” said one of the girls.

“And what do you know,” a young man retorted, “the ones with black hair, with lightning eyes, the ones that Baker’s Fritz knows, the fiery ones from the Danube down where Seph comes from...” His words were submerged in shrieks of laughter.

On the following evening, when the golden youth of Steinbronn was again assembled in the former mayor’s courtyard for praiseworthy activity, the tailor walked in amongst them once again. This time, he did not come quietly, unnoticed and timidly. He went straight for the high-stacked pile of finished wreaths, like a man who has his goal before his eyes and knows exactly what he wants, and took one.

They fell upon him as upon a thief caught in the act.

“Stop, tailor! That’s not on. The nerve!” rang out in a chaos of cries, and Fritz the baker’s son took the wreath from the tailor’s hand with a

hasty tug. The old man looked around him, as if he had been roused from sleep. He stammered something which sounded like, "Seph, Seph," then his look became more conscious and sharper and rested on Fritz's healthy face. "You," he said very quietly, and yet in a strangely penetrating and menacing tone, "once again now!" And he strode away.

The committee which was responsible for decorating the streets and the houses did a great part of the work in the evening by the moon and lantern-light. The tailor's dwelling faced the main street, and it was also to receive green decoration so that the old and pitifully wretched house would not, like that guest in the Bible,³ cause disgrace through a dress which was not fit for a wedding.

But when the assiduous, eager young men knocked for admission, the tailor did not open the door. No glimmer of light could be seen behind the closed shutters. So the resourceful fellows dragged a ladder over without further ado and hammered the nails for the wreath into the window-ledge from outside.

But when the bright sun shone in the street early on the morning of the festival day, the wreath which had been hung up had disappeared. Unadorned, the house looked scornfully into the day. Now the marshals of the festival were furious. Two young men were sent to the house to make the situation clear to the vagrant rabble and force them to do what was needful.

Hot with rage, and menacing, the two of them climbed up the stairs.

³ Matthew 22:11-13.

Silent, cooled off, they came back down.

At first they only made dismissive gestures and would not speak at all. Then they said that Seph had the wreath; but Seph lay there like dead. Yellow as a lemon, stretched-out and rigid, her scrawny hands folded over her breast under the wreath. And the tailor squatted beside her on his worktable like a monkey. He did not move and did not speak and did not take his eyes off the black-haired woman.

At first the sons of the village looked as if hens had stolen their bread. Then a short laugh burst out.

“She won’t be dead, the – or the tailor could breathe easy –”

“Until the witch is under the ground, the power will stay with her,” said one of them.

The festival took its course. The cannons banged, making the mists on the spring-damp meadows tremble and undulate.

The Steinbronn artillery master-sergeant was a grey-haired joiner, a former gunner who had fired along at Belfort.⁴ The cannons never could roar loudly enough for him, and when Fritz the baker’s son said, “Matheis, don’t spare your powder, the tailor’s witch has snuffed it,” he ended up putting in a triple load.

The bang from this was heard as far as Niedersteinbach, and the gunner, although he had plugged his ears with tow and opened his mouth wide at the shot as the regulations of his former battery prescribed – he felt a blow as if he were once again an apprentice with his wicked mistress.

⁴ Besieged by the Prussians in the Franco-Prussian War, from November 3, 1870 to February 18, 1871.

But he laughed as well. He laughed and thought that this blow had been the last malicious act of the yellow woman for whom the shot was meant.

After the festival, heads were heavy. In the tailor's house, the few people who are necessary when the silent Godfather has called in went to and fro. They could say of the tailor that he was all around the dead woman like a growling dog and nothing they did was to his liking. The shirt and the pillow were not fine enough, and when they talked about payment the old man went for them like a wildcat and asked if he had ever yet owed anybody money?

The day was warm, almost hot, on which Seph was carried over to the little Catholic God's acre at Niederbronn. Even though they set out in the early morning and four pairs of bearers took turns, it was bitter toil with this scrawny little woman. Stones or lumps of lead could not have made the wretched coffin heavier than the yellow-faced stranger did.

It was a small procession which walked behind. The festival still lay in the heads and limbs of the people of Steinbronn. The tailor, who walked behind the bearers, was wearing a long black coat which nobody had ever seen him in before, as well as a hat which was too big.

While they walked through the village, the little man looked around a few times, as if he wanted to see who had all joined the procession. But even though here and there someone stood at their door or in the street watching the coffin go by – only a few women walked over to accompany Seph.

In the end, the tailor bowed his head and pulled his big hat deep

down.

The bumpy way led through the belt of forest which surrounds Steinbronn. Under the pine-trees it was cool, and from the depths of the forest came the resounding cries of roaming children. Then the panting men laid their load in the moss and began to dry their wet foreheads.

The joiner, who had seen to the cannon salute, sweated the most furiously. "Tailor," he said to the widower with good intentions and without malice, "if you've had to bear such a burden with your wife for a lifetime as we have this half-hour today..."

He was about to say more. A sympathetic word from man to man, which cannot be denied any Christian soul; but the coffin moved.

The tailor flared up and yelled out, "There ye! Ye laid it on a root, folks! Lay it doon somewhere else, folks, if ye –"

And the bearers now saw a resinous, cartilaginous Scot's-pine root running through the moss like a curved snake. Nobody had seen it previously. They did not lay the coffin elsewhere for long. They had had enough. In silence they took it up; in silence they walked on under the pine-trees and out of the green belt onto the cracked, loamy paths which lie within the bounds of Niederbronn.

The women stayed behind at the edge of the forest. Those from Steinbronn are on bad terms with the people of Niederbronn and do not willingly enter their bounds.

The feud is age-old. On occasions it was about faith, on occasions about a right to wood or straw or a right of way. Since rights of faith and the right to wood have been regulated by the state, the outer order has

improved and the inner hatred has intensified.

Nobody knows if the tailor noticed that the women had stayed behind. He only pulled his big hat a little deeper yet over his wrinkled face.

Beside the path there is a wide, not very deep pond, which has belonged to the people of Steinbronn from time immemorial. Its water has a strangely dark hue, as if it had a black bottom. Water-spiders twitch over the surface and yellow buttercups and laughing forget-me-nots grow all around the flat edge. The pond is said to have one spot which is unfathomably deep. The people of Steinbronn say that a nunnery once stood on the site of the pond, and the Devil fetched it down one fine night, leaving a little hole open to Hell.

But the people of Niederbronn will have it that in ancient times, a mayor of Steinbronn had taken up digging for treasure with the Devil's help. He had come down very deep, to the place where gold lies as stones do in a field. But when he tried to grab it, water burst out of the ground, filling the deep shaft, drowning the treasure-hunter, and helping the people of Steinbronn to acquire a pond whose evil origin could be seen clearly enough.

Today the dark water did not lie peaceful and unmoved. Fritz the Baker's son had ridden his father's fat white horse in to water it. The young man sat in long boots on the unsaddled nag, which was enjoying itself in the sun-warmed water, whinnying and snorting. Heavy clouds of brownish mud rose up around the horse's hooves. As they rose like thick smoke, one could see for the first time how clear the darkly gleaming water was when it lay at rest over the boggy ground.

Fritz the Baker's son was no less happy than his fat horse. He bellowed out a song about a dark-brown girl and struck up sprays of droplets from the water with his long whip.

No wonder that the sweating bearers of the mournful load had a strong desire to tarry awhile.

They put it down in the middle of the path and trudged through the tall, dense grass, around the pond, as if they intended to encircle the neighing horse and the singing comrade.

The tailor looked up and moved his lips. Perhaps he wished to say that they really should not place Seph across the path like that, in among stones and clods of earth. But then he kept quiet. Slowly he walked over to the coffin, and very gently he sat down on it. At the place where his wife's feet lay.

And so, his back turned to the men of Steinbronn, he looked out, from under his big hat, over expanses of ripening fields where larks rose rejoicing. Grey and lifeless was his wrinkled face. It almost looked as if he was about to fall asleep.

Then there was laughter behind his back. A cry rang over, as if meant for the tailor. He was about to pull himself together, about to look around. But something large was already flying over the coffin, right beside the little man whose coat and face were wetted by sprayed drops of water. A horrified look passed over the tailor's countenance.

He jumped up and staggered forward. He bent down so low to the ground that his hat rolled far across the path.

He picked up a stone. A sharp-edged limestone with a fresh, bluish

fractured surface. For a second he weighed it in his hand, and then he threw it with a wheezing yell after the Something which had leapt over Seph's coffin.

That Something had been the fat white horse, drops running from its glistening flanks, with Fritz sitting on its back.

Pulled forward by the powerful momentum of his throw, the little tailor reeled over his hat.

But up ahead the horseman also reeled.

The men of Steinbronn ran up. Fritz, having slid off the unsaddled horse, was already lying his length on the path, and the white horse trotted towards the nearest meadow.

This had happened like flash and clap. Even if the joiner-gunner had not quite clearly heard the tailor shouting "Seph" at his fateful throw – one could easily have known how everything hung together.

Over in Niederbronn, the Catholic death-knell now began to toll. Quick, short, and busy was its ring, different from what the people of Steinbronn were used to. It sounded like an admonition to finally bring the foreign woman over and not keep the priest waiting. The men beside unconscious Fritz looked with hostile eyes in the direction from which the sound came. A few of them took out their heavy pocket watches and nodded. The joiner said in a loud and harsh voice to the tailor, who now stood motionless in the middle of the path: "You can carry her yourself, your bitch –"

Then the little man bent down, picked his crushed and dented hat up off the ground, and began to wipe the dusty yellow loam off it with his

sleeve.

“I’ll do that, I’ll do that, Your Grace,” he said in a totally choked voice, as he had always said when people brought him the hopelessly torn potato-sacks.

The comrade lay on the path, his young blood trickling out from his thick fair hair.

“We’ll take him home first! The living come before the dead,” said one of the men.

So they took hold of Fritz and lifted him up. Others fetched the chomping horse from the glittering, morning-damp grass. And they went away with their bleeding fellow villager and did not look round at the little Austrian tailor and his evil partner. In the distance the eager Catholic bell called in vain.

The tailor kept hold of his battered hat and cleaned at it. His scrawny hands trembled, and his face looked ashen.

He watched the men leaving, all of them, even the last one. Then his old eyes became big and appalled. He dropped his hat and took a step after the departing group.

But then he stood with limply hanging arms, like a crushed man, and a plaintive cry came out of his mouth, which sounded like “Seph, Seph!”

- - - - -

The Catholic priest of Niederbronn and the gravediggers there were the first to come afterwards to that place close beside the pond. They went

as far as the district boundary to meet the dilatory foreign guest of their small God's acre.

Only a good while later did the bearers from Steinbronn come, reinforced by the mayor, the policeman, and so many men and women of the village as would have sufficed to bury its richest and noblest native.

But all those who came there came in vain.

On the hot path, which was as hard as a threshing-floor, a small rivulet of dark, dried blood showed where Fritz had lain. Not far away lay the tailor's trampled hat and, another stretch further on, a pair of large, broken shears.

Gingerly, with cautious fingers, the joiner picked them up. "Lord above," he said uneasily, "the tailor has thrown his shears away! And shears in a sack is the only thing that helps against a witch. - Now she has him body and soul!"

The priest from elsewhere said nothing about this; but his face formed a hostile and contemptuous expression. The mayor saw this, and he turned harshly on the joiner and his foolish words.

And now they found two small, round, brown lumps of wood at the wayside, each with a shining nail in it. The mayor scrutinised them rigidly and he said that they were two feet of the woman's coffin which had been nailed on too badly and in too slipshod a fashion for them to stay on when the wretched little wooden house had been hauled over the bumpy path.

The joiner's hasty blood rushed to his head. "Since when have coffins been made to be dragged?" he angrily rapped out. "Should I have mortised and screwed in the feet as for millionaires? Who's going to pay

me for my work?”

And all of a sudden this “who’s going to pay” occurred to other people, and they looked for the little tailor with sharpened eyes.

At the edge of the pond, they found uprooted and squashed buttercups, and crushed forget-me-nots. The water was black and uncannily thick. It was darkest and cloudiest at the place where the people of Steinbronn have the sinful nunnery, the people of Niederbronn the mayor who was greedy for gold, lying in the depths.

The pall lay neatly and tidily folded not far away in the grass. For days a search was made for the foreign couple with hooks and poles. There were voices which said that if the joiner had not made the coffin so sloppily that water could leak through every gap, there would be no need for scouring.

Others said that a real witch could make any wood sink. And the yellow-faced one had simply drawn the tailor to her in the coffin after he had thrown his shears away, and before she descended into the Devil’s Pond.

For the little man to drag the load over the wayside and lunge it into the water, that would be quite impossible, the bearers maintained. For a dead person had never been so heavy for them, the strong men, to carry as the woman with the bird’s eyes.

The surface of the water has long stayed motionless over the boggy bottom. Only spiders twitch over it. Fritz the Baker’s son, with his patched-up skull, no longer dares to ride his white horse to water there. Not even in that part of the pond where the horse can find the bottom. When he sees

the water, he is seized with a horror more intense than is felt by anyone else. The people of Steinbronn say that this does not come from his patched skull alone.

Everyone feels sorry for the tailor. He was at heart a good little man. They had been able to give him the smallest potatoes, the thinnest milk, the worst-baked bread in place of payment without his making any protest.

If only he had not thrown the shears away at that moment! That was the ruin of him. God have mercy on his soul! prays the baker's wife.