

German Short Stories of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Carl Busse (1872-1918)

1. **Communion**
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Communion

(from: *Der dankbare Heilige und andere Novellen* [The Grateful Saint and Other Novellas], 1900)

A few years ago, I had some business to attend to in a small town in Silesia. For a long time, the idea had been floating around in my head of instituting inquiries there about possible ancestors of my family. The trail clearly led to that town, and in response to my inquiry, the priest's office informed me that the church registers from the second half of the 17th century were still, at least in part, extant. So I took advantage of a necessary stay in Breslau¹ to make the small excursion.

When I asked the portly hotelier about the priest, his face lit up. And from the way in which he answered me, I could quite satisfactorily infer the veneration the entire town felt for the man of the cloth.

The priest's house did not lie hard by the road, but was built somewhat back from it. In summer, the house may have been half hidden by the foliage of the massive chestnut-trees which stood in front of it like guards – now, in autumn, it glistened pleasantly through the already half-thinned trees. Here and there on the garden path lay burst-open husks and

¹ Now Wrocław in Poland.

ripe fruits, which two street urchins were fishing for through the fence, and when one of them managed to reach a chestnut, there was a shrill cry of triumph which perhaps carried further in the crystal-clear autumn air than it would have done at other times.

The priest himself blended with the friendly house and the calm clarity which radiated all around. Composed serenity and quiet peace, which knows no storms and no disconcertment, were written all over his face. He was one of those people whose mere proximity does one good.

He willingly showed me the church registers I had requested, ceded to me the small library-room situated next to his study, in which I could leaf through the yellowed, worm-eaten volumes to my heart's content, and did everything else to lighten my task. The priest's wife, giving no heed to my protests, placed a modest breakfast on the table and then withdrew together with her husband. So there I sat, now able to carry out the intention I had been harbouring for a long time. And I did indeed begin to search: The people were baptized and confirmed, then they married, they themselves registered children, they died. It was strange to see whole generations, as it were, filing past me here. And all the names were of the long-dead and the long-forgotten – names, whose bearers no living person knew any longer. One could not help feeling a stillness inside, and I turned page after page more carefully, as if I would disturb the dead otherwise.

In the room there was a cosy warmth. The bookcases all around, the badly mildewed copperplate engraving above the door, all the furniture and armchairs with the bolsters, which were evidently presents from grateful female confirmands, must have been decades old, and they

looked as peaceful and snug as if the spirit of the master of the house had passed over into them. No wonder that one forgot time.

And so it could come about that I paid no heed to the hour and was no little surprised when the priest and his spouse asked me to table. The invitation was made with such amiable naturalness that a refusal would have been impossible. After the meal, we chatted away for quite a while, so the afternoon was already quite advanced by the time I could return to my work. When it was finished, towards evening – without success, incidentally –, I was happy to let myself be detained a while longer.

I can still see everything as though it were today. The three of us were sitting in the spacious study. On the right, in the grandfather-chair, smoking his usual pipe, the priest; beside the lamp on the desk, his wife, with some needlework or other; I more to the left, telling them about my work, my life, and my plans. Suddenly, outside the front door opened and slammed shut again. The wind may have pushed it open. I broke off and fell silent, for I noticed that my hosts were listening for something. Then the housewife rose and quietly walked to the door.

“It is nothing,” she said, looking at her husband, when she came back.

He nodded and fetched a deep breath. It was as if a gentle feeling of trepidation were leaving him. Somewhat sheepishly, he begged my pardon and encouraged me to continue.

But the short moment from the opening of the door to the present had engendered a strange, almost uncanny mood in me. I quickly came to an end, and all then stayed silent for a long time, as though there were

something between us. The priest stared straight ahead with absent eyes. Now and then his gaze wandered over to the wall. On it hung a small picture in an ordinary cardboard-frame. It portrayed an old woman. I could not make out her features.

The silence began to torment me. I was just about to rise and take my leave with a few grateful words when my host seemed to wake up, as it were, and asked my forbearance so amiably that I was slightly abashed. I candidly told him that a strange sensation had crept over me earlier, adding by way of explanation that many things had befallen me in my life to make me susceptible to such atmospheres. He exchanged a quick look with his wife and said hesitantly: "I also have experienced much that is certainly very curious, and people would call me a fool if I told them about it. Or actually: there is only *one* thing which has happened to me that made an unforgettable impression on my mind, but it is all the more extraordinary for all that. Moreover, I am neither a nervous man nor highly imaginative in any way. Formerly, I told this story on occasion. I have not done that any more for a long time now. And I ask you not to press me today. But as I do after all owe you an explanation after what occurred earlier, I shall write down the incident I mean, and send you the simple account. I hope you may then find some rhyme or reason in it!" –

I had not yet left Breslau when I received his notes in a carefully sealed letter. I have changed next to nothing. At the top of the account was written in pencil: "Romans 11:33." When I looked this up, I found the words, "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

And I found the following strangely touching occurrence related on the few sheets:

I have now been the priest here for twenty years and have no cause for complaint. When I arrived, I found an industrious population who worked vigorously on weekdays and then, on Sunday, so far as it was possible, did not let the church bells call to them in vain. And faster than one had any right to expect, the town began to flourish. The further development of the nearby mines did its part in this: large factories were built, a great stream of workers was added to the number of inhabitants. And although there were many elements among them who were hostile to the Church, I still got on well with the people as a whole, and many a one of them poured out their heart to me in my study. It always gave me the greatest pleasure when a worker came in the late evening, which was not a rare occurrence. For most of them originally came from the villages in the district and preserved a little devotion for their old priest, who had confirmed them. Because they could go to church themselves only rarely at that time, before Sunday became a day of rest, they would sometimes knock on my door when their working day was over.

One evening – many years have passed since then – I was sitting by my lamp over the volume of sermons by a famous preacher from Berlin. The book is in my library still today, separated from the others, and placed inside it as a special bookmark is an old envelope which I grabbed in haste that evening. There had been much for me to do during the day and I was somewhat tired. So I must have failed to hear a knock at the door. And I

did not look up until the lamp began to smoke and a perceptible draught struck me.

And a little old woman was standing in the doorway. She may have been nearing sixty and had a grey shawl over her head and shoulders. I could not see her exactly, for it was dim at the door, and my eyes may also have been strained by reading.

“Well, good woman, what do you want?” I greeted her, giving her a nod of encouragement.

“Oh, Father, could you please come right away – to Corn Alley – a dying man would like Holy Communion – 23 Corn Alley – but it must be right away, not as late as tomorrow. If you would be so good, Father - -”

“Of course,” I said quickly, rising to my feet, “I shall come at once. I’ll be ready in a moment. So 23 Corn Alley?”

“Yes, yes!”

My wife was laying the table for supper just then. She helped me to get changed. And women being the way they are, even mine, who had been my most faithful companion through the course of so many years, could not suppress a soft sigh at the excellent meal going cold.

But when she heard that I was required by a dying man, she herself urged haste upon me.

I know that I took out my watch. It was half-past seven. Then I walked into my study, ready to go with the old woman.

“Well, good woman, now shall we - -” But I did not finish my sentence. For the room was empty. The little woman must have left already. Perhaps the fear inside her had driven her home. Well, I knew the

address: 23 Corn Alley.

Corn Alley lay at the end of the town, close to the factories, and was inhabited almost exclusively by workers. In among a few tenement houses there stood small shacks which provided just enough room for a family. And No. 23 seemed to be one of these shacks, for the woman had given no name.

Strange, that I had not asked! I looked around. A light fog lay in the streets, in which only a few people were to be seen. Suddenly it seemed as if I saw the little old woman in her grey shawl in front of me. I walked faster – we could make our way together, and she might give me a few hints about the poor soul who would soon be going to the eternal home ... But I was mistaken. A shadow in the fog may have misled me.

At the same time, it occurred to me that the old woman had spoken a dialect which was not usual in this area, however much it revealed a Silesian origin. This dialect may have been the reason why the few words she had said stuck so singularly fast in my mind.

Finally, I reached Corn Alley. Indeed: No. 23 was a shack. A single window on either side of the door. Above it, another and smaller one.

The front door was locked. I had to knock. Shortly afterwards an old cloth, which served as a curtain, was pushed back from a window, a casement was opened, and a bushy head appeared.

“Who’s there?”

“The priest.”

“Gracious me, Father, what are you doing here so late?”

“I have been called to a dying man.”

“To a dying man? Nah, Father, you’ve made a mistake in the house number! Here, everyone’s healthy.”

“Why, isn’t this 23 Corn Alley?” I asked in astonishment.

“That’s right! But that about the deathbed – nah! Since my wife went to Breslau, I’ve lived alone in this house and I’ve no wish to bite the dust yet. Franz Moller is still living above me – well, if I’m not thinking of dying yet, old codger that I am, he definitely won’t be. You’ve completely misheard, Father.”

For a moment, I began to wonder. But the words of the little old woman positively rang in my ears: 23 Corn Alley. It had to be right.

“An old woman asked me to come,” I calmly said. “Does one live here, by any chance?”

“Perhaps Mother Patzelt. But that’s further up – No. 21. That may well be it. Old Patzelt has been on his deathbed for weeks now. Well, goodbye, Father.”

He was going to close the window, and I was already thinking of inquiring at No. 21, when with a sudden resolve, and to perfectly salve my conscience, I said: “Pray let me in. I’d like to go to the other man upstairs. Something might have happened after all.”

Half laughing, half grumbling, he opened up and went back into his parlour without saying goodbye. I laboriously climbed up the steep steps. At the top I lit a match, and with its flickering light I discovered the door on which “Franz Moller” was roughly written in chalk – the visiting card of the poor.

At my knocking, a young fellow flung the door open. His bare,

powerful breast gleamed out of a coarse, half-open woollen shirt. He may have been at the beginning of his twenties, and his face, though not exactly fine-featured, was open and honest, and made more prepossessing by a certain touch of childlikeness.

There followed the same scene as downstairs. He was not ill either, nor had he sent the old woman. In the end, I was on the point of heading back and had already said, "Good evening," when he suddenly, a little shy and abashed, called me back.

"I actually have a request, Father ... don't take it amiss, will you ... I just thought because you're here ... and you were so kind to old Schwarz from the factory ... then you could perhaps ... perhaps ... well, it's like this, Father, I don't come to church on Sundays, the likes of us must clean the boilers and lubricate the machines and God knows what else. One looks like a pig until midday. And then one dresses oneself fairly trim and goes out a bit, and that's all. And because I don't come, and one would, when all's said and done, like to take Holy Communion again, then I'm asking very nicely, perhaps Father will give it to me now."

The childlike feature in his face was more strongly visible than before, and his good-natured brown eyes looked at me with an honest plea. When he saw my astonished face – I may also have shaken my head – he said, before I could give a word in reply, "Oh well, well ... It can't be done, I see. Then don't take it amiss. At home we always had to go to church, our mother drove us to it, and the year I was still in the village after my confirmation, she always took me along to Communion with her. Now I haven't received it since I started at the factory. And that'll be some three

years ago now.”

A curious feeling came over me at his words, just as if I should not go by the book here and I had to grant the poor soul’s dearest wish. But misgivings still stirred within me.

“Holy Communion,” I told him by way of reply, “is also called the Sacrament of the Altar. The servant of the Church may only bring it to one who is in danger of his life and is no longer able to walk before the altar. Besides, a quiet preparation through prayer and confession - -”

“Father,” he interrupted me, his eyes shining, “you will give it to me.”

Had he read the urge of his own heart in my words? – there was a joyful certainty in his voice, and as though vanquished by this rocklike certainty, I nodded and said, “Yes!”

He heaved a deep sigh of relief, excused himself for one moment, and stepped behind a curtain.

So there I was alone, and almost never before in my life had I felt so strange.

The room in which I found myself was low. If you stretched up your arm, your fingertips touched the ceiling. With the little lamp, which shone with a truly sparing light, you could see little enough. A rough table here, a chair there, a bed over there, on the wall above it, if my eyes did not deceive me, a picture, and a few illustrations from cheap magazines nailed to the door.

It took only a short while for Franz Moller to reappear. He had put on a black Sunday coat which he had rather outgrown and dressed himself up as well as was possible in the hurry. His face was serious and solemn. He

glanced at the chalice with timid reverence.

Well, we prayed and spoke Church confession. He did it with fervour. Then I gave him Holy Communion. And as surely as I hope for a blissful hour of death one day – I have never felt more solemn and more pure, and I have never felt so close to our Lord and Saviour, as I did in this worker's dwelling.

Franz Moller would not hear of my going alone. He wanted to at least accompany me through the workers' alleys. I willingly allowed this. On the way, I made enquiry at No. 21. Nobody knew anything; old Patzelt was doing better; his wife had not been at my house. So I reconciled myself to the idea that I had been the victim of a crude joke. A priest in a town which many different elements call home must be prepared for everything and learn to bear it. And when I saw the young worker's calm, happy face, I did not regret my trip.

Next morning, my wife rushed into the room, deeply agitated. Our local newspaper had issued a special edition. It is still in my possession today. In it, an announcement in boldface that at eight-thirty this morning, in the large factory in X-, a boiler explosion had taken place which had killed the worker Franz Moller and seriously injured another.

I have one more thing to add: The brother, who eked out an existence as a smallholder some miles to the north, came over for the funeral. I saw him first by the grave, and after I had spoken – my voice trembled all the while – he came up to me and bashfully pressed my hand. I spoke words of consolation to him and accompanied him from the nearby churchyard to the town. At once, with the very first word from his mouth, I

recognised the dialect. I had heard it on that evening when I was called to 23 Corn Alley. Franz Moller himself did not speak it – the three years in the factory here had effaced it.

My heart beat with every word that I spoke with the brother of the man just interred. Almost without thinking, my steps turned towards Corn Alley.

“Look, look,” said the worker, who had opened the door for me that evening, “you were right after all, Father. I don’t understand it.” – My answer has slipped my mind. I only know now that he looked after me in amazement as I climbed up the steep steps with the brother.

And so I saw the room again. Now it was bright afternoon, everything was bathed in light and pleasant. The illustrations were still stuck to the door, and above the bed there still hung the picture which I had not been able to make out at that time in the dim illumination.

I moved closer. I held on to the bedpost, my knees were trembling so badly. The picture portrayed the old woman who had called me to go to 23 Corn Alley. The dead man’s brother may have noticed my interest.

“That’s our mother,” he said by way of explanation.

“Why did she ... not come to the funeral?”

“Oh, Father, she’s been dead a good three to four years now. That was why Franz had to go away, you know.”

I asked no more. But I could not take my eyes off the picture.

“By the way – I have another one at home – exactly like that. Father, if you would perhaps ... perhaps ...”

He could not get the words out. I had to help him. That is how the

picture came into my possession. It hangs in its old, ordinary cardboard frame on the wall beside my desk.

That is all I have to tell.