

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Hans Hoffmann (1848-1909)

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The Yearning of the Dead

Unmoved in the frosty night lay the great sea, and heavy darkness above.

It was around the time of the frozen nights, when the sun turns in her yearly course, the time of great yearning and new, timid hope; the earth has become desolate, frosty, and dim with mists. Henceforth, however, it can become no dimmer, the thread of darkness has been spooled out and can grow no more; the light must break through and, secretly spreading, end up victorious. The time must turn, it will become finer weather day by day. These are the nights of yearning, when the new realm of the sun is born secretly, in dim shudders, to future splendour, the new summer, the new harvest, new strength and joy in life.

Unmoved lay the sea; only a shudder above it like a muffled sigh, a sigh of longing for release from the darkness. Unmoved lay the high dunes at the edge of the sea, frozen rivers of sand which, brooding wearily, silently concealed lurking life. They towered up in deathly pallor like an endless, gruesome chain of wan faces of the dead; beneath them, the bare, palely gleaming stretch of shore. Still no glimmer of hope; the night

had no light among the hanging clouds, not even the cold twinkling of the stars.

The hour came when the sun was at its deepest under the sea, the hour when the earth was closest to death; then a light shone forth from the highest top of the range of dunes, deep, silent and mysterious, and whirls of sand streamed up like roaring clouds of steam, and out of them grew a giant head, the shoulders covered with long white locks waving down from the crown and softly billowing, and two large, blue-shining eyes slowly opened towards the darkness. And the large head spoke: "Midnight is here. There will be change, yearning grows, the calm will end. You may rise up out of your deeps! The Old Man of the Sea is calling."

And a strange rippling soon began to move over the vast sea, though the wind stayed as still as before and no sound travelled through the air; it came mysteriously, a kind of surging and swelling, from within. The head looked, large and calm, over the swirling expanse. And the surging became stronger: wave upon wave rose over the surface and reared up ready to leap, billow after billow rounded its back and rolled itself up and shot forwards, but soundlessly, soundlessly; inaudible gushes of foam spurted into the depths and sprayed whitely streaming clouds back up. It silently flitted over the darkness as with a hundred thousand fluttering garments and tore the darkness apart with pale, unsubstantial shapes.

And they hastened and pressed out of the soundless expanse towards the shore with a silently dogged craving, a hundred thousand all at once, a raging army of ghosts, all driven to the battlefield by the same urgency.

But where they plunged down in a shower of spray onto the pale sand, they did not perish in weary curls like waves driven by the wind, and they were not devoured by the mass of spray that followed them; rather, they gathered themselves out of the foam and took firm form as they stretched up into shapes like jerkily mobile human bodies in pale garments. And with long strides of yearning they hastened across the beach, inland and up, to where the precipice of the dune rose up like a stronghold.

And the silent hordes began to scramble up the deep, deceptively yielding sand with passionate exertion, but perpetually in vain; always they seemed to approach, panting, the ridge of the summit, and yet they never reached it.

The large head turned its serious eyes towards the confused billows; rising higher over the crest of dunes, it stretched out shimmering arms to right and left, waved them in a gesture of forceful repulsion, and tore the far-reaching silence apart with a voice of thunder:

“Unhappy ones, what do you want?”

Then a whimpering and wailing arose in reply from a hundred thousand voices trembling from confusion, and they all cried in pleading misery:

“We want to live! Just live a little while more! Just bring to an end our days, which were suddenly cut short! In the deeps there is no rest from the longing for life.”

“I know,” said the head, “the Old Man of the Sea knows your fates: you are the dead whom the sea has swallowed throughout the millennia. I

see your bones, chilled to the marrow by ice, glow with febrile heat, I see the orbits of your extinct eyes flicker with the yearning which awakes in this hallowed hour every year. But would it not be better for you to continue enjoying painless rest, rather than strive up with dim desire into racing life again? Believe me, it would be better for you, Poor Dead!”

Yet the groans in the restlessly surging army of spirits only became more impassioned; the upstretched, imploring arms, shimmered whitely with a timid lustre, and “Life! Life!” echoed fervently out from the distant, blind desolation of the sea, a storm-song of harrowing yearning. “Let us live the time that was taken from us, that we lost on earth.” The giant head bowed its brow in deeper thought and spoke in a calm voice:

“Every year at this hour, it is granted to one person to return to the light and live out his life until he has had his fill of living. So speak to me, and I shall judge who had the most taken from them. – Speak, what have you lost? What do you have to make up in life?” it asked the tall figure of a man who, a flashing sword in his fist, had raced ahead of all others.

“The waves swallowed me in the midst of victory, in my great sea-battle. One more hour, and a new empire would have been formed to last for centuries, and my glory would have risen to eternity. So great a loss have I suffered. How can I get over that?”

Thus did the drowned man lament. But the great head smiled gravely and said to the strong one:

“Try to make your way over here; if your aim is worthy, you will reach it.”

Then the forward-presser made a charge at the top and stormed

over the edge; but up there he staggered on like a drifting sand-cloud, darted past unstoppably, suddenly collapsed, and dissolved like smoke.

“Empty! Empty!” the head said coolly. “How small is your greatness, how trivial your aim! If your empire existed a thousand years, or that of another, what would it matter to the peoples! A bare form! They continue to live one way or the other and spread over the earth. The world lost little with your life.”

And it asked another, who approached it in the form of a blooming youth. And he replied:

“I was sailing towards my wedding, my happiness, when my ship sank. I lost unspeakable bliss. If I could live only a year more, I might overcome my restless yearning.”

“Try it!” said the head, and he pressed forward to the top. But he fared like the first one; he dwindled and dissipated.

“How could you know that you would find happiness? Love is not only joy, love is also cares and sorrows. Countless men have gained what was denied to you; the burden of life was not lessened. Go, rest in peace! Your loss can be got over.”

The third one to approach was an old man with a bald head and a high, furrowed brow, who spoke in a solemn voice:

“For fifty years have I struggled, working unceasingly for the noblest aim: to instruct humanity, to finally free it from age-old delusions. The stars are not gods who direct the fates of men; they wander blindly along their prescribed course, following the eternal laws of a greater being. I had completed seventy years, the chain of my conclusions was firmly forged

into a brazen ring; certain of victory, I could announce my truth. I sailed over the sea to the wisest of peoples, but I never made land; the stars were veiled, lightning shattered my helm. I left the world unliberated from its delusion. Let me return to fulfil my high calling, and my name will be eternally blessed among men.”

He reached the summit and dispersed into dust.

“The delusion was broken without you a long, long time since. Did you seriously believe, poor man, that a great thought ever burgeons forth from a single head? Many divine it simultaneously, and time matures it; when harvest-day comes, the fruit may be picked. Your name or another’s? It is all one.”

The great head fell silent. And more approached, one after another, thousands upon thousands, and every one named a different loss that caused him torment. And every one gained the summit, only to flutter away.

Towards the end, a young woman came who spoke to the head: “I was carrying a little doll with me as a present for my child, when I tried to return home to her; it sunk with me, and the little one missed out on her delight; I cannot get over that. I would like to live only an hour, so I could make it up.”

“How long is it since your misfortune occurred?” asked the Ancient of the Sea with a soft smile.

“It may be a hundred years since,” the woman said dreamily.

“Then your little daughter will have grown up, died, and been buried long since.”

“What about it? In that case, I’ll surely find a little grandchild on earth or even a great-grandchild, and if not that, then some other child whom I can delight with my doll. I would just like to see such a little child give a smile again.”

When she had said this, laughter and whispered mockery broke out among the airy swarm: “She dares to force her way back into life for such a little thing! For a wretched toy, which each day manufactures in hundreds of thousands and then breaks! For a doll! How childish!”

“What is little? What is big?” the head asked composedly. “What is a crown but a toy? Or if not a toy, will it bring happiness for as long as a doll does to a child? Where is the measure for human joys? Where is a measure for yearning? – But this woman brings a measure with her that is not without validity to us: she does not long for pleasure for herself, as all others have done before her.”

The good woman spoke: “Oh God, the sorrows of humanity – how many of them there are! In a long life, sorrow will not easily take root in the heart of one who had his honest fill of pleasures as a child. It is solely from the sunshine of childhood that the healthy strength springs for people to resist the hard stress of their later years with joy. Happiness in the morning makes one strong in the evening. Who can know if a single joy too few in childhood will not make the man break down under his cares one day? Who knows if my child did not break down? Why shouldn’t I be willing to put down, for another young soul, that very morsel of joy which it perhaps still lacks to steel it for life? I would readily try it, if I were granted an hour, or only a minute.”

“Then try it!” said the great head, and the woman climbed up easily. And behold – when she was on the top, she glided, shining, over the dune and glided further, walking in a solid form and not dissolving at all, as the others before her had done. Her figure just became ever more radiant and fairer, and a gleam of light came out from her like a softly brightening sunrise.

The Old Man of the Sea made a fearful movement with his broad arms over the horde of ghosts and cried over them: “Enough! The one has been found who may secretly return to life today. You others, withdraw to your deeps until the sun reaches its solstice again.”

Then the figures retreated and fell silent in their misery; without a word, they sank into the depths and passed into water, and throwing themselves into the tide, they surged forwards, and there was nothing more to be seen than wandering crests of foam which rolled by in utter silence, thousands and hundreds of thousands of them. The great head watched them from its solitude without anger and without compassion.

And it also watched that woman who shone as she moved onwards and came ever deeper into the land, out of the desolation of the dunes to the places of men, where they lived with their cares and struggled on through persisting pains.

And seeing a light shining down from the first cottage, she floated in through the window on its rays and looked around for a child. And she soon found enough of them in this first home and reached a little shyly into her bosom, to fetch out the one little doll which she had been carrying on her since the last hour of her life.

She gave the doll to the youngest child, and when it shouted out for joy, while the others dully stared, she reached once more, without quite intending to, inside her dress. And look – she found the doll again, and even another toy with it which she had not had before, and she gave them both away and reached into her bosom one more time, and again found both presents along with something new. And so it continued; the more she gave away, the richer she became, and her wide garment swelled with joyous splendour.

And now the children all stood around her as around a mother, all eyes laughed and shone, and their shy whispers slowly grew to sonorous jubilation. And at the last, none of them cared about the giver anymore; each one played with its doll and laughed and twittered, and she stood to one side, happiest of all, and watched them playing so delightfully, and her dull eyes shone and laughed, as pure as the children's.

Only for farewell did she lift the smallest one up and kiss it and say very quietly, "You might be my great-grandchild. You have eyes just like my sweet child had. And you can laugh just as heartily. For certain, you're my descendant! Oh, how happy I am!"

And when the others pressed up to her and bombarded her with jealous tenderness, she said soothingly, "And you too. – And you too. Yes, all of you are my descendants, all of you, all."

And she glided on, and she came bringing blessings from house to house and made the children happy and was made happy herself. But the grown-ups saw no more of her than a flickering glow, like the fleeting flash of a wave in the morning twilight.

And the lovely woman did not weary of gliding or of giving until the last child closed its eyes and she found none still awake. Then she returned to the open night, where the stars were now twinkling, and said to herself with a smile:

“Now I can rest and find peace; today I have aroused as much joy as if I had given birth to ten children and raised them to happiness. My yearning is satisfied!”

She spread out her arms and let herself fall. As she was passing into sleep, a soft wind lifted her up and carried her out over the great sea and put her gently to bed under the solemn stars, to be at peace. The sea was now perfectly still, but for slight waves which gently laid themselves down on the shore, as tired children softly snuggle into the loving motherly breast.

And the heavens bowed down over the sea like a bliss-bringing tree, which bore, instead of blossoms, hundreds of thousands of radiant lights in its branches.

The Devil's Wall

In Halberstadt in days of yore, which was still an episcopal seat at that time, there lived a well-propriety maiden by the name of Ilsebill, who was so appallingly ugly as no maiden living nowadays can ever be and as no poor man's eyes could ever bear. But she categorically refused to believe that she was so misshapen, rather regarding herself, if not exactly as a beauty, at any rate as a bit of a dish.

“It may indeed be true,” she would say, “that my right shoulder is

somewhat higher than my left one, but at the same time, my left leg is longer than my right one: so it balances out. And when people say I squint – well, have it their way: but I do so with both eyes, and so their symmetry is undisturbed. And my mouth may be somewhat big, and my teeth somewhat long, but that makes my nose all the finer and smaller, in fact, just a little button. My hair may be ginger and my complexion yellow: but these two tints go wonderfully well together, as one can observe at any sunset. So I need not be ashamed of being seen, I should say.”

In spite of having such a good opinion of herself, she was full of venomous envy towards all other maidens and women, and also very haughty on account of her wealth; in addition, she was avaricious and miserly and very hard-hearted towards the poor. The greatest part of her income she laid out on jewellery and resplendent clothes, for her mind was wholly set on enchanting a man to marry her.

But it must be a nobleman, of that she was quite certain. When she was seventeen years of age, she settled her desire on a Prince; a year later, when none of these had taken the bait, she thought to content herself with a Count; when they also stayed away, a Baron or even a simple nobleman would have fitted the bill. But unfortunately, they were just as shy.

When she was twenty and several years old, she calmly said: “Well then, I’ve always said that the nobility of today is entirely degenerate and depraved, and has for a long while now been out of joint with the times; strength and worth lie only in the citizenry.”

And now she pursued rich merchants or high officials and such

stately people. But from year to year, she climbed deeper down, coming in the end to the small shopkeepers and pedlers and respectable craftsmen; by the age of thirty, she would not have turned down any tailor. But nobody stepped up, not even for her great wealth. So she went to an old woman who followed the trade of procuress, as well as being a witch, and had herself put up for offer throughout the land among the poorest peasants and neediest farmers. And they came in droves to check out the bride, but one after the other checked back out in fear, sorrowfully saying: "Better to starve than have such a monster in the house." And the last one, who was up to his neck and just about to go under, cried out loud, so she heard: "Now I'll go and hang myself. Let the Devil marry her."

And he was true to his word.

This exclamation went round and round in the poor abomination's head for a long time. Finally, she anxiously posed herself the question: "Would the Devil do it, by any chance?"

And she went back to the old witch and asked for her opinion. The witch shook her head doubtfully and at length gave her this answer: "Squire Satan is a hard-boiled bachelor and the only woman he'll suffer in his house is his grandmother, and she has him firmly under the thumb. He fears marriage, as evil people fear it, because then they'll have to help to rock babies and do all kinds of pious works. It's even rumoured that he's afraid he'd have to enter church; for women tend to be particular on that point."

"I wouldn't insist on that," said the wicked maiden, even though she herself was pious and went to church every day.

“All the better for him,” replied the witch, “and that could perhaps tune him to be a little more tractable, and I must say this: I think that he would like you. Your appearance will appeal to him, for a start.” Miss Ilsebill smiled, flattered.

“You see, his eyes see oppositely to human ones,” she gave by way of explanation, “everything that they find beautiful is disgusting to him, both people and things, and what they call ugly is his delight. He lies in ambush for pretty women with such relish for the very reason that they cause him vexation, and he brings them into temptations to which they of course succumb; the ugly ones who do his eyes good, he rather leaves alone, and that is why they are, in the main, more virtuous.”

Ilsebill grimaced but swallowed the bitter pill, for she was quite simply accustomed to much by this time, and said a little coyly:

“Perhaps he just has better taste than people do. And there are also many among them who find the ugly to be beautiful; and they think they are especially clever, so I suppose they actually are. But how could His Sable Majesty get to make my acquaintance?”

“On Walpurgis Night on the Blocksberg, of course,” answered the witch. “I’ll lend you a broomstick.”

“But that’s a long time away,” sighed the maiden, “more than a whole week.”

“Indeed it is,” said the old woman, “but time does pass. However, if you’re in such a great hurry, there is another expedient. Do you know the

Rosstrappe¹ opposite our dance floor?”

“Why, of course I know it. A desolate area.”

“Doesn’t matter, it has its advantages too. So, the Devil has his registry office on this rock: you’ll be amazed by how overcrowded it is. That’s where he joins in matrimony the couples who want to get married for the sake of money or a noble name. There’s a veritable migration to this rock, I can tell you. You know the stupid story which people are fed about the Princess who fled from the giant, her suitor, and whose horse imprinted its hoof in the stone. That’s sheer nonsense! No, quite the opposite, she was in such a terrible rush to go to the registry office.”

“That seems more likely to me as well,” Ilsebill confirmed.

“Well then,” the witch continued, “it’s quite simple. You’ll hire a fellow who’ll play at being your bridegroom and take you to this registry office; for no unattached person is admitted. He just needs to steer you in; afterwards, he can say no with all his might – and he will of course do that. But this case will cause an immense sensation there, it’s never happened before, and that works in your favour, for it will direct attention to you and to your particular kind of beauty which you have in the Devil’s eyes from the outset. It’s called the *beauté du diable*, French being his favourite language. But there’s one piece of advice I’ll give you: don’t for God’s sake give him any favours before he has formally married you. Don’t agree to a kiss beforehand, or he’ll have you in his power straightaway. Why, it’s long been known that if you give him your little finger, he’ll take the whole hand.”

¹ A 400m-high crag in the Harz mountains, famous in legend (cf. No. 403 of Bechstein’s *Book of German legends*, translated on this site.)

Miss Ilsebill went home rather depressed; for her going to marry the Devil had made her anxious. In particular, the question of how he would feel about the church ceremony caused her grave concern; it was perfectly clear to her that he was sure to use evasions. But her desire to marry overcame all else, and she very soon decided to follow the witch's advice and to at least make the Devil's acquaintance! And after all, she could always think things over later on.

She summoned a workman who was as poor as a church mouse, and who, as everybody knew, did not know fear, never yet having trembled in his life. She offered him a gold coin, hard though this was for her, for she was almost as miserly as she was ugly and pious; in return, he was to take her to the Devil's Registry Office on the Rosstrappe as her apparent bridegroom. Only, she did not reveal to him her actual purpose, that is, to marry the Devil; she was a little ashamed of this, for he has no good reputation.

But the man was horrified, for he could not but think that all this was aimed at him and she intended to carry him off into holy matrimony through a ruse; and he began to shake like an aspen-leaf, and he vehemently refused to follow her there. So she was left with no choice but to offer a gold coin more, although it almost broke her heart. Yet not until she had conceded ten coins was he unable to resist any longer, and he bowed to her demand.

She now ordered a carriage and drove at a gallop towards Bodetal Vale and the Rosstrappe. On the way, the man made several attempts, at peril of his life, to leap out of the coach; but she jingled the money he was

to receive, and then he sat still, quietly sobbing to himself for fear.

When they had finally reached the foot of the Roßtrappe and climbed up the steep rock, for there was no roadway at that time, they walked into the Devil's office, which was up on the top there; Miss Ilsebill let her escort walk before, and that was prudent, for otherwise, he would in all probability have stolen away in the nick of time.

A great many couples had already assembled, and they both had to wait a long time: that was only to the workman's liking and seemed to him to be a temporary reprieve from the rope. The brides were mostly unlovely of countenance and scrawny of figure, but splendidly dressed.

The Devil discharged his office with great zeal, and one couple after the other were dispatched. He wore a tail coat, for this article of clothing had been invented by the Devil even by that time; nobody else, however, wore it yet. He had stuck his tail in his coat-pocket, hidden his claws in white gloves and his cloven hoof in patent-leather boots; he had put a top-hat, which was his invention likewise, over his horns.

And so he looked very respectable; for the Devil is not so ill-favoured of countenance: he has in particular a really sweet smile, with which he seduces so many poor souls. Moreover, his eyes wink roguishly and amiably, and he knows how to waggle his ears gracefully.

Now when it was finally the turn of Ilsebill and the fake bridegroom, and the Devil asked him if he would take the maiden standing beside him to wife, his breath stopped for fear, and he could not force a sound from his throat.

Then he could not but think that his fate was fulfilled, that the Devil

would take his silence for a “Yes” and swiftly wed him to her. His eyes popped out of their sockets, looking like they were on stems, and he cursed his avarice for having made him undertaken this hazardous venture.

But at last, when the Devil really made it known that he had such an opinion and intention, he did manage to, initially at least, shake his head forcefully; and with that, his lockjaw was loosened and he immediately bellowed out such a booming “NO!” that even the Devil started back affrighted. And when he had got over his shock, his state turned to one of intense astonishment, in which he remained for a good while. So he threw an inquiring look over at the bride: and the sight of her overpowered his heart. “Doom and damnation,” he said to himself, “never before have I seen such a charmer.”

Then he took a slight step forward and silently wrung the man’s neck. “For first of all,” he said by way of explanation, “such a raggedy starveling does not belong in my Registry Office. And secondly, it’s too great a pity for this woman to see her, even for a moment, standing by his side as his bride. And thirdly, nobody should take the Devil for a fool.”

And he was right – nobody should do that.

Ilsebill was also happy that the fellow was dead, for he had done his bit and could only cause her inconvenience in future. The Devil now looked over at her again, stared at her with lustful eyes, and fell in love with her with such great force and swiftness as only he can manage. And the more ardent his infatuation grew, the more he pulled the most singular and hideous faces, and Ilsebill could not help laughing out loud, to her own

alarm: she feared she would thereby forfeit his favour, which she had felt straightaway. But her laughter was so spiteful and nasty that his love for her just flared up all the more fervently.

He also noticed from her bashful bearing that she was not unwilling. And leaving all his clients in the lurch, he came up to her with happy squeals, slipped his arm round her waist, hauled her to the edge of the rock, and whistled through the air with her in one mighty leap over the valley onto the high Witches' Dance-Floor.

“So, and now a dance, pronto,” he said happily, while putting her down, “but such a one where the skies dance along; and then – hurrah! – off into the bushes!”

“I shall grant you a short dance at most,” she replied bravely and firmly, “although I don't do so very willingly right here, for that could bring me into disrepute; fortunately, nobody will see us. But I cannot allow any other touching before marriage, not even a kiss on my hand.”

At the word “marriage,” the poor Devil went pale as death and shook all over; though he did recover and swear by his grandmother's beard – for she has one – that he would marry (at which word he almost choked) her even tomorrow if she would do something for him today. But she knew what to make of the Devil's, as many other men's, promises of marriage, and cried out three times with great force and emphasis:

“First marry! Marry! Marry!”

That was too much unpleasantness for him; he went into terrible convulsions and spasms and soon lay stretched out in a lamentable swoon. At this, she was afraid he might die on her and she would lose her

husband, so she looked for a bottle of smelling salts to revive him. However, she found nothing but a vessel with holy water which she had drawn in the cathedral and brought along by way of precaution: for one never can know when one might need such a thing. She held it under his nose and moistened his forehead and lips.

He leapt up into the air with a horrible hissing and snorting, and immediately jumped back over the ravine to the Rosstrappe.

She was satisfied for today; she knew he would come back to her, for his infatuation sprayed through all the cracks, and she went down through the Hirsch area to the Bode gorge where her coach was waiting for her. Then she got in and drove back to Halberstadt at a gallop.

The poor Devil, once the smell of the strong water had dissipated a little, prowled around the Blocksberg and through other rocky solitudes in perfervid infatuation, like a horned tomcat, and soon went searching through the towns of the people in the valley. But he found his loved one neither in Quedlinburg, nor in Balenstedt, nor in Blankenburg, nor anywhere else that he went. He did not go to Halberstadt: he readily avoided it because the bishop dwelt there and was heavy on holy water.

But because the Devil, during this time, did not do his job of leading people into temptation, but rather, in the manner of lovers, daydreamed the time away, there happened something strange and unprecedented under the Moon: all over the world, no more sin was committed, even less a crime, not even a mischief. And then, within a short while, an even stranger thing came to pass: a dull, powerful sound rang through the skies all around, sounding like the groans and the echoing yawns of a numberless

crowd. This came about from a tremendous boredom lying heavily over every land like a cloud brooding disaster; and the most pious souls of all secretly sighed in their chamber, "Oh, if only someone would lead me into temptation to commit a sin once more, even if it were only a really small one, even if it were only a little tipsiness or a secret kiss; but I don't know how it is, I can't do it at all. Or if my dear neighbour or anybody else would get up to something really sinful, so I could be virtuously appalled at it and be righteously outraged! But that's a no-go now also. Humanity is growing old." That was how depressing things looked on Earth in those days, and the Devil, neglectful of his duty, never had anything in his head but his thoughts of love.

Maiden Iselbill was better off. For one thing, she had no yearning for sin, having always abstained from it as doggedly as she had from virtue and good deeds. And for another thing, she knew exactly what she wanted and what she could do.

When Walpurgis Night came round, she went to her witch, borrowed an anointed broomstick, and flew with her to the Blocksberg. She had once again tucked a vessel with holy water, an even bigger one this time, into her pocket, and although she was not allowed to take it with her onto the summit among the witches and demons, this really not being the done thing, she did place it somewhere lower down, beyond where the rabble would go, on an easily recognisable stone of a peculiar shape, with a small hose beside it.

When she reached the top, she found an infinite swarm of people already there, dancing, milling around the broad hilltop in mad whirls with

bloodcurdling yells of joy, in a mist lit by flashes of torchlight. But she did not find Master Devil until after a long search, sitting inactive on his throne, completely crumpled up and gloomily doleful in appearance. Even his horns were now hanging limp and bent a little to the side, not to mention his tail, which hung down like a weeping willow.

The maiden was delighted to see this, for it showed her how strongly she had the wind in her sails, and she observed him from a demure distance for a long while. Only when it was time for the Ladies' Waltz did she make her way over to him and invite him, with a curtsy, to the ring-dance. He leapt up from his throne squealing a wild "Yippee!", fell at her feet, and tried to kiss her hands. But she withdrew them with the short answer, "If you please, marriage first!" But she spoke the word only the once this time so as not to throw him into a swoon again, for that would not favour her purpose.

But all the same, he behaved so flusteredly, so pitifully, running around squeaking in a circle like a rat whose hold is stopped up, and could not calm down for a long time. At last, however, he recovered his senses and thought up a sensible excuse:

"But *how* are we to get married?" he said defiantly, "it can't be done in my Registry Office, for firstly, there is only one official there, and I'm him, and secondly, we're marrying for love and so have no rights there. You will realise only too clearly yourself that I cannot have myself wed by a priest. And then I must also give you warning: you would get my grandmama as your mother-in-law, and believe you me, it's no easy matter to live with her. She is the uber-mother-in-law to end all uber-mothers-in-law. So you'd

better put the idea of marriage out your head. And indeed, free love is the most modern kind.”

Ilsebill gave a slight shudder, and at the same time she saw that his counter-arguments were right. However, she did not give the game up for lost, but reflected awhile before saying at length:

“We’ll throw mother-in-law out the house of course, that’s my first condition. And for the other concern, how about my crossing over to Islam, for example? You couldn’t have much of an objection to make to marriage in that case, could you?”

“Nonsense,” growled the Devil, “Mosque or church or temple or sacred grove or whatever the place may be, it’s all the same: no ten billy-goats could bring me into it. That goes against my nature.”

“We could have a home-wedding,” she suggested.

“A priest’s a priest,” the Devil cried with vehemence, “I would suffocate if I had to stand erect before such a fellow. It’s all impossible, utterly impossible.”

Now she had really run out of ideas; for in those days, there were no human registry offices yet, the Devil having reserved that for himself. But she still did not entirely lose heart; rather, she said eagerly:

“If I have some time to reflect, another idea is sure to occur to me, and I’ll find an expedient which satisfies both of us. Farewell for today; it is past midnight, I must go home.” But now the Devil went hopping mad and cried scornfully and imperiously:

“Oho, my sweetie, this is my dominion, here you are subject to me and must bow to my will, whether you wish to or not. Come to me, to my

arms, you gorgeous treasure!”

And he seized her wildly and forcibly wrapped his arms around her. As she had no power to resist, she did something else: she reached her hand in between his horns and softly scratched his head. That softened his mood, and he purred contentedly and desisted from his wild behaviour. She cleverly made use of this and said cunningly:

“Ugh! Kissing in front of everyone! That goes against the grain for me, as churches and priests do for you. You have to be just, and I’ll yield to you. Come away from the summit a little, where it’s quiet, and we can be delightfully alone, and there I’ll willingly scratch and kiss you, there we’ll make ourselves comfortable.”

The Devil is just: he uses the same measure for the King as for the beggar, and he fetches the one as well as the other, if he can get a grip on them. And as you know, he is also stupid; so he let himself be beguiled.

She clung to his arm and so led him with gentle force down to the stone where she kept her tool. Quickly springing forward a few steps, as though she wished to tease him, she grabbed her hose, and when he flew towards her, full of turbulent tenderness, she sprayed the whole load under his nose.

Howling, he started back ten steps, then hastily wiped his face; yet he could not even curse for several minutes, so holy is consecrated water. And he could not find any other words for sheer fury.

Ilsebill calmly said, “You see that I’m safe from you. There is a whole pot of holy water here. So be sensible and betake yourself back to your people like a good boy. I’m riding home.”

The poor Devil now whimpered pitiably and pleaded fervently, she must at least scratch him between his horns one more time. But she was well on her guard, and cocking a snook at him, she mounted her broomstick.

He came out with another plea: "At least give me your details, so I can enquire after your health."

"That'll be after marriage," she coolly replied. "But you can know my house; you may flirt at my window."

And she filled him in. Though the town was unpleasant to him, she knew right away that he would come; his love was too great. And as she flew away, he looked after her, gnashing his teeth, and yet filled with ardent admiration.

"That truly is a devil of a woman," he purred in delight. "I must have her, whatever the cost."

And so he returned, full of longing and sorrowful, to his mountain throne. Towards the next evening, no sooner had he slept his fill than he was there on the spot, handsomely attired in hat and clothes which concealed all those distinguishing marks that betray him, promenading before her house and peering at her windows

She soon showed herself at an upper window and pulled a hideous face at him. He took this for a charming gesture and inviting sign and made ready to cross the road and enter her house. But she hurriedly opened the window and directed a hose at him in warning – this time, it was a sizeable hand-pump hose – and he ran several streets away. Only when it had become quite dark did he secretly return and spend the night in yearning

plaint on her threshold. When day dawned, he went back to his mountains. This went on for several days while Maiden Ilsebill incessantly tried to think of a means by which she could marry him. And whatever a woman wants to do in all earnestness, she carries through, especially in matters of marriage.

In the end, she really believed she was on the right track. She had heard that when a couple say, "This is my husband," "This is my wife" in audible voices before the ears of a priest, a fully-valid marriage is thereby concluded.

So she went to her Father Confessor, inquired about this, and received confirmation from him. Now she confessed her desire for marriage to him, but said nothing about the Devil, only that it was a man who had travelled from out of town and was generally respectable but, from a curious confusion of ideas, did not believe in Holy Church or its power and rights, and would not hear of a wedding before the altar. For that reason, he had to be forced into a Christian wedding in this particular way. The good priest's eyes flashed with joy when he heard this. "We'll do that," he cried, rubbing his hands with a smirk, "we'll win a soul, a soul for the Church! Once he has become a Christian husband, I bet you anything we'll get the lost sheep, or rather ram, into our holy stable. We'll win a soul! When shall we go to work?"

"This very day, preferably," she quickly replied, "men are a fickle sex, and there are so many wicked women who seek to ensnare them. So one must be alert. He comes to visit me every evening towards dusk; if you will be on the spot then, I'll thank you for it, and Holy Church will not come

away empty-handed. But I must of course conceal you somewhere, in a cupboard or a chest, in such a way that you can hear everything but he does not see you, for otherwise he'll run away from us double-quick."

The priest agreed to everything and promised to come punctually.

And he was true to his word. Coming as early as the afternoon, he had a really not too uncomfortable space prepared for him in a large chest whose lid was closed, but in such a way that a wedged match created a narrow chink which nobody would easily notice from the outside, but through which he could see and hear everything quite splendidly.

The Devil came at the usual hour and began his languishing strolling trot. Ilsebill leaned out of the window and called to him, as there was nobody else in the street just then:

"I can't bear to see your misery any longer. Come up, I'll satisfy your desire. A small, quiet formality beforehand will content me. You must do this to please me, as I am, after all, giving you so much more. What I wish is nothing more than your saying to me, loudly and solemnly, 'This is my wife,' and I'll say, 'This is my husband.' And that will seal our union. If you have not changed your mind, come on up."

"There is no holy water up there?" he first asked distrustfully; but when she firmly replied in the negative, he no longer feared that she was telling an obvious lie and leapt for joy across the street and ran up the stairs like a schoolboy, when it so happened that his hairy tail, because it curled so delightedly, sprang out of his coat-pocket without his noticing and its tuft merrily wagged between his coat-tails. In his amorous mood, he did not take the time to put this back in order, nor did he consider it necessary,

for Ilsebill knew exactly who he was and could not take any offence at it.

No sooner had he rushed into the room than she quietly locked the door behind him, so there would be no chance of his slipping away at the last should he, through some unhappy chance, smell a rat.

However, he remained innocent and innocuous and forbearingly let her show him the place he had to take. But before he could say his line, which seemed so insignificant to him, it so happened that the tuft of his tail came too close to the chink under the lid of the chest and began to wave around the priest's nose.

Then there was suddenly heard a whimpering from the chest, immediately followed by an uncanny, cooing, gurgling sound, which pierced to the marrow of one's bones. The poor Father Confessor had become unwell, and there was no helping it, he had to raise the lid and stick out his head to get some air.

But no sooner did the Devil catch sight of the tonsure and the clerical face that he shot towards the door, and finding it locked and the key taken out, he furiously dashed around the room and up onto the walls like a cat gone wild. For he could not, you see, escape through the window, because the Devil can only return by the same way that he came.

The poor priest, meanwhile, when he caught sight of the end of the tail and clearly heard the cloven hoof clattering, and perhaps also smelt some sulphur in the air, knew immediately that it had to be the God-bewith-us. And gripped by acute horror, he leapt out of the chest, rushed over to the door, and after fearfully shaking it in vain, he likewise flew around the room in a blind rage, with the exception that he did not leap up onto the

walls for the sake of his clerical dignity. So it looked as if they were both chasing each other in a wild hunt, when in truth each was pitiably fleeing the other. The unhappy maiden, initially petrified with horror, remained motionless in the middle of the room and let them both keep darting around her in their headless flight, as around the central pillar of a racetrack. But gradually she came to her senses and realised that her game was lost irretrievably. Then, seeing the proper time to slip towards the door in between the two wild runners, she hastily unlocked it and pushed it wide open. Now the priest shot out first, with the Devil directly after him. The latter, however, ran faster with his cloven hoof, and catching up with the priest on the half-landing, wanted to shove him to the side so he could reach the open air first. However, the ecclesiastical gentleman, who could not think but that he intended to throw him down the stairs, clung to the Devil in his anxiety of heart, as to a saving support. So the two of them rolled down the steps, closely entwined, now the one lying on top and now the other. But the Devil had a softer fall, for he is skinny and a cleric is fat. Yet they both reached the hallway fairly well preserved, where they let go of one another and dashed down the street in opposite directions, thus very soon disappearing from the sight of the maiden who was watching them from her window.

The Devil removed to his mountains, where he continued brooding the wind-egg of his love-sorrow. The unfortunate priest, after he had more or less recovered from the fright with a hearty meal, entrusted the horror-story to his particular saint, Saint Gotthard, in the quiet shrine of his heart. But the Saint himself had no idea what to do in such an unheard-of-

situation and decided to ask the Virgin Mary herself for help.

Now Our Dear Lady is fashioned and endowed so strangely that she is able to see only the Good and the Beautiful in all the things of this world, and likewise in people; she is blind as a bat to all that is wicked and ugly. Because of this, she is unsuited to world governance and has no more than an interceding and mitigating voice in the Heavenly Headquarters.

So she did not at all comprehend the maiden's mind and mad desire in all its ugliness, but interpreted it a good bit differently.

"This marvellous maiden," he said with a radiant smile, which was, however, no smile of a human kind, but so gentle and celestially faint that of all the inhabitants of Heaven, only the three Archangels had the gift of seeing it, "this maiden, in effusive goodness of soul, wish ed to accomplish the great and unexampled feat of converting the Evil One himself to the Good, and was even ready and willing to sacrifice herself, her chaste body, to this end. That was a tremendous mistake: she did not consider, or did not know, that Satan is damned for all eternity to want and to work evil, and even God and the Saviour do not have the power to redeem him, for they cannot fight against their own original will and world-plan. Nevertheless, the maiden's intention was so beautiful and sublime that I must give her a token of my grace. I think I shall make her a splendid saint who signifies something on Earth and later in Heaven. Yes, yes, I think that's the right thing to do."

And fast as the Queen of Heaven is in carrying out beautiful resolves, she floated down into the ancient church at Halberstadt, which is

dedicated to Our Dear Lady, passed into the effigy of her which is found on the altar, and walked out, in a somewhat humanised form, into the Cathedral Square and on down the alleys.

When she reached Ilsebill's house at Broad Way, she rang the bell and asked the servant-girl if her mistress was at home.

"Yes, indeed, she's in her room," the girl said, letting her in, "this way please – look, there she is sitting on her couch of idleness."

But the Virgin Mary saw nothing; because there was no scintilla of goodness in Ilsebill, body or soul, the sight of the maiden was closed to her holy eyes, she was as air to her. Likewise, the maiden did not see even a breath of light of the Queen of Heaven: for she is visible only to pure eyes.

Mary was amazed that all was, and remained, empty, and thought to herself: The serving-girl must have made a mistake, the noble maiden is not at home. I shall call again tomorrow at a rather earlier hour. And she made her way back to her church, where she spent the night, to be at hand early on the morrow.

On the next morning, Ilsebill, in a morose mood after a sleepless night, went out into the street to cool her brow a little. While walking along, she saw a small child sitting on a doorstep, and the girl had a club foot which almost resembled a cloven hoof. All of a sudden, a deep shudder passed through her heart, she herself did not know quite why. But something forced her to turn round on the spot and regard the miscreation again and again.

And now the thought came to her: "If I married Squire Satan and had a child, it might easily bring such a foot into the world with it."

And from that moment on, she cast all thoughts of the Devil far from her mind and was healed of such odious desires for ever. At the same time, however, a curious sympathy with her unborn child stirred in her heart, with the wish to do some good to comfort it. And as she did not have this child at hand, she went over to the stranger's child and gave her a penny. But as she made a stupid face and did not know what to do with it, Ilsebill went to the nearest shop, bought a doll, and gave it to her. And when the little one's face lit up with jubilant delight, a soft reflection of this radiance passed over her cold, hard face also.

At this moment, the Mother of God came walking by; and behold, she was able to see the maiden and what she did, albeit as a dusky shadow. Of her countenance, she saw only the amiable reflection; all else remained hidden from her. She immediately took an interest in this kind soul and followed her on her way. And so she saw Ilsebill entering the house which she knew from the day before, and she realised this was the very woman she was looking for. Mary was delighted and went with the maiden into her parlour and talked to her. Now Ilsebill was able to see and hear her too, also just as a shadow, as a breath in the air; but she understood her words.

“I am the Virgin Mary and have heard the news of your magnanimous and noble, but foolish, undertaking to convert the Evil One himself. That is eternally impossible. Yet I see from this that you are the type to make a splendid Saint; I shall help you to become one.”

Ilsebill's head was reeling with astonishment and she began to fear that she had taken leave of her senses; all the more so as she had, just

before, been secretly surprised at herself for doing the unknown, stupid child an expensive kindness.

Gradually, however, she pulled herself together somewhat and felt terrifically flattered that the Queen of Heaven showed such an interest in her and even wished to make her a saint.

Nevertheless, she was still at heart undecided if sainthood was not too taxing a trade for her; in particular, she felt no calling to be a martyr: but she did not dare to contradict.

Mary took her consent as read and pleasantly continued:

“I shall grant you the inner power to heal crippled children through prayer and by laying your hands on them. Thus will you spread blessings around you and become the comfort and delight of your fellow people. Arise and come with me, you shall test your power at once.”

And she took the maiden gently by the hand and led her back to the child with the clubfoot. She herself took the girl's shoes off and then let the other discharge her duties.

Ilsebill obeyed: she laid her hand on her and loudly prayed a paternoster and an Ave Maria. And then the ugly lump began to stretch and take shape, and in a short space the cutest and most useful little foot had grown out, and the little one danced with pleasure across the street.

The child's mother had seen everything from her window; only, she did not see the Virgin Mary, who had modestly shifted to one side, so as not to outshine the reputation of the new saint. The mother now fell at Ilsebill's feet and kissed her hands and the hem of her garment, giving her thanks and praise without end.

This was a marvellous delight for the new healer, for she was certainly not used to such treatment, and it is a fine thing for a child of man to have oneself worshipped.

Meanwhile, the father also came along and gave thanks likewise, albeit a little more temperately and solemnly. To this end, he brought with him a purse full of money, all his savings, for he was but a poor man, and he wanted to offer it to her. And she would have taken it, had not Mary suddenly drawn near and whispered in her ear: "Leave it, they are poor people." So she refused, albeit with an unwilling heart. But she did realise that a business could be made of her holy skill, and this put her in an even happier mood than the fervent adoration. She was now firmly resolved to become a saint.

And she did as she had resolved. She left the town, moved into the mountains, and founded a hermitage high up in the monastery valley near Blankenburg, behind the blessed Michaelstein Abbey, on the spot where a famous anchoress, Liutbirg,² had formerly lived. For living away from people seemed to her to be favourable to a reputation for saintliness.

So she lived there for many years and worked miracle after miracle. For the reputation of the healing power that had been granted her spread quickly among people, first of all in Blankenburg, and from there, further and further through the lands around the Harz Mountains and out over them to both seas.

People flocked to her from all directions well-nigh day after day,

² Saint Liutbirg/Liutbirga/Liutberga, d. c.870.

bringing their children who were crippled in their feet or hands, or who had a hunchback or had grown crooked – all such ailments. And she laid her hand on them and healed them all.

So her fame grew tremendously among the folk, honours were heaped upon her, and grateful parents donated her gifts upon gifts, making her ten times as rich as she had been before.

But in these very years, which were so blessed for her, another miracle took place slowly, slowly in Ilsebill herself, which may seem to many people to be even greater than the ones she worked. That reflection of childlike joy and holy gratitude, which the Mother of God had once seen upon her countenance, now appeared in her features so often that these began to softly change. For there is no woman born of dust, not even the most wicked, who is able to entirely resist the look of a child.

And her heart gradually softened somewhat, as when rain drizzles for long on a dried-up field of grain. And that which grew in her grain-field was joy in her work and joy in those whom her blessing made happy. And those who brought her this joy, she could not but love, and she learned ever better the lesson that no person can help but love the one to whom they show kindness.

Soon, she ordered dolls and all kinds of toys, and on top of healing children, she liberally gave them presents, and when they laughed and rejoiced, she laughed lovingly along in her heart. And it was not long before the children began to sing verses about her, as they sing to this day

about good Bishop Buko of Halberstadt.³

Around the time when these new lights of the soul which played on her countenance had settled in, the Devil learned that his old flame was living in a mountain forest and performing miraculous cures. Seized with fresh desire, he hurried to her hermitage straightaway and went up to her under the mocking pretext that he wanted to have his damaged foot healed.

But no sooner had he set eyes on her than he suddenly started back and let out a startled hiss. Then he screwed up his nose, scratched his horns, wagged his ears in contempt and cried in a furious voice:

“Ugh, how ugly you’ve become! Barely recognisable. How is it possible for a human to change so unfavourably! And for the like of this, I, old ass that I am, almost died from so many years of sorrowful love! If my grandmother knew this, there’d be a pretty mocking and nagging. For the like of this! For the like of this! Once more: Ugh!” Now, he would have liked to wring her neck, but his nose caught some of the scent of saintliness, and so he did not dare do this, but abruptly turned away without a word of farewell and took himself off, half morose, half relieved. In this way was the poor Devil finally freed from his love-sorrows, and in the final analysis, he owed this to the Virgin Mary herself.

But when he came to Blankenburg and saw a great number of pretty and rosy maidens playing catch and enjoying themselves at the Thing, he grumpily said:

³ Burchard II (c.1028-1088, Bishop from 1059), to whom legend ascribes a fondness for children.

“Ilsebill is still more beautiful than these toads, that’s for sure.”

And now a timid fear suddenly seized him: he might once again meet with such disaster as to fall in love. And he decided to barricade himself against this in every possible way. And because he thought that this danger threatened him principally from the bishop’s seat at Halberstadt, he raised a giant wall in a wide arch around his mountains facing that town.⁴

And it stood rigid, smooth, and intact for a time, and he really had no more temptation from women. But the Devil builds with as little solidity as a master-mason from Berlin, and so his work soon became dilapidated, in part completely collapsing and vanishing, in part being torn asunder and fragmented by storms. And wherever the proud old towers loom up to this day, they have become ruined and unusable. Such remains of the Devil’s wall are shown today near Blankenburg and Thale.

But even so, no danger threatened the Devil any longer, neither from Halberstadt nor from the other towns around the Harz, for women as hideous as Maiden Ilsebill was in her youth are simply not born there any more at the present day. The women who live there now are all, without exception, ugly in his eyes.

⁴ The “Devil’s Wall” is a sandstone ridge, approximately 12 miles long, stretching along the northern edge of the Harz Mountains.