

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Helene Aeckerle (1875-1940)

Helene Stökl (1845-1929)

Helene Aeckerle – A Sacrifice

What it was that had brought them together, neither of them understood any more. The delusion had been a very short one. After only a few months, they regarded each other with hostile contempt, with inconsolable astonishment.

He was a man of the world, whose kid gloves seemed to have grown onto his hands: outwardly, highly cultured, perfectly formed, considerate – inwardly, uncultured, brutal and inconsiderate.

She was a nervous egoist; a sensitive, timidly anxious type: capable of moments of the most highly intensified emotion, – however, entirely incapable of any lasting strong emotion, of any significant action.

In the characters of these two people lay the reason for their not being able either to bear the hated shackles with dignity and self-control, or to cast them off with resolute mind.

Their life together was an eternal chafing and tugging – a clanking of chains, – an incessant, loud complaint and accusation... But they stayed together: he shunned the world, – she the resolve...

When she felt that she was going to become a mother, the baby became the shield with which her cowardly irresolution covered itself. – She had never possessed the courage to descend into the deepest depths of her being, – to strip the fair covering off her thoughts, the reasons for her actions. She told herself: “for the child’s sake” – and was convinced that she

was sacrificing herself and acting in accordance with the highest moral laws.

The child came. – It was a withered little creature, born too soon, with flaccid limbs and dull, as it were misty, eyes. They named him Adalbert after a “great” uncle of his father and arranged a big baptismal celebration.

After the birth of the child, the mother found a new lease of life. As if awaking from a heavy dream, she saw something of the world again and found that there really were still joys which could compensate her, to at least some degree, for the tragedy of her life.

She brought the old, experienced nurse of her childhood days for the child, and the all-embracing care of the old woman made her, in her opinion, quite superfluous in the child’s upbringing.

So Bertie’s life began in the arms of old “Paule” in a high, bright room whose windows looked onto the garden and which was irreproachably equipped with all the articles of childcare.

When he had reached the point where he could eat neatly with a little spoon, his mother had the idea of taking him along to table. He received a piece of cake from “Mummy’s” plate and seemed extremely pleased at this change which had intervened in his monotonous existence.

At one of the next mealtimes, there was an argument between the married couple: loud and violent words were spoken... Bertie chattered and shrieked along. This din seemed very amusing to him! Like a cage bird which is stimulated by noise, he bawled along. He clattered his spoon on his plate and kicked his feet about. Nobody paid any attention to him. All of a sudden the father rose up and violently pushed his chair away; while

doing so, his anger-flushed face with its flashing eyes turned towards the child... And suddenly the child's expression changed. He fell silent and stared with an expression of nameless terror at the infuriated man. His spoon fell out of his hand, he raised his arms and fearfully called for his mother. But his mother did not hear him. He reached his arms out further and yelled with a fear-distorted face: "Mummy, Mummy." She took no notice of this. Then he slipped down from his high chair with a desperate effort and ran crying back into the nursery.

On the next day, Bertie showed no desire to go to eat. "Bertie doesn't want to eat – doesn't want to eat," – he murmured to himself with an obstinate expression on his face when he was dressed; but he obediently went over at Paule's hand nonetheless. He ate extraordinarily daintily and carefully, looking from the one to the other with an anxious, embarrassed smile. This time, he received a piece of apple from Daddy's plate and seemed quite transfixed by this unexpected happiness. – After the meal, his father lifted him from his chair and let him ride on his knee – ever faster, ever wilder. Bertie closed his eyes and turned dark-red when the ride went really too fast, but he still kept asking, "More!" – and in the end he wrapped his arm around his father's neck. Joy had entirely extinguished fear...

A while later, there was another scene in Bertie's presence. This time, Bertie did not squeal and thrash about with pleasure at the beginning. He immediately went completely silent and pale. He also did not call for "Mummy" but only looked around him with horrified eyes, mute, and trembled. When his father slammed the door shut with a bang behind him, he crept down from his chair to his mother, who was crying. "Daddy, bad

man – very bad...” he said in an affectionately comforting tone, and snuggled his head into her breast. The woman started: “No, no –” she said sternly, “Bertie must not say that. Daddy is good!” At the same time, she unconsciously sat up more erect, and Bertie’s head lost its soft support. He looked at her, dismayed and helpless. “Daddy good!” he murmured obediently and tried to snuggle into her again. After that, he never said anything about his father again – but the horror remained inside him.

In wordless fear, the child let one storm after the other pass over his head. He gradually came to know the slightest signs of such a storm and waited, trembling, for the moment in which it would inevitably break.

When Bertie was scarcely six years old, they sent him to school. They thought it could only do him good to get together with other children. However, Bertie proved to be timid and almost completely unapproachable; he studied conscientiously and assiduously, but in social life with the other children he had an obstinate reticence and a bashfulness that bordered on distrust. It was therefore all the more surprising when, approximately half a year having passed, he formed a quiet but intimate friendship with Ottie Kumetz, the last boy in the class. Ottie was an untalented, somewhat lethargic child of an affectionate disposition and great sincerity. He said little, laughed often, and pulled at his bristly red hair. But he never argued with anybody at all, he was always willing to hand over his pen and his eraser, and he span the top more skilfully than anyone else in the entire class. It was in this ability that the roots lay of the affectionate admiration which Bertie felt for “Red Ottie.”

Their friendship became warmer and warmer, and Bertie was

allowed to visit Ottie Kumetz one afternoon. Ottie's mother played with them, and towards evening Ottie's father even came and built a train set for them. Bertie was overjoyed! Afterwards they all went for a walk together in the little garden. Ottie's father and mother had taken each other by the hand, and this led Ottie and Bertie to play at being father and mother. Bertie was very proud to be the father, and when he saw Ottie's father giving Ottie's mother a kiss, he too stopped and kissed Ottie enthusiastically and clumsily right on the nose. And they were both beside themselves with delight at this "comic" kiss.

Beaming, fired up with happiness, Bertie returned home. He dashed into the living room to immediately tell "Mummy" everything. Father was sitting in a corner of the sofa, and mother was standing at the window looking out onto the street. It was so uncannily quiet! When Bertie flung open the door, they both looked up – then he saw that Daddy had his frightful face on and Mummy looked angry and sad. He was frightened. "Mummy..." he had begun. He tried, hiding his fear, to continue: "Mummy... it was so lovely! Ottie's mother has... Ottie has..." Fear threw him into confusion; he no longer knew what he wanted to say. Embarrassed and perplexed, he looked from the one to the other. Mummy still kept completely silent, and Daddy took no notice of him at all.

Then Daddy began to talk with Mummy again, loudly and angrily! He laughed out loud all of a sudden and threw a book onto the table, making Bertie start. Shivers ran down his spine. He thought that something unheard-of, something dreadful must happen at any moment... Now his mother turned towards him. "What do you want, child?" she asked, a little

impatiently, “you must go to bed now. It’s high time!” “Good night,” said Bertie, unsettled. “Good night,” his mother replied absent-mindedly; and he went. Again it was so dreadfully quiet in the room; Bertie heard his own steps. He involuntarily began to walk on tiptoe. It seemed to him to be so infinitely far to the door – all the time he wished he were already outside, nevertheless he did not dare to run.

On the next morning, when he was alone with his mother, he told her everything after all; he was too full of those new impressions! And Mummy let Ottie come to him. That was certainly not quite so lovely, for Ottie was totally intimidated: he grinned all the time, pulled at his hair and did not say a word. He only spun the top as marvellously as ever – even though Bertie’s mother was watching. However, when Bertie’s father also appeared later on, he lost all heart and asked to be taken home earlier than the time arranged. –

One day, when Ottie was visiting Bertie again, it happened that Daddy and Mummy began to speak “loudly and angrily” in his presence. Bertie knew for certain that “it” was going to come, and trembled with fear. When “it” really came, he turned dark red and restlessly shuffled to and fro. Ottie stood there with wide-open eyes and gaping mouth. He pulled at his hair and looked in astonishment from Uncle to Aunt, from Aunt to Uncle. Bertie came up and gave him a hard nudge with his elbow. “I’ll be coachman, you must be the horse!” he said sourly. “Come!” – Ottie obeyed. He turned hesitantly round and ran after Bertie out into the garden. Once outside he stopped and asked in a low voice: “Hey, I guess they’re angry with each other?” – Bertie cracked the whip. “I don’t know!” he said coldly

and indifferently. “Now – run!” He swung the whip and chased Ottie around with a “Wo Hi!” and “Gee!” until such time as he himself could go on no longer. Then he sat down on the swing and looked morose. “I don’t want to play any more – it’s boring!” he said peevishly. After a while he stood up: “I’m going to fetch my picture book – you can swing if you like!” Ottie took possession of the swing right away, and Bertie went into the house.

When he came close to the living room, he began to walk on tiptoe; he stopped at the door and listened. All was quiet! He heaved a sigh of relief and ran on. In the corridor he saw his mother in a hat and coat. She reached her hand out to him amiably – but he hurriedly glided past her. “No, no, I have to quickly fetch my picture book!” He snatched it out of the bookcase and rushed away. No, he didn’t want to give Mummy a kiss, he didn’t love Mummy – not the least little bit! He had been so ashamed... He didn’t love Daddy either – didn’t love *him* at all! And he didn’t like Ottie any more either – didn’t like him in the least any more – there wasn’t a single person he loved! ... He felt like retching and his lips trembled. “The merry month of May has come,” he began to sing. His small, weak and hoarse voice wavered back and forth... “I don’t like anybody...” he stubbornly thought and strove to sing louder and in better time. “I do – Paule!” he suddenly remembered. He stood for a moment considering whether he should not go to look for her – but then he returned to Ottie in the garden.

From that day, Bertie evinced a remarkable aversion to inviting Ottie. All the more often did he ask to go over to his home. But in both cases, his behaviour always had something fearful, something depressed, almost conscience-stricken about it. His father found this behaviour of the boy

insupportable. He did not understand how *his* son could have become so inwardly flaccid, and he thought the blame must lie with the way his mother had raised him. He made the child do gymnastics, ride, and swim – with the rigorous, reckless energy with which he was wont to carry out his resolutions. But all of these excessive efforts seemed rather to sap the child's robustness than to steel it. He did everything that was demanded of him; he was courageous from fearful obedience.

This constant inner strain on his will and his nerves increased the burden his small mind had to bear to enormous proportions.

His mother was the first to see that this "training" was doing him no good, and she forbade a part of these exercises. The father insisted on his instructions being followed. The differences of opinion were more heated and more bitter than ever. Mute, powerless, conscience-stricken, - despairing, the child was in the middle, and his small soul saw no glimmer of light which could have lit his way out of this night of fear and anguish.

When Bertie suddenly began to shoot up in his eighth year, he became so miserable that he was taken out of school on the doctor's recommendation. The father wanted to send him to a children's sanatorium, but the mother was not able to part from him, and the doctor maintained that he could not be better off anywhere than in this house with its excellent hygienic installations and exceptionally good care. – So Bertie stayed at home – always only at home! He was not allowed to go to Ottie's any more, since he had caught a cold there in the small, overheated rooms. He sat with Paule in the nursery, thumbed through his books of fairy-tales, played with building blocks, and from time to time he listened – were loud and

angry words being spoken over there ... How he hated it, that loud speaking! When he heard it, he left his playthings where they were, walked up and down the room, pale and mute, anxiously played with his fingers and looked out through the window into the wintry garden. It seemed to him that the “loud speaking” never stopped at all now. –

The hematogen and the milk did not help. The child became ever paler, ever thinner and ever more nervous. In spring, his mother gave in to his pleas and let him go to Ottie’s once again. He came home exhilarated but with a chill and had to keep to his bed from that time on. His father reproached his mother in his presence for her “ridiculous weakness,” she answered tetchily, and Bertie began to cry. Then they stopped the loud speaking and went out; but Bertie listened, full of fear, to hear if it did not continue outside.

In the night, when his fever rose and a carriage rattled by, he sat up distressed in bed and cried: “Paule, Paule, listen, they’re speaking loud again!” Paule did not entirely understand what he meant, but she did realise that every sound agitated him. Therefore, the stretch of road beside his room was covered with straw. The rolling of the carriage now penetrated to him sounding very muffled and mysterious. – But his restlessness remained. A hundred other unavoidable sounds agitated Bertie. He was calmest when his father or his mother were with him individually. If they came to him together, however, there was a remarkable agitation in his fever-shining eyes which wandered from father to mother, from mother to father, restlessly observing them with an expression of fearful supplication.

Once, when his fever was particularly strong and his mind not quite

clear, he implored in a tearful voice upon hearing a sound in the street:

“Mummy, don’t speak so loud, don’t always row with Daddy!”

Then his mother understood him! – After that, she did not come into the sick-room with her husband, and Bertie became calmer. He was equally affectionate and amiable to both, and he assured both of them that he loved Daddy and Mummy just the same. –

Only once did they come together – that was when Bertie’s life was drawing to its close. Now, however, it did not disturb him any longer. He lay there completely still with wide-open eyes, looking up at the ceiling all the time. Every now and then he whispered something to himself: “Mummy... Ottie...” could be understood. His pulse became weaker and weaker... Suddenly he turned his head towards father and mother, his eyes looked at them with an expression of patient suffering, of weary hopelessness. “Bertie,” sobbed his mother, overcome with grief. And driven by an irresistible urge to light the child’s way into the darkness of death with a ray of sunlight, she wrapped her arm around her husband, who stood beside her with a grim, immovable expression.

It was the only true sacrifice that she had ever made for her child. - - She did not know if Bertie saw it, if he even still knew her. A mist lay over the eyes of the child... She kept her arm rigidly wrapped around her husband while Bertie, breathing heavily, looked at her with restless eyes which grew dimmer and dimmer... His mouth seemed to smile, when he breathed his weak life out with a soft sigh...

Helene Stökl – Travel Yearning

She stood, a little girl, on the boundary baulk beside her parents' house. The spring wind wafted blossoms from the nearby blackthorn bushes over to her, there was a chirping and a humming in the young grass at her feet; but she neither saw nor heard. She gazed steadfastly at the chain of mountains which, veiled in bluish haze, lay so far away and yet seemed so close before her. Suddenly her dark eyes lit up. She stretched her arms out wide and ran across the fields for as long as her breath lasted. For a moment, she took a rest and pressed her hot cheek against the cool bark of a cherry-tree, then she ran further on, ever on.

Late that evening, her parents found her, after an anxious search, fallen asleep from exhaustion at the side of a road. "I wanted to go to the blue mountains," she sobbed, wakened from sleep, "but I couldn't reach them."

She grew up, and her longing for faraway places grew with her. When other people talked about their travels, she went pale and silent. She could not hear the names Rome, Venice, Naples being spoken without tears rising to her eyes. Every springtime, when the mild winds rose and the birds of passage sailed away over her head, this longing came over her like a sickness. With burning eyes and hot cheeks, a gnawing, torturing hunger for distant lands in her heart, she moved restlessly around for weeks on end. At her request, she had been given the meanest chamber in the house. Her sisters ridiculed her, but she knew what made it dear to her. From its windows she could look far out over the houses of the little town and see the high road, which, lined with poplars, rolled away into an

interminable distance until the tall trees shrank by degrees to small dark points. She could see the coaches which travelled up and down the road, and when, in the night, the sounds of the post-horn trembled over to her, then her soul trembled with them.

The years went by and made her a wife. She walked along at her loved one's side on a mild summer's evening. Her cheeks glowed. "Oh, if I could always walk beside you like this, without stopping, to the end of the world!" With a smile, he drew her down onto a bench. "No, no wandering, my beloved, you shall teach me to know the happiness of home, we shall remain in it and build our nest." She mutely snuggled into him, and he kissed the tears from her eyes, the reason for which he did not understand.

Beaming with joy, he led his young wife into the dwelling determined for her on their wedding day. "Is it not finer to devote the first feeling of happiness to one's own home, instead of squandering it in foreign parts? You see, sweetheart, your table shall be here at this window. From here, you shall rule the household as a careful housewife!"

She looked earnestly for a moment at the splendid river which flowed at her feet, with the skiffs and boats, steamers and sailing vessels on it, with the railway on one side and the lovely, smooth high-road, down which vigorous travellers were striding, on the other, and she softly shook her head. "Not here, let us choose another place for me."

"Does the view not please you?"

"It pains me; I could not fulfil my duty if I had the roaming river and the voyaging ships and travelling people constantly before my eyes, and – I want to be a good wife to you."

He clasped her in his arms, moved. “Are you drawn to far-off lands so strongly? Well, just wait, a year from now, when we have properly settled down here, I’ll show you the world!”

A year later – there lay a blue-eyed baby in the cradle, whom she sang to rest with the songs of her longing. “A child thrives only at home!” She knew this well and did not desire to accompany her husband when his occupation took him out into the world. Nor could she go with him when he suddenly, even before their child had grown to boyhood, began that great journey from which nobody returns.

From that time on, her life revolved solely around that of her boy, she saved for him, she worked for him. But her longing had roused an echo in his soul. His eye roamed over the narrow bounds of home in ardent desire for distant lands; and what his eye saw, with its thirst for beauty, his hand was able to capture in beauty. Every evening, mother and son sat together and spoke of the time when he would seek out distant climes as an artist to win fame and honour. “When I travel, then you’ll travel with me, Mother!” She smiled at him and continued living in want and saving.

But the widow’s saved pennies accumulated only slowly. The travelling money which she could give the departing youth sufficed for one, not for two.

“I’m leaving you behind only for a short time, Mother! I’ll come and fetch you in a few years’ time, no more. Then you’ll get to know the beauties of the world with me!”

Foreign lands gave the youth a friendly reception. His name was soon mentioned with distinction, honour and gold were bestowed on him.

“Soon, Mother, I’ll fetch you soon,” he wrote in every letter.

But his travel yearning still drove him restlessly back and forth, and when this restlessness left him, he wished to establish a home for himself in beautiful foreign climes, as it pleased his artist’s heart; he intended to bring his mother there. But when the house was built, he met a pair of dark eyes which drove back thoughts of his waiting mother.

One day, he was standing on a hill by the sea and looking down at the town at his feet. The lost sound of a bell reached his ears, a bird of passage flew over his head. “Mother,” something suddenly yelled inside him, “Mother, I’m coming to you!” He rushed into his dwelling. A letter from his mother was waiting for him. “Don’t keep me waiting too long, my son,” she wrote, “or I’ll start my journey without you.”

He set out that very hour. Without rest or repose, he hurried home. Now he was there! He flew through the streets of the town, up the steps of the familiar house. How quiet everything was! Did his mother not know his footsteps any longer? For a moment he stood with pounding heart before the door, then he flung it open. There was his mother!

She lay before him, long and rigid and cold, her thin fingers crossed over her breast. Enthroned on her brow was the majesty of Death, around her lips there hovered a smile in which all the torment and worry of patience, all the bitterness of waiting, had been submerged in the final certainty of the happiness she had been awaiting so long.

He sank to his knees beside her, she who needed him no more now. She had begun her first journey without him, this long, great journey which calms even the most desirous heart and endows the fettered soul with

pinions for ever and aye.