

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Hermann Kurz (1813-1873)

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How Grandfather took Grandmother to Wife

“I was full thirty years of age” – Grandfather told me one day, without alluding to the Cloak Song,¹ for it did not exist at that time – “I was thirty and then some, and although I was the first-born son among my already married siblings, I still did not have a wife. This came from my great shyness: I didn’t have the heart to look a girl boldly in the eye, and I found little opportunity to do so, because being unable to dance, I never went onto the dance-floor.

My father was highly incensed at this and often said to my mother, ‘It’s a disgrace, all his brothers and sisters are settled, and he, the eldest, still runs around in the world as a single man! By God, you can’t but think that the girls take him to be a blockhead, or think we’ve nothing left to give him!’ But mother used to placate him, saying: ‘Just let him be, Father; nothing good comes from forcing someone into something, and the good Lord will surely provide for him.’

And He did. One Sunday I went for a walk by the tower, alone, as was my habit, for I could no longer associate much with my former

¹ A reference to the first line of ‘The Soldier’s Cloak,’ a song in *Lenore*, an 1828 musical comedy by Karl von Holtei (1798-1880).

companions, they keeping to their wives, and the younger ones did not suit me. So there I was, quietly going on my way and enjoying the sunshine, when a parrot suddenly caught my eye; it was in among the lettuce in one of the tower-gardens. I knew it well, it belonged to the daughter of the town physician, Doctor Rieber.

This Doctor Rieber was a highly skilled doctor, but in all other regards a singular man, which was evident from the mere fact of his speaking Prussian. You see, he had been in the Seven Years' War, and in his manners, and in the command of his household in particular, he imitated great Fritz² – of whom, however, he tended to speak ill. For at the Battle of Zorndorf,³ a cannonball which came hurtling over from the side had grazed him, injuring him in such a manner that he was rendered incapable of sitting and walking for some time, and of riding for ever. The field-surgeon replaced the loss with a piece of flesh from a calf, but there could of course no longer be any question of military service, and good Rieber was discharged with a small gratuity. 'My money is not for foreigners,' said the King, who was not in the best of moods just then: 'why did you not move out the way of the ball?' That was why Doctor Rieber bore the great King a grudge for the rest of his life, and whenever the conversation turned to him, he would cry out in indignation: 'He was a terrible tyrant who unjustly deprived me of my well-earned reward, because I couldn't think up such a good witticism on the spot as that soldier who,

² Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia (1712-86).

³ Fought between the Prussians and the Russians in 1758 with heavy losses (30,000 men killed or wounded) and no clear winner.

when asked, 'In what tavern did you get so disfigured?' gave by way of reply, 'In the one at Kolin,⁴ where Your Majesty paid the shot.'

The King could not of course have directed this question at him, for the wound was not in his face. But all of that notwithstanding, he was regarded far and wide as a doctor who saved all but a few of his patients from death. Everyone who knew him trusted him absolutely, but he was not in the apothecaries' good books, for he employed natural remedies whenever possible and used to say, when people have besmeared and besmirched their inner being through an irrational way of life, they think to wash it clean with a mixture, but in most cases this just makes it even dirtier. Among other characteristics, he could not stand it when somebody blew out a light. This would make him so furious that he lost all self-control and became outrageously rude to people. In the smell of a burnt-out candle, he said, all the infamy and the baseness of the world was assembled, and if anyone could breath in this smell without it making their blood boil as hot as Hell, then he must have a stinking soul; one should collar such stink-souls for being poison-preparers, for the diabolical fug of which they were enamoured sits insidiously in the breast of their fellow men and gives rise to illnesses whose true cause nobody suspects. Indeed, this nuisance hatches whole epidemics because it is sadly so widespread. -He could thunder on in this way for hours on end, and because he was regarded as an oracle in our house, this idiosyncrasy rubbed off on us, and so a good many people have criticised us for having such delicate noses.

⁴ A battle in 1757 in which the Austrians defeated the Prussians.

But there's no help for it, I would simply rather smell a rose than a blown-out light. They say, you know, that we wear a "laced hat," but that actually stems from my ancestor, from old Pugio.⁵ It is said of him that he wore such a hat as a senator.

Well, Doctor Rieber had a daughter by the name of Salome, who was second to none of the girls in the town in her appearance. She was, admittedly, considered to be proud, for she rarely came into company, and although she did not speak Prussian like her father, her words did sound more refined than was the case with other people. But it was her parrot which made the biggest sensation: he was, without doubt, a great rarity in our good town. She had received him as a present from a cousin who had gone on a journey to Holland and the East Indies and promised to bring back great riches; Fortune had not been favourable to him, and to avoid coming home empty-handed, he brought the exotic bird along for his little cousin. A chest full of golden goods could not have given her greater pleasure; all day long, she occupied herself with the bird, whose cage hung under the window and who learned to croak all kinds of extravagant nonsense from her. Now he called her by her name and wished her a good morning; now he cursed passers-by or jabbered a few scraps of Latin which he had learned from the doctor. Every time I walked by under her window, I stopped just like other people and looked at the parrot. Nobody could take offence at that, but Salome, who was almost always beside the cage, might have thought that I was looking at her, for she roguishly turned

⁵ Kurz is here referring to his great-great grandfather, Johannes Kurtz (1681-1762), whose favourite oath was "Pugio!" (a Roman dagger).

up her mouth when I walked by and looked up; but seeing her smiling so, I began to think of this and of that.

On this occasion, when I caught sight of the bird I said to myself: 'How distressed she will be that her bird has flown away! You must fetch him out from the lettuce, even if you damage a few plots in the process.' 'Salome!' he cried, 'Blood and thunder, where are you?' I walked towards him and he got very angry and croaked, 'Manum de tabula!'⁶ but it did him no good to use his master's favourite expression so appositely. I seized him, but so quickly that I could not secure his beak and he stabbed my finger with a vengeance. I bit my lip against the pain, held the parrot tightly by his head and wings, and carried him back to his prison, while he screamed and cursed with all his might. Salome was overjoyed when she saw the fugitive in my hands. Her cry brought her father over, and he said, 'You're a good boy, you hear? And courageous! For the little beast could have mauled you; but perhaps you did not know that.'

'No, look, Papa,' cried Salome, 'the bird has surely bitten him, why, he has wrapped his handkerchief around his hand. Why did you bandage your hand?' she asked me. 'Show me!'

'Oh, do not incommode yourself,' I said, 'there is nothing to see.' 'Indeed! What's the matter?' 'Well, the bird gave me a bit of a peck.'

'Show me! Show me! Oh God! Why, it looks dreadful, the mess the finger is in! I shall bandage it.' 'Manum de tabula!' cried Doctor Rieber, limping up with his crutch. 'What do you know about wounds, Miss

⁶ "Hands off [the picture]!"

Impertinent? Come, let me see, yes, yes, he's copped one, the parrot bears no mean weapon; but keep calm, that signifies nothing, we shall soon sort him out. Salome, go and fetch me my balsam for wounds, you know which glass it is. Salome! Blood and thunder, where are you?' he cried, when she did not come back immediately. At last she brought the balsam. 'Hell's bells girl, I believe you've been crying! Why did you cry?' She hesitated to answer.

'Your eyes are red; what's the matter with you? Why did you blubber?'

'Because the parrot did him –' She broke off.

'Him? Who is him?'

'Him' – she looked at me.

'Did him there some harm?'

'Yes,' she sobbed and burst out in tears again.

'Stupid girl,' her father growled, 'it's of no consequence at all! Give it here, my balsam will help more than your tears. Now, hold your hand out to me, it won't hurt, it'll only burn a little.'

I kept still so as not to cause the compassionate girl yet more distress.

'Now it's done. Now, Salome, you can bandage his hand.'

I became deeply embarrassed when she touched my hand with her little fingers. When she had finished, Doctor Rieber said, 'Come back here tomorrow, you hear? So I can look at the wound, adieu! Well, Salome, aren't you going to give thanks?'

She thanked me with a dainty curtsy and said, 'Adieu, come back

here tomorrow.'

When I went home that evening, everyone noticed my bandaged hand. I should say that on Sundays, all the sons and the sons' wives ate their evening meal at the parents' house. They asked what had happened to me, and I had to relate the whole story, during which I went red as a beetroot. Mother smiled and gave Father her hand. I didn't know what that should signify; but the others laughed likewise, and from that hour on my brothers called me The Bird-Catcher.

On the second day I went back to the physician, on the third and fourth likewise, and so on, until my finger had healed. During this time I became so well-known in the house that he invited me to come again even though I did not need him anymore. I was happy to hear him say this, for I would have injured my other hand if I'd lost the opportunity to enter the house again.

From then on, I went over frequently, and Doctor Rieber did not seem to mind. When the father was not at home, I met the daughter. The parrot was of course almost always the topic of our conversation. She told me, when I visited, how he had been in the meantime and what roguish pranks he had played. I stuck my finger in his cage and he cried, "Manum de tabula!" and pecked at me. Now when I did not start back quickly enough and his beak glanced against my finger, she teased me, and I often deliberately let myself be pinched by him just so I could be teased by her.

One day, she had thought up a joke in my absence and taught the bird the words, 'Clumsy Hans!' Now, when I walked into the room the bird darted around in its cage as if possessed and shrieked incessantly,

‘Clumsy Hans! Clumsy Hans!’ I knew fine well that she had concealed herself somewhere to listen in on the joke, and I threatened the bird that I would hit him on the beak if he was not quiet. When I really did land him one, he cried for help: ‘Salome! Blood and thunder, where *are* you?’ ‘Clumsy Hans!’ rang out from a large chest in the room. Encouraged by this, the bird struck up its mocking song again. ‘If you won’t be quiet,’ I cried, ‘then I’ll hit the *right* bird on the beak!’ and I opened the chest. Salome threw one of her father’s wigs in my face, causing me to stand in a cloud of dust, and leapt out of the chest. I ran after her and chased her around the room, she screamed, the parrot raged, and I laughed; all in all, there was quite a racket. At last, I caught her, and I was well on the way to making good on my threat when a voice behind us cried, ‘Manum de tabula!’

However, it was not the parrot who had intervened but the papa. He had arrived home just a moment before and been drawn to the room by the noise. ‘Thunderation!’ he cried, ‘what kind of behaviour is this from a respectable bachelor in another family’s house?’

I stood there like butter in the sun. ‘Clumsy Hans!’ cried the parrot, as if the little rogue really had been possessed of human intelligence.

‘Who taught the bird that?’ asked Doctor Rieber.

Salome lowered her eyes.

‘Aha, I thought so. And you wanted satisfaction? Isn’t that so?’

‘Yes,’ I stammered, “I was going to –”

‘You don’t need to tell me what you were going to do, I saw quite clearly. Do you love her?’

‘Certainly!’

‘Do you want to marry her?’

‘If Salome has no objections.’

‘Well girl, what do you say? Do you want him?’ She kept bashfully silent.

‘Listen, if you don’t answer, you won’t get him. Or do you not want him? Say no!’

Salome laughed and cried, ‘Heaven forbid! I wouldn’t say no for all the tea in China!’

‘Duplex negatio affirmat!’⁷ said Doctor Rieber. “Well, you have her, keep her well and warm, she is my only child! And keep a check on her idiosyncratic whims! She needs to be well disciplined, but with gentleness and love! You hear?’

I promised to be all love and kindness. ‘But,’ I said, ‘I must go home now and get my parents’ consent.’

‘You have that already,’ said my father-in-law. ‘Do you think you could have come to my house so freely if you hadn’t? Your father and I have been speaking about this with each other for a long time now. I shall therefore send for your parents at once to celebrate the engagement.’

My parents came and joyfully gave their consent. As there were no obstacles in the way, it was arranged that the wedding would take place in four weeks’ time.

But these four weeks became a burden for me. No sooner had

⁷ “Double negation affirms”: two negatives create a positive.

Salome become my betrothed than she completely changed towards me. Where she had teased me before, she tormented me now. She constantly found fault with something about me, my clothes, my behaviour, my coming and going – everything incurred her censure. On top of that, she was eternally giving orders: now I had to do something, now not do something, now bring something, now take something away, and I couldn't do anything to her liking. But most of all, she tormented me with an incomprehensible jealousy; she knew for certain that I had eyes for nobody in the world but her, and yet, whenever we came home from a walk, she would accuse me of having looked at this or that woman. Then she chid me and wept. 'I am really unfortunate,' she said, "to get so unfaithful a husband! Before we're even married, he's looking at others.' I often despaired, for I saw only too well that she was in deadly earnest with her jealousy, but her father comforted me.

'Indulge her,' he said, 'she cannot yet settle into her new condition; that is all sure to change. Stay for the present as you've been up to now, but after the wedding you'll have to pull the reins rather more tightly. I have spoilt her, for she's my only child, and even though I cursed and stormed, the naughty creature knew fine well that I wasn't in earnest.'

A very little while before the wedding, when I was sitting with my betrothed, we fell half-jokingly into an argument about her bridal dress. That was the time when farthingales were gradually going out of fashion, and I was delighted with this change because I never could stand those ugly, puffy things. But oddly enough, Salome had the notion that his garb suited her better than a close-fitting dress, which would actually have

showed off her dainty figure much more. We argued over and over, until I finally thought to play the Matador⁸ by saying to her: 'But you attach more importance to fashion than I do, how can you stay behind fashion like this?' 'Hark at him!' she replied, 'What are you prattling about fashion? What do you know about fashion, you clumsy Hans?' No sooner had she said this than the parrot joined in, incessantly crying: 'Clumsy Hans! Clumsy Hans!' Now as we were in a joking mood, I again threatened to hit the bird on the beak; she tried to fend me off, and as we were grappling with each other around the cage, one of us – even today, I don't know who it was – pushed the little door open, and the bird shot out like an arrow. 'Close the window!' cried Salome, but it was already too late, the bird had noticed the open window; and before I could look around to see which window was open, it was outside.

Now the wailing began, and once the wailing had come to an end, anger broke out, at me of course, I was to blame for everything, I had had the stupid idea of hitting the bird, and it had of course been me who had intentionally pushed the door open, who had opened the window beforehand to play this prank on her. No matter what I said, she would not be reasonable; I protested, I begged, I reproved – all in vain! I promised I would not rest until I had brought the bird back; he could surely still be caught. 'I advise you to do that,' she said, 'for I assure you, until you have brought my bird back here, you may not think of taking me to wife.' I went gloomily away. She had been in a good mood again for the first time in

⁸ A top trump in card games such as ombre.

many days, and now our joy had to end like this! I made unavailing inquiries about the parrot everywhere. Only on the next day did I learn that a citizen had seen and seized it in a vineyard, but the bird having wrathfully bitten him, he had been unable to hold on to it any longer; the bird had thereupon flown away, nobody knew whither. Salome did not show any anger when I mentioned this to her, but treated me with such a hurtful indifference that I firmly resolved to leave no stone unturned to get her parrot back. A few days later, I was put on a trail again; people from a neighbouring village came to town and happened to tell that a wondrous bird with very colourful feathers had been caught in that place. I told my betrothed this immediately and set out that same day. 'If you bring him back with you,' she said at parting, 'then something good will happen to you, and sooner than you think.' I did not know what this meant – would she perhaps come to meet me?

I had not gone far through the forest on the way to the village where the fugitive was said to be held prisoner, when I came upon a peasant girl, who upon my question, where are you from? told me that she came from that very village.

'Then you can perhaps save me a walk,' I said, 'for I'm looking for something there.'

'And what's that?'

I described the bird to her and told her it came from distant lands and belonged to my betrothed. 'I'll give you a generous tip,' I added, 'if you help me to get it back.'

'Now, that'll be difficult,' she replied.

‘Why’s that? How do things stand with him?’

‘Stand? Ha, it doesn’t stand anymore, it lies!’

‘What?’

‘Yes, under the ground! It’ll be roughly three, four days since a boy from our village caught that bird, with great difficulty, for it gave his finger a good old hacking. Then he brought it to my father, the schoolmaster, and asked him what kind of an animal this was. The schoolmaster didn’t know, and nobody in the village knew, but everyone came running up to see the gaudy bird. Finally, the schoolmaster said the bird wouldn’t look like that naturally, it must have been dyed. Now we were itching to know what he really looked like, so we put him in a bowl with cold water and eagerly rubbed his feathers down, but nothing came off. ‘That’s not enough,’ the schoolmaster said, ‘Let’s try it with warm water.’ We put really warm water in the bowl and soaped and rubbed the bird like a stocking, but it all came to nothing. Then we gave it another go with cold water, but the bird didn’t want to part with its colour. It was now so soggy and hung its head down and wouldn’t take any feed, even though we held out a big chunk of black bread before its beak. Long story short, I think the bath didn’t agree with him, and he croaked it that same day. But it moved us to pity, because it was such a lovely bird, and we dug a little grave for it and buried it in the schoolmaster’s garden.’

I did not like what I had heard, and yet I could not help laughing. ‘You are really stupid people,’ I told the girl, ‘and your schoolmaster in particular is a fine scholar! The bird naturally looked like that, and you have now made my betrothed lose it. If you could have imagined how much the

bird was worth, you wouldn't have treated it so. Washing and scalding a parrot! That's really too crazy!' I had to laugh, time and again, but the girl took it very badly and walked off with many invectives. I was surprised that these people could be so simple-minded, for they wander around all of Europe and half of Asia selling flowers and should for that very reason have been more experienced than other peasants in the region.

While having these thoughts, it suddenly seemed to me that I saw a yellow straw-hat with a green ribbon shimmering through the trees, and Salome wore such a hat. I went up to that place but saw nothing. I searched in the bushes and called, but she did not appear, and I returned to town in a thoughtful mood.

When I came to her to tell her about the disaster, she gave me such a queer look that I was utterly bewildered. She let me talk without interruption and did not make much of the matter; and she spoke a few words, not friendly and not unfriendly, nor indifferent either, as they usually were; I had no idea how to take them. But I followed her father's advice, I thought, everything is sure to change, and decided to wait and see in the meantime.

The wedding day approached. According to the custom of that time, the bride and bridegroom could not spend much time together on this day. The bride had to stay with the women and accept congratulations until the entry into the church; the bridegroom drank a glass of wine with the men. They were not placed together until the banquet, and even here they had little time to speak to each other because they had to constantly walk round and talk to the esteemed guests. I therefore had little chance to observe my

bride on this morning, but I was very reassured to see her so calm. Yet she had got her way and put on her farthingale. Her father said to me, 'Let her have her will, in God's name, you can always hang the farthingale in the wardrobe tonight and then make sure that she never puts it on again.'

The bells rang for church, and we walked there beside each other in silence. A large congregation had assembled, for people thought it a rare curiosity that I, a bachelor of many years, should want to thrust my neck into the yoke of marriage. The priest entered the altar and the ceremony began. When he asked me if I would have Salome, here present, as my wife, I said in a loud, joyful voice, 'Yes,' and I was only curious deep down if she would say it loudly too, for brides usually speak this decisive word only in a low, quavering voice. But when the clergyman directed the question at her, I heard an equally loud and hearty 'No!'

'Pugio!' I cried in my shock and fury, "what's the meaning of this?"

The priest reproved me with stern words for this secular cry and then asked the bride what had driven her to her unusual and unseemly action?

'I shall explain myself later,' said Salome; she now looked pale and frightened. The ceremony was spoiled, the assembly broke up in confusion, and I went home almost deranged with anger and shame. My parents were no less perplexed by this outrageous incident; they asked me what I had done to deserve it, but I could not tell them anything, for the parrot's death seemed to me to be really too slight a cause. While we were having this discussion, deeply distressed, Doctor Rieber limped in with ceremonial deportment and said, 'After today's occurrence, I would not have the heart to appear before this respectable family if I did not think a probe and knife

were needed here. You see, my perverse daughter has confessed to me that the reason why she caused today's spectacle was to punish her bridegroom for a hair-raising instance of infidelity. Now I myself am very far from giving credence to her allegation straight out, and even in the worst case, I would not find the prank she played today a whit easier to forgive, but the young man's honour, as well as my own, calls for a closer examination of the matter.'

I had a clear conscience and said, 'Talk, Doctor! What has she alleged against me?'

'She asserts,' he replied, 'that you are having an affair with a peasant-girl, and she will even have it that you met together with said person in the forest a few days ago, for which, as she had suspected from the outset, your excursion on account of the parrot had been made to serve as a pretext.'

'So she did follow me into the forest!' I cried, and I recounted what had happened there. But before I had finished, there was a knock on the door and behold! That peasant-girl was there before us, offering eggs and butter for sale. No sooner did she catch sight of me than she exclaimed, 'If I'd known *you* were here, I'd have steered clear of this house.'

'What has he done to you, my child?' asked Doctor Rieber, quickly chiming in as he walked up to her.

'He was vile to me!' she replied. 'To thank me for opening my gob and giving him information about his shabby bird, he called me a stupid goose.'

'So he didn't court you?'

‘What?’

‘The wicked world claims he gave you honeyed words.’

‘I’d have cured him of that, by heck! Honeyed words indeed! It was rude words he gave me. And I won’t put up with any from you either. If you don’t want my eggs, I don’t need your drivel. The likes of us won’t be talked to as if we were your subjects. We’re not from your villages, we’re Württembergian.’

With that she trampled out and banged the door shut before her.

‘She’s a sharp-tongued one,’ said Doctor Rieber. Then he walked up to me and apologised with well-chosen words for the freedom he had taken. ‘Now it has come to light,’ he continued, ‘that my daughter did not have even the slightest reason for her unforgivable step, I shall propose to the gentleman the satisfaction I have thought up for him. He shall pay like with like, I have come directly from the clergyman, who agreed, at my urgent insistence, to help execute my plan. Which is: tomorrow, the ceremony will take place once again –’

‘No!’ I cried, ‘not for anything in the world –’

‘May the gentleman be reasonable and let me finish speaking. Tomorrow, I say, the ceremony shall be repeated, even if I have to forcefully drag the perverse hussy into church. Then you will walk up to the altar together, and to ensure that she will have no chance to escape, the clergyman will ask her the question first; you can set your mind at rest, she will not say No, I warrant you, she has come to know my severity. You will thereupon, my esteemed young man, to her shame and your satisfaction, answer with No for *your* part, thereby giving her to understand that you

want nothing from her and do not deem her worthy to be your wife.'

'Doctor," I said, "I can't bring myself to do that!'

'Young man!' he cried irascibly, reaching for his sword, 'no offence, but you do not understand this at all! It is an affront that you cannot take lying down, and should you not be man enough to expunge it for yourself, it is yet your duty to your parents, and also to me, as an honest man, to accept my satisfaction.'

'Go to your daughter, dear sir,' I replied, 'and tell her she did not do well by me, but I bear her no grudge and am not capable of abusing her.'

'Blood and thunder!' he shouted, 'You must, may you be capable or not, and if you will not, you'll have me to deal with.'

'An enforcement in the church!" I said. 'That's simply not on.' 'Oh, it'll be on, when it's on tomorrow! We are independent and have our own consistory; who bothers about us? We have enough power to suitably chastise a wilful hussy!'

Now my father came forward, in whom there stirred some of old Pugio. 'Doctor,' he said, 'I am sorry for your daughter, but I must accept your proposal, for the insult would indeed be far too great were it not somewhat requited and divided. As I said, I am sorry, and I would be glad if another expedient could be found.'

'That was spoken like a man of honour!' said Doctor Rieber, 'but there is no other expedient, and so we'll stick to the arrangement.'

He left after everything had been discussed and settled. I was asked nothing more at all in the matter, I was just regarded as the one who had to avenge the affront to our family. Only my mother was sympathetic to me

and agreed with me that this would only make matter worse. 'It's a crying shame about the girl,' she said. 'I certainly don't want to speak in her favour, but brides are not always quite of sound mind. That is a condition in which not everyone can feel at home right away, and when you have to enter a new life in so short a time as she, with one bound, then you can easily lose your head, and the most sensible woman can do the stupidest things. I firmly believe that she bitterly regrets what she did, and not only because of its consequences; for her jealousy proves that she wasn't indifferent to you. But perhaps the fathers will have thought of something better by tomorrow.'

But that was not the case. Mother tried in vain to change father's mind; he threatened me that I would feel his utmost fury if I did not obey. An offensive against Doctor Rieber was likewise in vain; he remained far too tightly glued to his honour, as he expressed it, to be able to yield. 'Resign yourself in God's name, there's nothing to be done about it,' my mother said in the end, and I went to church at the appointed time.

A large crowd had gathered, for Doctor Rieber proposed, as he expressed it, to launch no mere manoeuvre, but a main action; public as the sin had been, he said, the penance must be also. My family accompanied me into the church. Only there was Salome brought to me by her father. She looked as pale as death, her cheeks were tear-stained, and she did not dare to raise her eyes to me, and yet I believed to see something other than mere humiliation in her face. The clergyman entered the altar again; everybody was curious and dead quiet. He had not brought a book with him to read the wedding formula, but only said: 'A bridal couple

have appeared here to express their will and opinion to one another before God and this Christian congregation.’ Then he beckoned us to him and asked Salome first if she would have me to husband. I could not help secretly throwing a look at my companion in adversity; she spoke the Yes with humble submission, neither too loudly nor too quietly. Then an inexpressible pity for the two of us came over me, and when the clergyman addressed me and asked if I would have her to wife, I said, in a steady voice, an assured Yes.

This Yes ran like an electric current through the church, for I heard a movement behind me – if one could speak of a silent gust of wind, then that would describe the shock which ran through the assembly. But I had eyes for nobody other than my bride. She was thunderstruck and would have sunk to the ground had I not put my arm around her. Now I looked at her intently, and she also raised her eyes towards me, but I could not say that I found any traces of a reproach in her gaze. I offered her my hand when she had regained her exposure, she took it willingly, and now I quietly said, ‘Hold fast to me, I shall never forsake you.’

The preacher had been momentarily confounded by my unexpected answer, but now he raised both hands and cried, ‘God bless you, young man, you have chosen the better part.’⁹ Then he married us.

Should I give a lengthy account of what happened further? Our union had quite simply been made fast and could not now be undone. My father would not come to terms with this initially, but he yielded at last to my

⁹ Luke 10:42.

mother's persuasion. She was happy with all her heart. She kissed my bride and said, laughing: 'Yesterday I thought I couldn't forgive you, but today you shall be forgiven, because now I haven't baked my wedding cakes in vain.'

The last person to consent was Doctor Rieber. He called me a milksop, said I had played a farce with his honour, and more suchlike remarks, but in the end he could be placated after all and he was secretly happy that all had turned out so well for his only child. Salome confessed to me later that she had almost bitten her tongue off over her 'No,' but she had been as one in a fever; and she requited my 'Yes' with love and fidelity for the rest of her life."

That was the tale my grandfather told me, and if I have said a little more in the retelling than I heard from his mouth, this does not come from powers of memory which suffer from an overflowing horn of plenty, but rather from my having been told the story at times later by other people to whom he had perhaps entrusted it in greater detail than he might have wanted to tell it in to a boy.

He told me many an old story when he and I were both busy in the fields or the garden. At those times, we sat down on a bench or on a baulk and rested; once he had told his fill, we went back to work. You see, his possessions, like almost the entire wealth of the town, consisted of land, and so I was with him in the garden, in an orchard or a cultivated field at every free moment, getting to know the fruits and the conditions for their growth, and I was allowed to lend a hand to my heart's content, shaking or

gathering apples, pears, or nuts, leaping into the haystack, riding on the sheaf-cart, taking out potatoes, and not only cutting grapes from the vine, but also treading them. Picking fruit in the hilly orchards at the foot of which the little river rushed past was especially enjoyable; you had to post yourself at the bottom of the bank and catch the apples which were rolling down the slope like balls before they bounced into the water. In his last days, he promised to teach me, as soon as the proper season had come, how to graft trees. I looked forward to this with indescribable excitement, but he did not keep his word to me, he died before the time for grafting had come.

His favourite haunt was his large garden, where he gave me instruction in the treatment of his floral array, which was not, however, particularly refined, but consisted of simple roses, carnations, tulips, narcissuses, sunflowers, asters, and auriculas. Usually the garden looked simple and olde-worlde, like “Granddad” himself; for that was what we grandchildren called Grandfather. A somewhat slanting wooden fence, discoloured by the weather, surrounded the garden on three sides; the fourth was closed by a grey wall, against a corner of which leaned an old elder tree; the well was made out of a rough trunk; and the little old house had a similar style of construction to the beehive which stood not far from the entrance door. A bee once stung me there so unexpectedly and vigorously that I fell off the almost storey-high garden-chair on which I had been sitting and nearly broke my neck. In this case, the exhortation to diligence, inasmuch as the industrious bumblebee intended to give one, was purely superfluous.

On days when we could not go outside, Grandfather customarily sat in his green upholstered easy-chair by the window, before the small table with the curved feet; and through the large magnifying-glass which he passed back and forth over the lines, he read in a low voice from his Folio Bible of 1608, while his hair fell down into the book like snowflakes from the sides of his head, for his forehead had become ever balder and balder. His old eyes must have been in sore need of assistance for him to make use of the magnifying-glass, for the Bible was printed in mighty letters. But this might also have had something to do with the marginal glosses, which ran down beside the text in somewhat smaller script and told the reader many things worth knowing, in a very homely way at times, for their writer had a particular fondness for explaining Hebrew place-names with familiar-sounding German names: as for example, he gave readers to understand that “Eben-Ezer” was just the same as “Helfenstein” [Help-Stone].

A short while before his death, Grandfather experienced an exceptional triumph. A competition to shoot at a mark was announced, and he went with me to the shooting-house to watch. “I can’t shoot anymore,” he said, “my eyes let me down, and my hand shakes; but I’ve always been very fond of shooting, so I want to at least see how other people do.” No sooner had we arrived at the shooting-place than many acquaintances greeted him. He wished them luck and watched with close attention. When he was ready to rise and go home, a man who was likewise advanced in years walked up to him with a loaded rifle and said, “What’s this, Senator? You, the best marksman of your age, are going to leave just like that without having honoured us with a shot?” Grandfather laughed heartily and

said, "A fine success I'd have – I believe I'd barely hit the disc. Yes, I just belong on the scrap heap." "Just have a go," the other man asked him, "only one single shot!" The others came over as well and pressed him to at least fire one shot. In vain did he object that it was many years since he had last taken a shot, there was nothing for it, the crowd kept badgering him until in the end he grasped the rifle. He took his position and then took aim for a long time. Although he trembled, the men who looked over his shoulder gave the others to understand, by way of approving signs, that he was aiming precisely at the target. Finally the shot was fired – jubilant cries rang out from every throat! He had shot the target out. He did claim that this had been pure chance, but nobody accepted that. Then he took a swig to the health of the company and went away with me, smiling very contentedly to himself. While I walked along beside him as proud as a King, appropriating his glory without hesitation, as boys tend to do. "It's strange," he said to me on the way, "I see better from a distance than I do close-up." After arriving home, he spent a long time looking with a peculiar smile at the portrait of "Grandam," who no doubt enjoyed many such great days with him. The portrait was hung opposite his easy-chair, a gentle, calm, fine face, and it did not look as if a girl's passionate mood had ever resided in it. Of course, it did not portray grandmother in her youth, and she had not even sat for the painter; he had rather painted her, though wearing her wedding-dress, on her death-bed.

About four days later, I accompanied him to one of his vineyards; we wanted to have a look at his favourite fruit, the peaches, which he had planted there in the higher section between the vines. "I'm too tired to walk

up the steep path," he said, "You go and look at the young trees and see how they're doing; if you find a couple of ripe ones, break them off and bring them down. Meanwhile, I'll have a seat on the landing-place and wait for you." With these words, he sat down on a turf-bound hill of piled-up earth which was used for loading winepress vats onto the cart in autumn, and I climbed up the irregular terraces, which were covered in their light green, looking forward to Grandfather's joy when I brought him a ripe peach. I found three of them and breathlessly ran back down. "Three!" I cried to him triumphantly from a distance. He did not answer. When I came closer, I could not see him at the place where I had left him. A sense of foreboding flew through my soul; I hurried there and saw him, having sunk down from his seat, lying motionless in the grass among the wildflowers. I ran fearfully hither and thither, and when at last I caught sight of a worker in a neighbouring vineyard, I waved to him and called for help. "What's wrong with the Senator?" he asked and came quickly over. "Take comfort, young Sir," he said, after he had tried in vain to raise him up, "he lived a long life in honour, and now he has died peacefully. He who dies such a death, dies well!"

But he was still alive; it had only been a stroke, which he recovered from in the coach on the way back. He could even, on arrival in the town, walk up the steps; but once up, he had to lie down in his bed immediately, and he never left it again. The light of his life became weaker day by day, and when he was asked, "How are you?" he would reply with a smile, "Well! And soon, I'll be even better."

One evening, when twilight had just begun to fall, he became

invigorated and cheerful, to everyone's amazement; he spoke a great deal and said he felt perfectly well again and thought to get up the next day. But all of a sudden he stopped and stared straight ahead in astonishment, then he sat up and spread out his arms with shining eyes, a cry of joy escaped his lips, and he made a movement as if to leap out of bed; but that same moment he sank back into his pillow, and his eyes closed.

Found Again

"Who is that strange builder's assistant you have there?" old Volkmar asked Local Councillor Thomas, pointing out of the window opposite which a new house was in the process of being erected. Carpenters and bricklayers were briskly at work, and thick ropes swayed back and forth with their loads. But among the crowd of workers, a man dressed in badly torn rags which hung loosely and wretchedly on his body, whose tangled and unkempt hair fell over his face, had caught the aged man's attention. He seemed to be driven by an intense zeal for work and, without allowing any help, dragged over whole beams and large stones, eliciting thereby no end of admiration of his immense strength. This strength did, admittedly, seem to join itself to the general activity without any purpose, and it needed only a glance to convince the spectator that it did not lie under the control of any ordering intelligence: however, upon closer attention, one found to one's surprise that it in no way hindered the other builders from working together. A gesture, a word on the part of the workmen was enough to make the unfortunate man lay down his load just

where it was needed; he then raced away to drag new things over which he likewise, without looking to the left or the right, deposited at the place commanded, and this manic work, this obedience, seemed to give him a deep satisfaction.

The old gentleman had watched this activity for some time, shaking his head the while, whereupon he turned to the Councillor with the aforesaid question. "They call him Michael the Idiot," was the reply. "The poor man has been roaming around the region for years, instinctively finding his way to hard and heavy tasks, and he is welcome as a fellow-worker everywhere on account of his colossal strength and, particularly, because in his simple-mindedness, he behaves extremely peacefully and amicably, never desires any wages, and makes do with the worst little piece of bread."

"One should really do something for the unfortunate man; it is not right to let him, as it were, run so wild."

"Bah," said the councillor, indifferently, "he has no needs, he does well enough. As the foreman tells me, in summer he sleeps very comfortably on the church-steps or out in the open air; but in winter, the farmers let him shack up in their barns because of his harmless disposition. Should the time come when he can no longer move his limbs, then there is always the prospect of an infirmary or some other eleemosynary establishment for him."

"It is sad, though, when one has no parents," said the aged man, while walking over to the window and secretly passing his hand over his eyes. He himself had the opposite misfortune to lament, and on this very

day! Three years ago to the day, he had lost his only son on the battlefield near Leipzig, a promising youth of fine talents and an even finer heart. Friedrich's enthusiasm had driven him into the war, which his faith called a holy one; his father was willing, his mother could not hold him back, and Luise, his betrothed, blessed his pious resolve with streams of tears. He did not return. A comrade saw him felled by the stroke of an enemy's sabre; the battle surged back and forth over this place several times, and when it was won, the unrecognisable bodies of the fallen, friend and foe, were buried in one large brotherly grave. Many a heart bled at that time, and many a quivering lip sang, "Where have all the dear ones, the brave ones, gone?"¹⁰

"As far as I'm concerned, I won't let him want for anything," the councillor continued, not having noticed the old man's emotion. "Moreover, such a vigorous beast of burden is twice welcome to me at this moment, when I – you of course know the reason why – wish to have my house roofed and ready before winter comes."

"It does not behove me to interfere with your intentions, whether to promote them or to obstruct them," said Mr. Volkmar, and on his turning round from the window to face the councillor, the latter was rather taken aback to observe two big teardrops in his eyes. The venerable old man silently grasped him by the hand and took him into the next room, where his wife and Luise were sitting.

These two also showed traces of bitter weeping, and the beautiful

¹⁰ The poem "Trost für Viele" [Consolation for Many] was written by Heinrich Fenner for those who had lost their loved one in battle. It was set to music by Gottfried Weber (1779-1839).

adoptive daughter was unusually pale today. The guest was thrown into no small consternation by their cheerless, silent reception; but when the reason for this sorrow came to his mind, as illumination often comes all of a sudden to the unseeing man, he was far more alarmed at his own thoughtlessness. He could not utter a syllable, no matter how hard he racked his brains; every word he thought of saying immediately seemed to him to be inappropriate to this moment, and his embarrassment became greater with every instant precisely through the mortifying pressure it exerted on him.

Luise raised her eyes, gave him a penetrating look for some time and then said: "I had hoped that you would give your workmen a day off today."

"On the contrary," replied the old man, by way of intervention, "he did not wish to make an exception of this day, and he meant well. Through the work which he is having carried out before our eyes, he wished to remind us of the power of peace to found, to build, and to bless, while he thought to quietly lead us beyond the other significance of this day, which makes our hearts bleed, through the noise of work."

At these words, a sword pierced the guest's soul; for nothing punishes us more fatally than when another person interprets a regrettable deed we are doing, or we have done, in a pious light, thereby presenting our nakedness right before our eyes. The poor councillor had not had any meaningful thoughts at all: he hoped to take Luise home as his bride in the spring, for which reason he intended to have the new house, which he wished to christen with the wedding, all roofed and ready before winter, and

in the zeal of his temporal designs he had clean forgotten about the eighteenth of October.¹¹ So, fully feeling his indelicacy, he sat, as it were, on the bench for condemned criminals, and began, with hesitation, with a stammer: “Certainly, nobody feels the significance of this day more deeply than I –” “Stop there!” cried Luise, rising to her feet. “I can see it in you, I can hear it in your words, you are telling a –” “Don’t become bitter, Luise! It does not suit you,” the aged man said in astonishment. His voice sounded deep and, at the same time, rather quavering, like a large old bell; it reached the inmost depths of the girl’s heart, making her tremble as if of herself.

For a moment, she reflected, then she walked up to the councillor, gave him her hand, and said, bursting into tears, “Forgive me, I should not have insulted the friend of this house.”

The councillor took her hand between his and pressed it tenderly. “Only the friend of this house?” but she interrupted him.

“Yes, you are a good, a truly good man,” she said, “but” – at the same moment she let go of his hands, taking a step backwards. A convulsion spread through her entire body, and the words she vainly strove to suppress forced their way to her lips. “But there is one thing he is not!” she continued, turned towards her foster-father. “He did not fight for the Iron Cross, or he could not have forgotten this day so soon.”

“*Dulce pro patria mori!*” the councillor remarked quickly and tartly. “Yet the thankless art of *living* for one’s Fatherland is perhaps the more

¹¹ The Battle of Leipzig was fought from October 16th to the 19th in 1813.

difficult one. I feel every respect for those noble volunteers who pressed in among the ranks of professional soldiers in their youthful zeal, although I am heretical enough to believe that the matter would have been settled even had they not gone, but –”

He talked on at length about the immaturity of that enthusiasm, of the less glittering, but more lasting, merit of sober labours for the public weal, that youth not called up should not be allowed to perish, and more of the same. Then he broke off, for although he felt the satisfaction of having given vent to his feelings, he felt at the same time that this had been done inopportunistically, indeed, in this critical moment it became crystal clear to him that he had turned the heart he was striving to win away from his heart. How readily he would have taken back his words, but it was too late.

Luise sat back down. “So we have come to the point,” she coolly began, “where a girl can answer the men who have the public weal in their hands? I shall not disparage your intelligence, nor impugn your capability, the need for you. But what would your statesmanship, what would your armies have achieved against that terrible war-dæmon, that Mars in person, if the miraculous power of popular enthusiasm had not flamed through your warriors’ swords and given wings to their bullets? With that one word, Jena,¹² all of your wisdom is felled. Only when the spirit of the Prussian people rose against him and the others whom it brought along followed, only then did God begin to withdraw His hand from him. How ceremonially you celebrated the peace festivities, and now, when you have

¹² At the Battle of Jena (14 October, 1806), the French destroyed a Prussian army which had failed to modernise its structure and tactics.

grown no more than three winters older and colder, now you begin to revile them, the true ones, the brave ones, the devout ones, who went to bed on these bloody fields. My lord and my God, would You had taken my soul to You in those terrible days! It is not here, it is there, where the horrible dance trampled the bloody standing corn. Oh, the poor, good, great heart!”

She sank back into her seat, covered her countenance and burst out into loud, wild, unrestrained sobs. Everyone was thrown into consternation; never had they seen the girl like this, never had they heard such words from her mouth.

The old man gave his wife a sign and held out his hand to the councillor with a pained look. The latter had turned pale and his expression showed genuine shock. “This is a melancholy hour for me,” he said, when he left the room with his friend, the mother, “but I spoke what I thought, and this knowledge will help me bear both this melancholy hour and ones to come.”

The honest old man was now alone with his daughter, like a Father Confessor with his spiritual child. He sat down beside her, put her head to his chest and kept silent until her convulsing bosom had spent its grief. When she had become calmer, he raised her little head and looked her earnestly and warmly in the eye. She disengaged herself and stood humbly before him, her head bowed.

“Father,” she began, “I am not worthy to be called your foster-daughter. I have said things which did not become me.”

“What brought this strange mood over you, Luise?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you,” she said. “Yesterday, I spent all day fearing this one,

because I knew it would be a hard day for me, and I went to bed with an apprehensive heart. After lying long awake, I finally fell asleep. Then I dreamed, and about who else but him, about your Friedrich!”

She laid her face in her hands, and her tears dripped down between her fingers like a gentle rain.

The aged man drew her down to him on the seat. After both had kept silent for a while, Luise continued: “I saw him, looking fresher and healthier than ever; he came towards me, near the church, you know, where we parted from him after the sermon and the blessing of weapons. I was completely amazed, but only in the way that one is a very little surprised at something impossible in a dream.”

“Yes, yes,” the old man said with friendly nods, “it is precisely that which is the truth in dreams – that they make the impossible real. If people had never dreamt of better days, then better days would never have come.”

“So I was utterly astonished when I saw him. ‘Good Heavens!’ I cried to him, ‘it’s you? Wherever have you come from?’ ‘From Leipzig,’ he replied in those quick, joyful accents which always touched my heart so exceptionally. ‘From Leipzig?’ I asked, and my astonishment grew and grew. ‘What, you needed three years for *that*?’ He gave a mysterious smile, just as he used to when he wished to tease me. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but I’ve had a long journey.’ At these words he suddenly became very serious, and now this appearance struck me as being strange and uncanny. I clapped my hands and cried: ‘Just tell me, are you alive? You see, we all thought you had fallen in the battle?’ ‘I am alive. You are all mistaken.’ Now I began to understand him. ‘Yes, you are alive, in light and in a better life!’ I cried and

began to weep bitterly. Then the vision disappeared, and gradually awakening and coming to my senses, I found my pillow bathed in tears. I could not fall back asleep, again and again I could not but muse on the dream, and then I suddenly lighted on –”

She broke off with a shudder, as if she regretted what she had started to say. The aged man gave her hand a strong squeeze and knitted his eyebrows, as if he had to look an evil enemy in the face. Then he said in a firm voice, “You lighted on heavy thoughts, you supposed he had perhaps not been quite killed, then after the battle, as can happen, they covered him with earth together with the dead, and in the end he regained consciousness under the earth.”

She threw her arms around him and clung to him tightly, trembling. “You see, dear child,” he said, “One must not keep such heavy, hideous thoughts to oneself, one must speak them straight out, then they have lost much of their power.” He slowly nodded his head a few times. “Certainly, certainly,” he continued, “if I had to believe that, my grey hairs would go doubly wretched to the grave. But do you think he appeared to you in a dream for *that*, he, the friendly soul, to bring you such useless and horrifying news? Oh no, no! If Friedrich comes to you, it will always be a good spirit. He surely wanted to tell you nothing other than what you yourself answered to him in your dream. But however this end may have been, hold on to this one thought, that all of his sufferings are over. And then think of so many who were no worse than he, who were in any case human beings: think of seafarers carried away by storms to languish on the open sea or on a desolate shore, of miners buried in a caved-in shaft; think

of the cruel severity of the old ways of execution and of torture – not to console you with companionship in misfortune, but to tell you that even the worst, most bitter fate is always to be meted with a human measure. And then think of these martyrs, of those blood witnesses in all lands and of all denominations, who freely and gleefully laid down their lives for that which, in the purity of their hearts, they called their holiest of holies, even though they were often made to yearn for death for many days under the most tremendous tortures. You see, many of them suffered without a cry of pain, and yet they were humans like us. What are we compared to them? But their tribulations became light to them because they were transitory, and a promise fortified their courage during their torments. This promise, don't you know it? It is in Revelations and it runs: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."¹³

Luise, who had listened in reverent silence up to then, animatedly grasped his hand at these words and cried: "Father, there you have brought me onto just what I wanted to say! Listen, I have not finished yet. After I got up, my thoughts harassed me and gave me no peace. So I finally decided to seek peace in the Bible, where I have found it so often. When I opened at random, it was the Apocalypse of John. Oh, whyever this? I thought, it will bring me unrest sooner than rest, for I can understand nothing of these horrible secrets. Yet I looked at the place where my finger lay, and, Father, just listen, it was: 'Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, for because thou hast left thy first love.'¹⁴

¹³ Revelations 21:4.

¹⁴ Revelations 2:4.

Pious though he was, the old man smiled and slowly shook his grey head. "That's how it turns out when women come upon the apocalypse!" he said. "Child, be careful. God has not given us our good, true common sense in addition to the Bible in vain, no, and the excellent teachings which have flowed from it."

"Usually, I am certainly not one to brood," she replied. "But look – for me – and in these circumstances –"

"Well," he said, "you would not be the first Christian soul to seek in the Bible a particular meaning for their personal affairs, but even there it depends on what the 'first love' is." Hereupon he volubly explained to her that this was the love of a child for its parents, and predominantly of the boy for his mother and of the girl for her father, that these first impressions of the heart can have a miraculous effect at a later stage, and that the youth is happiest when he finds the image of his mother, the maiden the image of her father. He himself, he told her, had chosen his wife in this way, and in this sense, he thought, one could certainly call upon a person to stay true to their first love.

He was going to continue spinning out this favourite thought, in which he seemed to happily indulge himself, but he suddenly found himself interrupted by the girl softly weeping, and cried in consternation: "Heavens, what a disastrous day this is! Now I, who wished to make everything right, end up going off on the wrong track, and while I am chattering away to you about my fanciful notions, I completely forget that you simply cannot apply them to your case. But even if you lost your parents so early that you cannot remember them any longer –"

“I have found parents, to whom I belong as though we were the same blood,” she cried, nestling up to him. “Oh, and it was that, you know, which always drew me to him so, and what I must still say to myself now when I think of Friedrich, that – that –”

“Well?”

“That in your youth you must have been just like him,” she said, smiling rather sheepishly through her tears, “or that he would one day, when his hair was white, be very similar to you.”

The aged man laughed very amiably. “It does my old heart good,” he cried, “to get to hear something resembling a declaration of love in the winter of my life. However, let us speak in earnest. You know that you are the apple of our eye, and the day which will take you away from our house will make a great rent in our heart. Yet I shall never place any impediments in your way. On the contrary, even if you believed yourself betrothed to the grave only with a thought, I would do everything to rid you of this delusion. It is simply the case with us weak, mortal humans that the Dead have lost a part of their right to us. The better, purer share remains unatrophied for them, and you know that in the place where Friedrich lives, they do not woo or be wooed, and so there is no jealousy. You follow your heart if it draws you towards a man who is similar to him, and you do not fear that you will break with your first love by doing so. I would also not want you to be untrue to your decision. The suit of this irreproachable man, even though it revives painful memories, has nevertheless given me joy for your sake, and I cannot deny to you, dear child, that we believe you to regard him with favour.”

“I myself hardly know how that has come about,” she replied, blushing and hesitant. “He was Friedrich’s friend, his grief for him, his heartfelt condolences, how could they not have won me? Then his becoming a familiar figure at our home, his daily coming and going, your friendliness to him, all of that made me confiding, but – men are quick to interpret everything so much to their advantage.”

“All right,” said the old man, “nothing has been said or negotiated so far which would bind you. So do what your heart prompts you to. But if it is only a passing disgruntlement, the scene that took place just now can no doubt be undone.”

Luise shook her head, without giving any reply, and her father left after saying some more kind words to her. When Luise was alone, her past rose up in her mind’s eye more vividly than at any time in these three years. She saw her friend again, looking fresh as he had appeared to her during the night; she took delight in thoughts of his excellence, as if he were alive and could walk in through the door at any moment. But at the same time, to fill up the gap in the present, she was driven towards a drawer which hid her holiest of holies. The pledges of happy hours lay there – letters, a ring, a lock of hair, and his final lines. He had never written poems, but on the evening before the last day, when melancholy and deep emotion suddenly crept over him after a cosy, almost cheerful time spent together, he had, without a moment’s thought, jotted down these few artless lines on a sheet of paper:

And should the God of Frays in truth
Snatch me up from the fight,
The force and vigour of my youth
No pain shall shroud in night.

In love and liberty aflame,
The moment lasts a year,
And so I may eternal name
My rapture short and fair.

She read them again now and admired the resolute, manly handwriting. Oh, and the same hand which wrote these tender words had betrothed itself to the Iron Bride¹⁵ and then, on the following day, given its last squeeze, its last farewell. Lost! This word contained everything. The happy images retreated from her, and once again she abandoned herself to the boundless feeling of her unhappy destiny, but it was pain without discord, it was alleviating tears in whose flow the soul bathes quietly and calmly.

A human heart that has cried itself out resembles a bird which poises in the air, or a child which stares dreamily into the blue sky. After Luise had exhausted her woe in all its depth and purity, she went up to the window, if not so naïve, yet almost as unthinking as a child, and watched the construction which had at first stirred up such bitterness in her. She

¹⁵ The Soldier's Sword. From a poem, the "Schwertlied" (Sword Song) of Theodor Körner (1791-1813).

followed the ashlar, the beams, as they were raised up high, and was astonished at the massive creation which the united activity of many people can bring forth. Now while her eyes slid down the rising house, she met a strange look which was fixed right on her.

The unfortunate silent man whom the builders had accepted into their ranks had hitherto performed his work without interruption, like a rigidly regulated waterwork which steadily keeps its wheels in motion with no will of its own. Nobody could have dreamt – and he himself least of all – that he could have a mind for anything else. Then a window gave a clinking sound as it was opened, the unhappy creature had just laid down a load and instinctively turned his head towards the sound. The poor man saw the maiden standing at the window; he raised himself ever higher and finally stood on tiptoe to have a closer and better look. Now Luise's eyes lighted on him. She was startled by his striking behaviour; she was terrified by the mindless, pitiful expression of those eyes, which seemed to be trying to remember a lost soul. He pushed back the unkempt hair which obstructed his vision, from his face. But at the same moment there was a sudden movement in the air above him, a confused din and crashing followed, cries from many voices – Luise leaned forward out the window as if she could pull the unfortunate sacrifice away from the spot – but it was already too late.

The councillor, after he had exchanged some further words with the mother, had hurried outside to calm his ill-humour by taking a hasty and impetuous walk. He had gone quite far when it occurred to him that the unfortunate construction was continuing. He ran back, and being unable to

catch sight of the foreman at first, he ordered individual workers, as he came across them, to stop at once. They obeyed this order, which was spoken with morose harshness, on the spot; others, who had not heard any of this, worked industriously on, and through this the work was suddenly thrown into confusion. A stone which was just then being pulled up came loose, swayed for a moment over the halfwit's head, but then fortunately knocked against a pillar, whereby the force of the fall was broken and the direction somewhat altered. However, the poor man, while he was still gaping up at the maiden, was struck hard on the shoulder and violently thrown against a large ashlar, which left him lying motionless on the ground with a bleeding head.

A large crowd very soon gathered around him. The councillor called to his old friend, who had come to the window at the shouts, told him what had happened, and the old man ordered the unconscious one to be brought into his house at once. He was carried into an empty room on the ground floor. Here, there was a bed with a palliasse, on which they laid him down. Blood was pouring down from his forehead, mouth, and nose; but he had lain there only a short while when he quickly sat up and looked about him with clear eyes. "Where am I?" he cried.

The bereft father, who had entered the room with the others, heard the sound of these words, and a violent shudder shook his body, and he held on to one of those standing around to recover his strength. After arming himself with considered calm, he walked up to the bed of the awakened man, whom he had recognised at once from his voice and his eyes; for the thick grime which coated his face and the bloody hair which

hung down all dishevelled had completely disfigured him. The uncertainty of his condition made it necessary to suppress every emotion of joy and fear. "You are home, Friedrich," said his father in a gentle voice, and the men standing around stepped back in horror, not knowing if a miraculous resurrection was taking place here or if one madman had met another.

"But how did I come here? Where was I?" the injured man asked. "What happened to me?"

"You have come from the battlefield," his father said as calmly as he was able, and with a light gesture to those around. "You are wounded, not dangerously so, I hope, but the wound is at your head, so you must stay very calm and quietly lie back down."

"Father, is the battle won?" he cried, sitting up even straighter. The old man nodded a Yes and fought back his tears with a superhuman effort. "It is peace," he said at last, "and now you must be at peace also." And Friedrich lay back down on his bed in complaisant obedience and closed his eyes.

We refrain from describing the scenes which necessarily ensued from this one. Whoever has awoken from a heavy dream at the sound of the morning-bell and cried to his mortally afraid heart: "No, the sun is shining again, your loved ones still live, we are still breathing in golden light!" – he will have a faint idea of the feelings which assailed the family that had been reunited in so miraculous a manner.

The doctor had little need to help: the cure had already been effected by that fortunate accident. But how Friedrich had escaped from the battle, and what had happened to him since then, no light was ever shed

upon that, for he could barely say any more than what his father had guessed at the first moment of their reunion. He remembered that he had been fighting not far from some bushes at the side of a faithful friend when he received that sabre-blow; now whether he had crept out from among the corpses, unconsciously alive, or whether his friend had carried him into the bushes, he did not know. He preferred to accept the latter explanation and declared himself obliged beyond the grave to the “good comrade in life eternal,” who could no longer solve the mystery here below. Be that as it may, the enemy’s sabre had not struck him a mortal blow, but it had left him with a sad life, a remnant of a soul and of memory, a three-year sleep whose story he thought it utterly futile to investigate. But all the more deeply was he moved, as were all those involved, by the miraculous pull of home and of the heart, which had led him back in an unconscious dream of death through unknown reaches and long periods of time, to bloom once more at the side of his parents, who found a new lease of life themselves, and to receive from the hands of his blissfully happy bride a longer rapture than he had dared to prophesy in those poetic lines.

To the Gallows! Says Oakie

Item, there was at one time strife between the people of Beutelspach and those of Bopfing. This arose because of a toll which the Bopfingers had thrown in the way of the Beutelspachers. Now it would assuredly have been for the best to come to an agreement between each other regarding such a toll; but however many agreements were indeed reached at that

time, the disagreements sprang up like mushrooms, more abundantly and lustily. On both sides there were manly and bellicose heroes who wanted to somewhat cool their hot blood. So they decided on war and sent each other letters of defiance which were written nice and slowly and clearly.

Now in those days there was a peculiar custom in German lands: when two parties started to butt their horns and a war broke out between them, they had recourse, before unsheathing their swords, to many preliminary actions, in order to warm their tempers and make their hackles rise. The Beutelspachers began in the proper manner: they went out, cut down the Bopfingers' trees, and returned home. Then the Bopfingers were not idle either, but advanced and extirpated the Beutelspachers' vineyards and drove their goats in to eat the young shoots for the coming year; then they returned home likewise. Now the Beutelspachers' spleen was somewhat stirred: they set out, lay in ambush not far from a meadow where the Bopfingers' wives and daughters were taking a stroll, fell upon them, and dragged them away as captives, a whole swarm of them; but they let several of them go, without their girdles, for the reason that, as the Beutelspachers gave out, they had wicked tongues. This vexed the Bopfingers exceedingly much: they burst into the Beutelspachers' countryside and scorched and burned, so that birds fell down roasted from the skies and the angels in Heaven had to draw up their feet. This undertaking being insupportable to the Beutelspachers, they collected their forces and pursued the Bopfingers with a troop of cavalry, blockaded their town with wagons and tents, and began to beleaguer and grievously invest them.

But the Bopfingers held out splendidly and did not let the enemy in, except the ones they pulled over the walls into their town with their long hooks, and these would rather have stayed outside with their own. The Beutelspachers did not blanch either, and would never retreat until they had captured the town. In the end, it came to such a pass that everything, on both sides, which teeth could break or crunch was exhausted, and a sausage was not to be had for gold, neither in the camp nor in the town. It was believed that the side which could starve down the other would be the master. Now the Bopfingers were very tough: they tied ropes round their bodies to keep their stomachs under sway when they rumbled, and when their hunger pained them all too much, they made fierce faces down from their walls, as if from sheer eagerness for the fray. The Beutelspachers, on the other hand, had bigger stomachs than the Bopfingers, and so hunger pained them twice as much. In the end, they could not eke out their existence any longer, but decided to venture their all in a terrifying and meticulous assault. And they did this, but the assault turned out ill for them, for they fell down off the ladders in heaps, from the weakness of their stomachs as also from the thrusts of the Bopfingers, and they realised that they would have to leave this hard nut ungnawed.

So they held a council of war and came to an agreement: because the enemy would be tired and feeble from the fight, they would try if they could not conquer them by terror and persuasion. They accordingly sent two heralds under the walls and had them call upon the Bopfingers to yield their town henceforth, or they would mount such a storm that the sound and din would be heard as high as God's Throne and they would not spare

the unborn babe in the womb – and yet other cruel words. But the citizens would not be threatened, they ran down the walls, they were not going to surrender the town, not so much as a stone; and one of them, he was called Oakie, a bold, merry companion, who had fought very devoutly among the foremost at all times, shouted mockingly down: “Aye, the gallows, you can have that!”

The others repeated this cry and laughed at the heralds.

The heralds rode away with this reply and faithfully reported in the camp the words that had been commended them on the part of the town. It was now as plain as a pikestaff to the Beutelspachers that the game was up this time, and they prepared to withdraw without further ado. But as they passed by the gallows, which stood in the open country – the Bopfingers had forgotten to leave a sentry at it – they remembered the answer their heralds had brought, and it seemed to them advisable not to reject such an honest offer out of hand. So they took down the block and the gallows, in order not to return home without any cause for commendation, but to at least bring a memorial back with them, and they subsequently set them back up in their own territory.

However, once both parties had recovered their strength to some extent, they issued forth against each other again. The Bopfingers had assembled their helpers, a mighty host, while the Beutelspachers had also called on their confederates for help; and so both hordes met on a field on All Souls’ Day and fought the whole day long. It was a great battle. On this day, Oakie was one of those in the field, he who had offered the gallows to the Beutelspachers by way of indemnification, and by his side was a young

son of the Townmaster, as the burgomaster was called. The Townmaster had given this son into his care and keeping because he was known to be a brave and reliable man. But the little master was very restless and presumptuous, and he tried to press forward here, there and everywhere in his green tabard, giving Oakie no end of trouble, bother and labour with him. Then he was suddenly attacked by the two heralds he had turned away with dishonour from the town-walls, and while he defended himself against this enemy, the little master slipped away so that he too could pick a quarrel with somebody on the field of honour. He ran into a tall Beutelspacher who was standing alone in the middle of the field and, having knocked off for the day, was watching the tumult. The little master made for him, began to dance scornfully around him, brandishing his sword, and cried: "You long crocodile, bite into my sword and don't bend down!" The trooper found these words troublesome, and he raised his mace, which was studded with sharp spikes. Saying, "You little grasshopper, kiss my morning star and don't stretch up!" he struck the little master between the ears, felling him to the ground where he writhed pitifully. Meanwhile, Oakie had extricated himself from both of his adversaries and tried to rush to the little Townmaster's aid, but he came too late to free the friend who had been entrusted to his care, and there was nothing further he could do than pitch the tall cutthroat down in the red clover beside him, which he accomplished with a single stroke. The poor little master raised his arm from the ground to give him his hand, spoke a few broken words, ordered him to pass on his final farewell to his father, and unclasped his carcanet to leave it to this faithful protector and avenger

by way of remembrance.

The avenger closed his eyes and rushed back into the tumult, where he wildly struck at the enemy. But it was all in vain. As the day declined, victory inclined to the Beutelspachers' side; the Bopfingers, together with their confederates, were utterly vanquished and fled hurriedly home, each one to his humble home. Yet they brought their dead honourably from the battlefield with them and left nothing for the enemy save the tassel of an old, woollen cap, which a Pale citizen¹⁶ had lost during his flight. This man had good reason not to spare his shoe-leather before the Beutelspachers, for if they had caught him, they would have put out both his eyes because he had been free of their town and had sworn an oath to them, but he was a deceitful official who did not dare to render his account, and so he became estranged from them and had become a Pale citizen of Bopfingen. The Beutelspachers treasured the captured cap-tassel no end as a mighty symbol of victory, indeed, no less than if they had won possession of a banner, and setting it atop a pole, they kept it in the church where they buried their dead. And in the inscription at the heads of the tombs, in which were written the day and the hour when these honest men were slain as honourable knights, to whom God grant a happy pristine state, they also commemorated the cap-tassel with the words: "And at this hour, this cap-tassel was won from the enemy to the shame of their banner."

Now, many prisoners had been taken on both sides in this fray. And although the Bopfingers had fled the field, it was not necessary for their

¹⁶ A citizen of a free city who lived in the suburbs, out of the city's jurisdiction.

prisoners to flee with them, for it was the custom in those days that anyone who was forced to surrender himself in battle would give battlefield-bail and was at liberty to return to his home without further ado. After the battle, however, those on both sides who had been taken captive and secured in such wise were called in to redeem their oaths and had to appear before their enemy and remain with him, in a public lodging, much to their chagrin, and consume their goods and chattels there, and were not allowed to leave without his ken and will. Then great lamenting arose on both sides among the wives and children on account of impoverishment, and both parties, recognising that the war had been harmful to them in many ways, allowed friends to intervene who had considered the matter carefully and whose intentions were good. These terminated and settled the feud and put it to rest, and forged a peaceful agreement between the two sides, and in the end a constant and permanent and everlasting peace was concluded, with the condition that they were to keep it for as long as this suited them. For that was the custom in German lands in those days.

But the man who had little joy of the peace was – Oakie. He was very badly received and soundly berated by the Townmaster for not having taken better care of his young son. He wanted to have Oakie's head lying in front of his feet; but as notable witnesses had seen how he was attacked and the young master had run away from him in the meantime, the Townmaster had to renounce this intention. He therefore devised another way to satisfy his implacable wrath, and as Oakie freely displayed the necklace he had been given in public, as he could indeed do with a good conscience, he took him to court and accused him of having sacrilegiously

stolen an old and invaluable heirloom from his son. Oakie might well protest, swearing by all that was holy that the young master had bestowed the jewellery on him, but none of his friends had been by his side at that moment of the battle, and the Townmaster was able to make many arguments that destroyed the credibility of his testimony. The gentlemen of the council, upon seeing that the Townmaster would insist on having his way and wanted Oakie's head, let the matter run its course. In the community, on the other hand, he had many friends who swore to his innocence and were ready to stand by him with blood and fortune. A division had in any case arisen between the citizenry and their council; for the guilds, who had become terrifying in arms and armour with the incessant events of war, were by no means willing any longer to tolerate the governance of the noble families who sat in court and on the council. The dissension became ever greater the longer it lasted, until it was well-nigh impossible to say whether it was an action at law brought by the Townmaster against Oakie or a matter between the Council and the citizens.

This meant that the verdict dragged on, but the Council, whose wits had been sharpened by the long convention of their rule, profited from the peace to consolidate their power, and once it had gradually regained all of this it finally took the plunge and spoke the death-sentence: for dishonourably robbing a fellow fighter, Oakie was to be hanged by the neck between heaven and earth.

Now when the execution-knell shrilled, all the people set out and marched out the gate to accompany Oakie on his last walk. Nobody

ventured to help him, but they cried farewells to him and looked at him sadly, for he was a true, bold, and cheerful companion. He walked along cheerfully and erect even on this bitter passage, which made many people wonder about him. Indeed, it seemed at times as if he had to force himself to keep a straight face. To his right walked a priest, to his left his procurator and lawyer, who had pleaded his case before the court. Finally, when they reached the place of execution, everyone looked around, silent and surprised; but they soon burst out into gales of laughter, for it was suddenly clear to them why their friend showed such signs of cheerful confidence. The Bopfingers, first with the alarms of war, and then with the case at law, had completely forgotten what had happened to their gallows and how the Beutelspachers taken them down and away. Only now, when they eagerly came up and saw they were no longer in their place, did they remember, and the gentlemen of the court and the council were close to fury and ordered that a new gallows be put up at once. Then Oakie's procurator stepped forward and said, "By no means, noble gentlemen, that would violate law and justice; if you no longer have the gallows, you have lost jurisdiction; for otherwise, anyone who was able to hammer a few beams together could exercise power over life and death; if, however, you wish to hang as you did before, you must either fetch yours from the Beutelspachers or a new charter from the Emperor for gallows and block and scaffold, also for all that concerns body and blood and goods."

The words the procurator had spoken were acknowledged to be true by all the people with one voice, and the Council, although with rebellious hearts, had to accept this. The Townmaster wanted Oakie to be stoned to

death by the whole community as a stinking ruffian who had perjurally, dishonourably, praiselessly, faithlessly betrayed the penal judicature to the enemy, but he could not have his way, Oakie being acquitted of this charge. His friends also put down a large security and surety for him so he would have to be released until the case was completely resolved.

Now it rankled with the noble families and the guilds and all the people and even Oakie himself that the Beutelspachers had their block and gallows. They accordingly sent to them to demand their three-legged property back. The Beutelspachers laughed and said they were not accustomed to return a gift received; if they wished to take the gallows by force, such an attempt was not forbidden; but they would never, ever, part with it willing of heart. At the same time, they referred to the peace treaty which had been drafted at the conciliation, according to which document the costs expended on the war fell to the charge of each of the two parties, each to cover his own; however, both parties were also allowed to keep anything that they had forcefully come into possession of and appropriated in the course of these discords and clashes, disunions, wars, and tumults, and all ill-will was to be dead and buried and neither party must punish the other nor renew hostilities, neither murder, nor fire, nor robbery and theft, whatever name it might bear, neither with words, nor with work, nor with counsel nor with deeds, neither secretly, nor openly, nor in any other way, without all fraud, without all malice.

Now if the gentlemen of Bopfingen had had their way, the war would have flared up again, and Oakie would readily have borne himself like a man before the enemy in order to make amends, even had it cost him his

neck later; but the guilds wanted no new war and said, the previous one had been contrived only to further the interests of the gentlemen, who had the most vineyards and had wanted to steal the wine-trade from the Beutelspachers with their toll and keep it for themselves. So the gentlemen were compelled to desist from their design.

Then the Council had the notion of going to the Emperor and procuring the rights for a new gallows from the supremeness of his Imperial power and grace, for the Emperor was good for all damages if one could come before him. Only, he was not easy to find, for he moved around the Empire throughout the year and was now here, now there. So they fitted envoys out at great cost who went in pursuit of the Emperor and asked for him in all parts. But it did not take long for them to find him. And when they had found him, they could not come before him right away, for messengers and officials from all lands were there, and every one of them wanted something from him and had some suit to press before him, so he had a great deal of judging and settling to do. The Bopfingers stayed around him in the meantime until they could gain a hearing, and moved with his court from place to place throughout the Empire. And because they consumed their travel monies in this wise, they had to keep sending one of their number back to Bopfingen to fetch fresh travelling expenses. They also had to grease and anoint the palms of everyone from the lowest servant to the highest arch-officers to finally be able to penetrate to the Emperor; nor were they able to appear with empty hands before the Emperor himself. This lasted for years, and the Bopfingers had to shell out a lot of money and goods.

During this time, it once happened that a thief from elsewhere was caught *in flagrante* at Bopfingen. So they sat in judgement over him, and he freely confessed to them that he richly deserved the gallows for this and other deeds. However, since they had nothing to hang him from, they were deeply ashamed, and they gave him fifty florins and said he should seek a gallows elsewhere. The thief thought they had done this out of contempt for his person, and it infuriated him, so he ran to their bitter neighbours, the Beutelspachers, and offered them the fifty florins for helping him to his right. But the Beutelspachers snapped their fingers and said, “What need do we have of a stranger? This gallows is for us and our children.” And with these words they let him go. He travelled around the Empire for a long time and could not attain his right, until in the end he arrived in Westphalia and fell into the hands of the holy Vehmgericht.¹⁷ They took pity on him and hanged him from the nearest tree, as was their way, habit, and modus operandi, and they stuck their knife into the ground beside it. For this court exercised great diligence and attended to every misdeed which called for a secret tribunal and could not otherwise find its right and its rope in German-speaking lands.

Meanwhile, precious little weal accrued to the Beutelspachers from their gallows. They had set it up in a nonsensical place, and when they had hanged several thieves – I don’t know whether they were locals or foreigners – on it one day, it so happened that the sun, once it stood behind the gallows, cast the shadows of the hanged men into the houses, and they

¹⁷ A secret tribunal during the Middle Ages.

swayed back and forth on the walls, this shadow-play shocking women who were with child to the prejudice of their bodies. Then the Beutelspachers apprehended grave danger for their posterity; indeed, they even feared that this might, with time, cause hereditary thieves to be born among them; and so they pulled the gallows back down and took it to a more remote location. In this way, it cost them also no little annoy, time, and money.

Now after the Bopfingers' envoys had travelled around with the Emperor for many years, they finally extorted a letter from him in which they were granted the freedom and power to put up a new block and gallows and to use the same. And the moment that they brought the parchment with the Imperial Seal home, the council had the gallows made and Oakie led out to now have the yellowed but still valid sentence carried out on him by the hand of Master Cucumber. And once again the community went sadly along and did not dare to save its friend. He was advanced in years and weary of life, and when his procurator said to him on the way out that there would be no helping him this time, he answered that it did not much matter to him, and yet, until the time that he was thrust off the ladder, his luck might yet prosper and his foes would have no cause to rejoice. Now when he was standing on the ladder, a councillor read out the Imperial Charter before the community in a loud voice. Oakie listened attentively, and at one point he gave a sign to his procurator; whose face all at once looked a picture of congeniality, like an autumn day when the clouds disperse. The councillor, when he had come to the end, was about to give the order for execution, and the hangman was reaching for the rope, but then the procurator stepped forward and said, "Noble, gracious,

steadfast, wise, prudent gentlemen, you have, it is true, obtained from His Imperial Majesty the liberty to chop wood in the forest and make a gallows from it, to put up the same, together with permission for other iron accessories, brackets, nails, ladders and more, but the main thing has been overlooked and forgotten by His Imperial Majesty, namely, the right to have a rope on the gallows, in the privilege, particular attention has been paid to all other points and not one iota is missing, the rope only excepted; I am therefore entirely of the opinion that you must send representatives to the Emperor once again and apply for a complete privilege on account of the rope, but for this day, and until further notice, refrain from this planned execution.”

This protest gave rise to tremendous rejoicing among the citizenry, and Oakie was brought down from the ladder with laughing mouths. The Council wished indeed to object, but they could not find fault with the constitution or the law code, and there was nothing they could do but apply for a decision from a higher court of justice, and until such time as this was arrived at and reached, the malefactor had to be released on the security of his friends once more. The case came before the praiseworthy Supreme Court, whose judges wholeheartedly execrated every injustice and therefore in no wise rushed to judgement. Finally, however, it issued its mandate and stated that the Council certainly must ask the Emperor for a special privilege to make use of the rope, and that before such a privilege was granted, the Council had by all means to abstain from capital justice, whereby the rope was understood.

Now as the sentence, according to which the condemned man was

to ride the withered tree, could not be altered, and his adversaries did not dare inflict another punishment upon him, the envoys followed the Emperor and travelled around the Empire with him; however, the lord not liking to hear about the same matter twice because of the heavy pressure of government, they had far more trouble, delays and impediments with the rope than they had previously had with the gallows. But when they had at last completed their suit and came back home with the justice of the rope as hoary old men, they found the noble families driven out, the guilds installed in Council and Court, and the entire order overthrown. They gave an account of their mission to the new authorities, handed over the sealed document, and obtained safe withdrawal, whereupon they hurriedly journeyed on to seek out their old friends.

On the day when the guilds had prevailed over the Council, the implacable Townmaster died of sorrow and ill-humour, and Oakie had also been long asleep, freed from all anxiety of death, under a handsome gravestone which his friends had raised from the interest on the surety money. Following old custom, the inscription was added: *Ascensionem expectans*, which means in English: He awaits his ascension. In such a way did the Bopfingers finally come to have their gallows and rope again. But a proverb about this has survived in Bopfingen and Beutelspach for many hundreds of years. That is to say, whenever somebody desired something unreasonable from someone else, or something that seemed so unreasonable to the other that he wished to emphatically reject it, he would refuse with the words:

“Aye, the gallows!” says Oakie.