

German Short Stories of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Hermine Villinger (1849-1917)

Lil' Button

This is my nickname because of my smallness; actually, I'm called Helene and was born in the Free Imperial City of Frankfurt am Main in the year 1850.

I went to the State School¹ in Friedberger Street and felt boundless contempt for all those who were academy schoolgirls – for I was a real child of Frankfurt who couldn't stand any stuck-up airs and wouldn't have a word said against her Frankfurt. That's why I once had a fight in Fahrgasse Street with an impertinent “whizzing and whooshing” paddock from Mannheim who said that we Frankfurters all had long noses, and we plied our umbrellas with such gusto that we ended up looking like two plucked geese. My sister Julie was seven years older than me and ran the household, for our mother had died young. Father, who is a Town Councillor, did not have much time for us, and was the only person in the world I had respect for. So when he scolded me, I simply went to my wall cupboard, stuck my head in and said around twenty proper curses; he didn't hear them, and it relieved me no end. As a small child, I was cowardly, but Uncle Josef in Rödelheim, whom we were visiting in summer, cured me of that. He had an estate with a big pack of dogs who all lay in front of his door in the morning. I was to go and say good morning to him but I was horribly afraid to walk through so many dogs. Uncle promised me

¹ The *Musterschule* (“Model School”).

a wonderfully pretty little casket made entirely of shells if I plucked up my courage. So I stood there before the dogs on many consecutive mornings, and my heart beat like a hammer mill. Then one day my uncle cried to me:

“Just go for it – don’t stop to think!”

I jumped over the dogs, and from that moment on I wasn’t cowardly any more.

I did something just like that when I was sent to the knitting-school in Rödelheim. For it was all village-girls sitting there and they gawped at me in astonishment, making me suddenly feel ashamed of my hat, and I didn’t dare to take it off. For almost an entire morning I sat there with a dark-red face and the hat above it and tried to knit, when suddenly I remembered Uncle’s words – Just go for it and don’t stop to think – and I tore my hat from my head and sat on it.

On the ninth of October 1860, I was given a tremendous clip round the ears. The reason: I was rude to our servant, and I met father’s rebuke with the answer: “Why, she’s only a serving-girl.”

“I never want to hear such a reply again. Mark this well, my child, there is no ‘only’ for you towards a human being. ‘Only’ is a terrible word, though it be so small; everyone who uses it, who presumes to say: Why, they’re only a servant – a worker – a peasant, or a Jew – is contributing to all the strife in human society. For by holding a human being to be less than I am, and making him feel this, I offend and wound him, and therefore everyone who utters this evil word to his fellow humans is irrevocably one of the most execrable wretches on earth.”

The next thing that happened was an unpleasant negotiation with

father on account of extortion.

Now, on the first floor of our house, there lived the Weideles family. Mr. Weideles was a good friend of father, and Mrs. Weideles assisted Julie in all household affairs with words and deeds. They were very rich and ate wonderfully tasty things for lunch. And so – when Mr. Weideles came home from the stock exchange, I was waiting for him on the steps, and I said:

“Good day, Mr. Weideles, how are the share prices?”

“God, what a child!” he cried, and taking me by the hand, he went with me to ask father if I could eat upstairs.

Mrs. Weideles, who wore a large white bonnet that came down over her eyes, kept saying, “Have this, have this, Lil’ Button –” and it would have been a very pleasant family life had there been no Aron, their son. He was so miserly that I gave myself an upset stomach every time just to spite him. I could indeed have forgiven him his miserliness, but what I couldn’t forgive him was these words he once said:

“God, the Councillor, your father – what is he – he’s not rich –”

Then I said, “My father is much more than rich, my father is virtuous.”

“Codswallop,” cried Aron, “what are you saying! There’s no virtue in the world worth more than money!”

One day he went away on a journey and came back as a bridegroom.

“What does she look like, Aron?” I asked.

“What should she look like,” he cried, “she’s rich!”

No sooner had I seen the young wife than I waylaid Aron when he

came down from his father upstairs.

“Yuck,” I said, “what an ugly, ugly wife you’ve brought in to our house!”

“Not so loud, not so loud!” he begged.

“I certainly will say it loud, I’ll even say it to her face, that she’s ugly!”

“God, Lil’ Button,” wailed Aron, “You won’t – I beg you, not on any account – don’t say such a thing – if I can, I’ll readily do you a favour.”

Then I reflected a while before saying, “Good, give me tenpence for gingerbread cookies for the last bench in my class –”

He sighed and gave me tenpence, and we were as happy as monkeys in school, and we ate the gingerbread.

A few days later I waylaid Aron again:

“Aron,” I cried down the stairs, “you know what, I *will* say it!”

“God,” he shouted, “Lil’ Button, you won’t – I’ll give you another tenpence, if you like, if you keep silent –”

“No,” I said, “one isn’t enough, I must have gingerbread cookies for the second-last bench as well.”

Then he sighed, long and deep, and gave me two ten-penny pieces.

And so it went on, and I raised Aron to ten ten-penny pieces, and everyone in the third class in the State School ate gingerbread every day.

Suddenly, Aron did not appear any more, but Mr. Weideles came to see father and spoke with him for a long time. When he had gone, I was called in.

“I’m going to read something out to you,” said father, “from the Criminal Code here.

“If the extortion occurred through violence against a person or through the use of threats, then the perpetrator will be punished like a robber.”

“Do you know the robber I mean?”

“Certainly,” I said.

“And aren’t you ashamed?” asked father. “How can you do such a thing?”

“Because Aron’s so miserly and sets money over everything, even over virtue.”

“Do you by any chance consider your behaviour to be virtuous?”

I admitted, “No.”

“How much money did you swindle Aron out of little by little – can you calculate it?”

I thought awhile, made a rough estimate, and said, “Roughly one and a half pounds.”

Father laid the money before me.

“You will give that back to Aron, and tell him: You are very sorry for your behaviour and you ask his forgiveness.”

“I can’t do that,” I explained, “for I’m *not* sorry.”

“Then don’t show your face to me,” said father, “neither at table nor anywhere else – under any circumstances, before you have put this matter right.”

That evening, I ate alone in the back room. Julie crept around me, weeping and sighing incessantly, and said: “I don’t understand you!”

On the next morning, I had to breakfast alone, then I went to school.

I couldn't help staring out of the open window at the fires of the three smithies all the time, for three blacksmiths lived opposite the school who hammered all day long. On this morning, however, it seemed to me that the hammering kept repeating: "But Lil' Button! but Lil' Button! but Lil' Button!"

After school, I went in God's name to Eschenheimer Street where Aron lived, but because I thought that he would in the end be very pleased with the money, I went into a confectioner's shop beforehand and bought one and a half pounds' worth of gingerbread cookies. I received a whole boxful, and I went with it to Aron; his mother was sitting beside him just then.

"Aron," I said, "I ask you to forgive me, but only to oblige my father – and here, you can take your gingerbread cookies."

"God, Lil' Button," he exclaimed, "I'm happy to forgive you, I'm touched – but what am I to do with all these gingerbread cookies?"

"Give them to the boys in the street," I said, "for you must have your punishment too, not only me."

Then Mrs. Weideles took me by the hand and asked:

"Child, what do you have against my Aron?"

And I said that he had looked down on father because he isn't rich, and that he set money over virtue.

"Aron," said Mrs. Weideles, "what vile words for the child's ears, be ashamed of yourself and take the gingerbread cookies and give them to the laddies right away."

"I'll do as you order, Mother," said Aron, and he went off with his

gingerbread cookies under his arm.

Hereupon a new event entered my life, namely my girlfriends, Minchen Sulzer and Evchen Klepper, announcing quite unexpectedly one day that they didn't want to walk down Zeil Street with me at twelve o'clock after school any longer because of my stupid childish pigtails, and because I was so small and didn't have a sweetheart.

The last thing in particular vexed me sorely, and I resolved to show them that I was worth just as much as they were.

One evening, at supper, Mr. Dengler – he came to eat with us very often, you see – was there, I said to him:

“Mr. Dengler, could you possibly do me a favour?”

He said, “With the greatest pleasure.”

“Then be so kind,” I said, “as to be my sweetheart.”

Julie turned dark-red and kicked me under the table, but Mr. Dengler said:

“Why not? Just tell me what I'm to do.”

“Nothing more than greeting me in Zeil Street at twelve noon, and don't forget, will you!”

He promised.

After school the next day, I put on a pair of brand-new gloves from my sister and told my girlfriends:

“You can feel easy about walking down Zeil Street with me now, I have a sweetheart.”

Of course they wouldn't believe me, but they took me with them out of curiosity.

At first, a few lousy grammar school boys came along and greeted us, and I laughed out loud and said: “I’ve someone else!”

Suddenly I saw Mr. Dengler coming over the road towards us. I quickly nudged my girlfriends.

“Here he comes, the very tall man with the beard and the brown hat.”

They almost split their sides laughing and would never ever believe me, while my heart pounded for fear that Mr. Dengler might in the end fail to keep his word and leave me in the lurch by not greeting me properly. But he doffed his hat low, down near the ground, and made such a serious face as if he really were my sweetheart.

Then my girlfriends very sheepishly walked away from me at the next corner, and neither of them ever alluded to my stupid, childish pigtails again.

Now as far as my sister Julie was concerned, I did like her very much, that was true, but I found fault with her in eleven things:

- 1 she was boring,
- 2 far too good,
- 3 had an unpleasant hankering for order,
- 4 she cried for nothing
- 5 she simply couldn’t put herself in someone’s else’s shoes – for example, in mine,
- 6 she preached in the most disagreeable manner,
- 7 she wasn’t to be parted from her women’s handiwork,
- 8 she never asserted anything with strength of character

9 she attached the most undue importance to manners,
10 she was far from having courage and
11 she always went red.

One day, after quarrels beyond description, I pointed out to my sister all of her characteristics by saying to her that, with such a lack of energy, she shouldn't for God's sake ever think of getting married, for one must before all else make an impression on children, and she didn't have the slightest talent for that.

Mr. Dengler came in just as we were talking, and I chose him to be the arbiter by asking him:

"Mr. Dengler, what is actually the main characteristic a future wife should have, surely it's not going red, as Julie does at every moment?"

"After that, she quickly turned towards the window, and when I saw that her eyes were flooded again, I said in Mr. Dengler's ear:

"You could comfort her a little, if you like" – and I took myself off. But what did I see when I came into the dining-room for supper? Julie had got engaged to Mr. Dengler, and we drank champagne.

A short while afterwards, I entered the Academy; when I came back in the summer holidays a year later for my sister's wedding, all of Frankfurt was astonished at the change in me – but chiefly Aron Weideles. "God," he said, "where's Lil' Button gone – I don't recognise this big, demure lady at all. Just tell me, for God's sake, how such a change for the better is possible?"

"Well, look, Aron," I replied, "it comes only and solely from the love of virtue, or could you perhaps name me a person, for example from

history or from life, whom love of money made better?”

Then he said, “Codswallop!” but with a very thoughtful face, and I cried, “There you are, ner ner! Virtue *is* worth more!”