

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries  
**Isolde Kurz (1863-1944)**

- |  |              |
|--|--------------|
| <b>1. The Iettatore</b>                        | <b>p. 1</b>  |
| <b>2. Aunt Susan's Last Will and Testament</b> | <b>p. 28</b> |
| <b>3. Sleeping</b>                             | <b>p. 69</b> |
| <b>4. The Shining Hero</b>                     | <b>p. 77</b> |
| <b>5. The Old Wardrobe</b>                     | <b>p. 95</b> |

**The Iettatore**  
A Forgotten Story

(From *Die Stunde des Unsichtbaren*, 'The Hour of the Invisible,' 1927)

The reader who should happen to know all about the Iettatura ('Evil Eye') need not be alarmed by this title. I have made the sign of the horns<sup>1</sup> over my leaves so that reading them will not harm him nor writing them harm me. We both generally assume, it is true, that we are superior to superstition, but it is better to be on the safe side nevertheless.

What kind of person is a Iettatore? One who has the Evil Eye, the answer will come. But the Evil Eye is known in the North of Europe as well; whoever has it wishes to do evil to his fellow men and is marked by nature as a vessel of evil, so that nannies can spit at his feet from ten paces. Not so the Iettatore, a variety that occurs only in the South. He can be the most perfect man of honour and inspired with the most benevolent

---

<sup>1</sup> Made with a clenched fist by backing the thumb under the middle and fourth fingers and extending the index and little fingers.

convictions; if he has brought this fateful gift into the world with him, then as long as he lives, wherever he goes, without his knowledge or volition, he is a danger to his fellow man. His coming is invariably bound with some misfortune, a loss, if not even a death. He himself can enjoy the best of success for a long time, until the perniciousness retroacts on its originator; he can be lucky in all that he undertakes while, at the same time, he rages among those around him like an epidemic. He suspects nothing of the doom that he brings; he sympathetically presses Friend A's hand to console him over the lost lawsuit, the prospects of which had still been so favourable before his last visit, then he hears that Friend B has fallen ill, hurries at once to his residence where his family receives him with horror and tries to quickly remove him – to no purpose, three days later he walks, a candle in his hand, in sincere grief behind the coffin of his victim.

He who will become a true Iettatore usually gives notice of this even in the cradle: he either cost his mother her life with his birth, or the wet-nurse, the moment she put him to her breast, fell into incurable insanity. Later, he has been pernicious to teachers and fellow pupils, has, through his mere presence, ignited fires, caused inundations, and perhaps even put the state in danger. But as the family conceals the evil for as long as possible, he can have caused no end of damage by the time the Mark of Cain is at last visible to all the world. There is no known case of someone afflicted with Iettatura ever having recovered from his malady; it is innate, hereditary, and incurable. It can pass over a whole generation or enter a collateral line, but like tuberculosis it appears again and again and is said to become more acute as the affected one increases in years. The home of

the Iettatura is Naples, which suggests a Greek origin, and it particularly likes to latch on to the aristocratic families there.

Formerly three great Iettatore-families stood out among the Neapolitans. They bore the proudest names in the land; I shall keep them to myself, so as not to harm them or us. My source, a very erudite and broad-minded Neapolitan, knew of a fourth, the most dangerous of all, but he would not name them: merely to utter their name was ominous, he said. After much pleading and urging, he wrote it in my notebook for me, but not without making the well-known protective sign with two splayed fingers of his left hand over it and then sighing from the depths of his soul: “Dio ce la mandi buona!” [God help us!] I have lost the notebook with the name, and that is probably for the best. Under the rule of the Bourbons, it was apparently no rare occurrence for members of such families to be banished the land for no fault of their own, but simply to render the Iettatura harmless. Their nearest relatives could, at the same time, hold the highest court appointments and public offices undisturbed, for usually only one person among the kindred was bearer of the diabolical inheritance. I do not however intend to write a treatise on Iettatura, but would rather like to tell about a completely forgotten Iettatore, whom I personally knew and who today, when I was rummaging around in the old, rediscovered sketches of my Florentine years, suddenly appeared to me in my mind’s eye.

It was in the nineties when I received, one day, an invitation to supper from Mrs. Clara G., the German wife of a Neapolitan noble who had

formerly set up house on a grand scale in Florence but now came to the city from his estate in Casentino only seldom. It had the playful postscript:

“As you love the odd types of humanity, so there is a surprise in store for you tonight. I ask however that you provide yourself with a little coral horn just in case, for you will make the acquaintance of the most notorious Iettatore, Marchese O., at my home.”

I immediately knew who was meant, although I had never heard the name before. The figure tainted with the bad reputation had been shown to me in the street as a curiosity of the town: a gaunt old gentleman with a striking physiognomy and somewhat slovenly outward appearance, to which, however, there still clung the traces of an earlier, aristocratic lifestyle. His appearance was not prepossessing, but there was something in his eyes that touched the heart, something timid and proud, like a man who was once condemned to death though innocent and who has avoided human intercourse ever since.

He was never seen in public places of entertainment; on the contrary, he walked to the Parco delle Cascine every day, particularly in the early hours of morning, and then most preferably along secluded bridle-paths to which pedestrians seldom find their way. There he walked slowly up and down, prodding the soft earth with his cane, singing to himself in an undertone and stopping now and then to let out a short laugh that was anything but happy.

The name of the Marchese O. had, as I have said, never yet been spoken to me, even those who were personally acquainted with him avoided uttering it: when the talk was of the unfortunate man, he was

simply called, “So-and-so,” or “Mr. So-and-so,” and one could hear, from the mouths of educated people, statements such as these:

“I had intended to take a sum to the bank today, but on the way I met So-and-so, so I thought it more advisable to turn back.” Or: “I must sell my horse, the Marchese, you know, the Neapolitan, praised its paces in Cascine Park the other day, so it’s going to break a leg any day soon.”

The Marchese O. had not always been a pariah in Florence. Older people remembered knowing him as a young man with a zest for life and as a brilliant member of the noble club; in those days, he rode on the crest of the wave and was engaged to one of the richest and most beautiful girls in high society. What circumstances were attended with the turning-point of his fortune had long been consigned to oblivion; now he led a solitary life as a bachelor, lived as frugally as a miser, and I was more than a little astonished when I met him one time, one single time, with a beautiful young woman on his arm in the entrance-hall of the pergola, attentively escorting her out and protecting her from any contact like a precious vase. I was told that she was the presiding judge’s daughter Lacava, the Marchese’s godchild and heiress-presumptive, and when I expressed my surprise at this enlightened family who alone seemed to defy the general prejudice, I was given for reply, with an indeterminable smile, that the Iettatura had no power over the House of Lacava.

I was therefore more than a little eager to become acquainted with the man to whom such an incomprehensible fate was attached. Apparently, my fellow countrywoman wanted, with her clear mind and warm heart, to make an attempt to bring the solitary man back among people, and I can

only regret that I arrived too late to observe the faces of the other guests when he entered; of course, Mrs. Clara had invited foreigners almost exclusively by way of precaution. I found him already seated, clean-shaven and in an immaculate frock-coat suit, beside the lady of the house. The entire circle seemed to have joined in a kindly conspiracy, for the outcast was surrounded with the most courteous attentions from all sides. Seen from close at hand, he had no repellent features; only, the unusual narrowness of his face, which actually consisted of nothing more than two profiles, and the long aquiline nose, which resembled the back of a knife, could strike one as sinister. But there was nothing of the classical Iettatore-type about him, his hair did not incline to reddish-fair, and his eyes did not have a piercing look, only an infinitely melancholic one, as if they would say: Yes, dear children, you come too late with your sympathy, this tree is past bursting into leaf.

The master of the house, his compatriot and coeval, indefatigably sought to cheer him up through reminiscences from the years of their youth, but the amiable and beautiful hostess, who, although younger than her spouse by twenty years, likewise treated him as an old companion, helped even more to rouse the guest from his timid reserve.

At table his constraint really was dispelled, the recluse revealed himself to be an entertaining neighbour, from out of the mask of reserve there broke an effusive Southern temperament and social talents which had only become rusty; they had not died. He recounted witty stories about Court in the Age of the Bourbons and displayed that old-fashioned gallantry which made elderly gentlemen all the more charming the farther

away one moved from the days when they were in vogue.

When we took our coffee in the adjoining room, the Marchese went and stood at the piano with the master of the house, and they accompanied each other, alternately singing merry Neapolitan folk-songs which put the guests in a transport of sheer delight. The Marchese still had a clear and powerful voice like a young man, and he sang with such youthful fire and exuberance that we thought we were listening to a *lazzarone*.<sup>2</sup>

A lady walked up to him at the piano and said:

“Why, I really had no idea that you were so musical, Marchese.”

“Now, is there a Neapolitan who is *not* musical?” he asked with a smile, and the lady of the house quickly interposed:

“Oh, you do not know that the Marchese has even written an opera, ‘Tullia d’Aragona,’<sup>3</sup> which was accepted by many theatres at Verdi’s intercession.”

“And performed at none,” the old gentleman added.

“Why was that?” asked the lady.

“In the Costanzi, the prima donna was wounded when a spurned lover shot her during the final rehearsal, and here at the Niccolini<sup>4</sup> fire broke out at the first performance, before the curtain had even been raised. Of course, everyone cried: There you are, it’s the Iettatura. And then the opera had to pay the penalty for this, being thrown overboard together with its composer. For from then on it was taken as read: Whenever ‘Tullia

---

<sup>2</sup> Here: A strolling singer in the streets of Naples.

<sup>3</sup> An Italian upper-class courtesan and poetess (c.1501-1556).

<sup>4</sup> The Costanzi: an opera house in Rome. The Niccolini: a theatre in Florence.

d'Aragona is on the programme, some misfortune is bound to occur."

"Outrageous! Ridiculous superstition!" cried those standing nearest by, and a disapproving murmur spread all through the drawing-room, while one or another of the company, perhaps, secretly made the Sign of the Horns.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Mrs. Clara with animation, "one would not believe it possible elsewhere. And we also suffered as a result of the foolishness, for my husband had written the libretto. The subject matter is from the Marchese's own family history, and he entwined it with the figure of the famous poetess and courtesan."

"Could we not hear something from your opera?" I asked the Marchese.

He threw an inquiring look at the lady of the house, who quickly interjected:

"My niece will sing Tullia's aria, 'O, senza pace,' for you, and the Marchese will have the kindness to accompany her. You will give us the pleasure, will you not?"

The Marchese bowed without saying a word. A quiet radiance passed over all of his face, making his unlovely features almost prepossessing.

The niece, a pretty seventeen-year-old German girl who was preparing herself for the stage, had already slipped away into a corner to rummage in the sheet-basket, from which she presently fetched out the aria; this little shift had been prepared by the hospitable household to

please the recluse.

Annetta walked to the piano, the Marchese sat down, and the listeners sat in a wide semi-circle. I could not take my eyes off the old gentleman; it was worth observing his face during the music. He did not look at the keys but raised his eyes as though he wished to hurry after the sounds as they soared away, and his fingers found their way by themselves. The girl, who had a good soprano voice, sang the lovesick poetess's aria expressively and powerfully, and elicited murmurs of admiration from the listeners. The composer did not miss out on his share. "That has a Verdian passion," I heard someone say beside me, and when the singer finished, an encore was fervently called for. The Marchese had suddenly become ten years younger and sat there as if transported into another world.

"If you are not tired," he quietly said to the young girl who shared his laurels, "you might sing the 'Un sol desio' passage one more time." The singer assured him with glowing cheeks that she was not tired and began the whole aria from the beginning:

'O, senza pace,' – but she did not bring the first line to an end, a shrill cry of terror drowned out her voice. She had come too close to a piano-candle with her hanging sleeve, and her flimsy blue silk frock instantly flared up. The Marchese tried to put out the fire with trembling hands, but two strong young arms beat him to it and extinguished the flames. Yet Annetta seemed to be quite beside herself, she screamed over and over again and had to be carried, having convulsions, into the next room. Ten minutes later, although Mrs. Clara came back and reported that her niece had suffered nothing worse than a fright and only needed a little

rest to calm her nerves, the evening was spoiled nonetheless. One gentleman had burns on his hand from extinguishing the fire, and the company broke up in dismay. Only now did we notice that the Marchese was missing, the piano was still open, and the fatal music-sheet lay on the floor undamaged – but the Iettatore had disappeared.

“I just feel sorry for the poor Marchese,” said Mrs. Clara when we were sitting together for half an hour after the company had departed. “I meant well, but this evening will, I fear, simply add fuel to the fire. I am convinced he will now keep away from us as well; for he naturally supposes that the accident, for which only the stupid vogue for hanging sleeves is to blame, will be ascribed to his presence.”

When I asked for the story of the singular man’s life, she referred me to her husband, who had been intimate with him in their youth and had perpetrated many a droll prank with him before the Marchese, being very young, joined one of the many conspiracies of the late forties and then came to Florence with that tidal wave of Neapolitan fugitives who poured over Tuscany at that time.

“In those days,” she continued, “it was generally believed that he was destined for a brilliant future. Although he lived in the humblest conditions, his estates having been sequestered, yet all great houses stood open to him, in Florence everyone went crazy about the talented and noble Neapolitan, and many copies of his lesser compositions passed from hand to hand. – When I made his acquaintance, his star was already sinking. I still clearly remember how friends of my husband said even then:

“What? You associate with the Marchese O., with the Iettatore?”

Turn your back on him when he comes again, spit at his feet, he has the Evil Eye, he will bring discord into your house.’

“And the poor Marchese himself, who still took the matter as a joke at that time, brought me a little coral horn one day – I have it still – which I should carry for protection against him. Of course I did not drop him, and he remained a friend of the family so long as we spent the winter in Florence, but we had a hard fight against prejudice even then, and if only a roast was burnt, the blame was laid upon the poor Marchese in jest or in earnest.”

“Well, there *was* something more than burnt roasts,” her husband interjected. “Do you remember the incident with the new Sèvres porcelain? My wife,” he explained to me, “had ordered a sumptuous Sèvres dinner-service from France, and to celebrate the porcelain she gave a supper at which friend O. had to be present. He radiated amiability, but when the first course had been taken away, it occurred to him to reach out for one of the small bowls just when the footman was walking in with an armful of plates, and to say: “It is really a quite charming pattern.” He had not finished his words when a crash sounded from the door, and the floor was covered with fragments. But at the crash the Marchese innocently turned his head round and said, with a pitying look at the offender who was gathering up the pieces, “These marble floors are too smooth, I have warned Mrs. Clara several times” – without suspecting that half of the company present saw *him* to be the real culprit.”

“He was right, the floor was indeed too smooth,” replied Mrs. Clara, quite unfazed. “And it is by no means out of the question that our new

servant was made nervous by the hints they had given him in the kitchen before he entered.”

“And that large chandelier of ours which he caused to crash on the next occasion?” the husband, who was perhaps not, after all, so sure of his broadminded outlook as he liked to make his German wife believe, reminded her.

I asked her how the unlucky devil had managed to accomplish that.

“Oh, very easily,” was the answer. “He came, saw, and conquered. No sooner had he advanced to the middle of the room to kiss my wife’s hand than something fell from above and broke, and our lovely chandelier lay in a thousand fragments.”

“But nobody was injured,” Mrs. Clara insisted unperturbedly, “and when the chain was examined, it turned out that the broken link was rusty; it was a miracle that it had held so long. The only strange thing about the whole incident was people looking for a scapegoat.”

“What can you expect?” the master of the house remarked to me. “It’s easy for foreigners to make light of a prejudice they are not born with. But these repeated mischances did the poor Marchese much harm. Among the refugees, some now suddenly claimed to know that his father had been a Iettatore, and then misfortunes came one after another. What happened with the opera, you have heard from the man himself. Around that time, he invited a few young people to a boating-party on the Arno one day, to watch the fireworks that were going to be let off on the bridge. The little boat collided with a larger one, capsized, the Marchese swam to safety, the others drowned, among them one of his fiancée’s brothers, whose family

was so shattered that they broke off the engagement. From that time on his reputation as a Iettatore was established, it was as though he were branded with a stigma. Duchess Carafa, whom he visited almost every day, had lost three delightful children, one after the other, to scarlet fever; the Duke was the Marchese's oldest school-friend and a truly enlightened man, and he wanted to force his wife to continue to receive the pariah, but the Duchess wrote a short letter to him in secret in which she implored him to have consideration for the worries of a mother who wished to keep her last child, and voluntarily stay away from her threshold. The unfortunate man had tears in his eyes when he showed me these lines. Offended and embittered, he withdrew from society, and nobody made any attempt to stop him. It was not that everyone had believed in his pernicious influence, but his long nose was a reminder of so many painful events at which it had been present that people gradually preferred not to see it any more. They let superstition alone and simply found that they did not exactly need to associate with the Marchese O., who had in any case lost his charming spirits and assumed a suspicious, embittered manner. Whenever he dared to occasionally leave his visiting-card here or there, he simply found nobody at home.

“In the end, there remained for him only the Club, in which he now spent all of his time. But there too, people did not really like to see him anymore, for if he should want to watch a game of cards, it could easily come to pass that the player beside whom he had seated himself would angrily snort at him, ‘Can’t you see that you’re spoiling my game, find yourself another seat.’ Then there were altercations, painful scenes, and

even duels, until the unfortunate pariah preferred to avoid his Club also.

“Of the entire society with whom he had previously associated, Countess Valenza had kept her friendship with him the longest; he visited her every now and then on a Thursday, where he found her old circle together, and there he was always received with undiminished warm-heartedness. His star, which was perhaps his unlucky star, ordained it that shortly before the death of this truly noble-minded lady, which broke up the hospitable house, he renewed an acquaintance there which was decisive for the rest of his life. Mrs. Lacava is neither beautiful nor brilliant, but she possesses a clear mind, a thorough education, and is, as a born Englishwoman, free from Italian prejudices. She approached the persona non grata with sympathy; it is said that she had favoured him when she was a girl but had been overlooked by him, he still being much in demand at that time. Her marriage was a mere matter of form even then and left her heart completely unengaged; President Lacava, who had been deceived in her financial circumstances, certainly treated her with respect, but he went his own way. It was with his full consent that the Marchese occupied the empty seat beside the lonely lady and gradually took over the role of master of the house. He accompanied the young lady to the theatre in the absence of her husband and helped her receive guests; he superintended the education of her little son, and later, when a little daughter came into the world, the Marchese undertook the position of godfather, and the little one received the name Tullia after his Child of Sorrow, the unperformed opera. Meanwhile, political revolutions had brought him back into the possession of his fortune; he could now have turned his back on the city

which had grown so inhospitable and lived abroad, free from defamation, as a well-to-do man. A new existence beckoned to him; it only depended on him to cast aside his entire past life and the accursed prejudice that clung to him, to start a family in a foreign place and become a person like any other. Mrs. Lacava herself advised him to do this. But his heart was bound: love for his little godchild displaced all his own wishes. He stayed where he was and is said to have made a will in which he designated Tullia Lacava as sole heiress. All of his thoughts and aspirations were restricted to this little flower of maidenhood from her birth on: he instructed her in music, arranged English nurses and French governesses, and to the few friends he still had, my wife and I first and foremost, he became practically unbearable, for he spoke of nothing but the progress the little one was making, her beauty, and her talents. He preserved a grateful, fond friendship with the mother, a pale, ailing woman, but he went down on his knees before the child – the child was everything to him. ‘When Tullia has grown up,’ that was the starting-point of all his dreams for the future, and he saw the signs of eminent talent in the little one’s childlike notions.

“In spring and autumn, he carried the whole family off to his estates near Naples, in summer he accompanied them on journeys or into the mountains, and the winter he spent very tranquilly in Florence, occupied only with the Lacava family like a quiet tutelary spirit. When Tullia made her debut in society, he ordered a dress for her from Paris that cost thousands, and he followed her with his eyes from the steps, rubbing his hands, as she got into the carriage with her father and mother. He went around in worn-out clothes, ate in a cheap café and accumulated interest

upon interest, to increase the dowry of his Tullia. On the occasions when the mother's heart disease got worse, he did not leave her bedside and watched by her through the nights so that Tullia's sleep was not disturbed. And when the girl, almost grown-up, wanted to be sent to a select college to enable her the better to comport herself in society, he supported this wish also, however hard it would be for him to stay at his melancholy post without her. 'When Tullia gets married one day,' – with these words he consoled himself for the domestic joys he had missed and for everything that Fortune had denied him."

"And did the diabolic influence really never make itself manifest in the Lacava family?" I asked.

Mr. G. was silent and glanced fleetingly at his wife.

"Let me talk now," she said emphatically. "All through sixteen years, while the Marchese looked after the President's house, not a tile fell from its roof. Indeed, it was as if the pernicious effect that people had imputed to him had changed into a sheer blessing there. But fate will knock at every door someday, with or without Iettatura.

"In the spring of Eighty-Seven, of unhappy memory, news of the disastrous battle of Dogali<sup>5</sup> flew through Italy like a seismic shock. Mrs. Lacava's eldest son, Alberto, a promising, very handsome youth of twenty-two years, was with his regiment in Massawa. A part of this very regiment had been massacred at Dogali by the Abyssinians. For many days, mothers, father, brothers besieged the Ministry of War for news of their dear ones in

---

<sup>5</sup> Fought on 26 January 1887. A small Italian force was eventually overwhelmed and virtually wiped out by a much larger Ethiopian army.

Africa. Godfather, as the Marchese was called in the President's house, happened to be in Rome at that time, and he hurried to the relevant ministry straight away but had to look in a number of times before the casualty list arrived from Africa: among the fallen, Alberto's name was one of the first.

“The Marchese did not dare to telegram the family, but personally brought the sad news to Florence. And now see the lengths to which human folly and human unkindness will go. For the Battle of Dogali had been fought a long time before, and the fallen were lying in the hot earth of Africa, when the casualty list came to Rome and into the hands of the Marchese. And yet Mr. Lacava could not refrain from saying to his wife in the first paroxysm of despair, ‘What need did that bird of ill omen have to meddle in our concerns? Couldn't we have sent another? Doesn't he know that his croaking brings calamity in its wake?’

“The senseless malice that suddenly burst out of these words occasioned the first matrimonial quarrel in the Lacava household, which was never subsequently patched up and which was also placed to the Marchese's account. A few years passed. Then there rose a new joy from the old sorrow in the House of Lacava, as tends to be the way with the fate of man. A Count Tancredi, Alberto's friend and comrade from the military academy, had come in the very first weeks, under the deep impression of the recent loss, to offer his condolences to the family, and seeing charming Tullia in her mourning-dress, he was captivated. However, they came to an understanding only last winter, when the young officer was transferred here with his squadron. The plan was to wait until Mrs. Lacava's birthday

for the formal engagement, then only a short time was to pass between this and the wedding, as is the custom here. Tancredi had also taken the godfather's heart by storm, for he played chess with him and showed himself thoroughly equal to the situation by showing even greater deference to his fiancée's godfather than to his future father-in-law. He had every reason to do so, for the Marchese furnished the young home on a princely scale and gave the couple so magnificent an allowance that he himself was left with only a scanty annual income. As proof of his particular affection, he gave the young officer an English thoroughbred, the racehorse Vandalo, which had already won prizes in Rome and in Naples.

“Around four o'clock on the first Sunday in May, the entire Lacava family made ready to drive to Cascine Park, where Count Tancredi was to race for the Arno Prize on Vandalo. Tullia was sitting in the landau the Marchese had sent, and in her light-green gown, with a mighty bouquet of roses in her hands, she resembled a goddess of spring. She was waiting for her parents, who were still tarrying upstairs, when, to her infinite astonishment, she saw her godfather, dressed with immaculate chic, a flower in his buttonhole, coming down the street. He had hung a field-glass over his shoulder and wore a tie-pin in the shape of a horseshoe in his tie. Tullia was seized with an inclination to laugh, so unaccustomed was this spectacle to her; but the next moment, her heart froze as if gripped by an icy hand: Surely he would not want to ride with them?!

Sure enough, he came up, gave a greeting, and innocently opened the carriage door. ‘But godfather,’ cried Tullia in alarm, ‘we shall be squashed together, you *know* I've invited a girlfriend.’

“Doesn’t matter,’ he calmly replied, seating himself beside her and feasting his eyes on her charming appearance. ‘When she comes, I shall simply get out and follow you on foot. I am firmly resolved to see Vandalò race today.’

“The arrival of the parents interrupted the conversation, but Tullia trembled all over, she felt, as she later recounted, as if she wanted to throw herself screaming out the carriage. She still sought objections, but a steady look from her mother, who set great store on the godfather being treated with deference, enjoined her to silence.

“Her last hope fastened on her girlfriend, before whose house they were just then driving up. Bianca had faithfully promised, and when Bianca appeared, her godfather would have to give up his seat; he was too chivalrous to make her squeeze in. A painful minute passed, then the footman came back alone: Miss Bianca was indisposed at present and asked to be excused.

“Tullia leaned against the back of the carriage, as white as a sheet, and said not another word. So, it was a decree of fate that her godfather should ride with her today, he, who had never otherwise accompanied her to a public entertainment. She avoided his admiring looks; she saw for the first time, in the knife-sharp bridge of his nose, the signs of the Evil Eye, which she had been taught to despise as crack-headed superstition. From that moment on, she hated her godfather, I have it from her own lips, and she resolved to make him pay for her fear. Had he not also accompanied poor Alberto to Brindisi and even called his blessings after him from the pier? And is it not known that the blessing of a Iettatore must change into

its opposite? What could it matter to him whether he rode with them to the racecourse or not? For the old gentleman it was merely a childish pleasure, while for her it meant an hour in Hell.

“Only when Tancredi walked up to the carriage and she took a short stroll at his side over the grass did she light up again, and her anxiety dissipated. There was no more handsome couple in the whole racecourse, and she knew it. Admired and envied and loved above all others – what more could a spoilt young bride-to-be wish for!

“And the godfather above all! He was actually in youthful spirits, the Neapolitan blood broke out once again from under the stern exterior, a rapid fire of good ideas poured out of his mouth, he was in constant motion, explaining the chances of the various horses and even taking part in the betting. – As we had chanced to come to a halt, in the crowd of carriages and horses on that day, bringing our two landaus side to side, he directed almost all of his words at my husband and me.

“Of course, he bet on Vandalo.

“‘Anything but that, godfather!’ Tullia cried out, grasping his arm.

“‘And why not, silly little goose?’ he replied, laughing. ‘Do you suppose I don’t know horses? Vandalo is the best animal on the whole racecourse. Today he will bring back in what he cost.’

“Tullia hung her head and could not think of anything to reply. The gentlemen’s race<sup>6</sup> began. Tullia, standing on tiptoe and pale as a marble statue, stood on the cushioned carriage-seat and followed Vandalo’s every

---

<sup>6</sup> A race in which the horse’s owner rides as its jockey.

movement with her small opera-glasses. He came past in second place, his rider cautiously holding him back; a black horse was a length ahead of him.

“That’s the way!” said the godfather. ‘You’ll see, you’ll see, Vandalo has air in his bones like a bird.’

Again they flew past, and this time the black horse was far back, but a dun had the lead.

“Vandalo, stride out, stride out!” cried the godfather, who could not be silent a moment. Constantly hearing his voice got on Tullia’s nerves, she trembled all over and her hands became cold and damp. But now Vandalo meant business, his rider leant forward and whipped him, he flew like the wind; for the third time he came rushing past, the winning-post was not thirty metres away.

“Bravo! Bravo, Vandalo!” cried the godfather, and before he had finished speaking, Vandalo crashed down, and horse and rider literally disappeared under the hooves of the dun as it came flying after. It was received with a general cry of horror when it reached the winning-post after running over the fallen rider. Vandalo lay motionless and covered its owner.

“The opera-glasses fell from Tullia’s hands, then she reeled after them and was only just caught up in her godfather’s arms. He placed her in the arms of her parents, and immediately afterwards his tall, gaunt figure elbowed a way through the crowd. In vain did the rest of us try to calm the girl with the poor comfort that the racecourse being soft and free from obstacles, the fall could not possibly have been such a serious one. Tullia lay like a dying woman and only groaned, ‘It’s over, I know, it’s over.’ Her

godfather did not return, and the throng around the site of the accident prophesied no good. The carriage was driven slowly, step by step, through the densely packed crowd towards the city.

“The rest of us followed. Before the exit from Cascine Park, we saw a covered object being carried from the grass into the ground floor of a house. The godfather walked beside the stretcher and did not raise his eyes. Tullia wanted to jump out of the carriage, but four arms held her back; and the landau, as soon as it was clear of the crowd, flew towards their home as fast as the horses could trot.

“Tullia had been right in her surmise: her lover did not regain consciousness. The horse had fallen on him and smashed his spine. But how it came about that Vandalo, much-lauded Vandalo, ridden by the best rider in the garrison, had fallen to its death on level ground – this was one of those things for which there is simply no explanation. Had he stumbled or been brought down by the horse behind? Tancredi could speak no longer; the two rivals had been too preoccupied with themselves at the moment of the catastrophe; the crowd had seen only the fall, not its cause. So it must have been a case of Iettatura, the most pronounced and the direst case imaginable.

“Tullia lay without moving or saying a word for many days; only, when her godfather entered the room, she turned her face to the wall. The worldly-wise mother at length thought that this excess of misery could harm her daughter’s future prospects, all the more so as the engagement had not yet been made public, and she took the girl away with her to England. Tullia acquiesced in everything that had been arranged for her,

except that she opposed, with vehemence, her godfather accompanying them. Her mother had to think up one subterfuge after another to conceal from the old friend how bitterly she accused him. On the other hand, she urgently demanded the company of her father, who had never been so intimate with her before, and the President had to take leave twice to visit his mentally disturbed daughter, while the poor godfather was left behind on his own in Florence and walked to the post office day after day to receive news from England. The mother wrote to him regularly and sent fabricated greetings from Tullia, because she could not persuade her to write a line to her godfather. The poor man then told us, with a radiant face, the affectionate words that a pious deception had brought him, and he generally ended with his usual refrain, ‘When Tullia gets married one day...’ – At the request of Mrs. Lacava, we brought the recluse more and more into our circle for the duration of our stay, to console him for his loneliness, and it was expressly for his sake that the present evening was arranged which has now come to so disastrous an end through the clumsiness of my niece.”

That was the last that I saw or heard of the Marchese O. for a long time, for our mutual friends left the city soon afterwards. I did, it is true, come across Tullia Lacava and her parents in a spa at one time. She was still beautiful, but deathly pale, and the forced liveliness with which she received the attentions of an elderly gentleman of good standing had, for those who knew her history, something heart-rending about it. Later on, I learned that she had married the gentleman of good standing and had received from her godfather the gift of his entire fortune.

Years passed again without my hearing anything more spoken of the Knight of the Doleful Countenance or his godchild; his image had receded into the hindmost nook of my memory. Then one day, in Switzerland, I was reminded of him by meeting Mrs. Clara G.

She immediately drew me to one side and said:

“If you go to Florence, then pray do me the favour of going to see the poor Marchese O. You perhaps will not know that Mrs. Lacava has died, the unfortunate man does not have a single soul left who takes any interest in him.”

“Well – and Tullia?” I asked. “Beautiful Tullia, she is alive and is, as far as I know, married in Florence.”

“Tullia? Oh, that is a sad story. Tullia has shown him the door.”

“What?” I said, “his godchild, his idol, has really and truly shown the old man the door after she has accepted the gift of his entire fortune?”

“Certainly. Tullia’s character has never been a pleasant one, for all the praise of her that circulated. She has not forgiven him for the death of her first fiancé, in her eyes he is and always will be the guilty party. She has got hold of the idea that his presence brought about the disaster. She also held it against him that her parents’ house could not become a social centre because of him. Moreover, she could have made a better marriage after Tancredi’s death without the Iettatore, that is her conviction. What can be done about it? I believe that she had secretly borne him ill-will for a long time, even before the catastrophe with Vandalò. She calmly accepted the gift and told herself, ‘It is the least he can do for me’ – but she knew how to keep him away from her house with propriety. As long as the mother was

alive, he did not come to realise her intention; they regularly saw each other at her house. But after the death of Mrs. Lacava – the President preceded her by half a year – then the two of them talked things out. It must have been a terrible scene. The Marchese wanted to tell her everything – what her mother had been to him and what rights he had to her, but Tullia did not let him finish: ‘By the memory of my mother, be silent, I cannot listen to you’ – and thus she drove him from her.”

“Does she have children for whom she can be afraid?”

“That would excuse the cruelty, but her marriage is childless. She told him to his face that he would drive her guests away, that she was not of a mind to forgo society as her mother had done. Indeed, she threatened to leave Florence if he insisted on seeing her in her house. One can only suppose that the early disaster turned all her heart to stone.”

“And how did the old man take it?”

“He could not help stammering when he told me about the matter. The worst thing is that he himself is now becoming superstitious and beginning to believe in his Evil Eye. As his adored Tullia can do no wrong, so he resigns himself to his fate and quietly covers his head. ‘She has suffered so much, poor Tullia,’ he said to me, ‘she shall suffer no more because of me.’ – Now he is seventy years old, and he’s ailing. Look him up, give him my best wishes and tell him that he still has friends; it will do him good and be a good work.”

I had his address written down for me, and as soon as I was in Florence, I prepared to visit him. But when I was ascending the steep Costa San Giorgio, where his dwelling lay, I saw his gaunt figure appear, stooping

and in threadbare clothes, twenty paces before me. I called him by name and hastened towards him; but the moment he caught sight of me, he violently waved me away with his hand and hurried off, faster than one would have expected from his shaking knees, in the direction of the Viale.<sup>7</sup> Near the Porta San Giorgio he disappeared without a trace, as if he had put on a cap of darkness.

The first attempt had therefore failed. He himself now believed in the Iettatura and did not want to bring calamity upon anyone; only thus could I explain his singular behaviour. There was consequently nothing else for it but to catch him unawares in his residence, if one wanted to bring him best wishes from the outside world and a sign of human sympathy. But it was far away, and not until weeks later did I manage to undertake a second walk.

I pulled the bell at his residence; a slatternly woman opened the door.

“How is the Marchese, he is at home, is he not?” I asked quickly, so as not to let him slip away.

The woman let me enter and said:

“You have come too late – if you wish to visit my poor master, then you must go to San Miniato – he has lain there for eight days.”

“Dead!” I said in dismay, and let myself be led into the heart of the empty abode. “He lived here for twenty years, you see, and he died in this bed. You will not believe what a good master he was – at the end he

---

<sup>7</sup> The Viale dei Colli (Avenue of the Hills).

became a little feeble-minded and got the idea in his head that his eyes brought disaster to people. And for this reason he wanted no doctor when his end was approaching but locked his door and did not even admit me. – The door had to be broken down, he lay there with his face turned towards the wall, as was his habit when sleeping. Everything had been tidied up and the last scrap of paper set in order or burnt; on the table there was a telegram to his only sister, the nun, which he himself had drawn up to announce his death to her. The necessary money lay counted out beside it. If your Honour had heard his will being read out! Tears came into the eyes of the law-officers. His grave was to bear no other markings than the number which fell to his lot; he wished that his unlucky name should go to long rest with him in San Miniato, for he was the last of his line. And so he requested the few people who still knew him never to refer to him in their conversations. He also asked good Antonia – by that he meant me – to forget him. And do you know what kind of misfortune he brought upon me? A handsome annuity and all the household furniture! Do you think that one can forget such a master? The rest went to the poor. They came and accompanied him when the coffin was borne over to San Miniato – the poor people are not afraid, there is no Iettatura for them. Otherwise, not a soul has troubled himself about him. Your Honour is the first person to ask after him.”

I threw another glance at the room and the empty bedstead, from which the mattress had been removed. A sunbeam fell through the half-open window and played on a photograph which portrayed Tullia Lacava in school uniform. I became absorbed in contemplation of the proud Roman

profile, which did not show such a marked bird-like physiognomy at the time the photograph was taken as it exhibited later. Then Antonia said, as she blew the dust from the plush frame:

“This lady did my master great wrong. I wanted to secretly fetch her to his deathbed. He had not ordered me to do this, but I knew it would have made him happy – I was not even admitted. – On the day of the funeral a servant from another house brought a splendid wreath, but he came too late, for the coffin was already out the house. And I think that it was better that way, the wreath would have weighed heavily on him; a man whose life is no bed of roses does not want any flowers on his grave.”

### **Aunt Susan’s Last Will and Testament**

(From *Von Dazumal*, ‘In the Olden Days,’ 1900)

The small town where I spent my childhood teemed with eccentric originals.

One of the most conspicuous of these was old Miss Susan Goodbread, retired teacher at the Girls’ School, a figure of such alarming ugliness that she continued to creep through my dreams, after her corporeal form had vanished from the earth, as an evil spirit for years.

She had a face that was almost nothing but nose, thin, white hair, and a little, bristly, grey moustache; and she tended to grumble to herself in a deep, husky voice while walking. Summer and winter, she wore a greasy fringed headscarf of black silk, and a faded Turkish shawl over her shoulders, both carefully folded into a triangle at the back, so that she

resembled, when seen from behind, a walking geometric figure.

In autumn and spring, she was frequently seen sweeping by hedges and fences and assiduously collecting, in a basket, weeds which had been pulled out and left lying. With these weeds, she planted a small patch of earth before the town which she called her garden. It was only a piece of meadowland which had been shorn around, a few steps square, lying by a field path and fenced round by a berberis hedge which a rough batten-door completed. There was a cornelian cherry tree in it, whose sour fruit – called *Dürrlitzen* [medlars] in that region – was invariably nibbled away by schoolboys before it was completely ripe. In this enclosure, which was a total stranger to shears and consisted of irregular flowerbeds and narrow, grass-grown gravel paths, there sprouted a confusion of nettles, knotgrasses and chicories, while masses of love-lies-bleeding grew apace, poisonous monkshood stood almost man-high, and wild mallows and small, innocently smiling pansies crept all over the paths, for nobody prevented this company, thrown together in a complete jumble, from spreading just as they pleased.

Whenever anyone spoke to the old woman as she was collecting these outcasts, she would hoarsely rap out:

“People are unjust – yes, unjust” – as if she were uttering a brand-new truth.

If one then pointed out to her that they were all only weeds, she became angry and replied:

“In botany, there are no weeds, they are plants like any other” – and walked away, muttering to herself words that, though incomprehensible,

were by no means complimentary.

She was always seen alone, for she hated everything which bore a human countenance, and her relatives, sundry of whom still lived in the little town, avoided her as far as the street was wide. Only death was able to reconcile her with all creatures, for whenever anyone died, be it man, woman, or child, Susan Goodbread followed the cortege in a triangular black cashmere and stood amidst the bereaved at the open grave. Was it curiosity or schadenfreude, or did she wish to express by this that she and her fellow men had nothing in common but transitoriness? I do not know; her appearance on these occasions was, at any rate, so well-known a habit that it made nobody wonder.

A deep, mutual distrust prevailed between the youth of the town and this embittered figure. She lay in wait behind her fence and struck at us with sticks the moment a hand reached out for her berries; we, for our part, threw stones into her beds of weeds as we walked past and tore the slats out of her fence. Why we waged this war on her, we ourselves could not have said. The inclination to torment eccentric Miss Goodbread had been passed down to us by the previous generation. We knew nothing about her except that she had just always been there in her black fringed headscarf and faded Turkish shawl, she had always been on bad terms with the children, and we were only making use of an inveterate right when we grimaced at her in public and secretly tore up her flowerbeds or ate up her Dürrlitzen before they were ripe.

Not until I had grown up and a long time had passed since people had last met this strange figure in the streets did I inquire more closely into

the peculiar old character.

I learned something I had never thought of – that old Susan had been young once, and not only young but pretty as well, indeed, nothing less than the prettiest girl in the town. But a ridiculous mishap that was exploited by the malevolently minded and constantly recalled to human memory had poisoned her entire life.

She had grown up an orphan in the home of her half-brother, the merchant Christian Goodbread, who readily employed her in the shop on account of her lively manners and good brain. She had time there, in between serving customers, to read novels from the lending library which she kept hidden under the counter. The few thousand guilders capital – one still counted in guilders at that time – which belonged to her from her mother's side were in the business and would have to be paid out to her in the case of her marrying, which Mr. Christian Goodbread and his wife Augusta, a termagant, absolutely did not consider to be a matter requiring great haste. But Suzanne thought differently on this point. A young usher at the Primary School, whom she knew from dancing-class, had won her heart, and they both eagerly sought opportunities to talk with one another. The merchant noticed the young usher's pressing need for almond soaps and malt lozenges, and he found it advisable to remove his sister from the counter.

But inventive as lovers are, the couple knew what to do. Between the usher's high garret and the attic-window of the Goodbread house there began an intercourse that did not go unnoticed by the neighbours. Letters, flowers, and other love-tokens wandered back and forth, diagonally, over a

criss-cross of inner yards and low roofs, on a string which had been fastened at both ends of the line with unutterable difficulty. But when the young people took their rashness a step further and tried to set in motion a nightly rendezvous over the roofs, the fateful catastrophe occurred.

The usher, as it appears, was supposed to climb up to the attic-window on a cat-path from the adjoining eaves of a neighbour's house; but this involved climbing over a gable that, if not higher, was yet steeper, and there he lost his nerve. He stopped still, seized with dizziness, and gave a pitiful yell for help that drove the sleeping neighbours out of their beds. The unfortunate Romeo had to be fetched down, to universal cheers, on a fireman's ladder. He did plead as an excuse that he suffered from somnambulism and had climbed too high onto the ridge of the roof while sleepwalking, but nobody believed him; for many people claimed to have seen brave Suzanne at the attic-window preparing to come to the aid of her timorous lover.

The news of this occurrence flew like fire through the small town, for which every scandal was a highly welcome diversion. The next morning, high and low swarmed together behind the Goodbread shop to visit the scene of the event. To the accompaniment of hoots, people pointed out the roof that the usher had clung to, screaming, with his hands and feet, and Suzanne's attic-window, from which a rope, tied there to pull the knight up, was still hanging down.

The outcry was tremendous. The Goodbread family conducted themselves as though a bereavement had occurred. The shopkeeper's wife ran from house to house herself, to spread the gossip far and wide and to

accept hypocritical condolences with a hypocritical face. On the following Sunday, even the priest alluded to the great outrage down from his pulpit, so that Suzanne sat there before the whole community like an outcast.

The usher and Suzanne no longer dared to cross the street, for whenever one of them showed their face, the alley-urchins sang a satirical song after them, which had suddenly come into being and lasted up to our days, only, we no longer understood its original significance:

It began:

“The usher on the roof,

Ah, oh, oof!”<sup>8</sup>

As the outcry would not settle down, a family council decided to remove the contrite woman from her hometown for a whole year, and Suzanne was housed with the family of a Geneva pastor, where she was to do some soul-searching but also, at the same time, acquire a thorough knowledge of French.

This misconceived step, which her relatives pressed upon her, decided her entire future fate. At that time, a holy Vehmic court of elderly women sat in the little town, the mothers of marriageable but ugly daughters, whose goal it was to undermine the reputation and the future of pretty young women. In secret meetings, over knitting-needles and coffee-cups, the sacrifices were selected, and calumny spread out from that point, through invisible canals, over the whole town. This Vehm now sat in

---

<sup>8</sup> The German has “Ach, ach, ach!”, rhyming with the word for roof (“Dach”). It continues: “And it was a special trump card, this “Ach,” which had to represent now the desire of the woman in love, now the knight’s mortal fear, now the laughter of the audience, modulating with ever-changing expression.”

judgement on absent Suzanne, who had no family interest to protect her, and who was not trusted in any case, for she was reckoned to be cleverer than others; and it was established that her way of life was immoral and her character reprehensible. That one failed tryst was made into a habitual flirtation in the attic, and her ensuing departure was given the most doubtful interpretation through shoulder shrugs and ambiguous words.

When Suzanne returned a year later, somewhat emaciated from the meagre fare and intimidated by the severe treatment in the pastor's house, people in the town exchanged surreptitious glances and signs. Nothing was spoken, and the rumour which ran round had neither form nor name, but the other girls withdrew from Suzanne, and she was no longer invited to the good families. Every young man who sought to approach her was deterred by the Vehm through mysterious hints, and anyone who would not understand these was warned straight out, or received anonymous letters. The usher had long since disappeared from the town, and this suspicious circumstance came to the aid of the slander. Whenever a man merely turned his head towards her in the street, someone told him the terrible story of the tryst in the attic before meaningfully breaking off, as if there were much still to be said which one would rather, from brotherly love, draw a veil over.

Suzanne could not defend herself, for she had absolutely no idea what rumours about her were doing the rounds. To regain the esteem of the people, she retained that puritanical bearing she had been made accustomed to in the pastor's house, by which means she scared the young men completely away without gaining any ground with the women: for

now it was said, “She’ll know, I’d say, why she’s doing penance,” or, “You mark the troubled conscience?” – The stupid and malicious people, who had the upper hand in the town, kept the gossip alive, and the sensible minority made no effort to refute it. So Suzanne remained ostracized, and when she, after many vain endeavours to make friends again, withdrew into herself, distrustful and embittered, then people *really* became hostile to her. There had long been no kind word from her brother, and her sister-in-law treated her with hypocritical gentleness as a woman who had erred and strayed, while secretly preventing the slander from petering out. Under this general and continued mistreatment, Suzanne’s entire character changed: she became timid and distrustful as an elephant which has been expelled from the herd, and she silently choked down the whole dose of poison which, in her later life, she was to give back drop by drop.

As soon as she came of age, she broke with her relatives, and pulled her money from the business in defiance of all objections, disappointing her greedy sister-in-law in her hopes. Even back then, she took the wretched attic-room in which she lived for the length of her life, utterly alone, without dog, cat, or bird.

Then she announced in the weekly advertiser that she had assumed the agentship of a fashionable wares business from the Princely Capital, that a comprehensive pattern card of dress materials as well as the newest shapes of hat were displayed to view in her dwelling. This was a notable event in the small town, for up to then the dignitaries’ wives had obtained their necessities from the Goodbread Dry Goods and Hardware Store, which had the same articles in stock year after year, or they waited to make

their purchases at the big spring fair, where they were sold factory rejects.

Everyone who belonged to the female sex climbed up the worn wooden stairs to Miss Goodbread to see her display of samples. Even the holy Vehm came and were not wanting for friendly words; for curiosity was, after all, stronger than moral sentiment.

The business called for boundless patience, for the customers were thrifty folk, and often, when they had flicked through all the patterns and inquired in detail about the price and the width of the material, they decided in the end to wait until the next season to buy the new dress. Yet Susan remained always polite and ready to serve, and her bittersweet smile never left her. She was not doing this for profit; she only wanted to hurt the Goodbread Dry Goods and Hardware Store.

As tiny as her earnings from commission were, she nevertheless managed to put by the interest on her capital, and it was not unknown that she occasionally purchased securities on her business trips to the Princely Capital, which she deposited with a bank there.

When at last, years later, the position of French teacher at the Girls' School became vacant, it was given to Miss Goodbread, who had been regarded as an authority in French since her journey to Geneva, in the belief that she was thereby compensated for the injustice she had suffered. For the slander had fallen silent as soon as Susan was past the age at which it could harm her. Since her beauty had faded and her face no longer attracted any man, she was greeted with respect again, and she was acknowledged to be a personage with whom one could associate without detriment to one's moral character. Even the "Ah, oh, oof!" died away over

the years, after Susan had smashed the handle of her parasol on the little shouters countless times; whenever anyone tried to start it up again, he was silenced by powerful cuffs to the head from his parents or teachers.

But the people could not give back to her the years of her prime that had been ruined, and no more could Susan forget what had befallen her. Indelible resentment and grief filled every corner of her soul. Every evening, when her accounts had been entered and her exercise-books corrected, she laid the cards for herself, behind lowered blinds, and anxiously asked Fate if Fortune would ever smile on her in this life. But the days flowed past dully and evenly, like the stream before her window, and youth, hope and desire gradually trickled away with them.

At the end of her twenties, she experienced a kind of Indian summer. The cheerful Head Forester, who helped his wife to select hats and clothes, spoke gallant words to the solitary woman every now and then, and the Principal of the firm on whose account she sold materials treated her, when she came to the Princely Capital, with a certain distinction. She bloomed again and even temporarily became somewhat more philanthropic, and her forced resignation began to waver. She had mystic hours when she dreamed herself having a mysterious rapport, soul to soul, with older widowed notaries or bachelor chancellery secretaries. But they had eyes only for the youngest youth and would have found Susan's silent wishes very presumptuous. Then her thirtieth year struck, and the portals of Paradise closed inexorably shut. Her bitterness turned to misanthropy.

Now, there lived a retired Major in the neighbourhood, who walked

down her street every day and had for twelve years contemplated the intention of asking for Suzanne's hand in marriage sooner or later; for even now there still lay, at those times when she was in a rather milder mood, a melancholy afterglow of youth upon her. The Major was the only man free from prejudice in the entire little town and had never listened to the slander. But unfortunately, he was of so ponderous a nature that there was, for him, an impassable gulf between intention and execution. Had Susan only known about his feelings, her bitterness might have been alleviated somewhat, even if the resolve had eternally remained a resolve. But the Major died, and Susan followed his corpse without ever having had an inkling of the unwavering adoration whose object she had been. Without hope, implacable, she brooded over the ruins of her life.

Between her and the girls she taught, a secret war was waged with vicious words; the sight of the young girls was a tormenting thorn for the aging female teacher, and they paid her back for every nasty remark with interest. Susan's only consolation was the certainty that these resplendent blossoms would necessarily wilt in a short space and have to make way for a Spring of new girls, which would, one day, pass over their rights just as ruthlessly as she herself and her generation had been shoved aside by these presumptuous new shoots. With cruel relish, she observed in others the transformation she herself had had to undergo, and it was a feast-day for her every time that one of the younger women entered her thirtieth year unwed.

The impotent hatred which writhed and squirmed inside her consumed all those remnants of beauty which had been left to her; she

wasted away to the bone, her nose grew long, and her eyes crept away behind a net of wrinkles. At forty, her little moustache grew, and at fifty, the children's fright, the Miss Susan Goodbread that all of us knew, was altogether complete.

The wicked women to whom she owed her unhappiness had all, with the exception of her sister-in-law, sunk into their graves, crushed by life, by this time; her coevals went the same way, but Susan continued to hate as though the insult had been yesterday.

Every five years, there came a new generation who had to be initiated into the mysteries of French grammar, and Susan flew into a rage at the world showing no sign of dying out. The mere sight of the children stirred up her bile, which the little ones requited with instinctive aversion.

As soon as she was retired, she gave up her pattern business also, for the competition she had entered into with her relatives had long since become superfluous. A series of splendid new shops had opened and pushed the Goodbread Dry Goods and Hardware business down into the third or fourth rank.

Susan shut herself off from the world in her garret. What she did there, nobody knew, nor did people bother about her. Whenever anyone saw her standing before gardens and ploughed fields, collecting cropped cuttings or other greens, they shook their head over the foolish old woman and walked past. Only the purchase of the little garden brought the attention of her fellow citizens back to Susan Goodbread, and this person and that was now of the opinion that the old one, with her frugal way of life, must after all have gradually laid by quite a tidy little sum.

The wife of the tax-commissioner's clerk entrusted the news to the wife of the cameral administrator, and through this woman it spread among the people that the old spinster paid a capital levy, which nearly put her on a par with the most affluent people in the town. In their curiosity, female neighbours approached Susan with questions, and the more anxiously and heatedly she protested that she had no money at all, and complained about her poverty, the more highly was her fortune estimated in secret.

It now occurred to the Goodbread family that leaving the old woman, who was growing infirm, so completely to herself was really not Christian behaviour. Sister-in-law Augusta, who had become a widow in the meantime, took the first step. She sent her Fanny with a large bouquet of flowers, bound by the gardener and wrapped in stiff paper points, to Aunt Susan, to wish her many happy returns.

Susan took a look at her niece, whom she did not know at all, for she was the nestling of the house and had been born long after her row with the family. To her surprise, she perceived that Fanny resembled her; it was as if she had stolen those reddish-blond plaits and the white, smiling face from her. Then her ire was aroused with amplified force; she pretended to be deaf, did not even bid her niece sit down, and, once she had gone, threw the flowers into the street sweepings. However, her sister-in-law was not put off so easily. A few days later, she herself was seen, in the corpulent flesh, wheezing up the steep steps to Susan's garret with a basket over her arm, from which the corner of a white serviette hung out, and which gave off a pleasant aroma of sweet eatables. But she gained no admittance at all.

Susan, who overlooked the entire street by means of a pane of glass attached to her window, had seen her coming from a distance and, recognising her intention, bolted the door. When old Goodbread knocked and tried to open, Susan behaved like a woman possessed, running up and down her room and yelling in her harsh voice, "Help! Thieves! They're going to murder me!" At this, the occupants of the house congregated, and Mrs. Goodbread was compelled to withdraw, her purpose uneffected.

Susan thereupon had a locksmith make a strong iron safety chain for her door, and this device, still quite unknown in that peaceful region in those days, caused a general sensation. From that time on, whenever anyone knocked, Susan put her chain across, opened the door an inch wide and treated the arrival, whom she could not see, as a burglar. Especially when one of her relatives tried to visit her, she raved and threw out invectives like a wicked old parrot behind its cage. People everywhere spoke about Susan Goodbread being filthy rich and afraid of thieves...

This talk also reached the ears of the mayor. He was still young and a very enterprising man in whom a natural urge for progress and a sprinkling of importunateness mixed in such a way that he lovingly bore the fortunes of the town in his heart while not forgetting his own interest. Immediately after assuming office, he had founded, with the co-operation of the priest, the Head Forester and other dignitaries, an Embellishment Society whose noblest duty up to the present had been to lay out romantic forest-paths and to provide beautiful Nature with benches painted green. But the mayor's thoughts were more elevated. The tasteless old pipe-fountain in front of the Town Hall had long been a thorn in his eye. He had

set his mind on tearing it out and erecting a monumental fountain in its place; besides that, the whole desolate square, which was habitually adorned by the market-women's stalls only two days in the week, was to be planted with trees and transformed into a public park. From this plan, the mayor expected not only to promote good taste and culture among the citizenry, but also to increase the influx of summer guests to the small, high-lying town, thereby raising the municipal prosperity. For him personally, his expectations were joined by the hope to receive the title of burgomaster for extraordinary services rendered. However, the undertaking, which would have required all powers to work together, ran into resistance in the town and caused a division even in the bosom of the Embellishment Society. One section of the members, who would not agree to such deep-reaching changes, left, the priest being at their head – which dealt the matter an appreciable blow at the very outset.

Now it is true that the parish council stood by their leader as one man: public recitals and concerts were organised, the proceeds of which went to the fountain project, and the daily newspaper, which had taken the place of the old weekly newspaper, published inspired articles on the ennobling effect of art and on the necessity to put oneself on a par with more favoured neighbouring towns which possessed their public parks and monumental edifices. But a strong counter-current, which had its source in the ecclesiastical camp, obstructed this progressive activity. The reason for this was not hidden from the more astute.

The priest had, for some years, been striving for his church to be embellished; with its dull windows and bare walls, it was certainly an

epitome of sober commonplaceness.

From the Consistory, who lacked the resources, he had been referred to his parish and their willingness to make sacrifices. And so he had organised, with the approval of his superior, a collection in favour of painted church windowpanes, and he frequently used his sermons as an opportunity to talk about the undignified condition of the House of God and to call upon those present for a donation, even were it the tiniest mite. A collection-box was put up in front of the church door every Sunday. But the parishioners who were for the most part poor and already overburdened with other taxes, took the priest's words "tiniest mite" all too literally, and now, ever since the second collection, carried on with the utmost energy by the mayoral office, had been set in motion, donations for the church windows had dried up more and more. Because he had foreseen this, the priest had taken a hostile position towards the new undertaking from the very beginning. Now, it did not come to a public row, but the clerical weapons struck in secret, and for all his energy, the master of the town could not prevent pious souls from taking offence at the sculpture intended to adorn the fountain, which, it was whispered, was to consist of an only half-clad female form, or from prophesying, on account of the public park, a decline in public morality.

The mayor's party, on the other hand, fought with open visor and had the press on their side. It ridiculed the project of church embellishment, and the painted windows in particular, such being thoroughly stylistically incongruous, as they would be inconsistent with the entire character of the venerable old church, whose beauty lay precisely in

her solemn, unadorned simplicity. These disparagements from the town press had a downright devastating effect on the priest's hopes, for they were reprinted in the newspapers of the capital and found an echo even in the state parliament, whom the Consistory, tired of the priest's eternal complaints, had petitioned to approve the embellishment of the church through public funds. The printed proof that the parishioners were perfectly satisfied with their church was used by the opposition to spectacularly scupper the motion, and the over-zealous priest received, on top of this, a reprimand from his Consistory.

The dispute about the monumental fountain and the church windowpanes was ablaze just at the time when the enterprising master of the town cast his eyes upon Susan Goodbread. If he could only succeed in talking the old pensioner, who had fallen out with her relatives, into a substantial donation for the fountain-project! With her "history," a dark legend of which had been preserved among the younger generation, she could be counted among those who were unprejudiced from the outset. And as she had no natural heirs, an opportunity to secure for herself the grateful remembrance of her fellow citizens must, in the end, be highly welcome. It was only a question of showing her the matter in the right light.

The Head Forester, her friend from time out of mind, was sent first into the breach. He had, when he met her one day several years ago gathering weeds before his garden, given her a few cuttings from his fruit trees, so he could with propriety enquire as to how they were faring. Then the old hunter began to cautiously prowl around his game. Had she seen

the new viewing bench on the Schafbühl, with the lovely view into the Lauter Valley, which had recently been placed there by the Association? – No, Susan had not seen anything; she never went any farther than her little garden. – That was a shame; the area around was coming on really splendidly, and the little town should not be left behind it for much longer. In this way, he gradually came to the fountain-project.

Again, Susan had heard nothing at all, although she read the gazette every day. So, one wanted to build a large fountain, like the one in the Princely Capital, with running water and a lovely lake round about bordered with trees and with benches to sit on as well? – That was certainly a beautiful thought; but where to get the tremendous amount of money from? Was the Embellishment Society so rich? Unfortunately not, was the answer, but that was precisely why all those who appreciate beauty must stand together, and a contribution was expected from her as well. It was not unknown to those in high places that she had seen a bit of the world and she possessed a level of education which was not usual among the female sex in this town, for which reason it was assumed of her that she would be able to appreciate the efforts of the Embellishment Society.

Susan growled, flattered by his words, but did not enter into any promises.

Now the mayor advanced in person as reinforcement. He knew the old Miss only by sight; now and then on his evening walks before the town, he had observed her activity behind the berberis hedge.

One day, just as she was dragging two watering-cans, filled with water from the nearby stream, over the road, he addressed her affably and

praised her care for the small property, whereby he remarked that, if everyone were like Miss Goodbread, the authorities would not have to combat so much disorder and slovenliness.

In spite of her misanthropy, Susan was not insensitive to the honour that was being shown her. When she wanted to, she could be very mild and humble. She pulled down her rolled-up sleeves and answered the gracious master in the proper manner.

The latter, without further ado, crowded her with amiable importunateness. With an eloquence that intoxicated the man himself, as well as others, he expounded to her his favourite theme of the influence of beautiful monuments and parks on national education; and into the play of future waterworks which he conjured up in her mind's eye, he mixed personal compliments strongly underlaid with secret irony. He went so far as to remark that she would have to become an honorary member of the Embellishment Society, not only for her material, but also for her moral support, and other words of this ilk, which she listened to with a silent, malicious face. But when, in her answers to the mayor, she echoed his own opinions and claims, she brought it about that His High Mightiness went home very animated and declared old Susan Goodbread to be one of the most educated and most sensible ladies he had met in his life.

He continued his siege over the berberis hedge. When she saw him coming, Suzanne walked from the interior up to the fence, like a nun to her confessional screen; for nobody was allowed to set foot in the garden. She basked in the honour that was shown her in her old days and nodded eagerly at everything the mayor said. Only, when he straight out urged her

to cough up her money, she shrivelled up and assured him in a pitiful voice that her means had been overestimated in a quite incomprehensible way. She possessed only a very insignificant capital from her parents and did not know what she was to live on henceforth if she broke into this small sum.

The mayor responded to these words only with a smile, for he knew the secrets of the tax-office.

No sooner did his intentions become known than his ecclesiastical rival armed himself for the tussle. In truth, Susan did not belong to the pious sheep of the priestly flock. Since that Sunday when he, as a young preacher, had pilloried the unfortunate woman before the assembled congregation in his overzealousness, she had kept far away from the House of God. She avoided it still, long after the event and its cause had vanished from public memory. Her staying away from the church had become an inveterate habit, which Susan had known how to continue even while she was working at the Girls' School. For after she had once been stamped and branded as an original, she could allow herself any deviation from the general rules with impunity. On the other hand, she ran, it was known, to every funeral, and in priestly circles one tended to the view – at least, had recently begun to do so – that regular participation in this religious act was to be considered as equal to constant attendance at Divine Service.

A couple of pious souls from the neighbourhood reported to Susan what a good opinion of her character and way of life was entertained in the parsonage and that, when the talk there was of Christian exemplars, she was always the first to be mentioned. It then followed as a matter of course

that the priest's wife occasionally stopped Susan in the street to exchange a few words with her, and that the priest also found his way there one day. He assured her in a paternal voice that his heart felt a sense of satisfaction every time he saw her; for one was now living in a time when all good people must assemble against the dangerous new spirit of worldliness and materialism. She, of course, belonged to the Old Guard and would certainly not support any endeavours which endangered morality. Was it true that she had made a contribution to the construction of the Embellishment Society's fountain?

Susan could assure him of the contrary with a clear conscience, for the mayor's wife, one of her former pupils, had just appeared in person at her garret with the collection list, and although she had not, like Susan's relatives, been shown the door, she had found her former teacher so deaf and immovable that she withdrew, her purpose uneffected, in the belief that the old woman was really not *compos mentis* any more.

But Fortune did not smile on the sexton either when he betook himself to Miss Goodbread, on the priest's orders, regarding a contribution for the church windowpanes. On that occasion, Susan possessed an obstinacy and slowness of mind that seemed remarkably similar to the dullness of extreme old age. There was no way to make himself understood to her. She could not be got at even visually; for in such cases she had always misplaced her glasses and therefore could make nothing of any writing. But the moment that money was no longer wanted from her, she came back to life and knew how to stimulate anew the hopes she had crushed.

Like a seasoned coquette, she led the rivals by the nose. The gentlemen on the Committee of the Embellishment Society began, one and all, to court her. The clerical interest was, on the other hand, represented more by the female sex, particularly by her fellow tenants, two old spinsters like herself, from whose grocery shop she obtained her few necessities, and who brought her attention to the church windows on every such occasion.

The nimbus of her wealth and the example of other people also attracted those who could expect nothing at all from her and who did not even look for anything from her. In this way, Miss Goodbread became one of the most celebrated personalities in the entire town.

Ever since luck had come her way, Susan had become more accessible, so that anyone could approach her now. She just did not step out of her habits. In spite of the kindness shown her by the priest and the priest's wife, she stayed away from the church, and she likewise resisted the invitations to coffee with which the Head Forester's wife honoured her. So that the competition for her favour would not flag, she occasionally gave to understand that she was old, she had no heirs; when she died, she now knew at least whom to leave her money to. People just had to avoid demanding some cash from her, or she fell into a tearful tone: One really should have patience, she would not be around so much longer; once she was dead, people would see how fond she had been of her hometown and how she had saved and hungered only for others.

She made an impression with such words for the very reason that people, from her appearance, could not but take her to be significantly

older than she was. And besides this, she kept secretly making inquiries, but in places where news of this was passed on, about a secure investment in government bonds. In the meantime, her relatives were not idle either. Her nephew Albert, who now ran the Goodbread Dry Goods and Hardware business, had at first watched his mother's and sister's fiascos with perfect calm, for being of a phlegmatic disposition, he did not consider it at all possible that the fortune of Aunt Susan, whose natural heir he was, could fall into a stranger's hands. Only when he saw the efforts being made from other sides was he convinced that there was danger in delay, and one day, he too climbed, slowly and heavily, up the three flights of stairs to Susan's dwelling to remind his aunt of his existence.

Albert had been a six-year-old child when Suzanne left the house, and at that time she had liked the fat, red-cheeked boy. When he sat in her upholstered easy-chair now, his legs stretched out before him and his broad thumbs crossed, he had almost the same fat, red face and the same slow movements as in those days. A small white scratch on his forehead reminded his aunt that she had once let him slip from her arms onto the shoescraper before the front door. Something akin to melancholy seemed to come over her upon this reflection. She treated him, not with open hostility as she did the others, but only with a wait-and-see distrust, which did not penetrate his thick hide into his consciousness at all. Her hardness of hearing presented no obstacle to him, as he had nothing to say to her. He just gave voice to some commonplace or other at long intervals and surveyed the heaps of spinster's odds and ends with thoughtful eyes. In particular, a brass-bound coffer on top of the chest-of-drawers attracted

his attention, and he weighed the two possibilities in the balance: either to put his business back on its feet with the contents one day, or to give up trade completely and occupy himself only with cutting off coupons. After he had sat in Susan's upholstered chair for half an hour, he took his leave, but only to return a mere few days later with his wife Elise. She was an out-of-towner, the sight of whom could not remind the aunt of any injustice she had suffered, for she had never pursued the old Miss with stones as a child nor vexed her at French grammar as a young lady. But it was only when the two of them hit upon the happy thought of bringing their little Max with them, a strapping blue-eyed scamp of three, that the ice began to thaw.

Aunt Susan put on her glasses to have a close look at her great-nephew; she even wanted to show him a friendly face. But her facial muscles having forgotten how to smile long since, only a grimace emerged, at which the little one broke out into loud screams. Yet his mother pacified him with a piece of sugar-candy, and at their next visit, he even let himself be induced by an apple to sit on Great-Aunt's lap for half a minute. On this day, a burst of sunshine fell into the old woman's ossified heart, and when she stroked the child's smooth, round cheeks with her wrinkled fingers, she felt a contentment which she herself thought to be unforgivable. When little Max came with his parents from that time on, he always found an apple waiting for him, which he consumed on Aunt Susan's lap according to an unspoken agreement. From this rapprochement, it was only a step to total reconciliation. There was a festival of peace and joy when Susan, for the first time in almost forty years, set foot in the scene of her childhood again. Inside the home, everything was as she had left it, only rather run-

down and disorderly. The counter, behind which she had sold the malt-lozenges, stood in its old place; boxes encumbered the storeroom as in the past but they were covered in dust and empty, and there was a smell of indigence on every hand. In Susan's former bedroom under the gable, the shadow of her own youth went in and out in the form of blonde Fanny.

Mrs. Goodbread Senior and her daughter-in-law had a rather tense relationship, which made it necessary for both parties to keep house separately. But in the presence of Aunt Susan, all was harmony and love. When she appeared, her niece Fanny was there at once helping to wait upon her, for the Goodbreads moved heaven and earth to honour Aunt Susan. The shopkeeper's widow dragged her corpulence down to the first floor and spoke with sighs of the wonderful times when she had lived so happily here together with her late husband and her dear Susan. It goes without saying that the barrier was now removed in Susan's own home also, and that the safety-chain fell into complete disuse. Hardly a day now passed when one or the other of her relatives did not climb up her stairs with a small basket over their arm or a covered bowl. There was now a pot of preserves from her sister-in-law, now a tart baked by Elise to try. Fanny knitted slippers and glasses-cases for her, and on Sundays Susan regularly ate with the family. When her good friends tired to visit her, they found the old woman surrounded by her relatives as by a bodyguard, and having a conversation about town-fountains or church windowpanes was now out of the question.

Yet communicating with the old Miss was not easy for her relatives either. What they wanted to impart to her had to be shouted in her ears

repeatedly, and even then she mostly gave a wrong answer. Naturally enough, they soon stopped being careful in front of her, and many remarks were dropped which were not meant for her ears. Fanny in particular, who had a sharp tongue, gave a loose to her mania for mockery, to which her aunt's appearance, her little weed-garden and, above all, her miserliness constantly gave abundant cause. For the old woman did indeed accept everything that people brought her and stored it up in her drawers, but she never gave even so much as a pin in return. Only little Max regularly received his apple, but she did not incur further expense for his sake.

Admittedly, she allowed just as little to herself. She still lived just as frugally as at the beginning; she had her food brought from a nearby inn, washed the plates herself, and still always wore the same greasy fringed headscarf over her snow-white hair.

She kept up her old habits in other ways, too. She still invariably laid the cards after the evening meal to ask about the future, and when her niece came upon her at this occupation, it was a regular cause of great hilarity among those standing around.

The young woman looked over her shoulder and said, without raising her voice:

“Is your bridegroom on the way now, Aunt Susan?”

“What did you say, Fanny?”

“I asked if the cards are favourable?” she yelled at the top of her voice.

“But I heard something about ‘on the way,’” her aunt said distrustfully.

“I asked if there were no bad cards in the way today,” the niece shouted again.

“Certainly, that one there, the black one, has always been in my way.” So saying, she pointed at the Queen of Spades and simultaneously shot a spiteful glance at her black-clad sister-in-law.

“She’ll be jealous of you, you old scarecrow,” the maiden replied, speaking in her natural voice again; and she continued this farce, to the secret tittering of the others, until Susan packed her cards together and angrily exclaimed:

“It’s no good. Shall I lay the cards for you, Fanny?”

Now everyone craned their necks. Susan spread out a new game, laying the cards, with infinite patience, from right to left and from left to right, and prognosticated a prospect of marriage, of which there were still difficulties standing in the way. But the lucky reds usually cropped up and brought a large inheritance or a money order, whereby everything turned out as desired.

“If only Aunt wanted,” the old shopkeeper’s widow, who was not the most delicate of souls, would then say, “then we’d soon have a wedding in the house.”

For some time now, an elegant young civil servant<sup>9</sup> had been associating with the family, and he had been paying court to Fanny, clearly waiting only for the aunt to die in order to declare his love. Fanny was utterly smitten with the civil servant’s fine linen and elegant manners and

---

<sup>9</sup> “Assessor” – the second lowest degree of the German civil service.

would not hear about any other match. Aunt Susan frequently asked after him in a tone of goodwill, as if she wished to confirm the young people in their hopes. For that reason, old Goodbread, who had also fallen in love with the civil servant, came at the aunt with insinuations the moment she could get her to herself, that she might settle a dowry on her niece in her lifetime – insinuations which, in spite of their clarity, were never understood.

Only Mrs. Elise understood her and lived in constant fear that Fanny might be given preference to her brother in the division. She was therefore always on the lookout so as not to leave her mother-in-law alone with Susan, and when she saw her soft-soaping the old woman she uttered in a low voice and waspish tone:

“Do you think we’ve pulled your chestnuts out of the fire?”<sup>10</sup> Susan, her knitting in her hand, let kind and angry words pass over her head. She sat behind her glasses, her wrinkles and her hardness of hearing as behind a threefold entrenchment and observed in silence. The only one who preserved a semblance of selflessness in his dealings with Aunt Susan was her nephew Albert. He never laughed along when Fanny cracked her jokes; his fat, immovable face was utterly incapable of showing a humorous movement. Aunt Susan’s eyes often rested on this face with a searching expression.

Nobody could see into Aunt Susan’s inner self. People did not know whom she preferred, or who displeased her, people did not have the

---

<sup>10</sup> I.e. we have done the hard work of wringing the money out of her for your benefit.

slightest idea what was going on inside her.

It often seemed as if she were observing her relatives' expressions with distrust, and spinning spiteful thoughts; and then, she was sitting there as if butter would not melt in her mouth. At times, one could think it gave her a malicious delight to make people scream themselves blue in the face; for it happened that she would have one and the same word repeated half a dozen times, but on another occasion, when Fanny had made an inconsequential remark to third parties in her natural voice, she turned around and said, "Indeed!"

"Did you hear me, Aunt?" asked Fanny, nonplussed.

"Yes, of course – I hear everything when there's an easterly blowing," Susan calmly replied.

Fanny turned red and pale, for she did not know whether she had not occasionally made one of her impertinent remarks when an easterly was blowing; but the old woman's wrinkled face remained inscrutable.

The considerable care that she now enjoyed took visible effect on her; her health improved, and there were times when she looked as though she might have a mind to reach eighty years of age.

One day, when little Max was alone with her in the garret, the little one suddenly stopped playing and said:

"Aunt!"

"What is it, Max?" she asked.

"When are you going to croak, Aunt?"

"What do you understand by 'croak,' dear Max?" his aunt asked, walking over.

The child looked at her fixedly and was unable to give an explanation. Finally, he said:

“Papa said the other day, ‘When’s the old bag ever going to croak?’”

The apple which the aunt had just that moment fetched down from the cupboard found its way back among the provisions.

“I see,” she said with her malicious smile, looking keenly at the little one to find in his childish face the Goodbread family features she hated so deeply.

“I see,” she repeated a few more times with perfect contentment as if she had heard something very pleasant. It was as if she had only now, through little Max’s information, been brought into perfect harmony with herself.

“Won’t it make you sad, Max,” she asked in the friendliest tone she could muster, “when the black men carry your poor old aunt into the churchyard?”

However, the little one showed no emotion whatsoever, but eagerly asked in reply:

“Will you take all your things with you, when you go into the graveyard in the black trunk?”

“Oh yes, all of them,” his aunt replied.

On the morning after this conversation, Aunt Susan donned her black cashmere and went to the Princely Capital.

When she returned from there, she changed her whole way of life. She took a serving-girl, furnished herself with a kitchen, and no longer had meals brought to her but cooked herself. She had also brought back with

her a new fringed headscarf together with a good, warm castor coat, and – what almost caused those who knew her to keel over – she had had her photograph taken by the leading photographer in the Princely Capital; she stood there, to the life, in full cabinet-size, with her long nose and her little moustache, with shawl and fringed headscarf, holding an umbrella in her hand. She showed the photograph to everyone who wanted to see it, thereby raising unheard-of laughter. But the laughter died on the lips of the Goodbread family. They calculated what all these new acquisitions had cost and loudly bemoaned the extravagance of the old fool; “For,” they said, “it’s all going from what belongs to us.” The women badgered Albert to have the spendthrift put under guardianship before she squandered all of her money on the Embellishment Society’s pipe dreams or on the fulfilment of clergymanical wishes. And when Albert put up his passive resistance to this unreasonable demand, the three of them, who already did not have the most favourable opinion of his vigour, turned all of their virulence against him and now spoke of the head of the family only as a “silly dope” and “dozy sluggard.”

Susan’s acquaintances claimed to know for certain that now, on top of all her riches, a large inheritance had devolved upon her. The younger people who knew nothing more about her than that she had a blot in her past and had a great deal of money, connected these two things and related that the owner of that company whose agentship she had held had been her lover in earlier years and had made her his sole heir upon his death.

She herself did not enter into any explanation; she only said, whenever anyone tried to sound her out, she was now, praise God, in a

position where she might indulge herself a little.

But the complete change in her way of life was not favourable to her, and she had not been following it for long when her health began to go downhill.

One morning, she was found paralysed in one side but fully conscious. She demanded to be taken to hospital but her family opposed this. The thought of the doctor and the nurses gave the good people a proper fright, and every person who set foot in the patient's room was suspected by them of legacy-hunting. They drove away the friends who had hurried over, almost with violence, and took up their quarters in a chamber of the wretched attic-flat, to take turns keeping watch by the invalid's bedside. And one must grant them this: everything that only the most tender love could have done, the three women did for the quarrelsome old aunt. Her sister-in-law dragged her from one bed to another, with Fanny's help, and fed her with a spoon. But Elise also planted herself by the sickbed and was not to be driven away. She knocked up meals for the patient and brought her fine wines. And by always playing the one off against the other, Susan fed a constant jealousy, which admittedly, in her presence, found expression only in competition to pay attention, but often enough burst out in sharp words and hostile behaviour behind the sick-room door.

Only when someone appeared from outside to ask after Susan's state of health did the three stand together and fend every intruder off like lionesses. No stranger's hand was allowed to touch their patient; indeed, they did not even tolerate the serving-girl lending a helping hand. They observed the priest, whose visits they could not prevent, with a thousand

fears, and continually interrupted to at least make it more difficult for him to talk about his church windowpanes.

The question of whom Aunt Susan would bequeath her property to occupied the whole town, and most of all, as is easily comprehensible, the Goodbread family. The brass-bound coffer which stood on the chest-of-drawers was the target of everyone's thoughts and, frequently enough, the object of mutually hostile insinuations on the part of the relatives. There was nobody who did not begrudge another their share, and yet the capital, inferring from the interest which was realised at the Princely Capital on the first of each month, must have been large enough to make everybody happy. As soon as this interest arrived, Susan locked it in the coffer, which had to be placed before her bed, with her own hands; and when it was opened, one could see how high the coffer was filled with securities, all of them well-sorted single packets in blue covers.

Susan now positively revelled in malice and enjoyed her power to the full. She was never satisfied with anything, she rang the bell a hundred times a day, she threw the cushions onto the floor, she spilt the soup, she had herself undressed, then dressed, and carried from the bed to the sofa and from the sofa to the bed, almost making the people about her succumb to the toil. Old Goodbread really did collapse and became bed-bound herself, but the young ones continued their competition, without caring about their mother and mother-in-law, who now lay helplessly at home. Through the constant threat, "I'll have myself taken into hospital," Susan kept her nurses compliant. But she did not want only to be cared for, but also entertained. She had Elise read the newspaper out for her from the

first word to the last, and Fanny had to play draughts with her or spread the dirty cards out on the quilt, and whenever even the slightest mistake was made, the most scornful words ensued.

Moreover, no-one was allowed to touch any of the objects in the room, or she would scream as if they wanted to inherit from her living body. She very conspicuously took the cash out of the coffer, as though it were not safe there, and hid it under her pillow. Through this behaviour, she made the two carers so mutually distrustful that the one always kept a close eye on the other.

She lay in her bed like a devil, with her wrinkles and her pointed nose, striking fear into all who saw her.

The civil servant came every day to inquire after her health, and he brought her flowers, which seemed to give her delight.

When she experienced a temporary improvement, she had a crutch made with which she wanted to walk through the room; but her carers did not allow this, and four youthful arms were always ready to lift and support her.

Finally, one day, when she felt somewhat better, she desired to make her will. The notary and the witnesses were secretly fetched, and she insisted on the doctor also being present to certify the mental health of the testatrix. For, she mysteriously remarked to each party, a bolt must be shot across the door in good time so the other party would not have the nerve to contest the will after her demise.

When this was over, she seemed to feel a great relief. She had the family members come before her bed one after the other, thanked them all,

and assured everyone severally that the depth of her gratitude would be revealed only after her death.

To Fanny she said:

“You’re too noble, I really don’t deserve what you’ve done for me, for I never could stand you.”

Whereupon the girl good-naturedly replied, “Oh, Aunt, pray don’t worry about it,” for her own conscience was not clean. Then she called Albert and Elise and performed the same scene with them.

After she had tormented those about her almost to death for several more weeks, she passed away all of a sudden over her cards.

A numerous cortege followed her bier. The Embellishment Society, through the hand of the Head Forester, laid a lovely wreath on its patron’s grave. Among the other floral donations, a well-devised bouquet of white roses from the civil servant, with rich bows, stood out. When the priest, as usual, related the vicissitudes of the deceased’s life at the open grave, he considerately brushed over the misunderstanding that had estranged her from her fellow citizens for a while, and dwelt all the more thoroughly on the description of her virtues and merits. “How often did we see her standing here,” he said, “in all weathers, rain or shine, in her modest black mourning garb, when it was a matter of paying one’s last respects to a fellow citizen, and her tears were not wanting even for the poorest. Never shall we see her standing here again. But let us be glad, my beloved brethren, that we shall see her again one day in glory, in that place where earthly afflictions have disappeared and the soul floats towards its heavenly bridegroom in immaculate purity.”

Our good priest was without doubt speaking in earnest; for the glory in which he saw immortalised Susan was radiated from the painted church windowpanes which she had illuded him with on her deathbed.

But for us children, it was a hard task to imagine the wicked, quarrelsome old woman in a white robe of innocence with wings on her shoulders. I can still remember this impression precisely, for I had secretly run out the house from curiosity to watch old Susan's funeral. And there is another thing that is strikingly vivid in my mind: when the first clod of earth, thrown by the hand of Mr. Albert Goodbread, rolled down onto Susan's coffin, a sound like harsh, rattling laughter rang out from the open grave, and I ran away in a blue funk before the ceremony had finished.

Several days after the burial, the will was read out in the District Court. This document had been handed over to the notary, sealed, in the presence of the witnesses, and not a soul had any knowledge of its contents. Only the legal heirs were invited. But a number of inquisitive people, who had learned the date through the garrulousness of the clerk, crowded into the lobby, and some of them were able to arrange it, owing to the lack of supervision, so that they could listen along to the reading out of the will behind the door. From these, the content spread all over the town like lightning, being first reported to the civil servant, who was reading the newspaper in the coffee-house opposite.

The will read as follows:

“I, Anna Susan Goodbread, retired teacher at the School for Girls, hereby draft the following, my last will and testament, being of sound mind, and my only regret is that I cannot be present in person when this

document is read out.

“Having changed the small liquid assets, which I inherited from my parents and doubled through my thrift, into an annuity which comes to an end with my death, I would be relieved of the trouble of making a will, did I not propose to bequeath several legacies in gratitude for the great acts of kindness done for me.

“But before that, there is something I have to say to my fellow-citizens and relations.

“Through your envy and meanness, your malice and stupidity, you deprived me of my youth and poisoned my life. When I was young and pretty you slandered and ostracised me. When I became old and ugly, you persecuted and mocked me. Because I had blonde hair and a pleasant face, I was cast out from the community. Because I developed white hair and a pointed nose, people threw stones at me.

“You young people will say: That was long before our time. But that is no matter to me. After all, you just chirrup the tunes your old ones have sung, for envy and meanness, malice and stupidity are immortal among you; they simply move to another person. Therefore, you have inherited my hate in a direct line from your parents. I have amassed it inside me over forty years and added interest to interest. I fed myself on hatred of you when I famished, and whenever an illness laid me low, hate restored me to health. I have been accused of not loving even animals, as becomes an upstanding old maid, and that is true: I could not stand them because they are similar to you. In cats and pugs, in parrots and apes, I always saw your features and your nature. Only plants did I love, the quiet ones, the

innocent ones, and, most of all, those ones you wanted nothing to do with. My only happiness was my little garden, which you found so ridiculous: the asylum for the disowned children of the plant world.

“I lived on the hope of some satisfaction late in life which I slowly prepared for myself, and your avarice presented it to me more gloriously than I had expected. So know this! I myself started the false rumours of my wealth. Just ask at the tax office, where I declared funds for taxation purposes which I never possessed. Otherwise, I never lied to you about my financial circumstances. The best way to deceive you is by telling you the truth. Your own miserliness would surely have confirmed in your minds what I kept repeating to you: an old, unhappy person is not in the position to assemble wealth. But you stupidly and blindly ran into the snare, and it was a right royal delight for me to have so many people around me in my later years flattering me and grovelling to me.

“The gentlemen of the Embellishment Society and the priest will perhaps understand, from the aforesaid, why I thought it advisable to give my little bit of money to a life-annuity institution. A few days of luxurious living were neither here nor there to me any longer, and in any case, the belated tenderness of my relatives took care of my needs. But it could indeed be that people really would become better from seeing a beautiful fountain and painted church windowpanes, and I would be sorry if they did. I wish for stupidity and malice to continue to thrive as hitherto, for I do not see why others should be happier than I was. I rather hope to God that you will carry on doing each other all the harm that I wish you from the bottom of my heart.

“But so my friends do not come away with absolutely nothing, I bequeath my photograph to the laudable Embellishment Society, which it may display wherever it thinks fit, and I ask my revered priest to accept my glasses so he can learn to see people and things rather more clearly.

“The little cash that remains, together with the proceeds from my furniture, will suffice to defray the cost of the funeral.

“And now over to you, my dear relatives!

“My hearing, which, God be praised, has always been excellent, put me in a position to get to know you thoroughly. I am glad to be able to say that you are all worthy of one another and there was nobody among you who might have forced me to alter my opinion of people in general and of the members of my family in particular.

“I am disposing of the rest of my belongings in your favour as follows:

“The coffer which stands on my chest-of-drawers and which so greatly preoccupied all of you, shall pass with its entire contents to my nephew Albert, as the current head of the family. However, I set the express condition that he use the papers to be found inside not for personal purposes, but only in the business.

“And so he does not need to rack his brains, I shall tell him right now: in the coffer he will find the old exercise books of my French classes, which will serve him well for wrapping up pepper and snuff.

“For obliging Elise, his wife, I have chosen an embroidered handkerchief to wipe her mouth with.

“To my witty niece Fanny, I bequeath my old pack of cards and wish

that, on the lonely evenings which will not fail to come, it will help her to while away the time as well as it helped me.

“There now remains my sister-in-law Augusta to be remembered, whom I have always regarded as the first cause of my unhappiness. In retaliation, I wish her nothing but a long life in the midst of her family. In remembrance of me, she shall receive the crutch, which will be of greater use to her in the evening of her life than it was to me, as she will hardly find so many hands willing to lift and carry her.

“The civil servant, whose delicate attentions did me so much good, shall not be forgotten either. I have cut off a strand of my hair for him, which will be found in my cupboard with the other bequeathed items. He can have it woven into a ring or wear it in a medallion on his breast – in lasting remembrance of the lovely hours spent together.

“As for my little garden, I bequeath it to butterflies and the birds of the sky. No human foot is to enter it, nobody is to eat its fruits. It shall be left as an everlasting symbol and make my hatred known to later generations. Cursed be the hand which dares to turn up my soil, cursed be the mouth which nibbles at my berries, cursed be anyone who breaks so much as a slat of my fence. And if there is a return from beyond the grave, then I shall certainly come to torment the violator of my prohibition.”

Thus concluded the Last Will and Testament of Aunt Susan.

I do not know what kinds of faces the heirs made upon hearing this, nor if they took up their legacies. I only know that the Goodbread business, in spite of the inherited coffer, was completely and utterly ruined, and the members of the family had to struggle their way, wretched and dejected,

through life. Old Goodbread lived many more years, tormented by gout and, even more, by the moods of aging Fanny, who subsequently entered another household as domestic help for the housewife.

The civil servant married the daughter of a rich industrialist and was soon appointed to a higher position elsewhere.

As concerns monumental fountains and painted church windowpanes, they still to this day fall under the pious wishes of the citizenry. The priest died over his efforts, and the mayor, who has not yet been able to raise the necessary sum, still gets by without the title of Burgomaster.

The little garden was left as a symbol, as Suzanne had demanded. The fence fell apart, but the berberis and gooseberry hedges grew ever more rampant until, in the end, they formed a well-nigh impenetrable web. Nobody dared to set foot in it after the time an impertinent boy almost caught his death from terror there. He wanted to pull down the small batten-door, which was surrounded by undergrowth, at night, to get to the cornelian cherries – when, in the middle of the garden, a bent female figure rose up out of the borders and floated, her gown flapping, towards the troublemaker, who caught an illness from the terror he felt and needed a long time to recover.

Later, enlightened minds did try to convince him that he had only seen a piece of cloth which had been hung up there as a thief-scarer and scarecrow by the late one during her lifetime, being moved by the wind, but he insisted that Aunt Susan had appeared to him in person, with the fringed headscarf around her head, and the long shawl flapping around

her, and had frightened him away from her *Dürrlitzen*. The consequence of this adventure was that the little garden remained untouched as a play area for butterflies and birds, whereby Aunt Susan's last will and testament was fulfilled to the letter.

Finally, there came the state, which does not stand on ceremony, and it laid its railway right through the middle of the cursed garden, whereby this was razed to the ground. As no avenging ghost appeared to the engineer who had ordered everything to be pulled down, one may assume that the spirit of Aunt Susan is now placated and at rest. Her curse also seems to have finally been lifted from the citizens, for pettiness and passion for gossip have been in decline ever since the little town was fastened by its branch line to the large railway network of the land.

### **Sleeping**

(From *Lebensfluten*, 'Floods of Life,' 1907)

It was, quite by chance, on Sedan Day<sup>11</sup> when I visited the town of my youth for the last time. Strolling around in the flag-decked streets, I unexpectedly found myself among the swarm of people which was surging behind the procession to the war memorial in the graveyard. How the troop of veterans marching at its head had dwindled! Heavy, stocky male figures with hoary heads, who had once stridden along in the victory procession as nimble youths; and the thickset militia-men of those days

---

<sup>11</sup> September the 2<sup>nd</sup>. This festival was celebrated between 1871 and 1918 to celebrate the surrender of the French Army on that day in 1870 after the Battle of Sedan in the Franco-Prussian War.

were now bent old men. They walked as a tight-knit group, separated from the large crowd, these veterans with their decorations and the memories deeply carved in their hard features, like wandering monuments in the midst of a new age for which the Great War had almost faded away into a fairy-tale. Even their flag did not seem to flutter as proudly and triumphantly, as if it too felt itself now to be nothing more than a thing of the past. For the acquisitions of that terrible year had become an inherited possession of this young world, while barely even the names of its sacrifices were still spoken. Consequently, the celebration which had once unleashed orgies of enthusiasm now bore a cool and official character, and indeed, this was one of the last times that it was actually held.

I let myself be swept along by the beat of the music, and before I knew or wished it, I was there at the graveyard with the others. While the flag-wreaths were laid and a speaker stepped forward, I disappeared into the quiet alleys of the garden which run between the rows of sunken graves. The long line of thujas<sup>12</sup> which I, when I was small myself, had known to be small saplings, I now found to be stately trees. I deciphered many well-known names, already half washed away, on the stones; others, whose bearers I had still believed to be among the living, flashed at me from new monuments as a sad surprise. Today, both death and life spoke of nothing but changing times.

When I returned from my amble, the celebration was already over, and the assembly had dispersed; only a few people stayed behind by the

---

<sup>12</sup> Also known as *arbor vitae*, an evergreen coniferous tree.

freshly decorated obelisk. Among these, a poorly-clad little old woman caught my attention, who was staring fixedly, but with an expression of reproach, up at the golden inscription which preserves for posterity the names of those who fell in the War of 70. It was not possible to infer the social station to which she belonged from her appearance, but every feature of her careworn, wrinkled face told me that I saw a grieving mother before me. Here was one who knew nothing of changing times – the wound she bore in her heart was unhealed and bled anew at the sight of this marble plaque. When she realised she was being observed, she fell into confusion and turned fearfully away, as if I had caught her up to no good. The question spontaneously passed my lips if she had a loved one among the brave men to whom this memorial stone had been erected.

But I very soon regretted my words, for I saw a hot blush rise in the little woman's withered cheeks and spread through her forehead, framed by thin white hair, while tears welled in her eyes.

"No, my Wilhelm's name is not on the stone," she replied in a voice trembling with indignation and hurt – "and yet he gave his life for the Fatherland, just as the others did – but they have forgotten my Wilhelm." And with these words, tears suddenly and unstopably ran down her cheeks, and she looked around, as though seeking help, to one of the veterans who were still standing by the memorial, a sprightly man decorated with the Iron Cross, who walked up to her with a friendly air.

"Look, Inspector," she cried to him in a plaintive tone, "my Wilhelm's name is still not on the stone."

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Preceptor, the gentlemen have other

things to think about now. And what does the name matter! After all, as many prayers, perhaps even more, are said for your Wilhelm at this place as for any other of these brave fallen soldiers.”

In these simple words, and the tone in which they were spoken, there lay a certain something which moved me strangely. Moreover, the man’s face seemed known to me, but I had no time to think about that because the conversation between the two held my attention.

“Yes, you tell me that every time, Inspector,” the old woman replied in the reproachful tone of a child to an adult who has failed to fulfil a promise – “But that’s a poor consolation for a mother who has had to give away her favourite son. At first, certainly, as long as my poor Wilhelm was still reckoned among the missing, they could not put his name up with the others, but now – that all hope has been lost for so long –” Sobs broke off her words. “I just can’t get over it, Inspector,” she continued disconsolately, “my poor boy being forgotten, alone of all.”

“Those who were there will not forget him,” the old soldier replied in a tone that was meant to sound comforting, but was spoken with something like a secret shiver. “And,” he added, lowering his voice, “there was nobody the comrades cried for more.”

These last words seemed to give the old lady a little lift.

“He was such a dear, good-hearted boy, my Wilhelm,” she said, having turned to me, “everyone who knew him loved him. But they shouldn’t have taken him from me so young, he wasn’t strong enough for the terrible hardships, and even if the bullet at Champigny had spared him, he still wouldn’t have come back healthy. You know what a tender little

plant he was, Inspector. He came into the world in sorrow, after his father had died, and he never had the real vitality his brothers did. For all that, he was so good, so hard-working, the best of all. Getting up early was hard for him, and yet he was always the first in school. In the evening, I often found him fallen asleep over his books, it broke my heart to have to wake him, but the teacher was so strict, and the homework had to be done. And the trouble he took to help me when none of the others thought of it! How he fetched water for me and chopped the wood, and saw to the shopping. There has never been a better son in the world. He did everything for his mother, even though he could often hardly keep his eyes open for tiredness. Oh, what he must have gone through in the hard service, my poor Wilhelm! – I just can't think about it.”

The old soldier to whom these words were directed listened to her patiently, although he had probably heard this talk from her mouth a hundred times before. He had prudently taken her arm, as her foot had slipped off the low base of the obelisk while climbing down, and he carefully conducted the old woman over the rough gravel path to the iron-barred gate.

Without thinking, I joined the two of them, more and more affected by the attentions this tough veteran was paying this doddering, wretched little old woman, to whom he was not, as it appeared, connected by any family relationship.

“Yes, yes,” he replied to her words as he walked. “He was always dog-tired and did everything as in a dream. Only when the army post arrived did he come alive.”

The little woman lit up. “Then the letters came from his mother – and the parcels” – she lost herself in cheerful and sad memories of those fateful days. – “Now he can sleep,” she said at last with resigned motherly love, which wished the best for its darling. The veteran pressed her hand at parting with a deep emotion in his rough-hewn features which took me by surprise.

“And I *won't* die until my Wilhelm has been given the honour he is due,” she said stubbornly, turning back towards the obelisk one more time.

“We’ll just have to make a new petition, Mrs. Preceptor,” the old soldier replied, and his eyes followed her with an indescribable expression as she walked away with a spring in her step, fortified and elevated by this promise.

I had in the meantime had time to look at the man, and I thought I recognised him to be a neighbour’s son who had been a corporal in the Rifle Corps and who, when he stayed with his family on furlough, had also paid a visit to my parental home at times.

On my speaking to him, it turned out that my supposition was not mistaken. After we had shaken hands and exchanged the usual enquiries, I asked: “Why is the old woman’s request not granted? She truly has right on her side, doesn’t she?”

The old soldier looked around to check that nobody was listening. Then he replied in a low voice:

“Oh, that’s a sad story. Wilhelm was a tall and lanky, weakly lad, and they certainly shouldn’t have levied him as a soldier. He would often fall asleep while marching and stagger back and forth like a drunken man; one

soldier would shove him to the other with his elbow. His enduring the horrendous forced march to Sedan amazes me to this day! His comrades helped him through whenever they could, but one icy-cold night in Champigny, his fate caught up with him all the same. Our outpost had a chain of double-sentries stationed facing the bank of the Marne. Outpost duty in the dreadful November nights was much more feared than an open battle. We had to be ready for an enemy attack at any moment, and were pestered day and night, without being allowed to move, by the bullets of the Zouaves.<sup>13</sup> It was no joke, believe me, to have to hold out on the swampy meadow, stock-still for hours and hours, in snow and rain, with your feet in mud, your hands almost frozen fast to your rifle, seeing nothing but the thickest darkness, hearing nothing but the murmuring of the water and, every now and then, a bullet whistling past.

“It came to be Wilhelm’s turn, and it so happened that the most dashing fellow in the whole company was ordered to sentry duty together with him. But with the first light of dawn, when the relieving soldiers came, neither of them gave any reply, and it took a long search before they found the first member of the outpost, lying head-down in a puddle, dead, laid low by a bullet from the far bank of the Marne. Ten paces away, behind a willow-bush, sat Wilhelm, leaning against a tree-trunk, on the wet ground. His head hung down on his chest, and he did not stir when called. We thought he was dead too – if only he had been! But he came round after a great deal of shaking, he looked around him in utter confusion and couldn’t

---

<sup>13</sup> Elite light infantry troops.

give an answer to any question. He had fallen asleep from frost and over-fatigue, the poor devil – *fallen asleep as outpost before the enemy!* His comrades would have liked to save him, but there was no chance of hushing it up, and he also had a sergeant who was hostile to him. Yes, God knows,” he added with a sigh after a pause, “it’s a hard and arduous thing, the life of a soldier in war.”

“What happened to him?” I asked with breathless insistence.

“The Court Martial sat that very morning. The whole battalion wept for him. But what do you – discipline –”

“Shot?” I cried.

The veteran looked around and made a movement with his hand which called for silence.

After a long pause, he quietly continued: “It was the hardest hour of my life. The whole battalion was lined up for it, and the best marksmen had to step forward – I was one of them. It broke everyone’s heart except for Wilhelm himself. All was indifferent to him, he couldn’t take any more. Only to sleep! Well, that’s been taken care of for him.

“But you see, however great the days which followed for us, the foundation of the Empire and the victorious entry into our hometowns – the image of Wilhelm in his last hour, leaning there against the wall with his eyes bound – I cannot get that out of my head. And his mother never takes my hand without a shudder running down my spine and my thinking: If she knew! – She doesn’t know and she’ll never find out. She lives on the hope of being able to read his name up there on the marble plaque, but that will never happen. Every few years, I have to make a new

petition for her. I write it on stamped paper, fold it up very neatly, and put it in my stove. For it wouldn't do any good, and it's better to let sleeping dogs lie. We can only hope that the nations will finally come to their senses and such appalling wars won't be renewed. Otherwise – how should the father of a family, who experienced something like that in his youth, ever sleep peacefully at night!”

### **The Shining Hero**

(From *Cora und andere Erzählungen*, 'Cora and Other Tales,' 1915)

Once upon a time there was a shining hero, and one day he lifted up a dark-eyed little girl, kissed her, and said: “This is my little bride. Take good care of her for me until she has grown up and I can come to fetch her.”

The child's father was a good friend of his from their youthful days and the town where they lived was his birthplace, which he was visiting after a long absence.

The little girl went back to playing with her doll, and nobody thought that the man's words had made a deep and lasting impression on her.

And he went out, with a few companions, into an unexplored continent, into a murderous climate. Through a thousand dangers he forced his way, to gain a foothold on virgin ground among savage tribes, far from civilization, where he fought and concluded treaties and won new provinces for his fatherland. He gave names to rivers and mountains, and wrote his own in the Book of Immortality.

From the treasures of the savage continent which he had opened

up, he sent a large yield of animal-skins, of weapons and household utensils and other products of primeval art, to his hometown for their ethnographic museum.

The parcel was accompanied by a letter to his good friend, who was the director of the museum. For the little girl with the dark eyes, whom he had named his little bride, there was enclosed an exotic piece of jewellery, the necklace of a savage Queen, assembled in a wondrous fashion from glass beads, mussels, and semi-precious stones.

The girl's mother guided her hand for a thank-you letter to the great friend, in which she signed herself as his little bride.

It took almost a year before the letter made its way through all obstacles to reach the distant hero. He and his loyal companions were dwelling among a subjugated but unreliable tribe around Christmas time, when the days were hot and the nights were cold, and he had to keep his weapons by his side day and night. The child's message with its clumsy letters came to him like a heavenly Christmas greeting. And so he christened a newly discovered mountain and the young river which gushed out from it with the name of the little girl: Perenna.

The little one grew older, but she did not become like other girls. When she played with her dolls, she would listen to the conversations of the adults, in which the hero's name recurred again and again. This name was like a seed in her heart, which grew with her, neither seen nor suspected by anybody. She knew that a mountain and a river in Africa were named after her. So how could she have been like other girls?

But she knew yet more. She also knew about the deeds her hero

had performed, and the places he passed through; she remembered them all with their exotic designations. When a visitor asked her mother one day where her great friend was sojourning now and she gave the answer that he had arrived in Ugogo on his journey to the coast, the girl lifted her head from her picture-book and said: "No, Mama, he is already in Bagamoyo now."

Everybody laughed at this. But when the father joined them, it was found that his little girl had been right.

He now frequently took her with him to his museum to show her the stuffed exotic animals, the weapons, tools and amulets of the savage tribes, and to take delight in her lively perception and the seriousness and eagerness of her questions. From that time on, the little one spoke and dreamed of nothing but the Dark Continent; even her dolls had to be dressed in African style and received the names of black chieftains and queens. And every time that there was a new addition to her birthday candles, she thought very secretly that it brought her another year closer to her hero.

She had a playmate who was called Eric and was a son of friends of the family. He shared in her African joys and lived with her in her inner world. Although he was several years older, he still had to do his utmost to keep up with Perenna's progress. He was always the first in his class, but however diligently he studied and however easily he comprehended, the little girl, who did not attend any school at all and was taught at home, comprehended even more easily and was farther advanced than he was.

Eric did not hold this against her, for he loved her. The two of them

were always together. And she had no secrets from him. She told him what she never spoke about with her parents, that she was the bride of the shining hero. That made Erich angry.

“You’re too stupid,” he said. “The hero was making sport of you. How could you become his wife? By the time you’ve grown up, he’ll be an old man. You’re the right age for me, not for him.”

“For you!?”

The expression with which she spoke these two little words made him gnash his teeth and sob into his pillow at night. But he resolved to keep very quiet and strain every sinew to one day, when he was an adult, perform just such deeds and win just such fame, so Perenna would realise that she was made for him and not for that other.

The child blossomed into an exotic, mysterious beauty. She had stopped playing with dolls by this time; she read and read. In her father’s library, she had discovered the books in which her great friend told of his life and his deeds. She hid them under her pillow and devoured them, when she knew herself to be unobserved, in a corner of the house. Whenever anyone walked past, she covered them with a volume of *Brehm’s Animal Life*<sup>14</sup> which Erich had lent her. Although she was free to read what she wanted, and it would never have occurred to her parents to say of a serious book that it was not suitable for small girls, she shied away from letting adults catch a glimpse of her secret.

Now she experienced with him, step by step, the great undertaking

---

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Edmund Brehm (1829-1884): his *Thierleben* was first published in six volumes between 1864 and 1869 before appearing in two further editions.

to which he owed his first fame, and which up to then had sounded only like a legend in her ears. She was there in Zanzibar when he procured the black porters, the mounts, and the bales of goods to barter in the Interior and he armed his small troop of Swahilis. Then the unforgettable expedition began which read like the books of the Odyssey, which she knew through Erich. The first native village, whose "Hongo" has to be paid with glass beads and colourful cotton goods, the next one, which takes up arms and is forced to make peace by rifle bullets, the march through the jungle where they clear a path with axes. And the wonders of the plant world, the lianas which hang down on the tree-giants like rope-ladders, the sharp grass in which a white foot durst not tread because it cuts like swords. And even the thousandfold lives of animals, of the great and the small, from trumpeting elephants to the white ant which ate entire tents. It was singular reading, where all that was read immediately became action in which the small reader personally took part. She too was involved in all the lovely or horrific events.

In the jungle, the riding-donkey which had carried her collapsed. She was placed on a wicker-litter and she floated forward on the shoulders of black men. In this way they went straight across unknown rivers, where the porters waded with her in water up to their chests, over scorching, parched plains, where palm-leaves held high protected her head from sunburn and where the hideous traces of slave-hunting, emaciated skeletons, still with the yoke around their neck, dried up on the path. Her litter had to always float before the horse of the leader, whose eye followed her everywhere, for she was his most precious possession, more precious

than sacks of pearls and bales of cotton, which they traded for provisions; why, she was his little bride!

She was there when he went to the “Schauri”<sup>15</sup> and sat behind him on the straw mat in front of the tent where he listened to the speeches of the foreign chieftains and exchanged presents or entered into blood-brotherhood with them. She was also there when the rifles banged and the savages’ arrows whizzed around the bold little troop. There were stretches where every foot of the way had to be paid for with blood and where the danger in their rear was no smaller than the danger right ahead. That was where her hero showed himself in all his greatness. He kept emerging from the turmoil unscathed, he was everywhere at once, and his mouth gave orders, his eyes gave security, his bullet never missed. He kept a last one always in the barrel of his gun; it was for the little bride in the direst need, so she would not be left, without protection, in the hands of the savages.

Oh, and the nights in the tent, the wondrous, silent, tropical nights! Palisades protected the camp, in which, to scare the wild animals off, a large fire had to be kept burning, whose reflection played fantastically in the high crowns of the palm trees. The little girl could sleep free from care, for outside her great friend, his weapon in his hand, was walking along past all the tents and listening out for any stirrings of mutiny or treachery.

At one time, their supplies threatened to run out. So they set up a permanent camp and sowed in the virgin earth, which quickly and willingly yielded its fruits. In the meantime, their weapons rested, and all was sheer

---

<sup>15</sup> A Swahili word meaning: ‘meeting,’ ‘council.’

play and joy. The great friend went hunting and shot zebras, giraffes, and antelopes, which the black cook knew how to prepare so palatably. The little girl sat before the tent, listened to the blacks playing their well-known wind instruments and delighted in their dances, which they accompanied with improvised songs. At that time it also happened that the large snake crept into her tent in broad daylight, at midday when the little girl was having a midday nap, and that the great friend, who came on the scene just then, broke its cervical vertebra with the butt of his rifle. It was that Python sebae<sup>16</sup> which now, with its frightful rings, formed the centrepiece of her father's collection.

The years passed, she hardly noticed. Her body wandered in her parental house in her hometown, it grew and blossomed out ever more beautifully, it danced, rode, played tennis, and was admired by everyone. But her soul knew nothing of this. It lived, clad in a lighter cover, over fifty degrees latitude away at the foot of the newly discovered mountain, where her river, the Perenna, roared from eternal springs.

At fourteen years of age, she looked like an adult. Already her beauty attracted the first suitors. Her eyes presented people with enigmas, they looked so far and unfathomably: jungle and ocean dreamed in their depths. Because Perenna cared so little about her admirers, it was assumed that she wanted to wait for her Erich, and the parents on both sides approved the union of their children in advance.

Erich alone knew about her dream. She told him the content of the

---

<sup>16</sup> The African Rock Python.

book, chapter by chapter, and he was happy to share her enthusiasm. It was only her making everything about herself that made him sad.

A beautiful star which stood over her house every evening for a while attracted her attention. When it twinkled with particular brightness, she thought that the Shining Hero was looking at it just then and perhaps thinking of his little bride, and that was what gave the star such radiance.

“You’re living in a world of imagination, Perenna,” Erich told her. “He doesn’t see the star at all. There’s another sky above him. He sees Canopus and the Southern Cross, which we can’t see here.”

“Where is the Southern Cross?” Perenna asked her father that evening.

He pointed to the South. “If our sky were clearer, little girl, I would be able to show you the constellation Corvus low down there. From this constellation which you don’t see, but must picture in your mind, draw a line to the horizon and beyond it, ever further in a southerly direction, then you will come to the place in the sky where the Southern Cross is. On my Egyptian journey it accompanied me for a long time, until I parted from it reluctantly at the Suez Canal.”

Now the little girl searched in thought every evening for the point in the sky which was adorned with the Southern Cross so her great lover would not be so alone under the foreign stars.

Her whole being matured as under a hotter sun, which opens all blossoms earlier and more abundantly. Her beauty and her gifts were spoken about all around. Yet Erich kept close on her heels; he could not afford to lose any time if he wished to become a famous explorer and one

day drive the Shining Hero out of Perenna's heart. "The will can achieve anything," he told himself a hundred times each day, for that was the great precept which he received from that book and with which he compelled himself and circumstances.

Perenna, however, continued to accompany the hero on his expeditions in untamed Africa, and became ever more deeply immersed in her dream. The world which surrounded her appeared to her, with its thousand needs and habits, as a morbid growth, while such a life in daily danger and among the most primitive conditions was the only true life. She did not like to sit on any upholstered chair, because she thought that, at the same time, her hero might be sitting on a stone or on the bare earth. What a moment that must be when everything superfluous falls off, all the trivialities taken to be important cease to be, and every soul must show what it weighs before the Throne of Truth. Even the cultural problems which were discussed at her parents' table had sunk, had disappeared, before the great, all-consuming question: Will we fight our way through today again, will we find a piece of meat to eat on the march, or be ourselves boiling in the savages' pot in the evening? Then there were moments when the pages of the book shook in her hands and she could not read on for fear.

"I tremble at the description, and he has lived it," she said to herself then, and reverence filled her entire being. Nevertheless, she hoped to also be there in the future and appear not too unworthy among such heroic greatness.

Oh, and the day when the raging river and the even more furiously

raging enemy swept the best of his white companions away and the hero sat weeping alone on the bank! The little girl sat down by his side and wept too.

Then when the black porters mutinied and clamorously demanded to go home to the coast, and the weak remnant of the whites also insisted on turning back, then there came the great moment when the leader said: "I shall stop nobody, but I am going on." And it was his little girl who was the first to declare: "I am going with you." Now they all went with him – in the next chapter.

One of the books contained a photograph of him. Yes, that was how he had looked when he lifted her up and named her his bride. Those were the handsome, clearly marked features, the dark hair around the serious brow, the piercing eyes, which she remembered so well. She looked at the image so often and so long, until she had made every smallest detail her own and no face on earth was more familiar to her than this one.

Little girl, these years were the greatest of your life. Their radiance will carry over even into your farthest future.

- - Perenna was sixteen years old. Now it would soon have been high time for the Shining Hero to fetch his little bride. But he was abiding in the African Interior and he had not been heard from for a long time. He had made a dominion for himself there which he defended against the barbarism on its borders and opened up to civilisation. He built roads, founded schools, saw to the administration of justice, and maintained a valuable colony for his fatherland. There was so much he had to do that he did not even find time to think about the museum in his hometown. He

might therefore even have forgotten his little bride in the end. Instead of him, others came and wanted to take her away. One man offered her a castle on the Rhine, another a brilliant life in the city and on travels. But it was nicer to sleep with her hero under the roof of his tent, guarded by Askaris,<sup>17</sup> and hear wild animals roaring in the distance. She could not be unfaithful to the dream of her youth, even if she had to wait so long a time. Indeed, if one of them had resembled him even remotely, but the difference was all too great.

Her mother began to complain that her child was so particular, but her father said: "My girl is right, she is waiting for her Erich. She cannot find a better man than him."

Erich was studying with distinction at universities abroad by this time. He devoted himself to zoology, for he felt no inclination for the military profession which would have brought him closest to the colonial enterprises. But he wanted to join an expedition as a natural scientist as soon as possible. He always spent the holidays in his parental home, in the proximity of his childhood friend.

The two of them were still as good friends as ever. Only, the girl did not want to hear of him loving her with anything other than brotherly love. For her, Erich was no man, he was still the boy who had helped her carry her dolls around.

"I demand no promise, Perenna," he said. "I'll wait for you as long as you want. If it must be, for all of my life. There is no merit in that, for I

---

<sup>17</sup> Indigenous African soldiers recruited by European colonial powers.

can't imagine anyone but you by my side."

- - All of a sudden, a loud cry of terror passed through the whole of the civilised world. A fanatical gang of Arabs had banded together to exterminate the Europeans and was surging towards the border which our hero guarded. The black natives joined them in droves; already, Christian missions had been wiped out and all kinds of atrocities had taken place. The hero's province was the most advanced bulwark; it was necessarily in line for the next attack. How would the battle end? Neighbours ill-disposed to him lived on his borders, his white troops were insufficient in number, the black ones were cowardly and fickle. And a rebellion had already broken out in his rear which barred his way to the coast and no longer allowed any news through.

Now Perenna did not need to keep her love a secret any longer, for everyone shared it. No name was mentioned so often as his. Every newspaper showed his picture. Whoever had been close to him in youth now appeared in public with memories of him, with anecdotes from school- and university days. Everyone claimed to have sensed and prophesied what a man was inside this boy and this youth. His hometown, where relatives of his still lived, trembled for him most of all. In every shop window his photograph stood for sale, public lectures about him were given, and money was collected for the relief expedition which the town equipped.

All of Europe was concerned about his fate. Had his province not been a centre of European trade and of missions, on which the neighbouring states also counted? People also knew about great treasures

of ivory which he had collected, and which they did not want to let be destroyed with him. Commercial speculation and politics mixed with the demands of philanthropy. Beside the official expeditions, private ones were set in motion which likewise had the aim of providing him with weapons, munitions, and food. But they sent out no message, and they too disappeared after a short while. The rebellion spread and surged like a sea around the cut-off province. Will the expeditions fight their way through to him? Will he be able to hold out until they arrive? Is he already dead, a prisoner? Those are questions which fill the columns of every newspaper down to the smallest local rag, day after day, week after week, month after month.

Because no news comes, fabrications and conjectures run all the wilder. So people read long reports of his demise from a supposed missionary and eyewitness, which is retracted a mere two days later. Perenna's father utters the name of the friend of his youth with an ever more serious face. The girl alone remains in high spirits. She is too young and full of life to believe in disaster.

"If the prayers and blessings of the whole of mankind lie in a pan," she thought, "and I throw my own heart in as well, weighed down with all its love, then that must make a weight which draws down the scales of Fate."

Thus thought Perenna, and her firm faith was not to be shattered.

The town had never experienced such a festival as that on the day when its greatest son returned. His work was saved, the revolt quashed,

the enemies scattered, law and order reestablished. Now he came to the fatherland to restore his health, and he left a completely pacified province behind for his successor.

His homeward journey from Africa was one long triumphal procession. Every country he touched conferred honours and distinctions on him. His fatherland received him with thunderous cheers. And today he was visiting his hometown, which had felt more anxiety for him than any other.

Every house flew flags. People flocked together from near and far, even the forest had moved into the town, to greet the hero, for every street he had to pass through had long rows of green trees on its left and right which had not been there before. His coach had to drive through the thunderous acclamation of the crowd at walking speed. Mothers lifted their children up to show them his face.

At the Town Hall a large banquet table had been prepared. The ceremonial reception was to take place there with an address from the mayor followed by a banquet. Maidens of honour with flowers in their hands stood in array, the loveliest girls in the town; and at their head was the loveliest of all, Perenna.

When she was to present her flowers, everything, hall and steps and people, swayed and swam before her eyes as if in billowing fog. She overcame her emotion, using every ounce of her willpower, and walked towards the celebrated one. When she raised her eyes, she was looking into the pale brown face, ploughed with a thousand furrows, of a hoary-headed man. No feature of this countenance tallied with her conception,

she believed herself to be looking at a complete stranger, and the surprise was so great that, instead of the words she wanted to say, she could bring forth only a confused stammering. When he took the flowers from her hand, she almost fainted – from the heat, it was thought – and had to be taken away.

He was old, his face was furrowed, his hair bleached. Dreadful disappointment! Why did he do this to her? What had become of the Shining Hero?

She was angry at him, as if he were to blame for the transformation, as if he had aged so on purpose.

“What’s wrong with you? Didn’t you like him?” asked her girlfriends, who were coming back from the reception.

“Oh, he is so old,” she said in a choked voice.

“You little fool, what’s got into you? Of course he can’t be a young man any more, but he isn’t old. His hair has been bleached by dangers and hardships, not by age.”

“Didn’t you see his eyes? *They* are young,” said another.

Yes, she had indeed seen his eyes, and his eyes were young. How strangely he had looked at her with them. Those were the hero’s eyes which had stared into the jaws of death so often. All the glow of youth from former times had withdrawn into these eyes, he was preserved there, his true I still lived there.

“No, you are right, he isn’t old, it’s only the dangers and the hardships,” she rejoiced, finding herself again.

“With his grey hair, I like him more than any young man,” another

girl said.

“Yes, his grey hair just makes him more handsome. He’s a God.”

She could not help but feel ashamed in front of her girlfriends for having been so small. What proud felicity to make up for all the dangers and toils of his heroic career with one’s own youth.

In the evening he came to her parents. It was the only hour he could make free for himself, for tomorrow he was expected in the neighbouring town where he had a lecture to give.

Perenna put her jewellery of mussels and stones around her young neck, and it gave her the look of an exotic deity.

“How beautiful she is! How beautiful she is,” the guest thought when he saw her again. They were standing together in a niche; he looked at the necklace he had given her when she was still small. And suddenly a memory came to him.

“Do you know, little girl, that this old uncle once called you his little bride?”

“And do you know, Shining Hero, that the little girl has waited for you all these years?”

The words were spoken before she thought them; where she had taken the courage from, she herself did not know afterwards.

“You – you? It isn’t possible!” He looked at her with inexpressible delight and pressed her head to his breast, kissed her hair, her brow, again and again. He did not kiss her mouth.

Then he pushed her away. There were tears in his eyes, in the eyes which had witnessed so many terrors unmoved.

“And now life is lived out, and I am old.”

“Not old! Not old!” she shouted aloud in joy at having something to forgive him, the Great Man.

“Look here! Why would you want these white hairs, you young goddess?”

“That doesn’t matter. I like these white hairs more than the brown ones of youth. They come only from the struggles and the hardships.”

“It is not the white hairs alone, you good child, but you don’t understand that. If I only had a son I could give you.”

“No! No! I don’t want a young one, I want your age, I want you yourself, you Shining Hero.”

“Child, child, it is too late for me, it cannot be.”

She continued to plead: “Don’t leave me. I see only you in the whole world, I’ve never seen another man since my earliest years. I want to be with you, I want to share in your dangers, I want to live in your tent, where you will protect me. What need is there of youth? I have it, I’ll share it with you, - a piece for you, a piece for me, then all will be right. You need only want it, and we’ll be the happiest couple on earth.”

The more ardently she implored, the more painfully he realised that he had to leave her.

“You don’t love me then,” she said despairingly in the end.

“How I love you! A young man cannot possibly love like this. I love in you that which is mine no longer, the sweetest thing on earth, youth. I love in you the love which cannot belong to me. You fair creature, how I thank you for having given me this last glimpse of a May landscape; I shall take it

with me over into my winter.”

He wept unrestrainedly on her locks. Then he tore himself away with a bleeding heart and departed.

At that time she did not understand him and she resented him for a long while, a long while. She had wanted to give him everything: youth, love, bliss. They belonged to her, she could give them if she wanted. He needed only to reach out his hand and everything was his. But he went from her, he left her for ever after all the years she had waited for him.

It was her Erich who understood and soothed her sorrow. His heart was her refuge; inside there, she knew, an eternal lamp burned for her. He had not become a famous explorer, the age of great adventure was over, he said, and life in the colonies was now like it was in every place where society gossips and puts on airs. But he distinguished himself in his profession and was a man who could honourably ask for her hand in marriage. Again and again he told her: “You are my guide and my light. All that I can ever be is your work. I have the best of me from you.”

She herself had it from another.

Finally, she also understood why the other had to go away from her. But she continued to think of him for the rest of her life. When her daughter grew up, she told her about the Shining Hero whom she had loved and who had gone from her in sorrow. And the little girl now sat for days on end and thought about the Shining Hero, and how she would have loved him if he had met her instead of her mother.

He had long been sleeping under his stone memorial. But Shining

Heroes can always rise again one day and appropriate the hearts of little girls.

### **The Old Wardrobe**

(From *Die Stunde des Unsichtbaren*, 'The Hour of the Invisible,' 1927)

The following has been communicated to me by a personage whom I believe to know as well as myself, for me to do with as I wish:

The occurrence I wish to relate, if it can be called an occurrence, lies far back in the days of my youth. To make it appear more comprehensible, I must preface a few words. I have always, innately, had my own conception of time. My mind never could embrace the idea that past events could die, could utterly cease to be. Pains and terrors which had lost their bearers long before, were still there for me, seeking a new soul to whom they could communicate themselves. I was often overcome, on a good day when everyone else was happy, by an indescribable sadness. There was a pain trying to rend me, and yet I knew that it had nothing to do with me personally. There are so many pains in this world which have lost their owners. All the terrible cruelty of previous centuries, the appalling penal punishments, the innocents tortured and executed, the hapless witches: something of that still remains and roams through space, even though the victims have been dust long since. They cannot come near the average person who has thick skin and short feelers, they search for a particular predisposition onto which they can hatch. When, while roving around, they encountered me by chance, I willingly received them, for how are they ever to find peace and go to sleep if nobody will listen to them and give them his

own heart in expiation!

In my homeland, one can occasionally find, in forests and at crossroads, small colourful handkerchiefs knotted together, which excite the curiosity of passers-by. “Leave them alone,” nannies say to the little ones who want to pull them open. “Leave them alone, you can’t know what it is you’re picking up. Many a person has brought sickness home from them, who went out fresh and red-cheeked.” In the same way, I would occasionally gather up, from childhood on, a bundle of stray pains.

At times, sudden terrors also came from somewhere or other, from empty space, and prompted rushes of blood. Every time, I thought they were the cries for help of my loved ones from the distance, searching for me. But frequently finding out that nothing had happened in those hours which concerned me personally, led me to suspect that I had, quite by chance, caught waves out of the infinite expanse which intended to go somewhere else entirely and had only touched me on their way because of my over-sensitive receptivity. This gift is as little to be envied as second sight; it can change fine days of life into their opposite.

In particular, there were certain spaces which I could not enter without being gripped by an agonising uneasiness. And now I come to my story, which is perhaps no story at all.

It was, as I mentioned before, in the distant days of my youth, that I was once compelled, on a journey from Florence to Venice, to spend the night in Ferrara. How this came about, I do not remember; it may have been because the operation of the railway was interrupted or some similar

reason, in any case, this break in the journey was not my intention, and as I did not know the city, I did not know where to find accommodation in the late evening. A hired servant told me at the railway station that it would be difficult to find a room because a festival, I do not remember which one, was being celebrated and had drawn in many non-locals. Moreover, a number of my fellow-travellers were also in the situation of not being able to continue their journey, and, insofar as they were not held up like I was by looking for their luggage, had a headstart on me. I was accordingly turned away from a succession of larger and smaller inns, until a hotel-keeper in a crooked alley, who had no spare rooms either, gave me to understand that he still had a makeshift expedient at his disposal, an old Palazzo, where a relative of his gave out rooms and whither he occasionally, when all his rooms were occupied, sent late-arriving guests; I would be as well accommodated there as in his own house. After I had quickly taken a few bites and drunk a glass of wine with intense thirst, I let the manservant take me to the aforementioned lodging. We had quite a long way to go, and in spite of the late hour the entire population seemed to be out and about; in every street two streams of people heading in opposite directions poured past each other. The house stood with its front to a small piazzetta, which was also filled with lively goings-on despite the middling illumination. It had stately proportions but was in bad condition, which was clear to the eye even from outside, and made a dismal, forbidding impression. I walked up a long, steep flight of steps, which ascended straight between two walls, and I was handed over at the top to a not very well-groomed old lady, who dismissed the hotel servant and gave

my things into the care of her own servant. I told her that I valued quiet and fresh air most of all, as it was imperative I had a few hours' refreshing sleep to continue my journey early the next morning. She brought me into a spacious room, both of whose windows looked onto the piazzetta and which was simply but decently furnished with every necessity, recommended that I not open the window before I had put out the light, and averred that I would slumber like a King here. I do not know if a good night's rest is one of the special privileges of a King, but it was not to be granted to me, at any rate, in that room. For no sooner had I let my head sink into the pillows than I jumped up in shock: through the open windows came the blaring music of a brass band, which seemed to have just arrived in the piazzetta and whose shrill sounds split one's ears and brain. They were playing the Royal National Anthem,<sup>18</sup> whereupon thunderous applause ensued. What to do? I had a strong headache, partly from the discomfort of the journey in the overheated railway carriage, which the sun had burned down on the whole day long, partly from the exhaustion caused by wandering around and the rapidly drunk wine. Closing the windows was out of the question in the intense heat, and it would furthermore have been only a half-measure against the penetrating noise. Waiting for the end of the popular entertainment was an equally hopeless prospect, for I knew from experience that it would go on until dawn. But I absolutely had to have a few hours of sleep before the early train departed, were I not to arrive in Venice considerably the worse for wear. I therefore stood up,

---

<sup>18</sup> The *Marcia Reale*, the national anthem of Italy from 1861 to 1946, composed by Giuseppe Gabetto in 1831.

threw on a garment, and rang the bell for a long time until the half-asleep manservant appeared and did not understand what I could be wanting at so late an hour. "Another room," I told him most emphatically, "for the noise here will make my head burst." He encouraged me to try to sleep one more time, for there was no other room as good as this one in the entire house. But as I insisted on having my way, he withdrew, sighing, to speak with the Padrona, who had gone to bed; and not until a long while later, during which time the music outside blared on, did he come back, with his carry-lantern and a bunch of keys; and grabbing my hand-luggage, into which I had quickly thrown my things, he led the way through a long corridor which split into several crossbars. I noticed in the darkness that this palace was far more sizable than it appeared from outside, and that one could easily lose one's way in it without a guide. At first we had passed by doors which had shoes in front of them, then our way went through a gallery which ran round a courtyard and which must once have had paintings on its walls, until another bend brought us before a remotely situated room, which the servant unlocked. It was stately and had handsome dimensions; a window-niche, hollowed out of the thickness of the exterior wall and containing a stone doorstep gave out onto a dark and quiet courtyard. Strangely enough, the window at this height was barred. I dismissed the servant after I had satisfied myself in his presence that the door to the corridor was lockable and that the one to be found in the side wall, though it had neither key nor bolt, led only into a small side-chamber with no other egress, in which there was nothing but a large old wardrobe.

I put out the candle, flung both casements wide open and tried to

sleep.

But of sleep there was no question. Before long I sprang up again and groped my way in the dark to the window, which I thought had shut. The fresh night air streamed towards me; it was wide open, as at the moment when I had lain down. It is curious, how long it takes to change the confined air of unoccupied rooms, which the landlord's folly tends to keep tightly sealed until the moment when a guest moves in.

I laid myself down in the bed again and tried to persuade myself that the air was improving every minute. But I did not manage to fall asleep. There was something unreal but unutterably encumbering suspended in the room like an invisible cloud. No sooner had this become clear to me than I was assailed by a feeling of oppressiveness which drove away all possibility of sleep and gave me the conviction that I was sharing this room with something dreadful. Just go! Just get out! But where to? I did not want to wake the poor devil of a manservant a second time, and I told myself that a bellpull would be unlikely to have enough power to cover the great distance. Nevertheless, I lit a light at the risk of all the room filling with mosquitoes, I wanted to at least *see* the bell, to calm myself down with the certainty that I was connected with the outside world in some way. But there was no bell. I put the candle back out so as not to use it up too soon. And again I laid me down to rest and began to take deep and regular breaths in order to attract slumber through total composure. Of the four hours I had reckoned on for my required sleep, one had already elapsed unused. I could not go on like this; I wanted to sleep henceforth, at any price.

No chance. A fear laid itself on me which pressed the breath from my body. This time, it did not come from the unknown, it was bound with this place, with this room. I had delivered myself up to it when I confined myself, far from human voices and human ears, in this room which it shared with me. What I would have given now for a sound of the brass band music which I had fled from and which was surely, at this moment, eliciting new storms of applause from the piazzetta. I listened in vain, no sound from outside penetrated into this uneasy seclusion. It was not as if anything ghostly had stirred in the room: there was no sighing, no rattling or shuffling, the horror here was holding its breath. In the end I could bear it no longer; I got up again and shone the candle on every wall, investigated every corner of the half-empty room and entered, with reluctance, the side-chamber, which must in past days have formed *one* space with the room, for the stucco work on the ceiling continued through and beyond the thin dividing wall. Here the incomprehensible, invisible presence became even more perceptible, but I sought to explain the increased oppressiveness to myself from the circumstance that the chamber was receiving air only through the half-open door. It was strongest near the old wardrobe. Summoning up a supreme effort of will, I opened the double-leaved doors of the wardrobe, which was completely empty, and hurriedly shut them again. The conviction that I was at the scene of tragic events grew ever more strongly upon me.

Tragic? No, there was more than that here. Every old palazzo in Italy guards a tragic secret. For they were all of the same stamp, these lords Este, Malatesta, Bentivoglio or whatever they may have been called, where

it was a question of their advantage or their supposed honour. But there was more here. Something downright abominable had happened here. The abomination had been condensed, embodied here, it was centuries old yet still present in the final, thinnest emanation, which hung on the walls and floated on the ceiling. What was it about the old wardrobe? The horror came out of the wardrobe, the wardrobe looked fearful.

I must have been very tired that night, as I ended up in bed again after all and at last – it might have been already towards morning – sank into a troubled and gloomy slumber.

A hard knocking woke me suddenly from sleep. It was harsh and thumping, but it was human. It brought no new terrors, but deliverance from those of the night; I instantly remembered that I had ordered the manservant to wake me at four o'clock, sooner rather than later. The train did not, it was true, leave until half past five, but I hate to hurry and rush at the crack of dawn, which is too sacred for one to be dragged straight into the grating bustle of day without any transition. Better to sacrifice an hour of sleep in the morning but meet the breaking day with a feeling of awe. Today this habit and my order to the servant came in useful for me. The waker had done more than his duty, for it was still some time before four o'clock. But dawn was already breaking in the room, and when I walked up to the window, the first pale light was just rising over the maze of houses. Praise and thanks be to Heaven, another dawn had come. The shortest night of the year, which had seemed the longest to me, was at an end, and a young sun, which had not yet beheld any misdeeds, made ready to kiss a likewise rejuvenated earth.

Before I departed, I cast one more glance at the wardrobe in the adjoining room. It stood there with an indifferent face and looked just like any other. What was it which had actually happened to me? I had been overtired, had had a headache, and had found as little rest in the second, quiet room as in the first, noisy one. That was all. Before long, I had forgotten the night in Ferrara, in the gloomy house with the old wardrobe.

Years, decades passed. The world had changed: motor-cars and aeroplanes gave the landscape a different countenance, while the electric light robbed the night of its clandestineness but also of its nightmares. Now one day, the chances of travel brought me to one of the loveliest villas on Lago Maggiore, and it so happened that I let myself be detained there for a few days. The ancient castle-like building was the product of various epochs, as was its décor, but the two together formed a perfect union. Only, the least part of the handsome household furniture originated from the place where it now stood, the most part having been bought and collected from run-down Upper Italian villas and castles. Among these latter items there was a large, peculiarly formed table with many drawers; it was said to come from the Castle of Urbino, which has for its part also lost its original décor. Indeed, a coat-of-arms with an oak-tree carved into the wood proved that it came from the property of the Rovere family. My hostess showed me, with a cunning expression on her face, a secret drawer, hidden with great art, which she had discovered and which had escaped the tracking nose of the second-hand dealer who had acted as the middleman in the purchase. She pulled it out with a press; it contained a small bundle of documents which undoubtedly came from the castle archives of Urbino,

carefully numbered and provided with an index. Someone or other must have taken the bundle from there and hidden it in the secret drawer, at some later, perhaps much later time, for some personal purpose, and then forgotten about it. Who knows how often this article had changed owners since then without this find coming to light. The present owner was curious to learn something about the contents of the bundle, which consisted for the most part of letters; she had endeavoured to do so herself but had been able to decipher next to nothing. Such old testimonies are difficult to read for the unacquainted, not only because of the penstrokes, greatly differing from those of today, which run regularly on amidst a lack of punctuation marks, but even more because of abbreviations, no longer used, of expressions which have fallen out of usage and are Latin in part.

To oblige my hostess, I took the bundle of letters with me to my room, and the first thing I learned from them was that they were addressed to Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, and bore the signature of one Matteo Milani, who pompously called himself the ‘Oratore’ – which at that time meant the same as Ambassador – of His Ducal Highness. His activity was, however, not in the political sphere, for it came to light from the letters that he had an unresolved matter of money and law between the houses of Este and della Rovere to bring to an amicable settlement and, at the same time, as the custom of the age entailed, supply His Lordship with tragic or risqué anecdotes which he had picked up at Court. For these gentlemen ‘Oratore’ had to be not only good speakers but just as good listeners, their office serving both to meet the need for entertainment of the great lords and to broaden their knowledge of human nature. Mention

was made on several occasions of a Lord Azzo d'Este, a highly cultured man and distant relative of the ruling house, who possessed an extremely sightworthy palace filled with exquisite paintings. He stood in high favour at Court and was consulted at every purchase of new works of art on account of his outstanding connoisseurship. The letter-writer had been asked by him to inspect his artistic treasures and had hastened to accept the invitation. The description of the paintings seen there spread over several pages. Even though that age lacked, without exception, the ability to convey the living impression of a work of art through words, yet the effusive adjectives and their continually recurring superlatives proved that among the treasures of Lord Azzo there were works of rare value and a genuinely deeply-felt emotion was striving to express this. The visitor's enthusiasm must have flattered the collector and owner, if it were not perhaps another reason which induced him to detain our source for a meal. But now I must let him do the talking.

“Around midday,” he writes, “a brother-in-law of my noble host appeared, a Signor Bentivoglio, from that branch of the family which settled in the province of Ferrara after the capture of Bologna and possesses large estates between Perotto and Torre di Fondo on the Reno River. When we betook ourselves to table, a servant opened the side-door and in walked a living corpse in black but sumptuous garments. ‘My lady wife,’ the master of the house curtly remarked upon her appearance. She made a respectful bow in silence before her lord, then one no less low before the noble guest, her brother, and such a one before me. The corpse sat down on her chair, which the servant moved for her, and sat in silence

throughout the entire meal, while the conversation ignored her, as though she were not present at all. Nor had either of the gentlemen returned her greeting. Under these circumstances, I considered it advisable to likewise refrain from addressing her; only, when a kerchief of hers slipped off, I deferentially picked it up. The corpse is still beautiful through the noble form of its features, if one can call a face so evidently belonging to death beautiful. On her hair, which is still a lustrous black in places, ashes have fallen, and her face and hands are ashen likewise. She did move her fingers as if she were eating, but I clearly noticed that she did not partake of so much as a bite. When the last course had been cleared away, she rose immediately and mutely took her leave of us, one after the other, with the same bows; it was only as if the faintest draught were wafting through the door. I was dying to know what fault the unhappy woman had been guilty of to draw down upon herself a punishment which seems to be leading her, under all outward signs of reverence for her lineage, slowly towards death, and in which her husband and brother are evidently united, for both their faces were as stone all the time she was near. At no time, earlier or later in the conversation, was a single syllable devoted to her. When, several days later, I returned the hospitality I had received with the expenditure for which I am indebted to your Ducal Highness, Signor Azzo appeared alone and made apology for Madonna Dejanira's absence, because she was unwell. It was the only time that the name of the unhappy woman was spoken in our intercourse. When I later dared to make passing mention of her, the reply icily skimmed over the topic."

This marital relationship seemed to have stimulated the curiosity of

the distinguished letter-writer, for in the next missive of the Oratore the usual business communications were followed by:

“I would fear that I were being neglectful in my duty towards Your Ducal Highness, had I not striven every sinew to furnish Your Grace with the more precise details you desired concerning the domestic life of the noble Signor Azzo, which has attracted Your Grace’s attention. This was not easy, insofar as the familial relationship of said Signor Azzo with the Court imposes restraint on all those who frequent that place with regard to things which touch upon his honour. The people of the town are also anxious not to cause offence by spreading disagreeable rumours; it is always most difficult to obtain information about such things which are not spoken of because everybody knows them. However, by means of my valet from Urbino, who had been able to establish a good rapport with the female servants at Court, I succeeded in making inquiries from which it became possible for me to penetrate the mystery which lies over the house of Signor Azzo d’Este. What I have learnt is the following:

“It appears that Madonna Dejanira, who, as I have already written, comes from the House of Bentivoglio, felt herself to be neglected in the first years of marriage by her noble husband, whose time, it must be said, was taken up to a tremendous degree, partly by the turmoil in Upper Italy in those days, in which the ducal couple made use of his mediation, partly by the charms of Eleonara Fontana, who is still uncommonly beautiful today, and whom every child in Ferrara knows. The wife, married young, was likewise beautiful and proud of her appearance as of her descent, and could not or would not control her hot blood. She believed, unhappy woman,

contrary to all human and divine laws, that the husband's infidelity should be countered with infidelity on the part of the wife; and she began to look around for a substitute for the conjugal marks of tenderness of which she was deprived.

“Signor Azzo had a secretary with the Christian name Antonio, a handsome and adroit man who attended to his entire correspondence and was of use for all other kinds of services, for which reason his master thought highly of him and distinguished him from all the other domestics. It was on him, who possessed, in addition to his other merits, a pleasant voice and a certain skilfulness on the lute, that Donna Dejanira turned her delight. She arranged, under the pretext of having him organise her correspondence, occasions for the two of them to be together often and long; and when the young man became aware of the hidden fire, he began to burn like a wisp of straw and forgot the reverence and gratitude which he owed his lord. Under the pressure of mutual desire, all that remained of reserve soon disappeared, and their evil fate, which was actually nothing other than evil desire, drew the two lovers together without any resistance. A lady's maid, who slept beside her mistress, was so wicked and so audacious as to smuggle the paramour into her mistress's bedchamber on nights when the Lord was away, which frequently happened. Her passion for the singer and lute-player became so ardent that she often did not let him go from her side until day was breaking. Whenever the Lord returned from his journey unannounced and desired admission to his wife's chamber, the lover would disappear into the large wardrobe in which she kept the best of her clothes. This wardrobe had a chink which the two

miscreants secretly widened for such cases, so it would allow in enough air for him to be able to breathe. Although the servants soon became aware of the nightly flitting and creeping, and began to whisper among themselves, the love-intrigue could have lasted a long time without the Lord learning about it, because Donna Dejanira had been able to secure for herself the devotion of the domestics through gifts and marks of favour, as also through her affable behaviour, had there not been Marchetto, the Keeper of the Keys, a violent man from Romagna who was devoted to his master, body and soul, because the latter had once saved him from the gallows in the nick of time following a manslaughter he had committed. The man from Romagna bore Antonio ill-will, as he believed himself to be thrust out of his lord's favour by him; he observed and made inquiries about the, in his eyes, suspicious couple until he had certain proofs of their guilt. Then he apprised his master of the serious crime committed against his honour, as well as the secret of the wardrobe. Many another man would have flown into sudden fury at such information and would have run his rapier through the two wrongdoers without further ado. But Signor Azzo showed, in this sad instance, the superiority of a truly mature and highly educated mind. He pretended to know nothing, and informed his wife that he unfortunately had to leave her again because he was being sent to Milan for a long time on his lord's business, and furthermore, to appear with greater propriety, he was compelled to take the most part of the domestic servants with him. He could leave her only reliable Antonio and her lady's maid, adroit Sempronia, for the charge and care of her, besides Marchetto to guard the house and attend to her safety.

“You may imagine, Your Grace, how the sinful couple inwardly rejoiced to be able to live in their criminal passion so unrestricted, so unendangered, for a long time to come. But things turned out differently. After the travellers had covered a few miles, Signor Azzo sent the retinue on ahead down the road to Milan. He himself turned off for Torre di Fondo, the residence of his brother-in-law. This latter he apprised of the events which injured the honour of the brother just as much as that of the husband and took him back to Ferrara as a witness to the punishment. At a late night-hour, when the illicit lovers were together in complete safety, Marchetto opened the door upon a silent sign from outside and let the avengers in. He put his hand over the mouth of the lady’s-maid, who was sleeping in the anteroom and woke up at the sudden light, and threatened her with instant death if she made so much as a noise. Meanwhile, Signor Azzo broke down the door of his wife’s chamber with a powerful kick. The paramour had just had enough time to disappear, with one leap, into the wardrobe, which Donna Dejanira quickly locked behind him, before the door fell in pieces. But it would have been better for him had he given himself up to the naked blade of the betrayed lord and thus quickly received the death he deserved from his hand, instead of enduring what he prepared for himself through his game of hide-and-seek in the wardrobe. For the noble Signor Azzo, on seeing his wife alone in the room and knowing the bird to be safe in its cage, burst out into sardonic laughter and said, while calling his high-born brother-in-law over: ‘We must apologise to your noble sister for having unseasonably woken her from sleep in the zeal of our devotion. The haste of our business must justify our

intrusiveness. We ask you, Madonna, to make yourself ready to leave at once, for His Lordship your brother finds it injurious to your reputation that a young wife, and be she ever so respectable, should stay behind, alone, without her husband's supervision, in a town like this. We have therefore decided that he shall convey you, without delay, to the Carmelite Nunnery near his residence, where he can monitor your welfare. The palace shall remain empty and locked up in the meantime. Now be so good as to dress yourself on the spot, you need not take any luggage with you, for there will be no occasion for worldly display in the convent, only for spiritual reflection and penitence. If, however, you desire to take one or the other of your garments from this wardrobe with you, then you shall be at liberty to do so, only you must make haste here before our eyes. Otherwise I shall now take out this artfully worked key and keep it on my person until my return in a year's time, so there will be no risk of thieves, who might force an entry into the empty house and rob the wardrobe of its valuable contents.'

"Madonna Dejanira trembled so violently that she could not manage to dress herself, for everything she tried to take hold of fell from her limp hands. Seeing this, Signor Azzo, who stood all the time with his back to the wardrobe, remarked with grim scorn, 'I am sorry that you must make do today without the usual attendance: Your versatile lady's-maid Sempronia has just this moment passed away from a stroke.'

"They put the unhappy woman, half unconscious, on a horse, whose reins Marchetto, on horseback likewise, took in his hands, and she would without doubt have soon slid down in a faint had she not been firmly

bound in the saddle. Thus was she brought to the Carmelite Nunnery, whose abbess is known far and wide for her strictness and sanctity. There she screamed night and day as though her wits were bewildered and tried to smash her head against the wall, so that she had to be bound. But several months later, she gave birth to a dead boy, the fruit of her sin, whom God took from her, and afterwards she was for a long time so ill that it was thought she would die. However, she made a recovery, albeit only half a one, and one that bore the marks of death, and when a year had passed, Signor Azzo, having completed his business, fetched her back to his house for further and even more severe penitence. For he brought her into the old rooms which she had occupied in the time of her opulence, and also returned to her the wardrobe key which he had taken on that fateful night. But since then he has never addressed a single word to her, although, at his command, she appears at meals every day as formerly. Otherwise, she lives confined at the scene of her crime, and bars were even put on her windows because she once attempted to throw herself down. What the wardrobe conceals, and whether she ever dared to open it, is not known, but it is said that she spent day and night on her knees beside it praying for death. In the neighbourhood, the rumour runs that the paramour is still standing upright in the wardrobe as a white skeleton, but no rational man can believe this, for the air in the house is now perfectly healthy and pure, Marchetto having taken care of everything.

“Here in the town there is only *one* voice, praising and extolling the great *moderatio* and *humanitas* which noble Signor Azzo has shown in this affair which touched so sharply upon his honour. He would have been

completely justified had he locked the sinneress in the wardrobe with her paramour, but he refrained from this measure out of regard for the feelings of the noble family she descends from, which appreciates his leniency. And if one gives proper consideration to the matter, the praise is deserved: Signor Azzo acted like a true Christian by not shedding a drop of blood; nor did he lock the disloyal servant and adulterer in the wardrobe, he did absolutely nothing but leave him in the place which he had chosen for himself. People also generally find the penitence which he imposed on the adulteress to be just as ingenious as it is godfearing: the presence of the wardrobe, which became her paramour's grave, in the middle of the bedroom, which was the scene of her offence, shall not only hourly admonish her to repent of those fervent hours, but also show her the way to Heaven as a memento mori. Anyone who has seen Donna Dejanira can have no doubt that her path of penitence will soon be over and there will be room for a worthier successor. Signo Azzo, as I was able to observe, is already inwardly occupied with this question, for he inquired with caution, and without wanting to make the inquiry apparent, about the female issue of the House of Rovere, whereby he intimated that he looks upon a nearer or more distant family connection with Your Ducal Highness as the highest peak of happiness which a man can ascend. When I told him, quite incidentally, that Your Grace was having the fair fruit of a happiness which blossomed apart from marriage brought up, away from Court, indeed, but under Your Grace's eyes nonetheless, which will ere long reach marriageable age, he expressed the liveliest interest. I would not dare to give a reply to the clearer proposal which will surely not be long in coming

before I am informed about Your Serene Lordship's opinion, which, in the meantime, I cannot think to be anything other than favourable towards such an estimable affinal relationship."

Thus far the Oratore, who was without doubt certain that he was speaking to a like-minded soul. I felt no desire to look further into the success of the suit. But after everything that one knows about the spirit of the century and that of the man who received the letter, I do not doubt that Francesco Maria, if reasons of expediency did not present an obstacle, will have leant a willing ear to the proposal of so highly esteemed and wealthy a man, who knew how to take care of so disagreeable a domestic matter with so much delicacy, tact, and "humanitas." As I am also certain that, should the case arise, the noblest artists and poets of that age would have had no inhibitions about glorifying the cognoscente and patron of all the Fine Arts, in spite of the rumours that were circulating about his act of revenge, through their works.

I folded up the sheets so as to tie the bundle back up. The silver sand, which the writer had not used stintingly, glittered and crackled as though the letters were freshly written. That sent one shiver after another down my spine. The silver sand did away with the centuries which lay in between. I had to turn on every one of the lamps distributed in the large hall, only to find, after reading, a late sleep visited by nightmares. It suddenly seemed to me that I was lying in that dismal room in Ferrara again, where the horror rose out from the large wardrobe. The fearful oppressiveness woke me; it was as bright as day in the room, all the lamps were burning reassuringly. That brought me back to reality.

I have written the story from my heart and thereby destroyed it. Now I am free, and Heaven save me from tormenting myself by seeking connections where all actual support is lacking.

I once slept badly in an old, badly ventilated house, which I entered with a headache after a hot journey, and there was an old wardrobe in the old house. That is all that can be said with certainty. What does it have to do with that Oratore's silver sand! Ghosts, begone!