

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Jassy Torrund [Josepha Mose] (1860-1943)

1. The Doctor's Christmas-Gift p. 1
2. The Plaster-of-Paris Cat p. 12
3. Credo p. 38

The Doctor's Christmas-Gift

(*Doktors Christkindl*:¹ from *Weiße Narzissen und andere Novellen*, 'White Narcissi and other Novellas', Reclam [1904]).

It was the family evening at the old Privy Councillor's, who still lived in his own house and gathered old and young around him like a patriarch. How rare they are nowadays in our fast-living, homeless age, such houses, such families, such cosy togetherness, where one reflects on oneself and remembers the past – instead of always letting one's thoughts only race into the future.

The dishes had been cleared away, and blonde Elizabeth, the little mother of the house, walked quietly around the table sweeping the crumbs from the white damask cloth. The young ones at the lower end of the table chattered about Christmas in low voices, and one of them said with a sigh, "I won't get by on my pocket money, there's no way I'll be able to cope. Oh God, the worries one has at Christmas!"

The old Privy Councillor, the seventy-five-year-old with the thick snow-white shock of hair over the powerful brow and the still young and

¹ 'Christkindl' means both the Baby Jesus and a Christmas gift.

keen eyes, listened with a smile and took up that last heartfelt sigh. “What do you know of cares?” he said in his clear, calm, sonorous voice. “Listen, I’ll tell you about other Christmas cares which go somewhat deeper than your childish concern about pocket-money”.

He leaned comfortably back in his chair, lit himself a cigar, and began: “It was the time when cholera raged in our town. I’d been in practice for several years by then, but it was actually only at that time that I learned the meaning of work and care, and, so to speak, earned my spurs as a doctor. The terrible disease nearly became more than we doctors could cope with, many of us were laid low ourselves, and it was almost superhuman what the rest had to do. Fifty to sixty visits to the sick every day was the norm – and I hadn’t gone to bed in eight or ten days.

“At noon on December 24th I came home, dead tired, hungry as a wolf, for they had fetched me away from the breakfast-table at seven in the morning – and with a heart full of heavy care. I had been in the cholera hospital for hours and had gone through dreadful scenes of misery and despair – and I had just come from a consultation over a patient of many years, the mother of seven children not yet reared – and we had had to give her up. The case was hopeless. At those times, you become so disheartened, so despondent in the feeling of your own incompetence. You carry the sorrow of mankind on your shoulders – and yet you cannot help. And at the same time there’s always the gnawing, secret fear: When will it come to you, to yours? Will you yourself not perhaps drag the terrible epidemic into the house to them?

“On the steps, my Polish cook came towards me, waved the beer-

jug in her hand and cried to me as she ran past, 'The little girl's there, Panie² Doctor, and food is ready, right back, right back!' And she trotted on.

"Barely heeding her words, I closed the entrance-door, took off my hat and fur-coat, washed myself in my room and went into the dining-room. Nobody there. I went through all the rooms, looking for my wife, the children – not a sound anywhere. I started to get a very strange feeling. I went through the kitchen, the soup was bubbling on the stove, but there was no-one to be seen. The whole house was deserted. With a vague sensation of fear I opened the bedroom door – and I felt as though my heart was going to stop: there lay my wife in bed, white as snow to the lips, with unnaturally dilated pupils like one who has death already in their heart – and she looked at me. Never in all my life shall I forget that look!

"I was beside her in a flash. Then she held out her hand to me, quite weak and cold and without a pulse, and said softly, 'Look, Henry, the baby!' A wave of horror swept through my soul – was she raving? But she had sat with me at the breakfast table that morning, cheerful and in good spirits – and the event was expected in four weeks at the earliest. But God in Heaven! There lay the little mite beside her, and when I stroked its head half unthinkingly, it started to bawl. 'A nice Christmas gift!' I thought in the initial shock, and I did not look upon it, God knows, with friendly eyes.

"The hunger and dead-tiredness, which had fallen upon me like wolves on the way home, were forgotten now. I laid the whimpering creature aside and devoted myself to the mother. It really was high time

² Polish for "Mister," "Sir."

that she received help! – and she became ever weaker. ‘Holy God, she’ll die under my care!’ I thought. And no living soul at hand who could assist me! Later, I heard: Mother-in-law had been there for some hours, but had had to go home at midday for her husband to have his food on time when he came back, exhausted, from his practise. She had sensibly taken our three children with her and the parlour-maid as well, who had to carry the youngest on her arms. And straight after that they had called the wise woman, before she had finished her work, to the sick-bed of her son, whom the cholera had gripped – and so she went away, hell for leather – and my poor wife lay utterly alone and more deserted than the poorest beggarwoman.

“If I’d only had a drop of wine there to strengthen her, to revive her! I ran through every room, looked in all the cupboards – no wine-bottle to be found anywhere. And the cook was still not back – deuce knew where the woman had got to and where she had put the key to the cellar!

“Then someone started ringing a storm on the doorbell. Nobody else being there, I naturally had to open myself. In the porch there stood a country-coachman, who pulled the fur-cap from his skull.

“‘Doctor, you should come out to Gräbsdorf soon, the Mayor’s children are abed with scarlet fever and his wife...’ He ran his finger through his hair, raised his eyebrows and said in a whisper, ‘The wife might have the Great Sickness.’

“‘The Great Sickness’ – that is what the people called cholera, because they were afraid to give the dreadful epidemic its proper name.

“I groaned – I was within a whisker of cursing. ‘I cannot come now,

man, now is impossible. My wife is lying at death's door herself. Go to my father-in-law, he might be able to get away.'

"Doctor, I beg you for Heaven's sake! The woman absolutely won't have any other doctor but you and she's moaning so terribly.'

"Are you here with the coach?'

"Yes I am, Doctor.'

"Then wait – and come back in an hour,' I said, my watch in my hand. Only when the man had gone did I think, why didn't I send him to the nearest shop for wine? I called after him, but it was too late. And I could not leave now – my wife was already lying unconscious. She was barely breathing; the sweat of death flowed out of every pore. I rubbed her temples, her pulse, with eau de cologne, with vinegar, with whatever fell into my hands. I called her by name – she heard no more. And at the foot of the bed lay the small, abandoned mite, whimpering helplessly – already quite blue in the face.

"And again the doorbell rang like crazy, six, eight times in succession. Out I went in a real rage of despair. Before the door, a man with a large basket was grinning all over his face. The first happy face I have got to see this day. And yet it was Christmas Eve – but who was thinking about *that!*

"How dare you, and what do you want anyway?' I yelled at the poor fellow. He, very meekly: "Wine-dealer Dittrich sends his regards, and he takes the liberty of sending the Doctor a small Christmas present..." And out from the basket peeped the silver necks of half-a-dozen bottles of champagne. I'm sure the man must have taken me to be insane, the way I

tore the basket with the bottles from his hand – he got his explanation and his tip later – at that moment I thought only of my dying wife, and in all my mortal fear the thought flashed through my soul like lightning: The Lord up there has sent this to you! I ran back into the room, knocked the neck of one of the champagne bottles on the edge of the table – how could I have had time to look for the corkscrew! – poured the bubbling, sparkling wine into a glass and held it to my wife’s lips. At first she couldn’t even swallow – but once she had the first drops down, it became much easier – and she gradually drank the whole glass, and I gave her a second one after that. Thanks to our Lord and good Dittrich – he was no adulterator! – his wine was good – she came round, colour came into her lips and cheeks, she opened her eyes and looked at me with full and clear consciousness. ‘Am I going to die, Henry?’ she whispered weakly and in confusion.

“God willing, no, my good wife! You shall live for many more years – as shall our little, unexpected Christmas present!’, I said. My eyes had become moist, and half dead from exhaustion, I sank into the chair beside her bed. And now I poured myself a glass of champagne too – I felt that without it, I’d have fallen to the floor.

“Well, my wife recovered and at last Suska came back to the house – how one can be mistaken about time, the whole eternity of the despair and mortal fear I had gone through had lasted barely half an hour!

“I was given a plate of soup and my wife also ate a few spoonfuls, and during this time Suska told me everything that had happened. That the mistress herself had sent her to the brewery for beer so I would want for nothing at lunch-time. And she had thought the mistress was asleep and

everything was hunky-dory – and so she had just gone.

“And while we were still eating, the doorbell rang again. A messenger from the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy, where I was the house-doctor. I should come at once, a man had been brought from Ohlau, both of whose legs had been run over and had to be amputated. And then Suska came: ‘Panie Doctor, is coachman from Gräbsdorf there and says he was told to come at two’.

“I ran my hand through my hair. ‘Good God, I’m only a man! And I can’t go now!’

“Then someone tugged at my sleeve. I turned around. My wife was lying in bed, her Christmas gift in her arms, and smiling at me like a saint with her dear, pale little face, the champagne roses blooming very tenderly and delicately on her cheeks. ‘I am much better now, Henry, much better. You can go. Go now, dear husband, and come back in good time so you can give the children their presents. They have been counting the days down and can hardly wait now. And then you can finally have some rest, you poor thing!’

“That’s the angel she was – she never thought of herself, always only of me and the children.

“I kissed her brow and impressed upon Suska the need to stay with the mistress, not to leave her alone under any circumstances, and if she were to grow weak again, to send for my father-in-law at once. And then I put on my fur-coat, took my seat in the covered cart, and drove off in God’s name into the piercing east wind. At the convent I took both the poor fellow’s legs off – and then on to Gräbsdorf. I bathed the mayor’s seriously-

ill children with my own hands, because nobody else wanted anything to do with this, and bundled them up again – at that time, water-cures were still decried as the devil’s handiwork, particularly among the peasants. I ascertained that the mayor’s wife fortunately did not have ‘the Great Sickness’ but had merely over-exerted herself when slaughtering the pig and – without offence be it said – had overeaten – and I drove back to the town after nightfall.

“It was snowing heavily and the glimmering oil-lanterns fought a laborious battle with the wind and the dark. On this holy evening it could really be seen how terribly the epidemic had raged in our town. In most of the houses all was dark, only very occasionally could a Christmas tree with burning candles be seen here and there. And as I drove through the quiet, dark little streets, flung this way and that in my springless covered cart on the bad, bumpy paving, overwhelmed by stupendously extreme fatigue, which settled on my eyelids like lead, and exhausted by the nervous excitements of the day, a deep, perfect contentment welled up in my soul like a softly glowing candle – an inexpressible gratitude to God, who had preserved my dearest and graciously saved my life from the hardest of all blows. And then I fell asleep – until the cart stopped with a shuddering jolt.

“I had not had myself driven directly home but had wished to take another look at my critically-ill patient on the way.

“Sadly, our diagnosis had been correct – her suffering was over, I came just in time to close the dead woman’s eyes and to comfort the despairing husband. For almost an hour I stayed there, and only when he had become a little calmer did I go – with a heavy heart.

“Eleven years had I stood by the couple’s side in joy and sorrow, and struggled through many a critical, care-racked hour with them – now the faithful mother’s eyes had closed for ever. I can still see the husband sitting at the table like a broken man – his smallest child on his arm – the other six motherless children all crowded around him, eyes red from weeping, frightened like chicks the hawk has startled. It was heart-rending. – *That* could have happened to me also today – this evening I too could have been sitting like *that* – with my newly motherless children!

“And once again fear gripped me and fell upon me like a beast of prey. Did I really know how things were at my home? What could not all have happened in five hours? If the fit had recurred – and no doctor could be reached for help? God knows where they were to seek my father-in-law in these troubled times, when in every house the sick were crying for the doctor.

“I arrived home and went up the stairs. The children were screaming at me in impatience. I threw off my fur-coat and quietly opened the bedroom door. Praise the Lord – my wife was sleeping soundly and peacefully – the smallest one, bedded down in the cradle, beside her.

“In the front room, the Christmas tree was there ready with all the presents for the children lovingly laid out. That had been my wife’s last work – while putting on the candles, the fit suddenly came over her, Suska related. And I felt no shame before the girl for the tears which poured hotly down my face when I found on my seat the silken green wallet my wife had made for me, with what she had saved from the household money inside it in shining silver coins. Yes, such a wife...”

The old Privy Councillor's cigar had gone out long before – he passed his hand over his eyes. There was a deep silence in the room, the children and grandchildren listened breathlessly; outside, the leafless branches knocked against the window-panes, and the December wind swept howling around the corner of the house.

The old gentleman sat up straight. His youngest daughter Elizabeth, the sunshine of his old age, the mother of his house, was standing behind him and had laid her hand on his shoulder.

And the father reached for this slim, soft hand and held it tight and stroked it with gentle fingers – as he had once held tight and stroked another, workworn, dear hand.

“And next – what was next?” begged the children's eyes and the lips of the young ones.

“Next? – Well, I lit the Christmas tree and gave the little ones the presents that motherly love had laid out for them – and while they sang and danced around the tree, I sat in the corner of the sofa and looked at them as in a dream – and before I could say Jack Robinson, my eyelids fell shut, and by God it was no wonder. And I slept in my corner of the sofa as deeply and soundly as a dormouse which has been eagerly waiting for its winter sleep throughout the livelong summer. The children ran out and were put to bed by our understanding Siska, the tree candles burned down – I slept and slept like a dead man.

“The mistress said, ‘Don't disturb him, let hm sleep, he has truly earned it’, and sent the girl to bed. And miraculously, the night stayed peaceful, no hand tugged at the doorbell – my first undisturbed night in

weeks.

“The next morning, when the Christmas sun was already shining brightly through the window, I woke up. My limbs felt all knocked up – but I had rested well, and stretching and straightening myself, I went into the bedroom, still as stiff as a poker, to now actually have a proper look at my living Christmas gift for the first time.

“It looked like all newborn babies and had its mother’s blue eyes and, already, real, blonde little hairs – but it seemed to me that this was truly no ordinary child, an uninvited little guest least of all – but a real, darling Christ Child, that the dear Lord had given me especially on Christmas Eve, for comfort in this hard, care-racked time.

“And she has remained such a gift from God for me – my dear Elizabeth – and I really couldn’t manage anymore without my blonde Christ Child from the Time of Cholera, particularly since her good mother closed her eyes.

“Well – and now be merry, children, and don’t let small Christmas cares press down on your young hearts. Life can be different from what we expect – and we still work our way through! And you, Lizzie, sing us a song to bring our thoughts to other things!”

And the soft, alto voice sounded out into the dark December night, and bright and cheerful children’s lips joined in for the old and jubilant melody:

“Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how blissfully,
Christmas comes with its grace divine!”³

³ Johannes David Falk (1768-1826), ‘O du fröhliche, O du selige’.

The Plaster-of-Paris Cat

(Die Gipskatze: from Die Gipskatze, und andere lustige Geschichten.

Reclam: Leipzig, [1909])

My good husband has always maintained that I have somewhat too much of a bent for show, and his Aunt Rosalie was wont – this presumably being the right of all rich old inheritance aunts, especially those related to one by marriage – to make the occasional barbed remark about extravagant housewives and the holy virtue of economising. But, good Heavens, with all the will in the world, I didn't know how or where to go about economising as long as the children were still small and had to have oodles of the most expensive milk every day. And then, when they grew bigger, and their clothes, trousers and demands grew all the more, I gave up every attempt of that kind as hopeless and comforted myself with the conviction: what Aunt Rosalie called extravagance was just a sign of the times and it was utterly pointless to set oneself against it. Only much later did a salutary experience teach me that Aunt had been right after all – and it happened thus:

Through all the years, we had modestly and happily celebrated the birthdays of our children as it had been the fashion in my own youth, in a small circle with chocolate and home-baked cakes – but one fine day, it absolutely had to be a party in the grand style, after the model of twenty-seven others which our Hilde had been to in the course of the year.

And I must say that I dreaded it. Merely the preliminary discussions and subtle shifts until I could bring my husband round; he, like most

husbands, is a vehement opponent of large-scale festive events which cost a lot of money and turn the whole house on its head. As am I, actually – but Frailty, thy name is Mother – and what can we do when our growing children come at us armed with their hundred and one convincing reasons?

I made use of the favourable atmosphere after my lord and master had successfully pulled a “serious case” through, and after table I conveyed to him, with the eloquence of Demosthenes, the wishes of our daughter – who, mind you, was always regarded as my private property in critical cases. It goes without saying that the tomato soup had the most exquisite flavour, the meat was tender and juicy, the dessert pears, which I had fetched from market myself, had been above all praise – one must know the point where men are mortal. “Well – how much do you need?” my other half graciously asked, and taking out his wallet, he cast languishing looks upon a twenty-mark piece. “Actually, I had intended to add something to my bookcase – but well, my girl shall have a good time.”

“I hope to manage with forty to fifty pounds,” I said as nonchalantly as possible.

My husband jumped up from his comfortable seat in the corner of the sofa.

“For Heaven’s sake, wife! Fifty pounds for a children’s party? But that is way beyond our means! Just think of all the things we could buy with that! How many Sunday excursions with the children, which would be a hundred times more necessary and healthier for them!”

At this point, our Hilde, who had crept in unnoticed, began to sob

pitiably: “But all the girls in my class...”

“Go away and do your homework!” the irritated father snapped at his favourite daughter in an unusually severe tone. And while the sound of bitter weeping came over to us from the children’s room, I tactfully ignored a remark about “my” Princess-daughter and resorted to cautious parleying – indeed, I even renounced a new autumn jacket, which I actually needed urgently. It is said of modern mothers that they no longer have a spirit of sacrifice. Oh, we have it – as much as the mother of the Gracchi and the most austere Spartan wives. Especially when our children cry – and next door, our Hilde was giving out bawls that would have softened a heart of stone, pulling out all the stops of her childish misery; this led our old house-dog to join in from sheer sympathy, and Hans, our eldest, asked with the well-known brotherly hard-heartedness: “Why’re you howling like a drunken dervish? Have you written a bad test? Or is it a stomachache? Come out right now and have a chamomile tea made for you, understand?” Whereupon the sobbing became so heartbreaking that the father could not listen to it any longer and resignedly added a second gold piece to the first.

I would have preferred to return both of them, so moved was I at that moment, for I know how it delights his soul to spend a few pounds now and then on his personal hobby-horse, the bookcase, he who is so thrifty and humble where his person is concerned. But I wisely recited, internally, my longstanding maxim: Landgrave, harden up!,⁴ quickly slipped the two

⁴ The advice given by the Blacksmith of Ruhla to Ludwig II “The Iron” (1128-1172), Landgrave of Thuringia. No. 452 of Ludwig Bechstein’s Legends, translated on this site.

double-crowns into my pocket, and called to Hilde that she should come and thank her father.

The child's jubilation and rapture knew no bounds, my husband really had to defend himself, or she would have hugged and kissed him half to death. He took the big girl on his lap, stroked her soft, light-blonde hair, which she has from him, and set only one condition: "But kindly wait with your shindig until I go to the Doctors' Convention at the beginning of September. I wish to be out of the range of fire – so many pretty young girls assembled together, that could be dangerous," he joked and stood up, for our Minna had just announced: "Already three bods in the waiting-room, Doctor." At the door, he turned round again. "I just hope that Aunt Rosalie won't burst in on the hullabaloo when she returns from Karlsbad. You'd have a hard time of it then."

"No fear," I said, happy that the matter had gone off so well, "she never returns until after the fifteenth and announces her arrival beforehand." Inwardly, however, I was not so entirely calm, for apart from her, ridiculously antiquated views about the duty of economising and bringing up children in a puritanically simple way, this much-courted, much-feared inheritance aunt had the unfortunate habit of always turning up at our front door at an inopportune time – and, without fail, just at a time when she could catch me in some innocent little extravagance.

In the meantime, we had ample time to make the preparations for our celebration, and this was almost the worst thing of all, for Hilde, in whose little head the forthcoming party swelled avalanche-like into the most important event of her life, did not give me a minute's peace. The

names and number of those to be invited were discussed and revised a hundred times, until at last the result was settled: the entire Third Class, of course, and added to this a few little ones from the Fifth, so our Evi would not miss out. Thirty-one children all in all, not counting our own three. Hilde demanded printed cards, the others had had some, and it would be terrible if she were the only one who didn't. But I flatly refused her this and sacrificed half a night, writing the thirty-one invitations, together with the addresses in my finest calligraphy, for our Minna to deliver. Less ceremony was taken with the replies. Most of them informed Hilde during first lesson the next morning that they would very much like to come, which unquestionably helped to make the boring German grammar lesson somewhat livelier. Only one of the young ladies, who is wont to call herself a full-blooded aristocrat with a perfect pedigree – (by the by, at that time, our daughter tormented the soul out of my body with her questions about our pedigree and the paternal and maternal forebears of the Kleinerts and the Schulzes) – uttered with reserve: she was allowed only to visit such children whose parents associated with her parents – for which she was pronounced by the democratically-minded in the Third Class to be an "affected little goose." Our Hilde took the blow quite composedly, all the more so as she was consoled by the prospect of a small Baroness von Elten in Evi's class – who was "much more noble," and about whom the dark rumour ran that she had been betrothed to a cousin from birth and she wore a real, genuine engagement ring on a little gold chain around her neck – having definitely promised she would come.

I could not refrain from telling my husband about the "affecting little

bride.” He was struggling with his collar stud just then – as everyone knows, always a critical moment in a man’s life – and I accordingly received only a contemptuous “Rubbish!” for reply. This brutal lack of understanding naturally had not the slightest influence on my interest in little Elten, but it did lower the parting-pain of the approaching separation by a notch or two.

Here I must, however, recall, another important event which temporarily pushed the coffee-party into the background even in Hilde’s little head. Having come back from a shopping trip in town, I was barely at the garden-gate when our three ran towards me with rare unanimity, and showing that facial expression which lies halfway in between a bad conscience and secret jubilation.

“Mama, just think, we’ve received a true gift from God!” my eldest began in a solemn voice.

A pause – I shook all over with the shock. The thought: Surely they will not have picked up a foundling before our front door? flashed through my mind.

“Just at the time when Papa’s going away and we’re always so awfully afraid,” said Hilde, and little Evi hopped and fidgeted from one leg to the other. “Can’t you guess what it is, Mama?”

“It’s a *dog!*” all three of them then burst out at once. “He ran to us, quite of his own accord, and he is so terribly cute, Mama! Oh, do let us keep him, sweet Mummy! We’ve christened him, ‘Theodore.’” They dragged the “gift from God” over in triumph: a young black-and-white spotted mutt of indeterminate breed.

“But children, we have our Flick!”

“Flick is really too old now, Mummy, he cannot defend us anymore if thieves and burglars come. But just look at what strong and splendid teeth Theodore has!”

Their trust in this young cur’s defensive powers was unshakeable, and they gave me no peace with their begging and beseeching until I allowed the “gift from God” to stay with us up to the time that its rightful master presented himself – but unfortunately, an announcement in the gazette remained as unsuccessful as the report made at the police station, and in the meantime, “Theodore” made himself at home in our house. He chose our best drawing-room carpet for his bad doggy habits, carried off my husband’s slippers, gnawed at the children’s boots and schoolbags, and inflicted such abominable devastation on his play-corner that our Minna threatened to hand in her notice. To make up for this, the “vigilant beast” lolloped around in the corridor all through the night as though possessed by an evil spirit, scratched and snuffled at every door, and every now and then gave out a pitiful whining which made us start up from deep sleep in terror. However, none of this occasioned our three the slightest concern; the milkman had assured them that he was a genuine Dalmatian and already worth his sixty pounds between friends. For a full-grown and well-groomed animal, three times that amount was often paid. And the milkman counted as an authority: his “Castro” – Hans had given him a half-hour lecture on the classical pair of friends in Antiquity,⁵ but the milkman shook his head and insisted on “Castro,” who had already won

⁵ Castor and Pollux.

awards at two dog exhibitions – consequently, the milkman’s authority in canine matters lay beyond all doubt. “Theodore” accordingly had the best titbits, which the children stinted themselves of, slipped to him, and every day our troika trotted around the small lawn in touching harmony for two full hours, “Theodore” on the leash in among them – so that the agreeable moment of the price-trebling would be reached as soon as possible.

On a fine September morning, my husband travelled to the Doctor’s Convention, we remained behind under Theodore’s protection – Flick no longer counted – and on the very next day, the longed-for and much-feared coffee-battle was to take place.

In the past, I had made a large, pleasant pot of chocolate for the public good, but this time, Hilde had most superfluously inquired what each individual would like, and so the matter became more complicated. There was tea, chocolate, coffee and milk for the girls to choose as they pleased, just like in a Swiss hotel, and I awaited our young guests behind a regiment of pots and jugs, surrounded by mountains of cakes.

And they came. Prudently, I had sent Hans for a walk with his gift from the gods, convinced that they were both best off out of the range of fire. No unmannerly behaviour towards the young ladies was to be expected from our good old Flick. At half past four the battle was fully underway, everyone was given what they most liked to eat and drink, and the chattering, laughing, slurping girls did not keep still for a moment. Now that the generality had been provided for, I could take a somewhat closer look at the individual girls. The bigger ones from Hilde’s class were already complete ladies, and they spoke in whispers and with giggles about

dancing-class and their admirers in the Third Class and the Lower Second; hearing their talk, our innocent Hilde gaped in astonished admiration. The secret little bride, on the other hand, appeared in a simple white washable dress as a genuine delightful child of nature. Even while taking off her coat in the children's room, she had seized hold of a rosy flannel piggy which she did not willingly let out of her arms. As if there had never been a more magnificent toy than this plump little monster which I had made with my own hands with the help of wire and cotton wool and a pair of my lord and master's discarded inexpressibles, and provided with black shoe-button eyes and a curly little tail – for our children, a point of view they had long outgrown. Through Lucie Elten's affection, it rose in the general esteem again and wandered from one arm to the other among the little ones, always imperiously demanded back by Lucie, and was maltreated, in the transport of tender delight and in later more elemental events, to such an extent that on the evening of this memorable day three legs, together with both ears and the curly little tail, were torn off.

While I was arranging a game of forfeits for the bigger girls after the coffee, a dispatch was delivered to me. "Two hours I've been running around with this," the postman said peevishly, "it had the wrong address." Pacifying him with a tip, I tore open the sheet. As a doctor's wife, one has ample opportunity to disaccustom oneself from over-anxiety, but I'd like to see the woman whose heart does not thump when she is holding an ominous little form unopened in her hands. My husband? was my first thought. But God be thanked, no – the dispatch came from Aunt Rosalie. – Aunt Rosalie! Had my husband not prophesied it? – All went black before

my eyes, and it was a long time before I comprehended that she was not announcing a visit this time but was only passing through our town on her journey, and she wished to see me and the children at the train station. No disaster in itself, and certainly no unreasonable demand on the part of a loaded old inheritance aunt – but just consider: here I was with thirty-one guest children, nailed fast, like Prometheus, by my housewife’s duties – and not even with my boy at hand, whom I could have sent to the train station in my stead – and imagine my state of mind accordingly!

In the dining-room, laughter and merriment had in the meantime swollen to a roaring lake – thank heavens, the big girls at least were taken care of for the moment. The young girls had withdrawn to the back room; happy squeals and exultant yells informed me that the little ones were also having a good time and my Evi was, at any rate, playing the amiable hostess – a talent which she has certainly not inherited from her father. I walked in, full of maternal pride – the children’s room was empty, but in the bedrooms situated behind it, a sight presented itself to my eyes with which a removal day paled in comparison. Lützow’s wild, daredevil hunt⁶ must have raced as erewhile over the table and beds, the cupboards and drawers stood open, clothes had been pulled out, pillows lay scattered around on the ground without rhyme or reason; in front of the mirror, a little miss was parading in my most expensive silk blouse and my carefully conserved Sunday-hat, which was tilted at a jaunty angle on the little blonde head; a second had dressed as up ‘Doctor’ with top-hat, jacket, and walking-stick – but at the centre of the interest and the merriment there

⁶ “Lützow’s wilde Jagd,” a patriotic poem of 1813 by Theodor Körner (1791-1813).

stood the secret little betrothed, who, with astonishing virtuosity, her rosy little piggy under her arm, was turning extremely plebeian somersaults on my husband's bed. Evi, highly exhilarated, rushed towards me: "Don't be angry, Mummy, she can turn such lovely somersaults, and where could she do it without hurting herself? At her home, she always does it on the divan in the children's room, but we don't have one."

In view of this unforgivable deficit, it seemed to be an entirely justified quirk of the little aristocrat to do her healthy gymnastic exercises on our big bed and the three children's beds in turn – and I do not actually understand why I stood transfixed, like Lot's wife, at the door.

Then the little sinner came running up to me, bright red, her tousled curls waving around.

"We'll tidy everything up, Mrs. Doctor," she said, quite out of breath, and she looked so sweet and mischievous and, at the same time, so touchingly innocent that I could not possibly scold her.

"You should not get yourselves so excited, children! Play with the dolls instead, or play School," I suggested.

"Oh yes, School!" What they hated and feared was made to serve as a delightful amusement once again, and seven pairs of eager little hands honourably strove to put the devastated beds in order, to clear the clothes away, and to place the host of dolls on chairs in rank and file. And a more peaceful game began.

My mind at rest, I went to the front room. Here also, everything was in full swing. – Only, Aunt Rosalie lay like a mountainous load on my soul. If Hans were at home at least, or his father! But it is an age-old fact that

men are never around when you most need them! I looked at my watch: half-past five. And at ten minutes past six, the inheritance-aunt's train would come. She would never forgive me if I did not go to the train station, and I knew what was at stake: It was a matter of my children's future! The courage of a lion-mother came over me. Could it not be possible for an hour...? If I treated myself to a droshky? *Where is a will, there's a way,*⁷ I told myself, and I held a council of war with Minna and our old sewing woman, who were washing cups in the kitchen. The ice-cream was ready to be served now, and in the pause between ice-cream and supper I drove to the station. It simply *had* to be! The two faithful, battle-trying souls would surely be able to keep the boisterous little horde in check for an hour?

While we filled the bowl of children's punch, I thought about what I should say to our inheritance-aunt. I did not want to lie that my merry troika were sick, but she must of course not learn the truth either. This old woman, brought up according to the very strictest principles of a puritanically simple age, who severely condemned every kind of demand and overindulgence – and a children's party in the modern style! Coffee, tea, chocolate with whipped cream, and seven kinds of cake, ice-cream with punch, open sandwiches and Italian salad – good God, if she had any inkling of that! It was a dead cert that she would disinherit us and this unfortunate party might cost my poor children thousands!

I resolved to keep my lips as tight as my husband's large wellington boots for his rounds in the country and the suburbs, and set out with a heavy heart. The train arrived – half a minute later I caught sight of the

⁷ This appears in English in the original tale.

refined, strict old face under snow-white locks. With unusual warm-heartedness, the old lady clasped me in an embrace.

“It will probably be the last time, dear child, I’m going downhill. Otherwise I would certainly not have let myself be deprived of the joy of spending a few days in your cosy home...”

“Cosy home!” – I saw the beds pulled out, the little bride turning somersaults, thirty-one kids all swarming, laughing, making a racket at once – and shuddered.

In the ladies’ lounge we found a tolerably quiet corner, and I ordered tea and bread-and-butter. Then came the long-feared question: “Well – and the children?”

I murmured something about the older ones having pressing homework and Evi having received an invitation and already gone out when the delayed dispatch arrived – and the lie was as gall on my tongue – but what does one not do for the sake of one’s children? The old lady’s disappointment was great; I would never have thought that children, and our wild kiddywinks in particular, mattered so much to her. She pressed her lips together and nodded mournfully to herself. “I would so dearly have liked to see them one more time; I fear that this is my final journey, Karlsbad did not do me the least bit of good, I had to stop the treatment early.”

I tried to talk her out of her gloomy thoughts. In the meantime, she asked after everyone with more interest, and more cordiality, than usual.

“So your dear husband has gone on a trip? It’s a miracle that he does something for himself even once. He is a good man, a thrifty, careful

father of a family.”

These words of praise – without any malicious little side-swipe this time – cut me to the quick. I thought of the forty pounds which I had taken out of the good man’s pocket like a footpad, and kept silent, ashamed and embarrassed.

“You have not gone on a summer trip, I suppose?”

“No, Auntie, we still haven’t enough for that ... although the children could really do with it,” I rashly added.

“I can well believe that, the poor things, so overburdened with homework that they don’t have even half an hour to spare for their old great-aunt! And all that learning will make them nervous and anaemic, as is the fashion nowadays. In my day, we knew nothing of that. By the way, you do not look well yourself, dear niece. Really worn-out!”

No wonder, I thought, and I felt myself going red – when, fortunately, tea and sandwiches appeared. After a while, Aunt began to rummage about in her handbag.

“It is too great a pity that the children are not here,” she repeated. “I’ve brought them something which they would certainly be pleased with.”

I knew the “brought” something of this loaded old woman from many years of experience, worthless junk from the 50-penny bazaar, and my gaze fixed itself, with no excess of enthusiasm, on the sizeable packet from which she peeled countless paper wrappings as if it were a treasure. And indeed: this time, she had actually surpassed herself: a Plaster-of-Paris cat – one of those little abominations with red eyes and far too long ears, simply impossible to find in Nature, such as you can buy from

itinerant Italians for ten pennies – came to light. My expression probably reflected my disappointment all too clearly – the old lady looked at me and raised her finger meaningfully: “It is a moneybox!”

We already had a nice collection of this kind of useful object in the form of owls, sentry-boxes, and lucky piggies – presents from Aunt; and after the most strenuous shaking, one copper coin would fall out of each of them.

“Listen! – I’ve wrapped the hatchlings in a little paper and written each child’s name on them as a memento!” Accordingly, shaking it did not sound excessively promising, and estimating three copper coins at most in spite of the ceremonial handing over, I received the precious gift with a forced smile while Aunt continued talking: “I would have liked to really commend the thing to them so they learn to save and, in later days, remember their old great-aunt every now and then. Now you tell them this instead of me, dear niece, and save assiduously – perhaps after a year it will cover the cost of a summer trip!”

The mysterious solemnity of her words only came back to my mind much, much later. At that time, I barely paid attention to it but sat opposite her, like a cat on hot bricks, in thoughts of my thirty-one guest children at home, and I heaved a sigh of relief when the porter finally appeared at the threshold. But what was this? – instead of giving the final call for the train to Neustadt, he raised his bell and announced: “The seven oh five train to Neustadt cannot depart because everything is flooded and the embankment is broken.”

The train to Neustadt? I shot up, and may well have gone white as

chalk with the first, thought-paralysing shock. Good God – what now?

Aunt Rosalie was the first to regain her composure – and in all the tumult, with everyone shouting out all at once around us, she reached for my hand and said, almost happily: “You see – I shall get to see the children after all – for now you must take me in tonight, willy-nilly, dear niece.”

She was right – what choice was left to me but to take in and accommodate the “dear, highly esteemed guest” in our house – in our “peaceful home” which had been completely turned on its head by a raging horde of boisterous kids?

In a dazzling flash, as if conjured up, the situation appeared before my eyes: the children’s party I had kept a secret and, in the midst of it, my own three “overburdened with homework” children. Poor children! – The stern old lady would never forgive me or them for the cowardly white lie!

Should I now do a moral genuflection, confess everything to her?

Instead of that, fervent motherly love hounded me deeper into the hole.

“Certainly – of course – with pleasure, dear Aunt – it is simply that, unfortunately, we have painters and decorators in the house just now.” In actual fact, my husband’s room was to be repapered in his absence, but the workmen had said they would not come until the day after next.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter, the smell of paint is not unpleasant to me in the slightest.”

“But we are rather cramped, dear Aunt – perhaps I should take you to a hotel...?” I stuttered, hardly knowing what I was saying.

She shook her head energetically. “On no account! I don’t trust your

big-city hotels, one is never alone there in one's bed and the doors don't close properly. I am such a scrawny little person, you know, you could put me up in the cot if the worst comes to the worst."

No way out. My fear became boundless. –Dear Lord in Heaven, never again will I lie, never again be so sinfully extravagant that I have to be afraid of my own house. Help me just this one, sole time!– I inwardly implored.

"Come, dear child – there is no point in waiting. Let us rather see to it that we get my case back, which is registered to Neustadt. I have all kinds of valuable things inside and would not like to leave it here in the station in all this confusion."

The weakly little old woman was, all of a sudden, more energetic and more judicious than me, the healthy one, and drew me along with her to the cloak-room. My legs felt paralysed; step by step, impending doom moved nearer. We were torn from each other by the agitated crowd which pressed towards the platform, I lost sight of the old lady in the crush, and it was long before I could find her again. – In the meantime, I had made my decision. I *could* perhaps have taken her, under some pretext, to a pension I knew, and spent the night with her if necessary – but I did not want to. Though she might disinherit my children – I could not and would not lie anymore. I would confess everything to her on the way in the cab – whatever the cost.

After endless jostling and being shoved around, we finally succeeded in getting hold of a porter. When we explained our desire with the help of a generous tip, he grinned from ear to ear: "Why such a fuss,

madam? There's no need at all for it now, because a special train is dispatched and will stop at Schmellwitz. You have a connection there. Well, well," he added, amused at our uncomprehending faces, "people wouldn't give the stationmaster any peace, you see, they almost pestered him to death. The luggage for Neustadt is already loaded."

"My case ...?" Aunt cried out.

"Already gone, Madame – transferred at once."

I could have flung my arms around the worthy man's neck.

"My case..." The little lady folded up completely, she was close to tears. "Well, dear niece, then it can't be helped, then I too must... who knows where they'll end up carrying it off to otherwise."

At the last moment, when she was sitting in the coupé along with her countless bags, boxes, and tartan travel rugs, she remembered the Plaster-of-Paris cat, which I had unthinkingly been holding in my arm up to that time. "Now do not lose it, dear child, and mark this well: it doesn't give anything out of its own free will! But I ask you, do not smash it before the right time. Save assiduously and next year, when the holidays begin, strike it dead. – Who knows where I'll be then," she added in a melancholy voice. Her small, thin face had an unaccustomedly gentle expression.

"But Auntie, you've always been so sprightly..."

The train whistled. A minute later, I was sitting in the tram which would take me to my part of town, and my thoughts were in a motley muddle. God be praised, that was over with – I would remember that half-hour, that would be my last white lie and my last children's party! Then I became calmer. I had at least seen the old lady one more time, even if it

should turn out to be the last time. As far as I was concerned, the poor rich woman, whom I felt sorry for at heart, might live for many more years and give my children worthless junk, if it gave her pleasure. The children – good God, what might they not have got up to at home in the meantime!

Now I had been prepared for all kinds of things – but well, I really had not imagined *this*...

Something like the milieu which an artist would use to paint the Jewish Riot in Chişinău,⁸ or the siege of Port Arthur, or the end of the world. At the time, it seemed to me rather to be the last of these. Even on the steps I could hear a rumpus and yells from countless children's throats, interspersed with furious barking – Heavens, wasn't that Theodore? Then a horrified shriek from Minna's lips and, at the same time, a tinkling of glass and shards which set my nerves on edge.

With faltering feet, I ran up the steps – the dog tore past me, howling loudly, with a bloody muzzle, and my heart stopped. Had the animal gone mad? – The children were after him with a rollicking cheer – my anxious mother's eyes could barely find my own children from among the others – and now they all yelled at me at once, so I could not understand a word at first: "We only wanted to tease him a little so we held the piggy out to him... And then he went for it and gripped it... and Lucie wouldn't let him have it and took Papa's stick and inadvertently hit the hall window... And it broke... But my Mama will definitely pay for it..." That was Lucie Elten – and at the sight of her half-mangled flannel piggy, I was able to join the dots. With trouble and toil, I pushed all of the excited, laughing

⁸ The Pogrom which occurred in April, 1903.

and howling little group back into the hall, and then, first confirming that none of them had been bitten or injured by splinters of glass – I looked around. The large polished pane was irremediably smashed, at least ten pounds' worth of damage – for my middle-class pride ensured that I would not accept a gift of these from the Baroness.

And in our peaceful abode, there was a mess which simply begs description. These well-bred young ladies had behaved like vandals in my cosy rooms, Minna and the old sewing-lady were no longer able to control them, and when, last but not least, Hans appeared on the scene with his “Gift from the gods” and “livened things up” with a vengeance – their authority broke down completely. Not to mention all the things they got up to with the poor cur – theatre, cabaret and circus in mad succession – until this came to a terrifying end with a death-defying leap by tormented Theodore through the shattered hall-pane. In the drawing-room, one of the valuable Japanese mirror-vases, a wedding-present from a friend overseas, lay in pieces. The large, heavy, wrought-iron standard lamp had “fallen over” – presumably as the result of a natural phenomenon, for nobody had touched it, and I had to thank God that it had not caught fire and so perhaps brought about the most dreadful disaster. I shall say nothing about three or four broken chairs, a knocked-over palm-stand, and the usual dozen smashed plates and glasses – they put the blame for everything on Theodore, who had fled howling and bleeding from the house where he had been subjected to such unaccustomedly disgraceful treatment. My boy chased after him in search, and my Evi, whose good little soul is passionately attached to all creatures, cried her heart out over

him.

Gradually everyone calmed down and it was in rather low spirits that the dear young ones tucked into supper. I thought of Great-Aunt and of her seeing this – I believe she would have had a stroke! Then I forcibly pulled myself together: this proud day in Hildegarde's life, her first and only children's party, must not end on a discordant note! I bravely mastered my just housewifely wrath, deferred all worry and scolding to later and sat down at the piano. There was dancing for an hour – I thumped out the necessary polkas and waltzes in silent fury. In the meantime, the bell rang outside, one kitchen-fairy after the other, turning up to fetch their young ladies, volubly made known to our Minna their disapproving astonishment at our smashed hallway-pane. I could not do anything about that, but dismissed the Thirty-one in God's name, who curtseyed very politely and expressed their thanks for the "lovely afternoon" – and then it was the turn of my own ones to be "thanked." During this time, Hans had returned home from his unsuccessful chase, without Theodore – and we faced the prospect of spending a night with a paneless entrance door just when we had the greatest need of our "protector against thieves and burglars!" Other mothers will understand how thoroughly I took my three to task – and when that was done and they had withdrawn, deeply dejected, with streaming tears (which, by the way, were for the maternal wrath only in the slightest degree, and mostly for Theodore, who had disappeared, probably never to be seen again), I held a military review in my devastated rooms like a Commander after a lost battle. In so doing, my gaze fell on Aunt's present, which turned up somewhere in a corner of the hallway, where I

had put it down in my initial shock – and I almost laughed out loud for fury and with gallows humour. All the vexation, the anxiety I had gone through, the agonising half-hour at the station – and now, last of all, the incalculable damage to our home – all this for a Plaster-of-Paris cat! And in my righteous anger I took the wretched thing and threw it into the rubbish bin with the other broken pieces.

What would my good husband say about all of this? With a sigh, I took out my savings book. The hallway-pane and the standard lamp had of course to be replaced before he came home. I could perhaps have the Japan vase stuck together – for I would not be able to find a counterpart to the other one anywhere in the town.

And when my husband returned home, refreshed and rejuvenated from his short holiday trip, I confessed everything to him and began to breathe freely again once I had it off my chest. But instead of scolding, he said in his kindly way: “Don’t be angry, wiffy! Rather draw the moral from this business. Things can’t go on like this, or the children’s wishes and demands will grow beyond all bounds. To their detriment and to ours. So Fall back, fall back, Don Rodrigo!⁹ Our inheritance aunt is thrice right: let us learn to save. Then all this vexation may one day prove to be a blessing.”

He took one of the earlier moneyboxes from its tranquil rest in the ornament cabinet, ceremonially placed it on the mantelpiece, and called the children. “Listen, troika, and mark this: from now on, this is the family

⁹ From Johann Gottfried Herder’s (1744-1803) “Der Cid” (first published 1805), a translation of “El Cantar de mio Cid.”

moneybox. If you are good and you work hard, you will get fifty pennies a week. Nothing will be spent on sweets – what is needed will be bought, and the rest will be saved. In this lucky little pig! You see how it grins? And in future, there will be no more birthday parties or balderdash of that kind. So we shall go to the mountains next summer. A holiday that we have earned ourselves! The one of you who saves the most shall sit beside the engine driver.”

That is what he is like, the good man. Like bees, he can gather honey from poisonous flowers and take the sting out of every misfortune. A real doctor – and the best thing is, he’s mine!

And so we faithfully slipped every saved farthing and penny into the lucky pig for a whole year, until it finally became so heavy and weighty that the children now invariably called it “Lazy Maggie.”¹⁰ And saving was a pleasure and a joy to us, the children voluntarily did without many things which they would have desired in other circumstances, and there was absolutely no mention of costly birthday parties. And when we “cashed up” shortly before the end of the school-year – a ceremonial event, at which we adults sat around the uncovered table in as much happy expectation as the children – a considerable little pile of money lay before us.

The children beamed with pride and blissfully eager expectancy – my husband and I looked at one another and our faces became rather long. 117 pounds, 65 pennies – a fine success – but with all the will in the world, it does not of course suffice for a family holiday!

¹⁰ “Die faule Gret” – a bronze bombard which was cast in 1409 and belonged to the Teutonic Knights.

“I shall make up what is needed and send you alone with the children,” my good husband said later. “We must keep our word, after all.”

We were both very monosyllabic – the thought of the holiday had lost all its charm for me.

Several days later, a letter arrived from our inheritance aunt. Alive in spite of all her ominous presentiments, she complained as always about a thousand kinds of illness and intended to travel to Karlsbad in August. At the conclusion of the letter there was a postscript: “The holidays are just around the corner, have you smashed the Plaster-of-Paris cat – and do you have enough with the help of the three hundred pounds?”

“What three hundred pounds?” my husband asked unsuspectingly. My heart stood still for horror. Had Aunt really...? I recalled her totally unaccustomed tenderness and warm-heartedness – the solemnity with which she had impressed the Plaster-of-Paris cat upon me – had she, beset by melancholic forebodings of death, in a barely believable fit of magnanimity, really and truly entrusted three hundred pounds to the wretched Plaster-of-Paris cat?

And I, hapless woman, had thrown it into the rubbish bin! I, unnatural mother¹¹ that I was, had cheated my husband and children out of their summer trip in blind rage! Three hundred pounds thoughtlessly thrown away!

We were both utterly petrified, my husband and I. So completely that he did not even reproach me – this moved me so much that I burst into tears. Then he consoled me as well as he could.

¹¹ “Rabenmutter,” literally “raven mother.”

“Don’t cry so, my dear! We can make it all up. The main thing is that we have all learned to save, thanks to our smart-aleck Aunt.” It was supposed to sound like a joke, but I could sense the suppressed bitter sigh beneath.

It was all very well for him to talk; I was beside myself, utterly inconsolable, for I alone was to blame for everything.

Then the telephone rang outside, my husband went out, and immediately afterwards Minna came in to clear the coffee-table. I had walked to the window, tears still running down my cheeks.

“There’s nocht wrang happened, is there, Madam?” Minna asked good-naturedly with that all-espying servant’s look.

A vague hope thrilled through me. Perhaps she knew something about this? had saved the Plaster-of-Paris cat from destruction? I gave her the third degree.

In vain – her innocent soul had no inkling of the valuable secret of the Plaster-of-Paris cat. She had not seen one at all.

“But Minna, you must have seen it among the broken pieces when you emptied the bin!” I cried with needless vehemence.

“A cat? Nae – but hang on – a wee white bunny mebbe, wi’ red een?”

“Yes, yes, certainly!” I recollected only too clearly the impossible red eyes and long ears of the small monster, and my hopes clutched at a straw.

“Evi has the wee beastie in her doll-cupboard.”

I rushed into the children’s room, flung open the cupboard,

rummaged with shaking hands among all the reverently preserved toy relics – and did indeed find, in the backmost corner, the rabbit-cat – all covered in dust – it must have stood there forgotten for many a moon.

“Dinnae smash it tae pieces, Madam, or wee Evi will be sad. Let’s rather bore intae it fae the bottom,” Minna suggested.

And that is what we did. And out of the dust and shards of plaster, three small packets wrapped in newspapers appeared. And in each of them there truly was a badly creased hundred-mark note and inside this, as a “hatchling,” a sparkling copper penny.

I laughed and wept for joy and smothered my Evi with kisses, whose compassionate little heart, in its sorrow for vanished “Theodore,” had at least saved the poor cat from a deplorable end in the rubbish bin and given it to her invalid flannel piggy as a comrade.

I was blissfully happy – and blissfully happy, full of fervent thanks to the generous donator, we went on a summer holiday with our children two days afterwards.

And every year since then we have gone on our “saved-up” holiday trip – every year, the Plaster-of-Paris cat is bored into from the bottom and the opening is then carefully resealed. And throughout the year, the small red-eyed monster does not stop grinning at the coppers and pennies we have saved.

So does the Plaster-of-Paris cat not have every right to the place of honour here on our mantelpiece – it, who taught us and our children how to save?

“Credo”

[from *Weißer Narzissen und andere Novellen*, ‘White Narcissi and other Novellas’, Reclam [1904])

The carriage which had fetched him from the station rolled along the high road. Brown and barren fields stretched into the distance to both right and left, solitary yellow leaves still hung on the hedgerows, and the pale-blue northern winter sky spanned the wide landscape. A sharp northeasterly blew icily, foreboding snow.

Professor Steindorfer wrapped himself more tightly in his thick travelling fur-coat, pulled his rug higher up, and leaned comfortably back. Such a journey across country in an open carriage on a clear December morning was just to his taste. He was no house-mouse and did not yet feel old in spite of his seventy years, and although he had given up his practice, on account of a temporary eye-complaint, a long time before. He now stood with both feet planted in the middle of life, letting the waves which streamed up and down surge powerfully around him, and held his ground against all the demands of the present in the calm peace and serenity of old age.

And as the flat, wide landscape unrolled before his eyes, his whole life rose up in his mind’s eye in the solitude of this winter journey.

His formative years, full of work and difficulty and want. Many an evening on which he had crept, hungry and freezing, under his thin blanket. He had fought his way through with iron strength of will and dogged industry, rising higher and higher, until others also perceived the

mark of genius on his mighty brow. Until he had attained to that place in life which was his due.

Then other times came.

He had been appointed as a professor at the university in his hometown, he had become Director of the town's hospital, and a circle of disciples had gathered around him, the master. For years, his house had been the centre of a large and brilliant circle in which science and the fine arts were cultivated. His reputation spread and his hands accumulated riches. His children grew up, his daughters made brilliant marriages, and one of his sons-in-law, his assistant of many years, took over the large private practice. The management of the clinic still lay in his own hands. Yet at this moment he was on holiday, on a Christmas-journey to his son. The youngest and the only one who would carry his name, his now famous name, into the future. Four weeks before, a son had been born to the young doctor Franz Martin Steindorfer, who had preferred country life to the more comfortable town practice, following his personal inclination, and the christening was to take place on Christmas Eve.

Here Ludwig Steindorfer's thoughts faltered – which had, up until then, wandered back into the distant past and conjured up image after image before his eyes with lightning speed, until they reached the present – and came to a halt.

It had been a difficult hour when this child was born into the world; it had almost cost his young mother her life. This delicate life had been fought for day and night: the experienced old doctor had wrung him from death with all his skill and energy. Had wrested –he clenched his fists, he

gnashed his teeth, he threw back his head in the full feeling of his power, his knowledge, his mastery – as he, a titan among his peers, had already wrested hundreds of lives from the great and merciless annihilator. He was proud of this – he believed in nothing but his knowledge, which made it possible to preserve and prolong the life of human beings to the uttermost limits.

He involuntarily raised his eyes, looking up fixedly and almost with menace. The One up there, to whom his mother had taught him to pray – he had long ceased to believe in Him. He believed only what he saw – and who had ever seen the One up there with his living eyes and sound mind?

And now they wanted to christen the baby. On Christmas Eve of all days. Balderdash! said the old man, and he smiled with mocking superiority. But he let them have their way. His daughter-in-law wished it so, and his old heart clung to the charming young woman with tender feelings. Almost moreso than to his own daughters. They still believed in the baby in the manger. And his son himself, the only son of this father, had retained a bit of his old childhood belief, an inherited trait from his mother. Well, let them! One must make concessions to the world. And although he himself felt the baptismal act to be something superfluous, a mere empty ceremony, he wanted to be there nonetheless when his son's son, his grandson who was to continue his name, was baptized. Thinking about it made him feel uncomfortable – well, it would pass by in the end, as everything in the world passes by.

He sat up straighter – a deep, replete contentment filled him, he felt as if his soul were spreading its wings. With pride he looked back on his

life's work, which he had compiled, stone by stone, and erected by himself. I have achieved *that!* I owe nothing to anyone save myself alone!

He thought of the simple woman who had borne his name, his student love, who had quietly, almost unnoticed, and in good time, crept out of his rising life, in which she no longer fitted. He thought of his children, who had been well brought-up and well provided-for, who revered and loved him; of the glory and fame of his name; of the solid wealth, which had not fallen effortlessly into his lap, as with others, but which he had accumulated with his own hand over years of tireless, strenuous work – and proud words flew through his mind: “Take thine ease, my soul, eat, drink and be merry!”¹²

He had forgotten that the words of the Bible continue with God saying to that man: “*Thou fool...*”

A tiny grey-white cloud rose up on the horizon, spread out, and grew visibly. The coachman pointed at it with his whip: “Ou’ll get snaw, Professor. An’ it’s about time tae, eight days afore Christmas.”

Eight days before Christmas – and a happy hustle and bustle in the young couple's home. The Professor had come so early in order to escape the various Christmas parties, which he found disagreeable, in clubs and in the hospital back home. And also, there was the unadmitted fact that he was driven by longing. Here, with his son, who resembled his mother in nature and character, he felt more at home than with his daughters, who took after him, whom his own hand had brought up to be cool-thinking, strong-minded modern women. Here, he felt happier and warmer, here, he

¹² Luke 12:19.

laid aside all brusqueness, all pride, all knowledge, and only wanted to be what even the poorest man is in his family: a human among humans.

But it was also a happiness which warmed one's heart!

He took great delight in the little boy, who was already wriggling merrily, and in the young mother, whose freshness and beauty were blooming again. With a deep inner satisfaction, he felt that *his* hand had succeeded in preserving this life which spread warmth and sunshine.

For hours, when his son was out travelling across country, he could sit with his daughter-in-law and listen to her charming, twittering chitchat, her daydreams of the future for little Ludwig Steindorfer, who lay slumbering in his cradle. The two of them built castles over castles in the air – the young woman in the blissful joy of motherhood and faithful trust, the old man, who knew the hardness of life, with genially smiling irony. In between were the happy little cares, the delightful Christmas secrets. In the evening the professor sat in the 'Grandfather Chair', a genuine ancient article of furniture of undisputed venerability, which the son had hunted out in some farmer's house or other and bought especially for him, puffed away at his short pipe at his ease, and watched the young wife as she piled mountains of lametta and shining chains of silver foil on the table and painted nuts which she had harvested with her own hands gold while laughing and joking.

Doctor Franz Martin helped with the merry work in his sparse hours of leisure.

He was not often at home. A malignant children's disease kept him on his feet almost all day and night. He did not complain, and he seldom

lost his sense of humour. For the strong, healthy man, being able to help and work was a pleasure and an agreeable exercise of his powers. Only to his father, the doctor, did he speak from time to time of his secret fear of dragging the infection into his home to his delicate young wife or his little newborn babe.

It was now three days before Christmas Eve. Christian's prophecy had held good: snow now lay ankle-deep. Secluded from the world, an hour from the train station, the church-village of Brennek lay in winter's peace. The Professor was glad of his rest. "Here, one can breathe again. No club evenings, no tiresome visits with a hundred thousand requests."

His daughter-in-law laughed. "But there are club evenings, Papa. Just ask Franz Martin. He's been looking forward to going to his skat club at Gralin for a long time. Poor man – just think, he hasn't held any cards in his hands for *six* weeks!"

The old man knitted his brow. "You would do better to get a proper sleep, my boy. You're looking very pale and bleary-eyed. Let the skat club be and hit the sack early. Three or four consecutive nights away wear down the strongest."

The son made no reply nor gave any promise. When he was sitting in the sleigh at midday, ready to travel to Gralin for his rounds, the old man opened an upstairs window. "When will you come back, Franz Martin?" Beside him, a small female head pressed against the ice-covered pane and made a sign and nodded. "Adieu, darling, have a good time and don't come home too late!"

The young doctor felt ill at ease; he shivered in spite of his fur and

the sunshine and already looked forward to his warm bed and an undisturbed night's rest at home, but he still had a joke at hand. "We'll see," he cried up, laughing. "I'll certainly be back for coffee tomorrow morning, rely on it! Don't worry, Miezi, you have Papa. He is a better companion than I am. Let's go, Christian!" Secretly, he pictured to himself his wife's joyfully surprised little face when the familiar sleigh-bells jingled before the door around tea-time. And the old man's contented growling.

In the meantime, the young wife buttered her father-in-law up like a kitten. "You were young once too, weren't you, Papa, let Franz Martin have his fun. It's his only one, after all. He'll meet all his good friends in Gralin today, the district court judge, the head forester, the gentlemen of the Inland Revenue. That does him the world of good and cheers him up. He's had a hard enough time of it these past weeks."

Towards evening, the sleigh bells did indeed ring outside, but only Christian came back with the tired horses. "The beasties want their bit o' rest as weel, since early yesterday ou've been on the road seventeen oors. The head forester wull bring oor master back wi' him," he reported.

Marie Steindorfer sat down at the piano and played and sang her father-in-law's secret annoyance away. Then she fetched the halma board and let the old man win one game after the other. And so he became quite cheerful and did not notice the hours slipping by. When it struck eleven, she brought him his nightcap, and he put his arm around her dainty waist. "A clever young woman outwits the cleverest old man," he said, tenderly pressing her to him. "Now your Franz Martin has really had to sit tight with his skat brothers."

She gave a merry laugh and lit his light for him. "The head forester has him on his conscience, he always does this. From pity for the horses, he says – we know about that pity! It's good that I have you, Daddy, that way at least I'm not afraid. Tomorrow we'll go for a drive, and the head forester will have to supply me with the finest fir tree in his forest as a punishment. The first Christmas-tree for our little Ludwig Steindorfer! Good night, Daddy!" A few times that night, the young doctor's wife awoke with a start from confused dreams; she felt that somebody had called her. But when she was fully awake and looked around in the light of her night-lamp, her husband's bed was still empty. The baby was sleeping soundly and peacefully. Shuddering, she pulled the blanket up higher. "He's really asking for trouble," she murmured drowsily. Once she had to laugh out loud. "Papa will curse. If he would at least come before eight, the dear fellow, so I could get him off the hook with a fib!" And then she fell back to sleep, a smile around her lips.

In the early morning, the maid brought her a note which the head forester's driver had handed in at the inn during the night. Scribbled with a pencil in hurry and haste, in shaky letters, were the words: "Don't worry if I do not come tomorrow morning. I'll drive straight on to my practice from here. God be with you! Kiss the boy for me, farewell!"

Something lay in the words, something grinned out from the shaking letters and threatened between the lines, which filled Marie Steindorfer's heart with vague forebodings. Her husband had never done this before, not coming home at all and missing his consulting hour. What might have happened, where might he have gone from Gralin? He had not written

where, how was she to search for him? Should she send Christian to Gralin? But then Franz Martin could suddenly come home and need his driver and horses. – She thought and brooded, without arriving at a conclusion, while hurriedly doing her hair and throwing on her dressing gown, which hung down in soft folds over her slim figure. Then the bell rang outside – that had to be the first patient, and immediately afterwards there were short and imperious knocks on her bedroom door. Good Lord, Papa! In her worry and agitation, she had not thought of him at all. And now it was as if a stone fell from her heart. Of course. He could hold surgery in Franz Martin's place – her husband had thought about that, no doubt. He would miss nothing at home and perhaps save himself travelling a long way round. That made her feel calmer. She went up to her father-in-law with a cheerful good-morning kiss, and he did indeed unload his first powerful peals of thunder onto her narrow shoulders. She took them amiably and poured him his coffee. When he had drunk his second cup and consumed the rolls buttered by her nimble hands, she had really got so far with him that he forewent his morning cigar and attended to the farmers in Franz Martin's place.

There was much to be done; not until after nine did he finish. The doorbell rang. Another one? The maid was about to send the person standing outside about his business with a "Surgery's all done!" but she recoiled at the entrance-door.

"Heavens, it's the pastor!"

"May I speak with Professor Steindorfer?" the worthy old gentleman asked in obvious haste. He was led into the consulting room. Marie was

sitting at the desk making the entries which the professor dictated to her. She leapt to her feet.

“You, Your Reverence? But not as a patient?”

“I ... I would like to ask the Professor to come for a walk.” The hypochondriac old gentleman, who discovered new manifestations of sickness in his body every day, clearly had a particular concern and the presence of the young female assistant made him uneasy. He squirmed as in embarrassment.

“I’m going, Your Reverence.”

When she had gone, he superfluously walked after her and closed the door of the waiting-room. Then he came back – only now did the professor see how pale and disturbed the man was –, pulled a paper out from his breast-pocket and said with tormenting long-windedness: “I am sorry, Professor, but I must impart some distressing news to you. Be a man! I come here in a grievous matter. Your son has fallen ill and lies in the hospital in Neustadt. Please read this telegram, which I have just this moment received.”

“Doctor Steindorfer admitted to this District Hospital yesterday evening with severe diphtheria. Please prepare his father. Patient’s fervent wish that wife learns nothing. Father to come here at once. Horsig, Senior Consultant.”

The old man’s hand, which held the paper, fell heavily down on the desktop – for a few seconds, he sat as if paralysed and shattered. Then he pulled himself together. “I must go at once!”

“Easy now,” the other prudently admonished. “His wife must not

notice anything! We shall leave together now – the sleigh is standing ready at my house. God grant that we catch the train in time!”

Professor Steindorfer had enough self-control to calmly bid the young wife farewell. “The pastor is taking me off on a sleigh-ride to Holbeek Forest,” he said at random.

His words were unhappily chosen.

“O Daddy, we had intended to go there together at midday today to fetch the Christmas tree. If the gentlemen wait just a quarter of an hour, I’ll come too, the weather is glorious.”

“Far too raw for you, child. Let it be, we’ll bring your Christmas tree back with us,” her father-in-law hastily advised her. He was already on the steps; he could not have held out before her clear, joyful eyes any longer. “Poor child!” he murmured as he walked down. Then not another thought of her – he now thought only of his son.

The pastor’s well-fed, phlegmatic horses ran far too slowly. The professor sat with his watch in his hand. “Driver, faster! We must catch the train to Neustadt, a dollar tip if we make it.”

The pastor, who insisted on accompanying him to the station, was sitting on thorns. His horses were not used to such a tempo. They fell back into their leisurely jog trot of their own accord. “Besides, the train is always late,” he said comfortingly. Not on this very occasion, of course. When they reached the hilltop by the toll-house, and the railway station lay close before them, the train arrived down below. A minute later it had already passed Gralin Station and crept onwards like a black snake across the white plain.

The professor groaned and the pious pastor's driver swore to himself. Yes, if his master hadn't been with them, he'd have driven like the clappers. Now the tip had gone up in smoke.

"When does the next train leave?"

"At half-past twelve," the pastor sheepishly replied.

"In two hours – Good God!" The word which he usually stubbornly avoided came involuntarily to Steindorfer's lips.

The sleigh stopped at the station building and the pastor peeled off his furs and blankets and clambered out, but the other man hesitated.

"Dear Pastor, how much time would we need with the sleigh?"

"As far as Neustadt?"

The driver, who knew the area, undertook to answer.

"There's nae hope o' daeing it in unner fower an' a half hoors, Sir. The hiewey lies deep, and the snaw is blawn intae awfie drifts in pairts."

"So it's better you wait for the next train, then you'll be in Neustadt at one-twenty."

They entered the small, stifling, overheated waiting room. The professor stretched his giant figure and breathed heavily – how was he to stand it, this two hours' wait! He ordered a bottle of red wine, and the pastor sat down with him as a patient companion.

After a while, the stationmaster appeared, who was both telegraph clerk and utility man at the small station. He looked serious and important; his eyebrows were raised and his face showed the solemn furrows of an official. In his hand he held an opened dispatch-form.

"This dispatch has just arrived, Professor. As you are here now, that

saves me sending the express courier to Brennek, and you can claim back the courier's fee of fifty pennies," he said deliberately.

Steindorfer had torn the sheet from his hand and read: "Professor Steindorfer, Brennek. Paralysis of the heart imminent, extreme danger. Come at once. Horsig."

The pastor had read over his shoulder at the same time; he laid his hand on his arm and spoke to him. Whatever came to his mind, words of Scripture and grounds of human consolation, all jumbled together. Professor Steindorfer sat slumped and did not hear a single word. His thoughts wandered far away. The stationmaster stood waiting beside him and looked as if he had all kinds of things on his mind which he would like to air to the man. But the pastor gave him a sign, and he crept out with suppressed sighs. After a quarter of an hour, the pastor followed him; he thought it better to leave the man inside alone now.

And he was right.

He sat, his head resting in his left hand, his right hand clamped around the edge of the table with an iron grip – indifferent to the impressions of the outside world. Like water over a weir, his thoughts shot through his brain – ever new, ever different, ever wilder, ever more pitiless. He could really feel them hammering and raging inside, behind his brow.

His son, dying!

And he, the father, the doctor, who might still be able to help, sat here damned to terrible inactivity!

He leapt up, his torment passed the point of bearability, he ran up and down in the narrow room like a captured animal – he tore his fur from

the nail, slipped into it and put on his cap – and now out onto the platform, where the wind whistled around his ears – and ever up and down, up and down.

His son is dying, and he is here, here – a miserable four leagues away and cannot get to him – he clenched his fists in impotent rage. He knew this Horsig, a truly antiquated fellow, one of the old school, who has added nothing to his knowledge. He certainly cannot help. If only *he* were there! He, who had saved hundreds, thousands from death, torn them from the claws of the cruel destroyer even in the eleventh hour. He gnashed his teeth, looked around wildly, stared up at the blue-grey sky. O you up there – my son, my only one! Let me keep him, you hear, him! If there really is One, a merciful One, an all-merciful One, then show your power! Let him live until I come, then I'll believe in you! Then I'll show you what I can do. Then I'll snatch him away from you! With these hands of mine, with my knowledge, with my ardent, all-powerful fatherly love!

Thus did he fight, thus did he wrestle, like a titan, with the more-powerful One above him, as Jacob once wrestled in the affliction of his soul.

He had long left the platform behind and blundered blindly onwards, somewhere or other, along a snow-covered field-path which ran beside the embankment. And he fought this thousand-year-old gigantomachy of the despairing creature who rebels against the Invisible One up there. On his own, deathly alone in the snow-covered field – wherever he looked, there was only sky and snow disappearing into the distance, flowing into each other, so it seemed to him as if he were wandering under a leaden bell and

must, sometime or other, reach its edge – where everything comes to an end.

A rumbling and shaking of rails roused him – he gave a start, stopped still, and looked around him as one in a daze. Endlessly, its engine hissing, a goods train rattled by.

Then he reflected, started, and looked at his watch. Above him there was a whistling in the telegraph wires, the wind playing its lugubrious melody. No other sound. Far behind him in the field, the red station buildings lay minute. He had been walking almost an hour. Now he turned around. Halfway back he met the pastor, who had followed him in good-natured concern. He pressed his hand, making the frail man flinch with a groan.

“I am calm, quite calm, dear friend! Travel home now and look after my daughter-in-law. Stall her for as long as you possibly can. Tell her I was fetched away to a patient on the way, I’ll be back in the afternoon. On no account must she learn where I am, where Franz Martin is. She would be capable of coming after me immediately. And she must not do that, she shall not do that. As delicate as she is. We must keep her alive for the baby’s sake. And my son...” He raised his head. “Pastor, if there is *one* in the world who can still save him, then it is I.”

They walked slowly back and the pastor related what the garrulous stationmaster had reported: Doctor Steindorfer had been unwell as early as noon yesterday, he had stopped when driving past and asked for two, three brandies. After that, a dozen or more sick calls in Gralin, where diphtheria was raging terribly. E.g. the day before yesterday, he had had to

perform a laryngotomy on a boy, during which the patient suddenly gave a violent cough, hurling a load of mucus and shreds of grey membrane into the face of the doctor bent over him. This caused the teacher, who was assisting with the operation as the sole helper, to say: "Ah just hope the doctor hasnae caught it himseelf!"

Well – and then the unwell feeling must have become worse. He had sent his driver home on a pretext and travelled to Neustadt on the seven o'clock train. He, the stationmaster, was surprised at the time by the doctor not taking a return ticket. Well, now he could see why. He had naturally not known the state of his condition and therefore preferred to go to hospital instead of possibly dragging the disease into his house to his wife and baby. He had hardly been able to stay on his feet and had travelled all alone in a first-class compartment.

The old man clenched his teeth so as not to shout out loud.

The image of his son rose up before his eyes. He had gone quietly without saying goodbye – he had begun this journey, this journey of death, on his own, bravely – knowing – that he would perhaps never see his family, his wife, his child, in this life again.

A fervent feeling welled up in his heart. Yes, that was him, his son, his only one, a real man, a real hero!

He passed his hand over his eyes and wiped away something that dimmed his sight. Yet his heart had become calm. He felt that the One up there would take up the duel with him.

The train came and one hour later a droshky stopped before the front door of the hospital in Neustadt. The professor leapt out. He gave hs

name.

“Is my son alive?”

“He is alive, Professor,” said the nun. She led him down the steps and told him on the way that Doctor Steindorfer had asked for Holy Communion during the night. The professor barely listened – what did that matter to him, that was so immaterial!

He walked into the room – at last! – the father, the doctor stood by his son’s sickbed – checked his pulse and exchanged short questions and answers with the doctor who was present and the nurse.

Franz Martin Steindorfer was still breathing – but he was dying. There could be no mistake – his father’s eyes saw this straight away.

His cardiac insufficiency had worsened tremendously in spite of camphor and caffeine, in spite of champagne and the strongest port wine. His pulse was barely perceptible and often stopped. And yet – who can kill hope in a despairing father’s heart?

“Have you injected him with strychnine, Doctor? No? Then quickly! – Fetch it, Sister!”

The senior doctor cried three words of guidance to the nurse as she hurried away. Then silence again. The breathing of the doctors could be heard.

The solution was brought. The professor gave the injection himself and his hand did not tremble.

O, let it not fail this *one* time! This *single* time! When it had performed life-saving services in the most desperate cases!

The patient lay breathing heavily. His father sat by his bed,

continually taking his pulse and observing, with a doctor's look of concentration, if any effect of the invigorating drug could be discerned.

A quarter of an hour went by, then another one. Almost an hour had passed – when the professor suddenly stood up and said in a dying voice: “In vain – in vain! *This* time of all times in vain! – He is dying – My son is dying - -”

And he stood there, his gaze fixed on the dying man, and the consciousness of his helplessness came over him like a plunging stream which pulled him down with it.

He saw that everything had been done which could be done. That nothing could work any good here. Nothing.

The One up there had met his condition: He is alive – now see what you can do! And he had a feeling that the One in whom he did not believe, did not want to believe, was looking down at him at this moment with a sneer and mocking his pitiful impotence.

Then the smitten man reared up under the hard hand. In a loud voice, the father called the name of his son, he wanted one more look, one last one, the farewell of the escaping soul. He wanted to force it out. His son should not leave like this – without a farewell! He clasped the limp, cold hand with a firm grip, he called again, called louder, with everything that a father's heart can put into short syllables. And his tone reached the soul, which was already almost beyond the threshold of earthly consciousness – the dying man slowly opened his eyes and looked at his father.

What a look – an unknown one, a solemn one – a look as if out of

another world, which made his father shudder to the core.

One last immense effort: “Father!” murmured the lips which had uttered no sound for hours. Then a rattling in the throat, an incomprehensible stammering, a sudden raising of the head – and now, like a final, angrily futile revolt of the struggling spirit against collapsing matter, babbling, barely comprehensible, faint as a breath and audible only to the father’s listening ear: “Raise my child to love God!”

These were the last words. The son’s bequest to his father. His last will and testament.

A jolt passed through the old man’s body.

Was this the reply of the powerful One, the merciless One, who mocked the despair of the lamenting father’s heart?

A few more breaths – after a pause, a final rattle – the head fell back, the features stiffened.

“My son!” the old man yelled out – heavily fell his head onto the pillow beside the waxen, solemn countenance of the dead man.

In the early morning of Christmas Eve, Franz Martin Steindorfer was laid to rest in the foreign town.

They had not borne his body home, not, as the mother wished, been able to baptise the baby by his open coffin. The authorities forbade it.

In the late afternoon, when the Christmas bells were ringing in the festival of love and peace, and the first small lights began to shyly glow through the dusk, a baptismal procession in the church-village of Brennek walked the short stretch of road from the doctor’s house to the church.

A small, sad, heart-rending procession. The young widow in her

trailing mourning weeds, her eyes as if extinguished by weeping, her small face looking out, snow-white, from the crepe folds of her veil, leaning on the arm of her father-in-law, who walked erect as ever – the figure of a warrior.

When the sacred ceremony had been carried out, Professor Ludwig Steindorfer held the baptised child, the son of his son, in his arms, and in a steady voice he repeated the words of the priest, “I believe in God.”

It sounded like a vow.

He bowed his head low. In this hour, he did not only bear witness for the unweaned babe, he bore witness for his own proud soul, to belief in a greater Being, a more powerful Being over him. There was a ringing and clangour in his ears like the sound of trumpets, the last words of his dying son resounded as if called by brazen tongues – words from beyond the threshold: “Raise my child to love God!”

And for the third time the old man solemnly repeated: “I believe in God!”