

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Josef Ponten (1883-1940)

The Doctor's House

We lived where the town tailed off into the countryside, in a side-street which ran downhill and came to a dead end against a mountain. A black prison lay on the one side, over allotments; on the other, behind cabbage patches, there was a red nunnery. In addition, there was a derelict ivy-clad castle and wooded parkland that had run wild, in which a stream, having its origin in the unknown mountains, roared over obstacles; a mighty sarcophagus from primeval times stood in a mossy, spine-chilling crypt, and a Roman altar with the name of some Marcius or other was there – no matter! For none of that was half as remarkable as the strangest thing of all: the doctor's house.

The doctor's house was the most remarkable house in the world. But grown-ups did not feel its eeriness at all! The milkmaid, driving in from the castle farm, delivered milk there in the early morning; the postman, coming out from the town, delivered the letters later. Now and then some other person would come, ring the bell, be sent away, and leave. On the bell-pull being tugged, which never created a sound that could be heard outside, the door was opened to the width of a chink – the safety-chain being kept on. An arm took in, and reached out – the door closed again. How could people let themselves be given such short shrift without becoming suspicious? How could the police not observe the house? But that was alright by us boys – we were quite grown-up already, none of us

was younger than ten – quite alright! We would make good this incomprehensible omission good! The house was *our* house, our terrible mystery! We would be a secret tribunal! We would bring the mystery to light one day, and the world would realise, with a shudder, what dreadful, perhaps sanguinary things it had unsuspectingly passed by.

We secretly besieged the house for many months, through the entire summer of a long year, beginning early in spring when we were allowed out to play in the streets again. We had sworn a sacred oath over a dead cat, a burning candle, and the skull of a marten which had been picked clean in an anthill. We had drunk drops of each other's blood, pricked from our arms with a needle, and sworn in dreadful earnest. My brothers were excluded, I did not trust them – who trusts his brothers? There were seven or eight of us, of the male sex – except for Annie, she was a female, but she fought like the strongest of us, and behaved moreover with such thorough decency that she could have been a man.

We had worked out a precise plan in accordance with which one of us would always, except, of course, on confounded schooldays, keep watch. The holidays were the real time of war, and it was towards the end of the long summer holidays that the events I wish to relate in this story took place.

The house lay detached in the long street; but strangely enough, it remained detached, however often a new building was erected: this was invariably built onto another house. As sons of men in the construction trade, we were struck by this: we gave each other meaningful looks and nodded our heads.

The ground-floor windows were always, by night and by day, to be seen with their inside shutters closed. We dearly wanted to have just one glimpse into the room that looked onto the street. What might be going on in there? Pshaw, we knew: horrible things, which excited us tremendously.

At the back, a wall ran into a cabbage field. We tried to look over it into the garden, yard, or whatever might be behind it, and as we could not put a ladder up, for fear of attracting attention, we made a human pyramid: Jakob, stepping into strong Anna's hands, climbed onto Johann's shoulders, he being the strongest, and Lambert climbed onto Jakob, but because he still could not reach the coping, I clambered – the smallest, but not the most faint-hearted of the street urchins! – high up the human ladder. There I was, standing on top of the wobbling structure, about to look over the coping – when the human tower collapsed. Johann, the ground floor, had given way (he later claimed that Annie had tickled him, but that was not true, he had simply been weak!). I suddenly saw – it was in the evening – the sun going down in the East, then a firework display of stars and darkness. When I came round, I was lying in bed with a broken leg. The fracture did set quickly, but even so, half the holidays passed the while. When I appeared before the fortress again towards their end, with my leg still in splints, the general situation was unchanged. The enemy had been watched unceasingly.

We gave up on an attack from the garden side: not because of the ridiculous height of the wall, which we would have overcome this time (for during all of my absence, Johann had drunk raw ox-blood from the butcher and he claimed to be strong enough now), but because the wall coping

was bristling with upright pieces of broken bottles in a cement-bed. This detestable fortification, which seemed to us to be a violation of all good manners, was not to be found even over on the wall of the prison courtyard. Near at hand, there was a wild plum-tree, quite tall, but ailing. Michael, the standout climber among us, got up the plum-tree; but when he scrambled along a branch and pushed the outer foliage apart to look into the yard, the branch broke, Michael fell headlong, and he likewise was put to bed unconscious. He spat blood and died soon afterwards; at all events, he dropped out of our enterprise.

We gave up attempted attacks on this side. It was clear that the house could be taken, the mystery of the silent walls be aired, only by a direct assault. Break in from the front! Through the door! Then Michael said – he was still alive at that time, but was spitting a lot of blood – / would have to be the one to do it. Everyone agreed, especially Annie. This general trust puffed me up not a little, and I accepted without a word; but I put the execution off from one day to the next. I reaped much honour in advance, and Annie kissed me before the assembled crew; but the willingness to pay me honour in advance decreased quickly while the impatience to see me act increased. I came into the greatest embarrassment, for – I realised that I was faint-hearted. But what was the good of that? Johann, being the biggest and strongest, soon came up with insolent words. The deed was urgent! The execution of the confederates' decree was fixed, after a short and resolute speech from Johann, who threatened me with proscription, for the evening of the next day but one.

I secretly went to church and prayed for a long time, on bare knees,

to my patron-saint and name-saint, Saint Hubert, Bishop of Luttich. I threw tenpence into the poor-box. Now nothing could go wrong!

The moonlit night gave the last impulse and impetus. The doctor, the owner of the house, had gone away on a journey in the morning, as our spies had reliably reported; his children had stayed home alone. We could not explain what we saw on the evening of that day, but it was very strange. We had come out again after supper and were standing in front of the house in the night-deserted street in the moonlight. The house was white with the moon. Then we saw ghosts behind the window-panes! Actual ghosts! Ghosts in long linen sheets, which stretched out enormous arms. And soon it seemed that pale cheeses were carried from the dark interior of the house to the windows, to the windows of the upper storeys, for the ground-floor remained shut – it was as quiet and deathly silent as it had always been. The cheeses were carried hither and thither, they also became gigantic and then shrank again, the ghosts made the sign of the cross with this, as priests do with their monstrance. It seemed to us to be a monstrous blasphemy! Johann nudged me in the ribs and said quietly but fiercely, “Tomorrow!” An ice-cold prickling ran down my spine, and being unable to make any reply for the chattering of my teeth, I simply nodded silently. Everyone stared at me in astonishment and kept a respectful distance. A policeman strolled along the street, but the guardian of law and order – fine guardians, these policemen! – saw nothing striking about the house, rather regarding us suspiciously; however, he soon set his mind at rest and went away, yawning loudly at the moon. Although I was close to fainting, I strove to think nothing, to imagine absolutely nothing, to make

my mind a blank. Feverishly, I pulled myself together – Behold! I felt myself to be a real big man. I said, “Till tomorrow, everyone!” I said that in a steady voice and went home. “Till tomorrow!” the others said in an undertone, and everyone dispersed. The street was soon empty, while the ghosts carried on with their haunting.

By the way, have I introduced us? Well, our names, Catholic and Biblical, plain and simple, were: Johann, Jakob, Josef, Peter, Franz, Michael (the drop-out), Lambert, Hubert, and Anna. In the suburbs, only children from families who were Protestant or irreligious in some other way had names such as Emil, Bruno, Hildegard and others, and people with Christian names like these were suspicious to us. And so were the doctor’s children. Emil was the name of the oldest one. He was a tall and lanky boy, his hair was straw-coloured, long, and carefully plastered to his head with water. The other two or three small boys and the girls also had hair combed down with water. We did not know what the other boys were called. The children did not go to our school: they did not go to any school at all, for it was said that the doctor considered our schools – all schools, in general – to be contemptible and superfluous, and taught his children at home. Although he had a point with the superfluity of schools, that was of no use to us. The mother was dead. He was an odd fish, that doctor! He had no practice, he lived on God knows what income, very simply and very thriftily, for the family was not well-fed like us and our fathers. The doctor also wore his hair, long, grey hair, combed down tight on his head with a wetted brush. For as long as we could remember, we had seen him in a long, old-fashioned coat which might once have been green. He very rarely

appeared in the street, and when he did, it was invariably with his children. He led two of his boys, by his right and by his left hand – ridiculous! If our fathers had tried to take us by the hand...! – the half dozen girls, all of them also with plastered-down hair, walked hand-in-hand in front. We had often heard laughter in the yard or the garden, ball games, a hoop being trundled – the old man was playing with his children! If our fathers had done that with us – ridiculous; first of all, our fathers, who were occupied all day, had no time for it, and secondly ... no, how disagreeable, if our old men had wanted to play with us! When we came home that moonlit night, I led the conversation at table onto the doctor and his family. Father, who was open to talk with us only at mealtimes, said, more to mother than to us, that the “Oddball” (the doctor, that is) had travelled to the Levant, where he had come from years before, because of a funeral in the family. Mother, who almost always kept silent, interrupted to ask if the “Blues” (the Protestants, that is) also buried their dead? She had heard that they left them to be eaten by wild birds. Father gave a knowing laugh and said, The oddball believed that humans were naturally good, that they became bad only through state education, that a thrashing did children no good at all (here he winked at my brother Matthias, whom the teacher had complained about), that children were never cruel, but became cruel through school and the example of their fellow men. A mad philosopher had taught this and other nonsense, and the fool brought his children up in accordance with this philosopher’s precepts, teaching them himself, keeping them away from any intercourse with the outside world, playing with them and taking them for walks in nature. We were then sent to bed, mother cleared

the table, and father went to his drawing-table. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell asleep.

The day had arrived! When I opened my eyes, I was wide-awake at once. It was my day! I nodded confidentially to him out through the window and leapt with both feet out of bed, jumped into my trousers, gave myself a proper wash, breakfasted as usual, and occupied myself somehow or other throughout the day, teaching our watchdog tricks, repairing postage stamps – if I had thought about the evening, I would have felt sick. Nobody noticed anything different about me. I did not show myself to my mates. I did see them from the window, wandering down the street throughout the day and glancing now at the doctor's house, now at my parents' dwelling. I knew that any change that was suspicious in the slightest would be reported to me, but nothing was reported and nobody showed up. Johann did, it was true, send a messenger with the inquiry if I was by any chance ill. I curtly dismissed the messenger with the answer, I wasn't Johann, was I? That was that; I saw how the others laughed at Johann and he went home. Only Annie came to afternoon tea, bringing my mother a cake as a present from her mother. My mother, gratefully happy, cut into it at once, and Annie tasted it with us. She sat opposite me and, while she told my mother how many eggs her mother had beaten for the cake, surreptitiously winked at me – that bucked me up no end – and then she left.

Darkness came slowly. After supper, father went to play skittles, while mother went to visit Anna's mother. We had already been sent to bed, but I found this and that to busy myself with, and once my parents had gone I stepped out – I myself did not know how – into the street.

It was night. Dark. The moon lay behind thick clouds. The air was mild. It was pleasantly warm.

No sooner had I stepped out into the open than the conspirators emerged from front doors and corners. Johann first of all. He laughed derisively, but one look at my face – he grew very serious and got annoyed. I left the ninny to his own devices. Annie walked up beside me, took me by the hand, and led me, without saying a word or looking at me, up to the house. There, she looked me straight in the eyes, set me, with both her hands, in the middle of the street like a statue, and then left me. So there I was – truly, it was awful!

My mates had followed us, it goes without saying, in inconspicuous groups and at various distances. Some of them had a finger in their mouth from embarrassment. I saw that Peter was more afraid than me; saliva was flowing from his mouth along his finger into his sleeve. Peter's fear gave me a peculiar courage. My mates dispersed in the allotments on this side and the cabbage fields on the other side. Not far away; I knew that nobody would leave me in the lurch. Only Johann, I believe, that cowardly cur, scarpered.

The street was empty. Even the policeman did not come tonight: I later heard that Annie had taken the precaution to induce our fellow-conspirator Franz – he, you must know, had to call the policeman "Uncle" – to detain the police over cards until midnight. On the far side, under the prison wall, we heard a soldier tramping around the prison in hobnailed boots.

How did I feel? I don't know anymore; I think I didn't feel anything at

all. I was insensible! I made the strongest efforts to stay so.

Then I had pulled the bell! How it happened, I don't know – I had pulled the bell. I heard the clang of a bell in the empty house. At the sound, I started back in alarm. I never trembled so much during the entire undertaking as at the moment when the bell clanged inside. And how could it be otherwise? Hitherto we had never heard a bell answer when someone outside asked with the bell-pull. But I thought of Annie, and thought also, I believe, of honour, duty, and all kinds of manly qualities! I had got a grip on myself again; I tugged at the bell-pull once again, more violently this time. But still there was no movement in the house. So I tugged at the bell-pull frantically, like a madman.

It worked! A window was opened on the second floor, and Emil called down into the street: "Who is there?"

I had not expected that. I had a hazy notion of having to answer, "Nobody" – or better than that, not answering at all – but in my confusion, I cried: "I am!"

"I? Who is I?" cried Emil.

Then I was terribly ashamed of my stupid answer, and I stepped back into the arched doorway and made myself thin, pressing my back against the door, so that Emil could not see me. Emil called out into the night, "Is it you by any chance, father?"

No answer from me. Then I tugged at the bell like mad again – incessantly. All fear had left me!

The window above was closed, and all was silent for a while. I kept quiet too. Emil needed time, after all, to pull on his trousers and come

down.

Only at this moment did I consider what I actually wanted to do. Get into the house, yes! But what then? Do some mischief? Oh no! Actually, my promise would be fulfilled, my pledged honour redeemed, if I forced my way into the house, perhaps if I only succeeded in pressing forward into the hall. But what then? Of course, that would not settle the matter, so much was clear. But as I said, do some mischief? Never! Besides, I had no knife, no box of matches. I did not want to murder or steal – Oh no! Our fathers, and my father in particular, were respected citizens. Moreover, my father was well-to-do, and we did not need to steal. I felt around in my pockets, searching for some tool so that it would, so to speak, dictate my task to me. Thank God, I had a mask! Of course I had a mask, a black one from the carnival! Annie had tried it on my face yesterday, at our final conference: one strap was the worse for wear, so she had taken the mask home and sewed a new one onto it. We always wore masks – I should not, by the way, have forgotten to say this – at our clandestine meetings and conferences, black, yellow, red ones: how could we have been conspirators, had we no masks? No disrespect to the oath we swore, but the mask was, after all, the main thing! And how necessary the mask was to me now – absolutely necessary! I *must* not be recognised. Although Emil had not recognised my voice, he had to have seen me in the street often enough. He *must* not, on any account, recognise me! He would denounce me to his father, and he would report me to the police, would perhaps even come to see my father – the rest did not bear thinking about! I did not fear a caning from father, but to publicly dishonour him – I would

sooner drown myself!

I put the black mask on. It was quite warm under it, and it tickled my eyelashes. I muttered to myself to find out if I – in any event – could change my voice. I should have practised that today, instead of wasting the day in idleness; but now it was too late. I tried to speak as deeply as father spoke; but I didn't succeed. Well, no matter! There was no fear of my being recognised, and I had no evil intentions...

All stayed silent in the house. I tugged at the bell again and, as a matter of form, looked up and down the street, to see if the policeman or anyone else were not coming. But I need not have worried, for nobody came, and if somebody had come, the conspirators in the cabbage-fields would have warned me – the whistle for such contingencies had been practised; Annie, at least, could be relied upon.

Then ... I heard something behind the door: whispering. Emil and his biggest sister were perhaps standing behind the door: I had heard the quiet shuffling of bare soles, I thought, and it also seemed to me that I could see the weak glimmer of a candle in the keyhole. The two eldest were certainly standing behind the door, trembling with fear, and waiting. Now my patience was at an end: I gave further short, energetic tugs at the bell-rope.

"Who – the hell – is there?" Emil's voice asked at once. Emil saying, "the hell," pleased me exceedingly: he was a worthy opponent, I would treat him decently. His having come down in a sleeping house at night, and his sister with him (but Annie would surely have done that, too), was most honourable; but his saying, "the hell" was simply terrific!

I did not answer, of course. I could hear my heart thumping so loudly – I thought the children had to hear it through the woodwork.

“Is it you then, father?” Emil now asked. “Have you come back early?”

No answer from me.

“He’s gone,” I heard the girl whisper. I undeceived her, ha! – I tugged at the bell.

“It will be the postman,” Emil remarked casually – he was clearly trying to master his agitation. I heard a fumbling with the safety-chain, but the door was not opened.

“Do you have a telegram?” Emil asked in a loud voice. “Something must have happened to father,” he said to his sister in a gloriously matter-of-fact tone with brotherly calm. “Don’t be afraid, Hildegard, we shall have to bear the news.”

The door was going to open in a moment! I squeezed into the corner between the outer wall and the left wing of the door, which would remain closed when the right one opened.

“But damn it all, why don’t you speak?” Emil now yelled. (Splendid: “Damn!” Wasn’t it?) “Have you lost your tongue, or are you sloshed?” (“Sloshed” was decidedly rather coarse.)

“Perhaps the man is dumb,” Hildegard quietly offered by way of excuse.

“Perhaps...” Emil muttered angrily, and he let the safety-chain fall. It struck loudly against the wood of the door. “Hildegard, hold the candle,” Emil said inside, in a loud and unconcerned voice. “I want to see who it is

who, in the middle of the night...” the hero added. A key worked in the lock.

Now it was coming! When the door opened, I had to get in at all costs.

The door opened. Immediately I had a hand and a heel in the gap. I slid along the wing of the door and pushed my posterior inside the house while sending our whistle out into the night with four fingers.

In a flash the conspirators were there, all masked. Jacob was first, Annie second. I swung sharply round, and we poured into the house. “It’s children,” I heard Emil call out – that annoyed me.

Emil and Hildegard were wearing night-gowns. Eilhard and Thusnelda (yes, that was what they were called! I knew their names in a moment) were standing up on the landing. Both of them were young, perhaps the age of alphabetarians. They screamed and fled. Emil was a big, strong boy, almost an adult and the same age as me. At first he stood rooted to the spot, then he threw himself into the horde of housebreakers like a lion. But there were too many of us, his strength gave way, and he was thrust into the cellar and the key taken out. No notice was taken of Hildegard: she screamed in a remarkable falsetto, decently held the candle up high so we could see better while we disposed of Emil, and screamed unceasingly. Without doubt, she would still be standing there just like that when we returned from exploring the house. For that’s what we did! At first, the room on the ground floor beside the front door, which had always challenged us so brazenly with its closed windows, with its eternal wooden shutters. The room with some kind of Bluebeard-like secret! We fell upon the door, we burst in – the room was empty! In the faint light from

Hildegard's candle in the hallway, its high emptiness seemed monstrous to us. Empty – the mysterious room? No severed heads, no strings of toenails, no scalpel, no tubs full of red blood? Empty – ? (Perfectly natural: it had been the waiting-room for the patients, which had been cleared out when the doctor gave up his practice to devote himself exclusively to life with his children. This came out later.) But it incensed us no end, the emptiness and drabness of the mysterious room. Back into the hallway, to the other door! That's where the tubs would be! The back room, as we could see at once, was the father's study: the walls were lined with books up to the ceiling, and an intense feeling of respect swept through me at the sight. The shoes of the Brothers of the Vehmgericht were now clattering up the staircase steps; I was after them and soon at the front again. Room after room was opened: nothing extraordinary anywhere, nothing like ... shall we say, like a chapel for worshipping idols with Indian images in gold, a flogging chamber, a chapel for relics of the dead and embalmed house cats. What we found was a whitewashed room with gymnastic apparatus, trapezes, dumbbells, and wooden and iron bars for exercises. Can you understand our disappointment? Then you can comprehend our anger. The moral ground had been taken away, so to speak, from our venture. We began to yell from fear. Gaining courage from this, we yelled incessantly, while dashing higher up. Downstairs, Hildegard was screaming in her high pitch; upstairs, the children were screaming (for they slept on the second floor, the boys at the front, the girls at the back). Thusnelda had not neglected to place her candle on the stairs when she had taken to flight, so none of us suffered a leg injury. She and Eilhard had crept back into their

beds. We stamped, rushed, howled through the rooms. In this we found our triumph: our satisfaction was complete! To and fro, to and fro, leaping, dancing, and frightening the children. Some of them cried, others gave out screams, and their heads being under the bedcovers, these sounded like they came from a cellar; the youngest one lay there as if lifeless. But he was not going to die, no fear of that! He was going to recover soon. A boy in bed had the night-candle, a tumbler with oil and a floating wick on it, in his hand, and he looked at us aghast. We must have cut pretty figures: the black, red, yellow masks before our faces, one of us wrapped in a colourful bedcover, picked up off the floor, another in a white sheet pulled out from a bed. And screams like at a witches' revel...

A cry from the little boy: the night-candle had slipped from his hands into the bed – the oil had flowed into the sheets – the bed was ablaze!

Screams and horror! The conspirators stampeded out through the door and down the stairs. A carafe of water was poured over the bed – but it was no use.

In the blinding glare, the children leapt out of their beds, even the ones who had lain with their head under the covers. I pulled the smallest boy, who was stiff as a poker, out of bed: ha! He was up on his legs at once and could run like the others. The children dashed down the stairs after the conspirators. I dived my hand into all the beds to convince myself that they were empty – then I ran out of the burning room. And flew down the stairs! Downstairs, we let Emil out, and everyone, conspirators and children, a jumble of white shirts and black masks, passed out through the front door.

The street was empty and dark, but the windows of the upper floor were red and the street uncannily lit up. The soldier over beside the prison fired the alarm into the air, and soon the bell in the monastery was ringing like billy-o. The conspirators dispersed to their homes – I did too. I entered the house; father was not home from skittles yet. Clothes off and into bed. I let Matthias, awoken by the noise of the night, wake me from a feigned sleep.

Hey, that was some ado in the street! The flames were now crackling out the second floor. The fire brigade came rushing up, and torches flared and smoked: the brass helmets of the firemen glowed red. Hoses were screwed together, and soon a jet shot up, as thick as the trunk of the plum-tree from which Michael had fallen headlong, and went hissing into the flames. White steam! The street filled up with black people. The police were there too, acting very consequential.

In fact, nobody came to grief. The children were taken in for the night by compassionate families; father, who had just come home from skittles, brought Eilhard to our house. I gave up my bed to him. Everyone severely censured the doctor who had left his children on their own. The second floor was gutted. But I heard from father the next day that the house was well insured and so the doctor would not suffer any loss. Oh, father didn't half curse the crazy doctor! He should be happy that his "bug-ridden house" – so father said – would be handsomely rebuilt from the insurance money. And the builders would get some work also. The anger at the doctor was intense all over the suburb. Nobody believed the children's accounts: they had simply been hallucinations of the little ones,

who had felt themselves forsaken and had terrible dreams; one of them, who had lit his night-candle from fear, had therefore been careless in some way. No credence was given even to Emil's clear account, all the less so when the police positively declared there had been nobody in the street on the night in question at that hour. Nothing came to light...

The fire kept burning for a long time that night. The fire engine pumped a pond of water at the second floor. The clouds lay red. Flames snorted like a herd of wild horses. The rafters split asunder with a bang; it rained red-hot nails. I could see all of this very nicely from my window. It was glorious!