

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
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The Ghost

In Anno Domini 1874, we forest-boys of Einsiedeln set out with great noise and mortar towards the woods of Mt. Freiherrenberg for a bear battue.

It was a glorious autumn day, one of those days on which you think the birds will surely start to talk all of a sudden, and the dear Lord will come walking round the corner of the forest, cut a long stick in the hazel-grove, and have a bit of a quick stroll, before breakfast, around His Paradise which had newly arisen overnight.

We assembled before our house, "The Adam and Eve," after lunch. The hunters were well equipped with hunting weapons of all kinds. Our neighbour's Xandi carried a colossal crossbow. Kareli had slung a wooden rifle that was painted blood-red over his shoulder. He could fire a little stick out of this farther than two paces. Gusteli possessed a hunting-gun which you could pop a cork out of that hung on a small string. Some had blowpipes and everyone had bags full of rowan-tree bullets. I, as the leader, carried a yew bow, with which I was able to propel feathered arrows high into the air. I only had to come out in front of the house with the yew bow and the sparrows would scatter in all the directions of the wind every time. This bow was also very unpopular among all the cats of the neighbourhood. A hunter's apprentice from the upper village brought a dainty little iron pistol with a paper roll on top that gave a terrific bang when you fired it.

That's how splendidly we were armed for the bear-hunt.

A team of no fewer than eight horses neighed in front of the house and waited impatiently until grandmother had put my shoes on me and I could take the reins.

Among the eight horses there was a stallion. A stallion had to be in the team, as there was always one of those in the four-horse monastery carts every autumn which went prancing along with proudly bent neck and crunching the bridle.

But Wyseli insisted on being the stallion.

Pawing in the sand, neighing spiritedly and behaving terribly wildly every now and then, she stood in a double-team and tossed her flaxen-bright curly hair like a mane.

The other horses, cropped with sheep-shears, threw envious side-glances at this blonde, streaming mane.

Around the proud team the hounds barked and yapped, baring their teeth, a few half-naked dayworker lads who, full of uncontrollable belligerence, pinched the wildly kicking horses in the leg.

Now I appeared, completely combed and washed, in a soldier's hat adorned with feathers, with proud gestures like a Prince setting out for heron hawking with a bevy of ladies. Not without a certain offendedness in my look, I blew my nose into grandmother's snuff-smelling handkerchief; but then I freed myself and walked out in front of the house.

Joyfully neighed the horses. Impetuously pulled the little blonde-maned stallion at the leading-rein; the hunters took up their positions, and off we went with huzzahs and halloos, the terrifying pack at the front, to the

forest of Mt. Freiherrenberg.

As we were thundering up towards the monastery, the team suddenly fell into disorder, and the smallest of the horses, Thommeli, began to cry his heart out and lamented: No, he wasn't doing this anymore; he rather wanted to go home; Wyseli kept hitting his legs with her shoes.

"The liar, the liar!" Wyseli shouted, her face flushed with anger. "I'm not wearing any shoes; I'm barefoot!"

"It still hurts; I'm going home!" Thommeli said sulkily.

"Well go, then!" said Wyseli. "Only because of such a boy, who the teacher once told at school: Thomas, go out, you've..." She broke off and then cried at the top of her lungs, "Pants-pooer, pants-pooer!"

Now Thommeli began to sob in earnest, and only by means of a little bit of rock candy, which I took, still nice and warm, out of my mouth, and ceremonially handed to him, was the little headstrong-turned horse to be kept in the team.

"Prrr! Gee up, gee up!" We flew on.

You see, not all that long a time before, our fathers, the hunters and sharpshooters of the forest-town, had hunted the famous Etzel-Bear in the forests on Hohenetzel. For a farmer had come and had brought the exciting news that he thought he had seen a large bear in Etzel Forest; at least, he swore he had definitely seen traces of it, at first as big as forest gloves, and then as big and deep as well-rooms. So then our brave fathers set out, without a second's hesitation, with flashing weapons and money in their pockets, to shoot the beast-killing and manslaying monster. Now they

did not, indeed, bring a bear back home; but they had, our mothers said, brought back a few mighty apes, real specimens fit for exhibition. And so: the glorious Etzel bear-hunt had fired the enthusiasm of us forest-boys and we therefore decided that we would shoot a bear likewise, in the nearby monastery-forest. The hunting sacrifice, the bear, ran along among the hunters.

We soon disappeared into the forest which immediately bordered the village. And now the wild gallop of the horses slackened to a leisurely trot; for we were going up through undergrowth and in among massive beech-trees to Cross Height. Suddenly, the high-spirited stallion began to sing:

“The cuckoo is whistlin’,
Ah’ll soon stop its ca’,
What’s this that ah’ve caught?
A wreath made o’ straw...”

And after that, it yodelled away in a high-soaring little voice with all the power in its lungs.

“No,” protested Franzeli, the foremost horse, “no, if Wyseli yodels, that spoils everything; horses don’t yodel, do they!”

“I won’t do this anymore if she keeps yodelling!” said Bläsi Rycheli.

“I won’t, either!”

“Nor I,” rang out on every side.

Wyseli had to keep her high-pitched little voice to herself; for she would have been very reluctant to quit her pleasant post as stallion in the team.

Now the hounds, which had been barking so loudly hitherto, began to collect beech-nuts, and suddenly we all, horse and hunter, hound and bear, forgetting everything else, eagerly got down to filling our trouser-pockets, which were only extremely rarely narrowed by room-robbing handkerchiefs, with the lovely dark-brown nuts. I believe we would have completely forgotten about the hunt in the end. Then someone shouted out, "A squirrel, a squirrel!"

This was a bombshell to us. The horses vamoosed and almost knocked me over. And all of a sudden we found ourselves at the foot of a massive beech-tree into whose red foliage the squirrel had disappeared. At first, some tried to capture the broad tree; but then the squirrel, that bold leaper, sprang from the wide-branched beech over onto another and laughed at us.

"Aren't we going on the bear-hunt now?" cried Estacheli Fridi.

Then we composed ourselves at once, and off we went, merrily up the forest; only that Thommeli began to bawl again and kept wailing, "Mother! Mother! Go home! Go home!" The dark forest gave him the creeps. At first I assuaged his growing fear with a peppermint drop, which I'd been able to grub out of the seam at the very bottom of my trouser pocket. Wyseli also promised him that she would give him such a lovely little ring as the one from a curtain she wore on her finger if he stopped crying. But that didn't keep back his stream of tears for long. He straight away began to rub his eyes with his sleeve and to quietly sob, and looked at all of our trouser pockets out of the corner of his eye; and as nothing more was going to come out of there, he became inconsolable and filled

the forest with a steady bawling. When we tried to win him over with consolations and pretty promises, it was only as if we had freshly oiled his pipes; for he instantly forced out notes in an arc: it was just like a fountain which you stop by pressing your thumb for a little while.

“No,” Wyseli said in the end, indignant, “a horse that keeps bawling like a lost sheep, we don’t want that.”

“No, ’course not! Thommeli can’t go with us anymore,” the other horses concurred.

Judgement had been passed on Thommeli. But how were we to get rid of him? We could not send him home on his own; he might miss the way...

“Hey, boys!” an old woman suddenly cried from behind a beech-tree; she was gathering leaves for a leaf-bed. “Help me fill this sack with leaves, and I’ll happily take Thommeli home with me.”

In a flash, we all had our hands full of leaves, and before a quarter of an hour had passed, the old woman had the sack full of leaves on her back and the incommoving little boy at her frock, and was staggering homewards.

We now galloped out of the forest and came into Schlosseren Meadow; there were several big potato-fields there.

“Boys,” cried Fridi, “there are potatoes here!”

“Yes,” I said, “if only we had potatoes! Then we could make a fire in Donkey Meadow on the Freiherrenberg, and some of us would have to roast the potatoes until the others came back from the hunt.”

“I want to roast potatoes!” cried Gusti.

“No, me! Me too, me too!” everyone shouted.

“Hey, we don’t have any, do we,” I said, “nor a match neither!”

“We do,” cried Fridi, “I have a match.”

He grubbed around in his trouser pockets and brought to light, among a handful of beech-nuts beside a half-eaten chestnut, which he quickly popped into his mouth and devoured, a small bundle of matches. Franzeli also had a few in his hand, together with some pieces of rattan, such as we gathered up behind the umbrella makers’ workshops and tended to smoke, with very mixed feelings, behind the left monastery-wall.

“Now we can make a fine fire,” I said, “if only we had potatoes now!”

“There are some there!” said Wyseli, pointing to the fields.

“But listen,” warned Kareli, “we mustn’t go rooting around; that’s stealing!”

“Oh,” said Seffeli with the torn shirt, superior-like, “look here! It’s not stealing at all, it’s just a trespass, father said, when you cut yourself a dry little stick and root for potatoes. A trespass is only a venial sin, father said. Since way back, people had gone into, for instance, Grandfather’s Wood, or some other road, and had sort of gathered up this and that from what was lying there, was beginning to spoil, or was superfluous.”

“Yes, that’s true, a trespass isn’t stealing!” Fridi now agreed in a loud voice, proud of his equally good knowledge.

“My father said it too one day in Schachen, when we were carrying peat away from the wrong place.”

“No-one will see it,” said Wyseli.

“Shall we?”

“Yes, let’s!”

And there we were among the potatoes, and before five minutes were over, everyone had a few potatoes in his pockets.

“Caw, caw!”

We bolted like greased lightning back into the forest, and although we now saw that it was only a passing crow which had given us such a terrible fright, no amount of money would have brought us back into the fields. Our little hearts beat wildly, and we looked at Fridi and Seffeli with distrust, almost antipathy. What if digging up potatoes was a real sin after all?

But our consciences did not remain uneasy for long.

“Now let’s go into Donkey Meadow, or we’ll *never* get there!”

someone cried, and soon we were running swiftly on and going ever higher up the forest.

Then we saw many massive blood-red mushrooms in the moss.

“We’ll take them with us too,” said Gusteli; “mushrooms are edible.”

“Whoa,” said Xandi, “they’re poisonous, don’t you know; all mushrooms are poisonous.”

“Including the ones,” a small boy in the First Class asked, “the teacher cleans the blackboard with?”¹

We all burst out laughing, and Wyseli furiously flew at the poor mushrooms and did not rest until she had trampled them all down with her fast little bare feet.

¹ In German, “Schwamm” means both “mushroom” and “sponge.”

We carried on with the hunt. Then the forest thinned out; now we were in Donkey Meadow all of a sudden, and deep below us lay the quiet, marshy-brown Sihl Valley, and in the far beyond Lake Greifen and a fragment of Lake Zürich glittered like spick and span mirrors.

There we stood in the cool shade, the sunlit world deep below us. How lovely it was! We wanted to make our camp here. We threw ourselves down in the meadow grass and looked into the distance with shining eyes.

“I see Lake Zürich!” someone cried.

“Hey, so do I!” sounded all around.

“Yes,” Geroldli now said, “if you look through your legs, Grandfather said, you’ll see the sea.”

“Oh, that’s not true at all!”

“Yes, it is true. After all, a grandfather must know for sure.”

In an instant we were all on our feet, and making a deep bow towards the edge of the forest, we enjoyed the happy prospect in this newfangled way through our legs.

“Yes,” someone said at length, “it’s true, I see the sea... It’s very blue.”

“Yes, I see it too,” someone else said, “it’s crackling blue, and a bearded vulture is flying towards it.”

We stared and stared in astonishment and everyone saw the sea. Except for Wyseli. For a long time, she had been struggling away in vain to see the world in the very same way as us, backwards and bent over; again and again, her red-and-white chequered frock came before her eyes. That made her furious, and gathering her frock up more boldly, and with

desperate effort, she finally succeeded in imitating our difficult lookout.

“Oh Geroldli, you liar!” she suddenly cried. “It’s not true at all that we see the sea; it’s only the sky, and it’s *not* a bearded vulture flying towards it, it’s only a crow!”

Deeply insulted, we sprang up. But actually, Wyseli had been right, and right she stayed: what we had seen was the blue sky and a crow passing over the valley. That made Wyseli rise considerably in our estimation. A very rare case; for usually, we despised girls as something unfathomably beneath us.

But we soon grew sick of looking down into the valley, and the bear-hunt began. The horses were set free and changed into courageous hunters and yapping hounds.

Wyseli had transformed from an angry stallion which kicked out all around into a splendid little Diana. Ivy was slung around her little breast, her frock was hitched up high, and she carried my yew bow in her hands, because she was to lead the hunters on the bear-hunt in my place.

For you see, I, and the bigger boys, preferred to make a fire and roast potatoes during the hunt. She, for her part, very proud of her new dignity, whistled through her fingers, piercing the air, and flew into the forest, courageous and desirous of great deeds, with her retinue, a little troop of small boys. The bear had, a while before, evaded the incipient pursuit by a double-quick flight into the thicket.

Wow, how Wyseli jumped over the hedge, her cheeks alight! Lord, how the pack howled! Soon the hunt was raging deeper inside the forest.

Then we, the rogues who had stayed behind, pulled out our

potatoes with a smirk. We quickly scraped off the venial sins sticking to them, and the remaining peaty soil, with pocket-knives² and coat-sleeves and laid the felonious fruit together in a neat little pile. Some boys now bounded into the wood to gather pine twigs and pine cones. Soon a big fire was burning in Donkey Meadow at the edge of the forest.

To make it smoke really strongly, we continually threw bundles of grass and whole armfuls of bracken into the fire, which made thick, brownish-yellow clouds, bestarred with ember sparks, roll out through the tops of the firs and high over the forest. It was unspeakably beautiful. Fridi and Franzeli amused themselves by repeatedly lighting their pieces of rattan, the so-called “woodvines,” at the fire, and smoking them in the sweat of their brow while utilising every last reserve of air in their lungs.

From afar came the sound of Wyseli’s exultant and order-giving little voice.

We had thrown the potatoes into the fire, onto the hot ashes, and we listened in silence to the singing and cracking of the dry twigs. Now we plotted a wretched, treacherous conspiracy and decided to eat up the potatoes as soon as they were done, before the hunters came home from their arduous chase. From this it can be seen how evil invariably begets evil. First the trespass with the potatoes, and now the black betrayal.

We anxiously listened for sounds from the forest. The hunt was still far away; the potatoes turned ever darker.

But now we heard, not all that far away, a terrible babble of voices

² Rollenhegel – a pocket-knife with a cylindrical handle.

going Boom! Boom! and the bang of the pistol and the horrible growling of the hounded, raging bear. The noise rapidly came closer. Now Boom! Boom! And then shouting and cheering that did not want to end. Aha, they must have bagged the monster. We started in alarm. It could not be much longer before they arrived with the bagged game. We quickly looked into the dying fire. Yippee, the potatoes were certainly almost done!

“They’re coming, they’re coming!” I said in a low voice. Now we reached as quick as lightning for pine twigs and began to rummage through the glowing ashes for baked potatoes. We raked them, poked them, and rolled them out into the grass and pricked up our ears. The hunting-expedition was rapidly approaching. The potatoes were beautifully browned but, alas, mostly still as hard as a stone axe. Ever closer rang out the hunters’ mort, the triumphant barking of the hounds. They would be here any moment. Oh, how we worked now! We plunged our bare hands into the ashes. The fiery-hot potatoes flew from one hand into the other as though we were conjurers. From all sides, we breathed and blew on them as though our lives depended on it, a ring-dance of snorting bellows. And at the same time we danced around the fire like Indians around the martyr’s stake. With contempt for death, like the famous fire-eaters at the fair, we bit into the black, still smouldering potato-skins and choked and forced the hard tubers down, as though we were all “Stunggisstüggel”, *vulgo* potato mashers.

In a short time, we looked, at the hands and face, like the ebony-coloured negroes from Upper Nubia or Inner Australia. Groaning and hopping from one leg to the other, we bared our freshly-painted chompers.

Inside, we must have looked like unswept factory chimneys. But the ashes seemed inexhaustible; again and again, often with howls and gnashing of teeth, we took out half-baked potatoes. And now we gave a start, and the glowing tubers disappeared into our pockets as quick as a flash.

Panting, red as a freshly-open wood anemone, Wyseli raced out of the forest. She brandished her yew-bow high in the air: “We have him, we have him!”

And we did indeed see, through the trunks, the group of huntsmen proudly advancing, and we saw the dead bear lying on their shoulders, its tongue hanging far out.

“Scoundrels, scoundrels!”

Wyseli yelled this out, piercing the air like the distress signal of a locomotive. We all stood there paralysed; paralysed stood the hunters with the bear, paralysed the dogs which had been raging so fiercely just before. For a moment only, Wyseli looked into the dying, plundered ashes with melancholy eyes; then she threw the bow far away and pounced, furiously shrieking, “They’ve stolen all the potatoes from us!” on me, who had just hidden a potato in my pocket.

The hunters, horrified, now let their kill splash into the moss, and they all threw themselves – with the bear, believed to be dead, at the front – upon the hot ashes.

But Wyseli clung to me wildly, and as I was not prepared for so furious an attack, she brought me to a fall, and a dogged grapple immediately began. My potato was ever more threatened, and now, truly, I felt Wyseli’s nimble hand already in my trouser-pocket. However much I

resisted and struggled, my lovely black-burned potato, perhaps the loveliest of all, seemed lost to me.

Then a dreadful scream rent the air.

Half-dead with terror, we started up.

What was that? Everyone looked with staring eyes towards the stable in Donkey Meadow, which Sesseli was pointing to with outstretched arm.

There, standing in the stable door, was a sinister white figure without a head.

“A ghost!” one of us cried.

Gee up! We flew, rolled, and tumbled down the Freiherrenberg, like hares tearing down a slope, and we did not rest or stop until we came to the fowling-floor near the highroad.

Silent, with shudders now pleasantly running through our bodies at the fright we had come through, we looked up at the uncanny stable. And although a part of our hunting equipment still lay up there in the forest heights of the Freiherrenberg, we would not have dared to take a single step towards it. We even abandoned the potatoes, which had rolled out of our pockets in our hurried retreat.

“It was a ghost,” Franzeli said at last with frightened eyes.

“Yes,” we all agreed in low voices, “it was a ghost!”

“It didn’t have a head!”

“No, it had no head...”

A long pause, and continual staring up in astonishment at the mysterious meadow-stable.

“Oh, it couldn’t have done anything to me,” Wyseli now said, becoming braver; “I’m an Our Lady’s child.” She lifted her blouse a little in the breast region, and we could see a small medallion that she was wearing around her neck. We all stared at Wyseli in envious wonder.

“Yes, it can’t do anything to an Our Lady’s child,” Kareli agreed self-importantly. The Our Lady’s child haughtily pursed her lips and theatrically shook her flaxen hair.

“If you say, ‘God comfort the poor souls in Purgatory, God give all Christian believers everlasting rest, and the eternal light shine for them!’” said Geroldli, “then ghosts can’t do you any harm.”

“I know now what we’ll do,” I said all of a sudden. “Listen, I have a cousin in the monastery, and he can drive evil spirits away and exorcise them, my grandmother says, because he’s the Mal-, the Mally -, because he’s the Mally-fix Father.”³

Now I was clearly the object of boundless admiration. The Our Lady’s child and even Geroldli with his short prayer for the Poor Souls were no match for that. Everyone stared at me in wonder: His cousin in the monastery is a Mally-fix Father!

I swelled up. “You know what, boys, we’ll tell him!”

Yes, certainly, we should tell him, they all agreed, so he would banish this white monster from the stables in the meadow, otherwise, one wouldn’t be able to walk in the monastery forest any more.

³ “Malifixpater”, properly “Malefizpater” – a Capuchin Monk who has the power to drive away all evil.

“Then go and tell him; we’ll wait here until he comes,” said Franzeli.

“Oh no,” I said, rather more dejected now, “I’m not going on my own; somebody must come with me.”

It wasn’t entirely clear to the hunting party why two were necessary to communicate a message. The companions of the chase didn’t know that I was supposed to have gone to my cousin in the monastery today instead of going out hunting, to take a preliminary test with him on the acolyte’s prayers, which I had promised him I would learn. You see, when I began to recite the short Latin prayer to myself, the saying that I had heard from some wicked servers kept coming into my mouth with constant malice: “Laus tibi Christi!⁴ – Lauf, Tüfel, oder i friß di!”⁵

“Franzeli, you come with me!”

“Nope,” said Franzeli, hesitantly and anxiously. “I’ll rather wait for you; perhaps, perhaps someone has told your cousin, the Mally-fix Father, about the potatoes we dug out –”

At first, I had thought that everyone would want to come with me; now, Franzeli’s misgivings had the effect that they all started coming up with every possible kind of excuse to save their bacon, until suddenly Wyseli leapt up from the grass and said, “Meiredli, I’ll come with you!”

“Fine by me, come on!”

So we swore the remain-behinders to be good and wait for us on the fowling-floor, and we made off, Wyseli and I, over the Brüel to the

⁴ “Praise to thee, O Christ!”

⁵ “Out, Devil, or I’ll eat thee!”

monastery.

The large gate to the Student Courtyard was open. Actually, in those days there were no closed doors in the monastery for us forest-boys.

In harmony, hand in hand, we strolled through the courtyard in which the Mother of God and the father Saint Joseph look down on you from niches in the wall. Then we went through a long passage; we came into the large garden behind the Confession House and ran towards the Brothers' Garden.

Suddenly a thought flashed through my mind. I stopped and looked at Wyseli with great anxiety.

"Come on," she said, "Why're you running so slowly?"

"Oh," I said, utterly dejected, "you can't come with me to my cousin after all. Women are not allowed in the monastery, where the men of God are."

Wyseli flushed. She came very close to making a wry face. All the corners of her mouth twitched, ready for tears. But then she said, in a low voice, "Ha – I'm not a woman."

"But you are," I said, "when you wear a skirt."

She could not think of any other objections now, but stood there, blood-red all over.

She felt terribly ashamed at being a woman and not even being allowed into the monastery to the Brothers. With troubled eyes, she looked down at her suspicious dress. So that was to blame for her being one of those. Perhaps skirts were like toads and they gave you the mange if you touched them in a monastery. She felt unspeakably ashamed.

“So go now, Wyseli!” I ordered as gently as possible. “You can wait for me at the Lady’s Fountain in front of the monastery, and I’ll go to my cousin on my own.”

All of a sudden, a defiant little fire flared up in the girl’s eyes.

“No,” she said, “I’m coming with you!”

“No, you can’t!”

“Yes, I will!”

She pressed forward towards the Brothers’ Garden, and when I desperately held on to her skirt, she hit and scratched my hands, crying. Now I began to cry too, and so, howling, we scrapped around with each other. Finally, she broke away and made a bee-line for the Brothers’ Garden.

“Then wait, wait, Wyseli; I’m coming too!” I cried.

She disappeared in the passage to the Brothers’ Garden.

When I rushed into it likewise, full of worry and fear, I saw her standing in the archway, pressed up close against the wall, timidly looking into the Garden of the Novices, which was supposed to be proscribed for her.

What mysterious things might be living and moving in there, she wondered?

Now she heard my footsteps. She gave a loud shriek, bounded wildly into the garden, and then she was gone.

She had surely thought that the footsteps came from a monastic brother who wanted to apprehend her for a severe reckoning.

So there I stood, looking around the garden. It was a magnificent

tree-garden. No sign of Wyseli. Now I went looking behind all the tree-trunks, I looked up into all the treetops. No Wyseli. She had completely vanished. Or had she run into the summerhouse, which stood in among the trees? I hesitantly ventured inside. There was nobody in there. So I went out again. I found no sign of the little one. Then I took the plunge and cried: "Wyseli!"

No reply.

Once again: "Wyseli!"

"Yes," said a quiet voice from somewhere or other. However, although I searched everywhere in the garden, I could not find the girl. So I made my way into the summerhouse again.

"Wyseli!"

"I'm here," came in a tearful tone from under the long, circular bench.

"Well, come on out!" I said.

"No, I can't," she said pitifully.

"No-one's going to do you any harm."

"They will, they will; when they catch me, they'll surely lock me up in the monastery cellar!"

"Oh, you silly! Why, there's nobody here. So come on out!"

"I can't," she said now with weakly suppressed, bitter sobs.

"What, for Heaven's sake, is going on in here?"

A monk was suddenly standing in the entrance to the dim summerhouse. I started with horror. But Wyseli kept as quiet as a little mouse who notices the cat before her hole.

“Hey, little boy, tell me, what are you doing here?”

I could have shouted out for joy. From the voice, I recognised my cousin the Mally-fix Father. And now the light fell on his serious face. I was comforted.

“Oh!” I said, talkative all of a sudden, “we wanted to come to you, Wyseli and I, because there’s a ghost in Donkey Meadow and you can drive ghosts away, grandmother said, because you’re the Mally-Fix Father. And once there was a man, grandmother told me, and he was a Capuchin. And he went up a high mountain one day, where there was an enchanted forest... You know, a forest is enchanted when everything inside it is bewitched, the birds, the trees, the leaves... And so the Capuchin went up a high, high mountain...”

“Quiet, stop, Meiredli! Stop, you’re deafening me, you... Why, what is this? Who just coughed under the bench there?”

“Ha, who else but Wyseli!” I said.

“Wyseli?” the old Father drawled out. “A girl... Now, how did she come to be under the bench there?”

“Ha,” I said, “she just slipped under it.”

Now my cousin laughed out loud and then genially commanded, “Child, just you come on out; nobody will harm you.”

Then Wyseli came creeping out from under the bench, covered all over with dust and cobwebs with tousled curls and a tear-stained, intimidated little face. This was how she appeared before the Father, a picture of misery, and stammered, gulping and sobbing: “P-praised be Je-Jesus Christ!”

“For ever, Amen!” the monastic brother replied with a smile, and he led both of us out into the open.

“Are you going to lock her up now?” I asked, full of trepidation.

“Lock her up?” the old gentleman said in surprise.

“Mother put this skirt on me,” sobbed Wyseli.

“What nonsense is this you’re talking, children?”

Now I puffed myself up and explained to him the reason for our visit to the monastery as well as Wyseli’s fear. For a moment, the Father’s face grew serious; but when I kept bringing up the terrible white monster without a head in Donkey Meadow, which had by now swollen up to the height of a house, the old, winning smile passed over his features again, and he said, stroking Wyseli’s blonde hair, “What do you say, Wyseli, isn’t Meiredli a stupid boy for believing such ghost stories? You and I, Wyseli, the two of us don’t believe in that, do we?”

I was gobsmacked; paralysed with astonishment. And he was supposed to be the “Mally-fix Father,” the man who spoke in this way about a spirit which I’d seen with my own eyes. For a fair while, I wasn’t able to recover from my amazement. My clerical cousin was so disbelieving, the Mally-fix Father, the Mally-fix Father! In the end, he didn’t even believe in portents for the dying. I was just about to interrogate him when the vesper bells began to ring for Vespers.

“Now be good, children, and go back where you came from!”

He took two brown doughnuts out of his wide habit pocket and handed one to each of us. “The bells are ringing for Vespers! And stay good! The ghost in Donkey Meadow must surely have been a white cloth

or some other thing. Just go there again and dare to take a brave look into the stable; you'll see then that this whole ghost story is simply your imaginations working overtime. Now go in God's name!"

So this was the degree of disbelief my clerical cousin had come to! I was speechless. And upset at his contemptuous words, but well consoled, on the other hand, by his sweet doughnuts, we immediately left – Wyseli broke into a gentle gallop straight away once outside the Brothers' Garden – the monastery.

But when we came to the fowling-floor, we found the hunting party was no longer there. They had all, long since weary of waiting, gone away home. We did likewise.

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On the next day, as the Mally-fix Father showed himself unwilling, we determined on going to an old church-tramp, to Seppetrudie, who had the reputation of knowing more and being able to do more than other people.

Seppetrudie provided us with all kinds of good counsels, recipes and countercharms from her witch's kitchen for an infallible attack on the ghost in Donkey Meadow.

And so we marched, well provided with secular and spiritual weapons, up Donkey Meadow towards the stables. My disbelieving cousin, the Mally-fix Father, was to be brilliantly convinced, and the evil spirit driven out for all eternity in spite of him and without him.

Apart from spears, wooden swords, stone-slingers, bows, and the aforementioned little pistol, we had made ourselves invulnerable with

“Amadelens”, amulets which the Capuchins habitually gave us. And we intended, following the old church-tramp’s advice, to go for the monster with holy water. Franzeli carried a medicine bottle full of Easter water in his hand, Geroldli an inkwell full of Epiphany water. A few boys had armed themselves with consecrated beech-twigs coming from the feast of Corpus Christi. Little Seffeli panted along with a long pole, which pulled him now to the left, now to the right. A few prickly palms from Palm Sunday still hung from it. As for me, I had a piece of charcoal, safely contained in my pocket, from the woodpile in which Judas had been burnt before the church on Easter Saturday, as happened every year. In short, we couldn’t go wrong; we were well insured and equipped. The old church-tramp decided in the end, plagued by curiosity, to come along with us, and she promised us to lay the evil spirit with her even eviller tongue.

Her accompanying us raised our morale considerably, and so we moved, albeit ever more hesitantly, towards the stables in Donkey Meadow.

And we heard a noise in the stable.

That brought the offensive to an immediate halt, and I clutched the charcoal in my trouser-pocket more tightly. We might have been, together with the devout old maid, on the point of taking to our heels, when, to our utter horror, we saw Wyseli approaching the stable absolutely fearlessly, holding a consecrated beech-twig out before her. What we would hardly have done, or done only in a large company, Wyseli dared to do in boundless trust in her being an Our Lady’s child and in the magic of her divinely-blessed beech-twig.

Wide-eyed, holding our breath, we stared after the girl.

Now she walked with hesitant, ever shorter steps towards the open door. We saw her blanch, and the twig she was holding far out before her trembled in her hand. Now she came up to the stable wall, quickly positioned herself beside the door, moved her blonde head, and moved it again, and finally took a furtive look into the stables.

Suddenly she gave a joyful shout, leapt boldly over the threshold, and was to be seen no more.

We held our breath, almost dying from anxiety, and curiously anticipating what was to happen next.

Suddenly we heard Wyseli's courageous voice; there was a crashing and a clattering in the stable; our hair stood on end like salt grass, and now – our legs were bent ready to run away – something white appeared under the door; and behold, there was Wyseli riding on an old, snow-white horse over the stable threshold, and she cried, her cheeks bright-red: "Gee up, gee up, horse!" and struck its sides with the consecrated beech-twig.

We were flabbergasted!

The old horse with the haughty little rider clip-clopped a little way into the meadow, then it gently bedded her down in the high ferns before leisurely making its way back into its stable.

We brought Wyseli back to the village in triumph and had, from then on, a terrific respect for her, although she wasn't even a boy. She later became a far greater enchantress than even the old church-tramp, Seppetrudie.