

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Paul Keller (1873-1932)

The Most Precious Thing (from *In Deiner Kammer*, [In Your Room] 1903)

The Ship of St. Nicholas (from *Das Niklasschiff*, 1907)

The Jumping-Jack (from *Das Niklasschiff*, 1907)

The Most Precious Thing

The whole world was so dreamily grey. Happiness, when it brings dreams, paints its images with the colour of the aether or with the flames of the dawn sky. But anyone who walked through this semi-cold, dead air, through which only a few lonely crows sailed and a snowflake trembled down here and there, felt himself shiver and came to no happy dream. And had he been a man free from care, he would still have had to escape to the light of the stove fire, escape from the all-powerful melancholy outside, before the shaken happiness in his heart could once again find calm and raise a smile.

A crow alights on the rotten signpost which stands at the crossroads up on the crest of the hill, and a bit of snow crumbles down onto the boy who is sitting on the milestone at its base. He straightens up a little and the black bird flies away.

To the left, a valley, to the right, a valley; to the left, the village where the church and the school are, to the right, the wide wood with the mill at its edge. Jacob was a bad person, after all; he had stolen a dollar only recently. He was chased out this morning, though he had been at the mill

for five years. But the new one finds out everything.

Jacob – yes, yes! But he was a good acquaintance all the same and told him many things. About the Christ-child¹ too.

“George, don’t be daft, there’s no Christ-child! I’ve fetched the Christmas-tree from the forest every year, and the other stuff is from the market in the town.”

That was what Jacob said, and also: Everything was always kept in the large old cupboard in the attic, to which the new one now had the key.

If only he didn’t have to say Mother! She *isn’t* his mother! A new wife for his father, that’s what she is – nothing more!

“But now these three things remain: faith, hope, and love; but the most precious thing is love.”

That is written in silver letters on a small black tablet on the wall at home. Why does he think of that just now? For he had been thinking about the new one, who has been at the mill only four weeks and whom he does not love. He loved his real mother, but she died.

How greyly the sky stretches over the churchyard! Only the tall fir-trees which stand there look beautiful. Do the dead know everything that happens on earth, I wonder?

If so, whatever may mother think of father!

She has been dead barely a year. When she died, father cried as if his heart would break and wailed louder than he, George, had done; and barely a year later he married the new one. The wedding was four weeks

¹ “Christkind” – the traditional Christmas gift-bringer in many parts of Europe.

ago. There wasn't any dancing but there was great merriment. Only he was not merry, certainly not merry. His new clothes were very handsome and he wore gaiters for the first time in his life, but that was the only good thing. Otherwise – he felt so uneasy all the time, and there was a sticking in his throat like the time he got diphtheria. All the people wanted to pat him, and he was ill-mannered to everyone. At table the new one put sweets in his mouth; then she wanted to draw him close to her. But then he couldn't stand it anymore, he started to howl and said his teeth were hurting from the sweets. And he ran out, a short distance into the wood. There he cried loud and long. He kept wanting to run to the churchyard and tell his mother in her grave that there was a wedding at the mill, but he did not go. Then he was terribly cold, and he thought he must be very ill. So he went into his little bedroom and crept under the covers in his new clothes. He prayed most fervently that the dear Lord might just let him die; and then he fell asleep.

The sound of sleigh bells rings over from the far distance. George stands up. It could turn out to be father, who drove to town today, and he would be surprised and would keep on asking why George was coming back from school so late. The half-hour after it finished is probably long past.

The boy straightens his school-satchel and then he turns his eyes down to the churchyard. These eyes with all their defiant devotion and their deep child's sorrow. His half-benumbed hand searches in his pocket and pulls out a small coloured handkerchief. He waves down with it. In earlier days, he always waved with his handkerchief at the same place, but in the

other direction, towards the mill, where his mother was at the window.

While climbing down, he thinks again that there is said to be no Christ-child. A great bitterness takes hold of him. So why did they always kid him with this, why was it always so very wonderful, and what on earth is Christmas Eve for?

The bitterness turns into resentment, and this turns against his new mother, not against the servant who is to blame for his sorrow. Suddenly his features brighten. – Yes, yes, he'll do that, that will annoy her! And he quickens his steps to the mill. –

The new mother is a beautiful, quiet woman. She had been in a convent in her girlhood and had learned much. She is busy in the mill from dawn to dusk.

She does not ask George why he has come home so late. The servants have already eaten their lunch, but she has been waiting for the boy. Father is not yet back from the town.

They eat their midday meal in silence. Since that last time, she does not speak much with George anymore, does not put any more sweets in his mouth, but she is always friendly to him. Today she casually remarks:

“It won't be long now till the Christ-child comes.”

George puts his spoon aside. He leans back in his chair, lets his head drop down low over his chest, and begins to swing his legs.

“There's *no* Christ-child,” he mutters defiantly. Startled, the young woman looks at the child.

“There – is no Christ-child?”

“No, I know it!”

“Since when have you known?” escapes the other’s lips.

“Since you’ve been here!”

“Well, well,” the young miller’s wife chokes out before going to the kitchen. She soon returns.

“Who put that into your head?” she asks.

The boy does not answer straightaway, then he says defiantly:

“Jacob told me.”

“So, Jacob? And who told you beforehand that there *is* a Christ-child?”

“Who? I – I – don’t exactly know but – I think, my mother.”

“Your mother? Well, in that case you must believe Jacob more than your mother.”

The boy sat as if turned to stone. On the last stretch of the way home he had thought it up so marvellously, how he could annoy her, and now? Jacob and his mother! But there is something more he must say:

“Jacob said I could fetch the Christmas-tree from the forest quite easily myself.”

“Yes, my boy, you can do that, and indeed, you will have to do that if you want to have one, because the Christ-child does not come to children who do not believe in him.”

And she goes back into the kitchen. The boy is alone. He pushes his plate back and props his arms on the table. And he stares, motionless, out the window on which white snowflakes are falling.

If he knew, if he knew for sure! Her out there, she doesn’t say yes and doesn’t say no! His real mother would definitely say “yes!” – yes, yes,

yes! – But – if Jacob would just come back!

How it racks him, the young sceptic! The storm that is going through his tender soul is not perhaps as deadening as the one that passes through an older heart in which a belief is foundering, but it is just as cold. Why do we all want so badly to deceive ourselves, why are all so eager to barter at the market stalls of life? And why do we all place more trust in the crafty dealer's face than in the rustic, warning voice which echoes to us from the solitude of our home, admonishing caution!

Outside a sleigh bell rings. Father is coming. George does not want to meet him now. So he goes out and creeps off into some corner.

While the miller, having returned home, consumes his midday meal, his young wife sits opposite him.

“Jacob was a real knave,” she says, “not only did he steal from you, at all events steal for years while your sickly wife was confined to the parlour, he has also sinned against George.”

The miller looks up in surprise.

“George no longer believes that there is a Christ-child, and he wants to fetch his Christmas-tree from the forest himself.”

The miller shakes his head, but takes the matter more lightly. “Oh well, he's going to find out one day,” he says.

“One day, certainly, but not so suddenly and not right now. George is nine years old. That is not, in general, an age at which children should know everything. And George in particular. He's an idiosyncratic boy. Your wife devoted much of her time to him. In his way, he is much more mature than all the other boys. The forest has played a big part in that, and his

always being so alone and not keeping company with other children. If such a beautiful belief is suddenly torn from him now – that is not good, Henry. Especially in his case. All of that ought to have come little by little and much later, so he would not have noticed a thing. And I – I had been so looking forward to Christmas Eve, and I thought we – would come together. – But I don't want to burden your mind, the mother must take care of this kind of matter.”

The miller gives his wife his hand across the table. After a little while, the wife asks:

“How is business going on?”

The miller scratches his ears. In the last few years, his affairs have gone downhill fast. His wife's long illness contributed greatly to this, and if he had not married again, he would certainly have sailed onto the rocks. So he was very happy to have got Anna. He did think that she was a little too refined for him, but she was extraordinarily capable and had a kind of general idea of things which missed nothing and which he himself lacked. Her money, admittedly, her father had tied up, because he knew how things stood with the miller.

“It's not exactly good,” he now says, “you know, I just lack the necessary.”

She looks at him with clear eyes.

“I shall give the necessary, Henry. I am of age, and I'll sort things out with my father. But only the necessary. As for the rest, it must pick up by itself, and I would like to use the interest from the other money for George. I would like him to go to school in the town in a year or two; he's so

talented, and it would be a crying shame if he didn't go."

The miller is a prosaic man, but at this moment water is flooding his eyes.

"Anna, I don't know who has gained more from you, I or the boy."

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It is night. Usually, George falls asleep soon after going to bed, but today he lies with his eyes open. It is so dark in his bedroom. And when something stirs, he timorously lifts his head a little off the pillow and stares at the door with wide-open eyes. He keeps thinking that it is bound to open and the Christ-child will walk in and look at him with angry eyes.

The Christ-child, in whom he will not believe...

The boy's brow is burning. Today he has done something very wrong for the first time: downstairs, he pocketed a piece of candle and a key. If he has the key and the candle, then he can get to the bottom of everything, the little sceptic thinks. But now he is afraid to use them nonetheless. The cupboard-door he intends to open could creak, and the light could be noticed downstairs. And father has strictly forbidden anyone to enter the loft with a naked flame. He would punish him severely if he caught him. Indeed, the rotten woodwork could catch fire, the entire mill could burn down, and he himself could suffocate in the flames.

But he might still find out.

Suddenly the boy is standing out of his bed. He throws on some clothes and then he rubs a lucifer against a floorboard. When the candle has begun to burn, George takes a deep breath. Cautiously he opens his bedroom door. He must walk down a long corridor. His heart beats

uncontrollably loudly, and the candle trembles in his hand. The objects on the walls cast long, ghostly shadows; the wind shakes the roof and fades away, quietly whistling, into the forest. In the corner there, not far from the staircase, is the cupboard of which Jacob spoke. It is said to be almost a hundred years old. The boy convulsively holds the cumbersome old key with his right hand while melting tallow drips onto his trembling left hand. Now the key is in the lock; and now the door opens. It creaked, and George turns towards the staircase, listening. All is silent as the grave. Then he lets a little tallow drop onto one of the wooden floorboards and firmly sticks the candle in it. And now he begins to rummage through the cupboard with feverish hands. At the top, old clothes are hanging, but under these lie several packages and boxes. He opens the first box, there is an old muff of his late mother inside; in the second, father's fur-cap; in the third, a few lined winter-shoes, also from his mother's time. The packages likewise contained trivial things: wool, a number of patches of cloth, an old clothes-line.

Nothing!

But in the drawer at the bottom – there, certainly. The boy begins to pull the drawer but it does not budge. This makes him twice as eager, and he exerts himself to the utmost. Whatever is it with the old drawer? It cannot have warped, and it does not have a lock. He grips it again, and now he pulls so hard that his face turns dark red. Then – a soft hand is laid on his brow. With a cry George falls onto his back. A white figure is standing beside him.

“He- help! Christ-chi-Id!”

“Don’t shout, George, or father will hear!”

It is his new mother.

George gets up and cowers at the woman’s feet. He is trembling all over and cannot manage a single word. Shame and fear are coursing through him all at once. What will she do to him?

“Just be calm, George,” she says quietly. “I only want to show you how to get this drawer out. You see, at the back here, on the cupboard floor, there is a wooden pin. You must pull it out first, or it will hold the drawer fast.”

She pulls out the wooden pin and grasps the candle.

“What are you going to do?” pants the boy.

“I’m going to light you, my boy,” she says kindly. “There, the drawer is open now, so look! And very early tomorrow morning, while father is still asleep, come down into the kitchen, I’ll give you the bunch of keys, and you can look through all the cupboards and drawers.”

“I don’t want to look anymore,” says the boy, covering his face with his hands. And he kneels, trembling, before the young woman. The faint gleam of the candle illuminates the group. The tender female eyes are fixed on the boy with boundless benevolence.

“You’re cold, George, would you like to go to bed now?”

“Yes.”

She gently pulls him up; he does not resist. Then she places an arm round his shoulders and slowly escorts him back up the long corridor. In the bedroom she waits until he is back in bed. Then she bends over him.

“Will you tell father”? he timidly asks.

She shakes her head with a smile. Then she kisses him on the brow. A blissful shiver runs through the child's body. And now it is dark. She has gone – imperceptibly quietly.

On the next day, George walks around like one in a dream. He feels very miserable. He has not been able to look at the “new one.” He is in a very curious mood with regard to her. She has been very kind to him, but it chafes him that he had to feel so ashamed in front of her. He feels his defeat and her easy, smiling victory. Why was he in such a hurry to ask her not to say anything to father? That was very stupid of him; for there would have been nothing more than a beating, and even that only in the worst case. Now she will always think he had her to thank for everything.

And then – about the Christ-child. Does he know now? No, he only knows that there are no presents inside the old cupboard and probably not in the other drawers or cupboards either, as the new one was willing to give him the bunch of keys. He knows absolutely nothing.

In the afternoon he begins to feel uneasy in the sitting-room. Because father is in the mill, he must be alone with the new one. So he decides to go out into the forest which belongs to his father's estate. He states his wish with difficulty. The new one nods.

“Yes, George,” she says and bends down low over her sewing.

The light hatchet which usually has its place in the woodshed is lying in the hallway. George wonders who could have put it there, and for a moment it occurs to him that he could use the hatchet, as he intended to fetch his Christmas-tree by himself. But he leaves it lying there.

As he walks over the frozen mill-pond, he wonders what he actually

wants to do in the snow-covered forest. However, nothing comes to his mind except that he might see a deer. It is a large mill-pond with very lovely ice. He could skate on it, like the boys in the village do; but he does not want to. That kind of thing seems stupid and dangerous to him, and his mother really did not want him to play with other children. She said the very best and most pleasant place to be was with her in the mill. And that was true.

It is well that he is wearing long boots, for the snow lies very deep. He wades slowly and cautiously onwards, and only by the large oak-tree does he stand still a while. His mother often sat here in summer and he beside her. Yes, he even made a poem on the tree one time, it was about a thunderstorm and at the end “Leiche” [*dead body*] rhymed with “Eiche” [*oak*]. His good mother liked it very much, and now he has to say it softly to himself.

Through the white and brown branches there is a shimmer of green. That is the fir-copse. The boy must stop and take deep breaths. – There are the – Christmas-trees. The big question is just: who decorates them – the Christ-child or one’s parents? Tormenting doubt overtakes him again, and it is curious that, in this, he always thinks only of Jacob and not of his mother.

He approaches slowly. He now clearly feels that he would not be able to fell a young fir-tree after all. But he will look at them. And as he comes closer, he suddenly stops still as if paralysed, his face turns pale as the snow, his eyes flare up ... bigger ... bigger ... then they suddenly go out ... and the boy ... falls slowly down ... into the snow.

Ten paces before him is a Christmas-tree with colourful lights and golden tinsel, with red apples and shimmering confectionery, a Christmas-tree with an angel and a crown, a Christmas-tree without a wooden stand, firmly rooted in the forest floor ...

A female figure flits out of the darkness of the trees and gathers up the unconscious boy. She is not strong and trembles violently, but she carries the child away, and it is not far to the mill ...

The snow-dusk shines in through the window in an uncertain light.

The boy lies in a deep sleep. On the edge of his bed sits the young woman; she has her hands folded and looks continuously into the child's flushed face. Over the bed there hangs a small photograph ... depicting George's mother.

The light is too dim for the young woman to precisely distinguish the features of the portrait. She does not even know if those eyes are content or angry. But her young soul trembles before the magnitude of her responsibility, and she wants to talk ... to render account ... to the other woman.

The young miller's wife is too simple a woman to find words for the sensitive dictates and instincts of her heart which have guided her. So she can only talk with her heart while she sits there with folded hands and looks over at the small portrait on the wall. He is so lonely, so tender, so dreamy, this boy. He is such a clever child who holds fast to a new ray that shines into his soul and whose thoughts develop it continually. And then his deep, sick melancholy. If the boy who still waves over and thinks over to the churchyard were to have his childhood taken from him, when there

is nothing to replace it, nothing, and he had to bear his immense loss in his heart together with the deep grief of losing his mother, that would be far too much for the young soul; and it not being all that strong, the seeds of hate and pessimism would be scattered in it along with the seeds of a wild profusion of weeds.

No, no! ...

When, in the future, his beautiful belief in the Christ-child founders, he must be strong and calm ... he must first have a mother again, who leads him ... guides him ... knows how to comfort him.

And right now, he has no mother.

The young miller's wife shakes her head at the portrait.

"I won't take him from you ... listen ... I just want to love him."

A star rises outside in the grey snow-sky. Then the agitated young wife becomes calmer. The boy tosses and turns in bed, and suddenly he begins to speak in the voice of an anxious dreamer:

"The Christ-child ... I ... I ... believe in him, I do, I believe in him ... believe in him ... The cupboard is empty ... The Christmas-tree is ... in the forest ... and the Christ-child doesn't come to the children who don't believe in him anymore ... Jacob ..."

Filled with pity, the young woman bends over the child and kisses him so intensely that he opens his eyes.

The boy stares up in alarm, then he shudders and presses the quilt to his face. After a while he begins to weep bitterly. The miller's wife gives him time. Then he asks:

"Are you very angry with me?"

“I? Why should I be, George?”

“Because I ... because I didn’t believe in the Christ-child.”

“And now, George?”

“Now I believe in him ... out in the forest there’s a Christmas-tree.”

“Yes, my boy. I’ve seen it too.”

“You?”

“Well, I found you there.”

“You found me? ... I’d have died otherwise!”

And he crawls back into his bed, shuddering. Then he begins anew.

“He’ll never come to me again.”

“The Christ-child, you mean?”

“Yes, because I didn’t believe in him.”

“He will come, my child, I shall pray for you.”

A deep, long pause. Then the boy asks, in heavy apprehension:

“Who can ... ask for something like that ... for such ... children?”

“Who, George, who?”

The question comes quavering from the woman’s lips, and two eyes alight with a compelling sparkle bend over the child. Then the boy cries out:

“Their mother!”

And he hangs around her neck.

A blissfully happy Christmas evening came to the mill. The Christmas-tree was radiant, the Christmas-tree from the forest. The boy, happy now, is in his bedroom. He has been given so much for Christmas, and given precisely that which he had wished for the most, and which he

had thought nobody knew about. But the Christ-child knows everything... he firmly believes that...

The miller is happy also. This very day, he has such fine plans for the mill and for the boy ... So much new hope!

The young miller's wife is now alone in the sitting-room. The festive radiance has gone out; there is only a night light burning in her hand. From the wall, the silver letters on a black plaque shine down to her. Abashed, she casts down her eyes, and finally closes them; but she sees the writing even through her lowered lids:

“But now these three things remain: faith, hope, and love; but the most precious thing is love.”

The Ship of St. Nicholas

A Reminiscence of Childhood

Saint Nicholas never came to me. But he came every year to our neighbour's son, rich Mill-Charles. He would then show me in school, every 7th of December, the lovely things he had got as presents.

I must say that I bore St. Nicholas a grudge. Even though my clever aunt had told me:

“You see, we have such a little house, so it's quite possible that St. Nicholas doesn't see it. For he is an old man, you know.”

I accepted this for a number of years, but when I was ten I decided to go and stand by the road to lie in wait for St. Nicholas, and to draw his attention to our house.

He always came around 7.30, Charles had told me. Good, around 7.30 I was standing by the road before the mill with my eyes peeled.

“Mr. Nicholas,” I was going to say, “please, I live over there! In that little house there, with the chestnut-tree in front! If you go up to the chestnut tree, you’ll see the house all right. I know the catechism even better than Charles does, and I won a prize in the school exam and he didn’t!”

That’s what I intended to say. I had thought long about this speech and knew it by heart.

Oh, it was one of those fine speeches that are never given. For when St. Nicholas really came, a tall man with a wild, unruly, long beard, with a shaggy fur-skin turned inside-out and a straw-rope for a belt, my courage failed me, and I almost died from fright behind the lattice-fence, where I was hiding, when he went past.

Only when he was far away did I get all my courage back and cry like one possessed:

“Mr. Nicholas! – Mr. Nicholas! – I live over there – in the little house there – by the lime- no, by the chestnut-tree – listen, by the chest-nut-tree!”

He did not turn round, he disappeared into the mill.

I trembled all over, and tears of anger welled up in my eyes.

I was going to get nothing this year also. That was obvious! For St. Nicholas had muffled up his ears.

Besides – I had forgotten the two most important things, catechism and the school-prize.

That night I lay awake in bed for a long, agonising quarter of an

hour. I knew that I would never be happy again in life. But then came the great Comforter who knows how to lie so delightfully – Sleep. He erased my sorrows and put sweet bliss in their place. He told me I had received two tin soldiers from St. Nicholas, a blue one and a red one.

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The next day, Mill-Charles had indeed brought a whole load of things to school with him once again. At first I didn't want to look at any of it, but when he placed a small wooden ship on the school-bench, that was the end of my self-control.

Oh, it was a sweet, sweet little ship! It had a mast and two sails, why, even a small iron anchor. On its side was the name of the ship:

“St. Nicholas!”

I remember to this day how I suddenly laid my head on the school-bench and began to weep bitterly. The other children laughed at first, then they talked to me; finally, one of them ran over to the teacher, who was breakfasting in his sitting-room.

For it was a village school and lessons had not begun yet.

I did not tell the teacher the reason for my tears. But I stopped crying. A wild defiance came over me. On that day I didn't let Mill-Charles copy my sums, and when he took a beating, I was pleased.

A beating! That's what his ship got him! St. Nicholas should just have peeked through the window to see his beloved Mill-Charles lying over the chair while I sat so proudly on the bench and had a slate on which every answer was correct!

Oh, I was on the road to becoming a bad person! I did not even feel

any pangs of conscience when, on the way home, in spite of everything that had happened, Charles amiably invited me to float the little ship on the mill-stream with him that afternoon.

No, I turned him down rudely. Indeed, I said something more, which only the deep bitterness in my heart could have made me think:

“In any case, we’re enemies with you! For my grandfather had a lawsuit with your father about the well and my grandfather had to pay everything though he was innocent.”

The enmity between the old ones led to enmity between the children. What I said about the lawsuit was right. For we shared a well with the Miller’s family, and where there’s a shared well, there will have to be a lawsuit too.

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Almost two weeks passed. Mill-Charles was often given a beating in school. The teacher found that he had fallen badly behind not only in arithmetic but particularly in composition. Good Heavens! The teacher had 110 pupils in four different departments; he really could not get wise to the ruses of such schemers as I was.

In my favour, I can truthfully state that I gradually stopped being glad about the beatings that Mill-Charles received. At least, I was not so uproariously glad as on December the 7th.

On December 20th, Charles came up to me on the way home once again.

“Do come with me to sail the ship today!” he said.

I can still see how beseechingly his brown eyes shone out of his

red, robust face. For a moment I wavered. But my resentment prevailed.

“And in return, I’ll have to let you copy my answers tomorrow, right?
No fear!”

And I turned my back on him.

It was a heavy guilt I took upon myself.

That same day, shortly before dusk fell, I saw the miller’s wife running screaming across the yard, the miller running right behind her, then the servants, and last of all, even the lame Mill-Grandmother hobbling just out of the gate.

And a little later the strongest servant at the mill came back carrying Charles.

He had been playing with his little ship and had fallen into the icy-cold mill-race.

At first, I was completely torpid and calm. I did not feel any schadenfreude; I was in too deep a shock for that. There was only a curiosity inside me as to what would happen next.

But then, when it grew darker, ever darker, when our lamp had still not yet been lighted, I became uneasy, so sorely uneasy.

Grandfather was silent, aunt said not a word. And no light – no light! A storm began to blow. The storm in the evening, the dark storm, always made me afraid.

I moved to the fire. But our dog growled at me because I chased him away.

A coach rumbled outside. We all went to the window. It was the miller’s closed carriage with the two lanterns.

“They’re bringing the doctor,” said grandfather.

And aunt said, “Who knows!”

Then I felt a gripping in my throat, and when I tried to ask aunt what she meant, I couldn’t get a word out.

If he were to die!

Oh, I was a stupid little boy, I had no sophisticated soul but a naked, terrifically tender heart that was pierced with a sudden darting pain when Death and Guilt came so near it.

I could not breathe; I crept out, then I ran across the yards over to the miller’s house. I stood for a while freezing before the door, then a maid came whom I could question.

The doctor could not promise anything, she said, and Charles was lying there with his eyes open, but he could not speak nor could he hear.

I slowly turned back. For a long time I leaned against the miller’s garden-wall; at length I sat down on the threshold of our house and stared over at the lit windows.

Aunt found me thus and put me to bed. I thought about Charles incessantly. There was one sole comfort for me – that his eyes were open. As long as they did not close! I stretched my hands out on the blanket and imagined that I could keep Mill-Charles’s eyelids open.

Yes, I had to keep them open – I had to! If I had gone with him, he would not have fallen into the water. Now his eyes mustn’t close! No, no, they mustn’t close!

And I held a little piece of bedding in between each thumb and middle finger and kept thinking they were Charles’s eyelids.

Once it occurred to me that if Charles were to die, we would have a day off school and could sing the lovely song, “O where is the home for the soul to be found.”²

But the thought that had always thrilled me whenever a death occurred in the village was frozen this time by a frost inside me which made my limbs shiver. And my thumbs and middle fingers pressed themselves more tightly together...

In the end I wanted to pray. And my heart humbled itself in its great fear, and I prayed to Saint Nicholas, to the only saint I believed I'd made my enemy. I represented to him with great fervour that he would be acting very justly if he never gave me any presents, because I was so bad; but he might take pity on Charles and make him healthy again, for hadn't he always been very good to Charles?

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Three days passed. Every day I lay in wait at the well for Marie, the miller's maid.

Yes, his eyes were still open, she had told me.

If his eyes stay open for so long, he's sure to recover his health, I comforted myself. But the worry that they might close did not leave me, and I brooded until my head hurt over why Charles couldn't see anything when his eyes were always open.

I eagerly tried to see nothing with my eyes open, but I didn't succeed. I saw even in the evening and at night.

² “Wo findet die Seele die Heimat [,die Ruh’]. Written by the preacher Franz Ludwig Jörgens (1792-1842) to the melody of ‘Home, Sweet Home.’

Finally I couldn't bear it any longer, and I asked my kind, clever aunt. She reflected a while, then she said:

“You see, Charles has no soul now.”

That had been on December 23rd. It was good that we had no more school by this time, for I couldn't have learned a single thing or paid the slightest attention. I was thinking all the time about Charles no longer having a soul.

Where his soul had gone – I racked my brains over that, hour after hour. I knew it could not be in Heaven, as Charles had not died yet.

Wherever had his soul gone?!

On the night of the 23rd, I lay awake a long while. My little heart beat quickly and loudly, my hands wandered here and there over the coverlet, my head was burning. It was so hot in the bedroom.

And then it came to me in a flash.

When Charles fell into the water, his soul passed out of his mouth and drowned in the stream.

With a jolt I sat upright in bed. I was appallingly cold, and yet the sweat ran down my face.

The soul! Charles's soul! Fallen into the water! Drowned! Helplessly drowned! Oh God!

Such a soul is something delicate, something fine, something in a little thin white shirt.

If it fell into the icy mill-stream and drowned and froze to death in it!

I am in deadly earnest when I say that never again in my life have I suffered as bitterly and despairingly as I did back then when the clawed

fingers of fear and remorse dug into my defenceless young heart for the first time.

That was the first time I heard the clock strike the midnight hour.

After a long time, I was so exhausted that I sank back into bed half-dazed. – And in his heavy weariness, a gentle, comforting thought came at last to the little battler.

The ship! The ship had been in the water! Perhaps Charles's soul had clung to the ship!

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On Christmas Eve I went to the well early. I had to wait a long time, then the miller's maid came.

“Are his eyes still open?”

“No, since yesterday evening they've been closed!”

“Is he – is he dead?”

“He isn't dead yet.”

She filled her pitchers and went. Unmoving, I gazed after her, as after someone who is carrying away the last hope.

He wasn't dead yet! But his eyes were closed now! It seemed to me to be the moment of greatest danger.

I had to look for his soul – his soul!

I hurried through the small door of the yard out into open country, over a ploughed field and towards the mill-stream. I trembled all over with an icy fear, but I went.

Oh, I couldn't quite manage it! I ran upstream at a distance from the brook. I peered over with fervent longing, but my feet got stuck in the holes

of the new-ploughed field.

There was the large ash-tree. There he had fallen in. Once more an intense mortal dread came over my child's heart. But then I saw Charles lying before me with his eyes closed, and weeping aloud for fear and worry I ran to the ash-tree.

A mild frost had come in the night, it had covered the stream with a thin sheet of ice. The glittering surface lay before me as smooth as glass. A smiling, dead surface!

Frozen! Now it couldn't be found anymore! Now it was hidden under the ice!

I slowly crept down the stream. Once I gave a start when I saw something white in the ice. But it was only an air-bubble.

Then I gave up all hope. My head hurt, my feet kept stumbling and slipping. And a piercing deathly cold rose up from the stream. It was a melancholy walk for a child on Christmas Eve.

And then I came upon the miracle! –

Frozen, not far away from the bank, stood Charles's small, sweet wooden ship. "St. Nicholas" was written on it, and the wind played gently with the little sails.

But inside, inside the ship there lay something white.

With wide, sparkling eyes I looked at it.

At first the thought occurred to me that it might be a leaf blown from a tree which the hoar-frost had turned so white. But soon a much, much better realisation came to me.

In the ship was Charles's soul!

A bit congealed, a bit frost-covered in the cold winter nights –, but Charles's small, white soul nevertheless.

It had saved itself!

Oh – Hallelujah – saved! –

I slid down the edge of the stream on my knees, I seized a thin alder branch and bent far over the water. For one moment I hovered like that between life and death, then I was holding the ship in my hands.

I did not throw any more glances inside it. No, I did not dare do that. But with hands raised high, just as a priest carries a holy chalice, I carried Charles's soul home to the wooden ship.

When the wind swept over the white field, when the large, black birds flew over my head, I pressed the ship to my breast.

But when the golden sun shone through the clouds, I carried it high in my hands again and walked slowly, happily, assuredly, step by step.

There was a bell by the miller's door. I pulled the cord with a frozen hand, making the bell ring shrilly through the house.

The miller came running out cursing. But I stood there calm and serious and said as solemnly as if I were speaking a prayer:

“I've brought Charles's ship! In the ship there's his white soul!”

The miller stared at me. But as I looked into his eyes with such conviction, he did not say a word, but took the ship from me and carried it into the house.

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And even before the lights of my small Christmas-tree had been lit, the miller walked into our parlour. He sheepishly apologised for his visit

and said he was so happy, for the doctor had just been round once more and had said that Charles would definitely get well again. He came to tell us because we had often enquired.

Grandfather and aunt were friendly to the miller. I did not say a word. Nor did the reverent silence of joy leave me when the miller continued:

“Just when your Paul brought the wooden ship and rang our bell so feverishly, Charles woke up from his sleep and regained consciousness. And our eyes nearly popped out of our heads, all of us, because your Paul said that he was bringing Charles’s soul in the ship.”

The Jumping-Jack

Anyone who thinks it is a simple matter to construct a Jumping-Jack is gravely mistaken. Jumping-Jacks are living things, a hempen soul inhabits their paper organism, and it is not given to every mortal to breathe the right breath of life into a machine. As the conductor Kurt Fabricius, for example, had to learn to his great chagrin.

Mr. Fabricius had the good fortune to call a friend his own who was five years old and was named Hans. Most five-year-old Hanses are enigmatic individuals with even more enigmatic desires. The specimen in question was no exception by any means, and so he wished “Uncle Conductor” to give him a Jumping-Jack for Christmas, and it had to be one made with his own hands. The great cordiality that existed between the two led the big friend to promise the little one the fulfilment of his wish, and as it is a point of honour between men to redeem a promise to the letter, so

Conductor Fabricius entertained the great plan of constructing a Jumping-Jack with his very own hands.

After he had formed the design of the work of art in his mind's eye, he looked around for suitable materials. It must be said that the Conductor was a little embarrassed about buying materials for a Jumping-Jack. So he drove to a remote part of town where he was sure not to be recognised and walked into a stationer's shop. The proprietor, who was there in person, scrutinised the gentleman who was entering and then, suddenly assuming a sugary, radiant expression, made a life-endangeringly low bow over the counter with his entire upper body.

"Your very humble servant, Conductor Fabricius! How may I be of service?"

Fabricius stifled a quiet oath; but then he plucked up his courage and stammered out:

"I ... I would ask ... yes, I would like, - that is, I would like ... a ... a ... a ... box of notepaper."

The stationer, thinking to have made the interesting discovery that the celebrated conductor and singing teacher was a stammerer, served the unusual guest with his greatest courtesy nevertheless.

With a sorely dejected spirit, Mr. Fabricius found himself back in the street with a hundred sheets of notepaper and envelopes in his hand. If things continued in this way, he might end up with ample provision for his correspondence for the rest of his days. It was of course no unwelcome discovery for the artist that he was so well known in the town, but when a man goes out to buy Jumping-Jacks, he prefers to travel incognito ... And

the same thing could easily befall him in the next shop. That must not be.

And so, taking a sudden resolution, the Conductor went back into the shop.

“Look here, for a little joke I need a ... a ... oh, hang it all – it’s like this, I need a Jumping-Jack.”

“A Jum- a Jumping-Jack is what the Conductor needs?” and the stationer burst out into laughter as if the biggest joke-shell of the century had exploded beside him.

Mr. Fabricius was furious.

“Thunderation, what’s there to laugh about if I ... if I, just the once ... need a Jumping-Jack?”

“Oh, may the Director forgive me ... it is just that ... I only meant ... here ... here we have the very latest Jumping-Jacks, please have a look!”

“No, no, away with them! Ready-made ones are no use to me. I must have one that I put together myself.”

“A ... a Jumping-Jack ... which ... which the Director puts ... puts together himself?”

Now it was the stationer who was stammering.

“Haven’t I just told you so?” the purchaser shouted in exasperation. “Man alive, don’t you understand?”

This sentence slipped smoothly out his lips, for he knew it by heart from concert rehearsals. In a trice, the dumbfounded stationer placed on the counter a number of Jumping-Jacks to be made up.

“Give me the biggest one!” said the nervous conductor.

“That will be this very handsome Servant Robert.”³

“Certainly! The cost?”

“15 pence, if you please. Would the Director also be needing paste for glueing and the cord?”

“Wrap up all that is needful.”

“Very well, Director! So, a Jumping-Jack – 15 pence, cardboard – 10 pence, cord – 5 pence, gum arabic – 10 pence, that comes to 40 pence. May I give the Director a short explanation?”

“No thank you! Here is 40 pence. Adieu!”

Thank God! He was back in the street and carrying the Jumping-Jack materials safely packed up. It was a dreadfully large packet. And it had the very shape that could betray its content. He walked only a few steps with the sinister load before signalling a cab, and he rode home by taxi with the Jumping-Jack.

Once there, he summoned his landlady to his room and commanded her:

“If a visitor comes, I am not at home! Not for anyone! I am engaged in a difficult and necessary task, during which I absolutely cannot tolerate any interruption.”

The landlady understood him and promised to admit neither males nor females to his room. But he carefully locked the door nevertheless, for safety’s sake. Then he heaved a deep sigh of relief. “That’s that! Now the work can begin!”

³ *Knecht Ruprecht*: The companion of Santa Claus who punishes the bad children.

First of all, he divested himself of his jacket, for he had a presentiment that he was going to feel hot. Next, he carefully unpacked the paper Jumping-Jack and contemplated the noble creation. In so doing, his artistic soul gave a small aesthetic convulsion.

“Why, what a hideous villain! These incredible colours! Such idiocy is criminal! The eyebrows have the exact same shape as the gambrels on which butchers hang up dead pigs. This kind of thing is simply impossible.”

He sank into an armchair and looked with horror on the Jumping-Jack, which cheerfully grinned its vermilion face at him. It was clear that he could not use this monster of ugliness. But it was the most expensive specimen in the whole shop. Were there no Jumping-Jacks painted in accordance with the laws of art? Probably not! It could hardly be expected that Lenbach or Defregger⁴ would ply their brushes in the Jumping-Jack industry. So there was really nothing else for it but to take this hideous specimen.

The Conductor fetched his paper-scissors and began to ‘cut out’ the Jumping-Jack. It went very well. Only a few of the beard curls fell victim to the shearing-knife, and half of the nightcap tassel was cut off. Otherwise, the upper body of the Jumping-Jack lay neatly cut out before him, on Liszt’s Rhapsodies as underlay, with no further wounds. The Conductor’s spirits rose, and he then cut out both arms and legs without much pause to worry about their anatomically correct delineation.

But now it was time to cut out the cardboard. Depend upon it, that

⁴ Franz von Lenbach (1836-1904), a German portrait painter; Franz von Defregger (1835-1921), an Austrian artist known for his scenes of the Tyrolese Alps.

would prove more irksome. In any case, he thought it advisable to first fortify himself for this intention with a glass of grog. He ordered one and took it from his landlady at his door without allowing her a look inside his artist's atelier.

Then he drew the Jumping-Jack's body on the cardboard following the pattern, took another deep swig, drew five intense puffs of his Havana, and began to work away at the thick cardboard with the scissors.

It was maddeningly difficult. The Conductor exerted all his strength to press the finger-and-thumb holes together, his teeth clenched. Sweat broke out on his brow, and in his agitation and his exertion, he cut exactly the same sulky face as the Jumping-Jack on the table, only with a dash of ironic desperation. Nevertheless, the results were simply wretched. The scissors respected the drawn guiding-lines only in an extremely inadequate way, and so it came about that the Jumping-Jack's stomach was toothed at the sides like a crosscut saw. With a cry of pain, the Conductor threw down the scissors. A bluish blood-blister shone on his elegant, white conductorly hand. Such a task was, in his opinion, quite simply beyond human power. If things went on like this, his right hand was sure to be paralysed. Half-disabled! And he could soon be conducting with his left hand. All because of a boy's whim. Because of such a little scamp! But no – he was the only, beloved little brother of his Fanny, and usually a very nice, dear little rascal. And he had promised him this.

So the Conductor set to work again with a heavy sigh. But before that, he had hit upon a glorious idea for how to save his delicate fingers. To this end, he had pulled a new white kid-glove on his right hand, thinking

this armour would render him invulnerable to the murderous iron of the scissors.

Ah, this belief was a delusion! The glove was little help to him, and it did not exactly make his hand movements more dexterous. The end result was the positive caricature of a Jumping-Jack. But at least the body was finished, and that is, after all, the main thing as far as Jumping-Jacks, and most human beings, are concerned.

At last, after a great deal of agony, all was done, and the great moment came to apply the glue. The Conductor uncorked the bottle of gum. In doing so, he believed to have made the discovery that there are few things in this world as unappetizing and ghastly as gum arabic. Nevertheless, he overcame his aesthetic unease and tried to cover the cardboard with glue by means of the cork. It did not work with the cork, he did not have a paintbrush, and so he was left with no choice but to use his finger. But a finger covered in blood-blisters stirring around in glue is just frightful. To such depths can an artist sink when he makes Jumping-Jacks.

When the sticky business was finally finished, the end result was simply deplorable. There were gaps and cracks here, there, and everywhere, there was no question of congruence between picture and pasteboard, and the great Franz Liszt had been glued on the Jumping-Jack's rear in the most ignominious manner. Only a bold, surgical intervention with the pocket-knife could free the great Master from this shameful position.

With a glum expression, his hands thrust deep and despairingly into his trouser pockets, the Conductor brooded over whether he could blow

the breath of life into this shapeless monstrosity, or whether it would not be better to leave it in a state of death. But after deep deliberation, he decided that he would bring this homunculus to life, for people were not all Adonises, after all!

So he continued his creative activity. Anyone who has acquired the most elementary knowledge of the anatomy of a Jumping-Jack knows that such a man has ten joints – specifically, four arm joints, four upper-thigh joints, and two knee joints. And here again a distinction must be made between the holes for the joints, the cord for the joints, and the knots for the joints. As six holes need to be double and each knot is to be tied three times, the Conductor calculated, by means of pen and paper, that he had to lace 16 holes and tie 48 knots – which calculation, incidentally, subsequently proved to be too low, as he had not taken into account the hole in the head for hanging it up and the knots of the pull-cord.

Suffice it to report that the Conductor managed all these holes and knots comparatively well, and he did no further damage other than several scratches which he inflicted on the tablecloth with the borer.

And now it came to the *catastrophe*, to the grand finale, to the apotheosis. The Fidgety-Jack was supposed to come to life, he was supposed to jump. With shaking hands, the Conductor ventured to finish the work, to attach the pull-cord – in a word, to endow the Jumping-Jack with a hempen soul.

O, Good Heavens! However much the Conductor pulled and tied the cord, however much he tugged at the string as if he were ringing a bell – the Jumping-Jack moved neither its arms nor its legs.

Crushed, the artist sank into a chair. His work had failed. A sad realisation passed through his soul: though you create a work with a thousand toils and pains, if you just lack the strength to tie that one remaining necessary knot, you laboured to no purpose and your creation stays lifeless.

“Mrs. Böhmert! Mrs. Böhmert!”

It sounded like a cry for help.

“Mrs. Böhmert, tell me... tell me... can you make Jumping-Jacks?”

She looked at him indignantly.

“Conductor, I am a respectable widow!”

“Blast it all, what does my asking you if you can make Jumping-Jacks have to do with your respectable widowhood?”

“I ... I will not be made fun of, Conductor.”

And she turned her considerable rear façade on him and rustled away.

“Old hide!” the furious Conductor gnashed, throwing a book that came in his way to the floor. For the sake of his honour, we assume that he meant the book when he said, “Old hide.”

Then he sat, a broken man, in a sofa corner. The Jumping-Jack lay insolently between ‘Lohengrin’ and the ‘Valkyrie’ and looked at him with contempt and scorn. If he could get at the scoundrel, if he could force him to dance! But alas, his wits were not up to such a deed.

It occurred to him that he could anonymously send a shilling in postage stamps to a bookseller and request him to send, poste restante, a “short, easily comprehensible guide on how to build Jumping-Jacks.” But

will such a useful manual exist? Certainly not! We actually still have a palpable yawning gap in our literature.

Then what?

And all of a sudden enlightenment came to him. He quickly snatched his coat and hat from the stand, and three minutes later he was sitting in the electric tram heading for the Ringplatz.

A freezing boy stood before him.

“Buy a Jumping-Jack, dear, kind Sir!”

“Certainly, my boy, show me your wares!”

He eyes the assortment and almost gives a start. There is exactly the same Jumping-Jack that he has at home.

“How much does this one cost?”

“Thirty pence, dear Sir!”

Thirty pence! And his outlay alone amounted to forty.

“But does it work?” he asked skeptically.

“It works very well,” the boy declared, “the kind gentleman may convince himself.”

And the kind gentleman really did convince himself. He made the Jumping-Jack dance in the public marketplace.

“Boy, did you make it yourself?” he asked incredulously.

“All by myself, kind Sir!”

“Then you are an artist, boy, a genius! I’ll buy your Jumping-Jack! Here’s a pound for you!”

And before the startled boy could express his thanks, the Conductor had gone; sitting in the nearest cab, he was driving back home

accompanied by a Jumping-Jack.

He there studied the workings of so enigmatic a jumping being with scrutinising eyes and was thunderstruck at their simplicity. He quickly seized his own mannikin by the collar, and a few minutes later it was hanging on the wall and throwing its arms and legs around like a man possessed.

“Mrs. Böhmert! Mrs. Böhmert! Come in! Let us be friends again! Drink a glass. I must show you a great achievement. I have made a Jumping-Jack, a Jouncing-Jack, who really jumps.”

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On Christmas Eve, the Conductor was invited as a guest to the house of Chairman Steinbach of the County Court. This gentleman had two children: a nineteen-year-old daughter by the name of Fanny and a late arrival, a five-year-old son, who was called Hans and was identical with the five-year-old Hans mentioned before.

Hans surveyed the Jumping-Jack that was presented to him with critical eyes.

“It’s easily seen that you made it on your own,” he said. “He doesn’t fit properly together, and he has a lot of bubbles too.”

And when the Jumping-Jack was on the wall and had to show what it could do, the little critic found that he dragged his right leg somewhat. But the experienced artist remedied this defect by means of a small operation which succeeded brilliantly.

And that evening, it so happened that the Conductor found himself alone with charming Fanny. He had loved her a long time, but he was not

sure of his ground. And as he was a man who always acted according to definite plans, he had decided to venture his proposal before Whitsun. However, things turned out differently through the mediation of the Jumping-Jack, and this came about as follows:

“Did you really fulfil the boy’s wish and make the Jumping-Jack on your own?”

“Certainly! Well, he’s a charming little rogue, and he is – Yes, but it was hard work, I must admit.”

And he told his tale of woe very amusingly and affectingly. The lovely girl looked at him with shining eyes.

“What a good man you are,” she said softly.

And then it happened that the Conductor stepped out of time with the beat, and passionately seizing the lovely girl’s hand, he told her he would not have done all of it had the boy not been her brother and were he not desperately in love with her.

And what happens on such occasions: he reached out his arms, and she reached out her arms a little, and then ...

Then Hans came running up, saw it, and immediately let out dreadful yells:

“Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah! Splendid! Splendid! Uncle Conductor and Fanny are acting just like the Jumping-Jack!”

And he vigorously swung his arms and demonstrated *ad oculos* to his esteemed parents what Uncle Conductor and sister Fanny had actually done.

Later, at the time of the engagement, Hans was allowed to stay up,

and he embraced the opportunity to offer the following flattering explanation to his new brother-in-law, which bore shining witness to his grateful child's heart:

“Do you know the actual reason why I wanted a Jumping-Jack from you? Just look how he swings his arms and his legs. And that's exactly what you did when I saw you in a concert once. You know what? From now on, I'll call you 'Uncle Jumping-Jack.' That'll be a cracking good joke between the two of us!”