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THE SON OF HIS MOTHER

BY CLARA VIEBIG

Authorised Translation by H. RAAHAUGE

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BOOK I

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The Son of his Mother

CHAPTER I

The husband and wife were of a literary turn of mind, and as they had the money to cultivate their artistic tastes he wrote a little and she painted. They also played and sang duets together, at least they had done so when they were first married; now they went to concerts and the opera more frequently instead. They were liked wherever they went, they had friends, they were called "charming people," and still something was wanting to complete their happiness--they had no children.

And they would probably not have any now, as they had been married for some time, and the likelihood of children being born to them was very remote.

No doubt he sighed and knit his brow in unguarded moments when he sat at his desk in his office, but especially when he passed through the villages in the Brandenburg March on the rides he took in the more distant environs of Berlin--partly for his health, partly because he still retained the liking for riding from the time he was in the cavalry--and saw swarms of little flax-haired children romping on the sandy roads. However, he did not let his wife perceive that he missed something, for he loved her.

[Pg 2] But she could not control herself in the same manner. The longer she was married the more nervous she became. At times she felt irritated with her husband for no reason. She persistently turned her eyes away from the announcement of births in the newspapers with a certain shrinking, and, if her glance happened once in a way to fall on one in which happy parents notified the birth of a son, she put the paper aside hastily.

In former years Käte Schlieben had knitted, crocheted, embroidered and sewn all sorts of pretty little children's garments--she used to be quite famous for the daintiness of her little baby jackets trimmed with blue and pink ribbons, all her newly married acquaintances would ask her for the wonderful little things--but now she had finally given up that sort of work. She had given up hope. What good did it do her to put her forefingers into the tiny sleeves of a baby's first jacket, and, holding it out in front of her, gaze at it a long, long time with dreamy eyes? It only tortured her.

And she felt the torture twice as much in those grey days that suddenly put in an appearance without any reason, that creep in silently even in the midst of sunshine. On those occasions she would lie on the couch in her room that was furnished with such exquisite taste--really artistically--and close her eyes tightly. And then all at once a shout, clear, shrill, triumphant, like the cry of a swallow on the wing, would ascend from the street, from the promenade under the chestnut-trees. She stopped her ears when she heard that cry, which penetrated further than any other tone, which soared up into the ether as swiftly as an arrow, and cradled itself up there blissfully. She could not bear to hear anything like that--she was becoming morbid.

[Pg 3] Alas, when she and her husband grew old, with minds no longer so receptive and too weary to seek incitement in the world, who would bring it to them in their home? Who would bring them anything of what was going on outside? What youth with his freshness, with the joyousness that envelops those of twenty like a dainty garment, that beams from smooth brows like warmth and sunshine, would give them back a breath of their youth, which had already disappeared in accordance with the laws of Time? Who would wax enthusiastic at the things that had once made them enthusiastic, and which they would enjoy once more as though they were new for them too? Who would fill the house and garden with his laughter, with that careless laughter that is so infectious? Who would kiss them with warm lips, and make them happy by his tenderness? Who would carry them on his wings with him, so that they did not feel they were weary?

Alas, there is no second youth for those who are childless. Nobody would come into the inheritance of delight in what was beautiful, of taste for what was beautiful, of enthusiasm for art and artists which they would leave behind them. Nobody would guard reverently all those hundreds of things and nicknacks she had gathered together so tastefully in her house with the delight of a collector. And nobody would, alas, hold the hand that was fast growing cold with loving hands, in that last difficult hour which all dread, and cry: "Father, Mother, don't go! Not yet!" Oh, God, such loving hands would not close their eyes---

When Paul Schlieben used to come home from his office in those days he was co-partner in a large business that his grandfather had founded and his father raised to a high position--he often found his wife's sweet face stained with tears, her delicate complexion marred by constant weeping. And her mouth only forced itself to smile, and in her beautiful brown eyes there lurked a certain melancholy.

[Pg 4] The doctor shrugged his shoulders. The lady was suffering from nerves, that was what was the matter with her. She had too much time for brooding, she was left to herself too much.

In order to alter this, her anxious husband withdrew from the business for an indefinite period. His partners could get on just as well without him. The doctor was right, he must devote himself more to his wife; they were both so lonely, so entirely dependent on each other.

It was decided they should travel; there was no reason whatever why they should remain at home. The beautiful house was given up, their furniture, all their costly things were stored. If they cared to do so they could remain away for years, get impressions, amuse themselves. Käte would paint landscapes in beautiful countries, and he--well, he could easily find compensation in writing, should he miss his usual work.

They went to Italy and Corsica--still further, to Egypt and Greece. They saw the Highlands, Sweden and Norway, very many beautiful places.

Käte pressed her husband's hand gratefully. Her susceptible mind waxed enthusiastic, and her talent for painting, which was by no means insignificant, felt powerfully stimulated all at once. How splendid to be able to paint, to keep hold of all that glow of colour, that wonderful effect of tone that revealed itself to her delighted eyes on her canvas.

[Pg 5] She was so eager that she went out with her painting materials in the morning, whether it was at Capri, on the shores of the blue Bosphorus, in the yellow sand of the desert, facing the precipitous pinnacles in the Fjords, or in the rose gardens of the Riviera. Her delicate face got sunburnt; she no longer even paid any attention to her hands, which she used to take such care of. The ardent longing to manifest herself had seized hold of her. Thank God, she could create something now. The miserable feeling of a useless life did not exist any longer, nor the torturing knowledge: your life ceases the moment your eyes close, there is nothing of you that will survive you. Now she would at least leave something behind that she had produced, even if it were only a picture. Her paintings increased in number; quite a quantity of rolls of canvas were dragged about now wherever they went.

[Pg 6] At first Paul Schlieben was very pleased to see his wife so enthusiastic. He politely carried her camp-stool and easel for her, and never lost patience when he remained for hours and hours near her whilst she worked. He lay in the scanty shadow of a palm-tree, and used to follow the movements of her brush over the top of his book. How fortunate that her art gave her so much satisfaction. Even though it was a little fatiguing for him to lie about doing nothing he must not say anything, no, he must not, for he had nothing to offer her as a compensation, nothing whatever. And he sighed. It was the same sigh that had escaped him when the numerous flax-haired little children were playing about on the sandy roads in the Brandenburg March, the same sigh which Sundays drew from him, when he used to see all the proletariat of the town--man and wife and children, children, children--wandering to the Zoo. Yes, he was right--he passed his hand a little nervously across his forehead--that writer was right--now, who could it be?--who had once said somewhere: "Why does a man marry? Only to have children, heirs of his body, of his blood. Children to whom he can pass on the wishes and hopes that are in him and also the achievements; children who are descended from him like shoots from a tree, children who enable a man to live eternally." That was the only way in which life after death could be understood--life eternal. The resurrection of the body, which the Church promises, was to be interpreted as the renewal of one's own personality in the coming generations. Oh, there was something great, something indescribably comforting in such a survival.

"Are you speculating about something?" asked his wife. She had looked up from her easel for a moment.

"Eh? What? Did you say anything, darling?" The man started up in a fright, as one who has been straying along forbidden paths.

She laughed at his absent-mindedness; it was getting worse and worse. But what was he thinking of? Business?--surely not. But perhaps he wanted to write a novel, a tale? Why should he not try his hand at that for once in a way? That was something quite different from sending short chatty accounts of one's journey to one of the papers. And of course he would be able to do it. People who had not half the education, not half the knowledge, not half the aesthetic refinement of feeling he had wrote quite readable books.

She talked brightly and persuasively to him, but he shook his head with a certain resignation: nonsense, neither novels nor any other kind of writing. And he thought to himself: it is always said that a piece of work is like a child--that is to say, only a truly great piece of work, of course. Was the work he and his wife created work in that sense? Work that would exist eternally? He suddenly found things to censure severely in her picture, which he had politely admired only the day before.

[Pg 7] She got quite frightened about it. Why was he so irritable to-day? Was he going to develop nerves at the finish? Yes, it was evident, the warm air of the south did not suit him, he had lost his briskness, looked so tired. There was nothing for it, her husband was more to her than her picture, she would leave off her painting at once.

And that was what happened. They went away, travelled from one place to another, from one hotel to another, along the lakes, over the frontier, until they made a somewhat longer stay high up among the Alps in Switzerland.

Instead of lying under a palm-tree he lay in the shadow of a fir--now his wife was painting--and followed the movements of her brush with his eyes over the top of his open book.

She was busily painting, for she had discovered a delightful subject. That green alpine meadow, with its wealth of flowers as variegated as they could possibly be and the backs of the brown cows with the sun shining on them, was as full of charm as the Garden of Eden on the first day of creation. In her eagerness to see she had pushed her broad-brimmed hat back, and the warm summer sun was burning little golden spots on her delicate cheeks and the narrow bridge of her finely shaped nose. She held the brush that she had dipped into the green on her palette up against the green of the meadow in order to compare the two, and blinked with half-closed eyes to see if she had got the colour right.

At that moment a sound made her start--it was half a growl of displeasure at the disturbance, half a murmur of approval. Her husband had risen and was looking at a couple of children who had approached them noiselessly. They were offering rhododendrons for sale, the girl had a small basket full of them, the boy was carrying his nosegay in his hand.

[Pg 8] What exceedingly pretty creatures they were, the girl so blue-eyed and gentle, the boy a regular little scamp. The woman's heart swelled. She bought all the rhododendrons from them, even gave them more than they asked for them.

That was a stroke of great luck for the little Swiss boy and girl--just think, to get more than they had asked for. They blushed with happiness, and when the strange lady asked them questions in a kind voice, they commenced to chatter ingenuously.

She would have to paint *those* children, they were really too delightful, they were a thousand times more beautiful than the most beautiful landscape.

Paul Schlieben looked on with a strange uneasiness whilst his wife painted the children, first the big girl and then the small boy. How intently she gazed at the boy's round face. Her eyes were brilliant, she never seemed to be tired, and only paused when the children grew impatient. All her thoughts turned on the painting. Would the children come again that day? Was the light good? Surely there would not be a storm to prevent the children from coming? Nothing else was of any interest to her. She displayed great zeal. And still the pictures turned out bad; the features were like theirs, but there was no trace of the child-mind in them. He saw it clearly: those who are childless cannot paint children.

Poor woman! He looked on at her efforts with a feeling of deep compassion. Was not her face becoming soft like a mother's, lovely and round when she bent down to the children? The Madonna type--and still this woman had been denied children.

No, he could not look on at it any longer, it made him ill. The man bade the children go home in a gruff voice. The pictures were ready, what was the good of touching them up any more? That did not make them any better, on the contrary.

[Pg 9] That evening Käte cried as she used to cry at home. And she was angry with her husband. Why did he not let her have that pleasure? Why did he all at once say they were to leave? She did not understand him. Were the children not sweet, delightful? Was it because they disturbed him?

"Yes," was all he said. There was a hard dry sound in his voice--a "yes" that came with such difficulty--and she raised her head from the handkerchief in which she had buried it and looked across at him. He was standing at the window in the carpeted room of the hotel, his hands resting on the window-ledge, his forehead pressed against the pane. He was gazing silently at the vast landscape before him, in which the mountaintops covered with snow that glowed in the radiance of the setting sun spoke to him of immortality. How he pressed his lips together, how nervously his moustache trembled.

She crept up to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "What is the matter with you?" she asked him softly. "Do you miss your work--yes, it's your work, isn't it? I was afraid of that. You are getting tired of this, you must be doing something again. I promise you I'll be reasonable--never complain any more--only stop here a little longer, only three weeks longer--two weeks."

He remained silent.

"Only ten--eight--six days more. Not even that?" she said, bitterly disappointed, for he had shaken his head. She wound her arms round his neck. "Only five more--four--three days, please. Why not? Those few days, please only three days more." She positively haggled for each day. "Oh, then at least two days more."

She sobbed aloud, her arms fell from his neck--he must allow her two days.

[Pg 10] Her voice cut him to the heart. He had never heard her beg like that before, but he made a stand against the feeling of yielding that was creeping over him. Only no sentimentality. It was better to go away from there quickly, much better for her.

"We're going away to-morrow."

And as she looked at him with wide-open horror-struck eyes and pallid cheeks, the words escaped from his lips although he had not intended saying them, drawn from him by a bitterness that he could not master any longer:

"They are not yours!"

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CHAPTER II

And they went away.

But it seemed to the woman as though every joy had disappeared with the emerald green meadow in the Alps, in which she had painted the lovely children. There was the same old nervous twitch in her face, the corners of her mouth drooped slightly and she cried very easily. Paul Schlieben watched his wife with positive dismay. Oh dear, had it all been in vain, the giving up of his work, all this travelling about without making any plans that was so fatiguing? Had the old melancholy frame of mind taken possession of her again?

When he saw her sitting there so disinclined to exert herself, her hands lying idle in her lap, a feeling akin to fury came over him. Why did she not do something? Why did she not paint? That confounded meadow in the Alps was surely not the only place where she could work. Was it not beautiful here as well?

They had settled down in the Black Forest. But it was in vain that he hoped from day to day that one of the quiet green wooded valleys or one of the nut-brown maidens of the Black Forest with her cherry-red hat and enormous red umbrella, as Vautier has painted them, would tempt her to bring out her painting materials. She felt no inclination--nay, she had positively a kind of dread of touching her brushes again.

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He reproached himself bitterly in secret. Would it not have been better to have left her that pleasure and not have interfered? Still--the thing would have had to end some time, and the longer it had lasted the more difficult the separation would have been. But he had made up his mind about one thing, they would return to Berlin again late in the autumn. With the best will in the world he would not be able to stand it any longer. He was heartily tired of this wandering from hotel to hotel, this lounging about the world with nothing to show for it but an occasional short article for the papers, a chatty account of a journey to some corner of the earth of which people knew but little. He longed for a home of his own again, and felt a great desire to return to his business, which he had often looked upon as a fetter and so prosaic whilst he was in it. But Käte! When he thought of her again spending many hours alone at home, with no interests beyond herself and her reading for in her state of hypersensitiveness she found little pleasure in associating with other women--a feeling of hopelessness came over him. Then there would be the same sad eyes again, the same melancholy smile, the old irritable moods from which the whole house used to suffer, herself the most.

And he subjected himself to an examination as though blaming himself for it. He passed his whole life in review: had he committed any crime that no son had been given to him, no daughter? Ah, if only Käte had a child everything would be right. Then she would have quite enough to do, would be entirely taken up with the little creature round which the love of parents, full of hope and entitled to hope, revolves in an ever-renewed circle.

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Both husband and wife were torturing themselves, for the woman's thoughts especially always ended at that one point. Now that she had been separated from those dear children, from the, alas, much too short happiness she had experienced that summer, it seemed to have become quite clear to her what she missed--for had it not only weighed on her like a painful suspicion before? But now, now the terrible unvarnished truth was there: everything people otherwise call "happiness" in this world is nothing compared to a child's kiss, to its smile, to its nestling in its mother's lap.

She had always given the children in the meadow a tender kiss when they came and went, now she longed for those kisses. Her husband's kiss did not replace them; she would soon have been married fifteen years, *his* kiss was no longer a sensation, it had become a habit. But a kiss from a child's lips, that are so fresh, so untouched, so timid and yet so confiding, was something quite new to her, something, exceedingly sweet. A feeling of happiness had flowed through her soul on those occasions as well as the quite physical pleasure of being able to bury her mouth in those delicately soft and yet so firm cheeks, which health and youth had covered with a soft down

like that on the cheeks of a peach. Her thoughts always wandered back to that meadow in the Alps, full of longing. And this longing of hers that was never stilled magnified what had happened, and surrounded the figures that had appeared in her life for so short a time with the whole halo of tender memories. Her idle thoughts spun long threads. As she longed for those little ones so they would also be longing for her, they would wander across the meadow weeping, and the large present of money she had left behind for each of them with the proprietor of the hotel--she had been obliged to leave without saying good-bye to them--would not console them; they would stand outside the door and cast their eyes up to the windows from which their friend so often had waved to them. No, she could not forgive Paul for showing so little comprehension of her feelings.

The stay in the Black Forest, whose velvety slopes reminded them too much of the Swiss meadows and from whose points of view you could look over to the Alps on a clear day, became a torture to both the man and woman. They felt they must get away; the dark firs, the immense green forest became too monotonous for them. Should they not try some seaside resort for once? The sea is ever new. And it was also just the season for the seaside. The wind blew already over the stubble in the fields, as they drove down to the plain.

They chose a Belgian watering-place, one in which the visitors dress a great deal, and in which quite a cosmopolitan set of people offer something new to the eye every day. They both felt it, they had remained much too long in mountain solitudes.

During the first days the gay doings amused them, but then Paul and his wife, between whom something like a barrier had tried to push itself lately, both agreed all at once: this sauntering up and down of men who looked like fools, of women who if they did not belong to the demi-monde successfully imitated it, was not for them. Let them only get away.

The man proposed they should give up travelling entirely and return to Berlin a little earlier, but Käte would not listen to it. She had a secret dread of Berlin--oh, would she have to go back to her old life again? So far she had never asked herself what she had really expected from these long months of travel; but she had hoped for something--certainly. What?

Oh dear, now she would be so much alone again, and there was nothing, nothing that really filled her life entirely.

No, she was not able to return to Berlin yet. She told her husband that she felt she had not quite recovered yet--she was certainly anæmic, she was suffering from poorness of blood. She ought to have gone to Schwalbach, Franzensbad or some other iron springs long ago--who knows, perhaps many things would be different then.

He was not impatient--at least he did not show it--for he was moved with a deep compassion for her. Of course she should go to some iron springs; they ought to have tried them long ago, have made a point of it.

The Belgian doctor sent them to the well-known baths at Spa.

They arrived there full of hope. In her the hope was quite genuine. "You will see," she said to her husband in a brighter voice, "this will do me good. I have a vague feeling--no, I really feel quite sure that something good will happen to us here."

And he hoped so too. He forced himself to hope in order to please her. Oh, it would be enough, quite enough if the characteristics of the landscape won so much interest from her that she took up her painting again, which she had neglected entirely. How pleased he would be at even that. If her former zeal for art showed itself again, that was a thousand times more health-bringing than the strongest iron springs at Spa.

The heather was in bloom, the whole plateau was red, the purple sun set in a mass of purple.

It happened as he had hoped, that is to say, she did not begin to paint, but she made expeditions into the Ardennes and the Eifel with him on foot and in a carriage, and enjoyed them. The Venn had bewitched her. In her light-coloured dress she stood like a small speck of light in the immense seriousness of the landscape, protected her eyes with her hand from the view of the sun, which is so open there, so unobstructed either by tree or mountain, and took deep breaths of the sharp clear air that has not yet been vitiated by any smoke from human dwellings, hardly by human breath. Around her the Venn blossomed like a carpet of one colour, dark, calm, refreshing and beneficial to the eye; it was only here and there that the blue gentian and the white quivering flock of the cotton-grass were seen to raise their heads among the heather.

"Oh, how beautiful!" She said it with deep feeling. The melancholy of the landscape flattered her mood. There was no gaudy tone there that disturbed her, no medley of colours. Even the sun, which sets there in greater beauty than anywhere else--blushing so deeply that the whole sky blushes with it, that the winding Venn rivulet hedged in by cushions of moss, that every pool, every peat-hole full of water reflects its beams ruddy-gold, and the sad Venn itself wears a mantle of glowing splendour--even this sun brought no glaringly bright light with it. It displayed its mighty disc in a grand dignified manner, a serious victor after a serious struggle.

Käte looked into this marvellous sun with large eyes bathed in tears, until the last beam, the

last rosy streak in the grey mass of clouds had vanished. Now it had gone--the heavens were dead--but in the morning it would be there again, an eternal, imperishable, never-conquered hope. Then should not, ought not the human heart to beat again too, revived anew, always full of hope?

[Pg 17] Clouds of mist sped across the moor, veiled, indescribable, vague shapes. There was a whispering before the coming of the wind, a lisp through the heather and the cotton-grass--it seemed to Käte as though the Venn had something to tell her. What was it saying? Ah, it must be for some reason that she had come there, that she felt she was being held fast as though by a strong and still kind hand.

She walked on with quicker, more elastic steps, as though she were searching for something.

Her husband was delighted that his wife was so pleased with the neighbourhood. True, the landscape had no special attraction for him--was it not very desolate, monotonous and unfertile there? But the characteristic scenery was certainly harmonious, very harmonious--well, if she found pleasure in it, it was better than a paradise to him.

They often drove up to Baraque Michel, that lonely inn on the borders between Belgium and Prussia, in which the douaniers drank their drams of gin when on the look-out for smugglers, and where the peat-cutters dry their smocks that the mist has wetted and their saturated boots at the fire that is always burning on the hearth.

[Pg 18] So many crosses in the Venn, so many human beings who have met with a fatal accident. Käte listened to the men's stories with a secret shudder--could the Venn be so terrible? and she questioned them again and again. Was it possible that the man from Xhoffraix, who had driven off to get peat litter, had been swallowed up there so close to the road with cart and horse, and that they had never, never seen anything of him again? And that cross there, so weather-beaten and black, how had that come into the middle of the marsh? Why had that travelling journeyman, whose intention it was to go along the high road from Malmedy to Eupen, gone so far astray? Had it been dark or had there been a heavy fall of snow so that he could not see, or was it the cold, that terrible cold, in which a weary man can freeze to death? Nothing of the kind; only a mist, a sudden mist, which confuses a man so, that he no longer knows which is forward or which is backward, which is left or which is right, that he loses all idea of where he is going, gets away from the road and runs round in a circle like a poor, mad, terrified animal. And all the mists that rise in the Venn when daylight disappears, are they the souls of those who have never been buried, and who in garments that are falling to pieces rise every night from their graves, which have neither been consecrated by a benediction nor by holy water and in which they cannot find rest?

That was a fairy tale. But was not everything there as in the fairy tale? So quite different to everywhere else in the world, in reality ugly and yet not ugly, in reality not beautiful and yet so exceedingly beautiful? And she herself, was she not quite a different being there? Did she not wander about full of hope, in blissful dreams, like one to whom something wonderful is to happen?

It was in the sixth week of their stay at Spa. The nights were already as cold as in winter, but the days were still sunny. It was always a long journey up to the inn even for the strong Ardennes horses, but Paul and his wife were there again to-day. Would they have to leave soon? Alas, yes. Käte had to confess it to herself with sorrow. Everything was very autumnal, the heather had finished flowering, the air was raw; the grass that had already been frozen during the night rustled under her feet. They could have found use for their winter clothes.

[Pg 19] "Ugh, how cold," said the man shivering, and he turned up the collar of his overcoat. He wanted to twist a shawl round his wife's neck, but she resisted: "No, no!" She ran on in front of him through the rustling heather with quick steps. "Just look."

It was a wide view that presented itself to their eyes there on the highest point in the Venn, that is adorned with a rickety wooden tower. The whole large plateau covered with heather lay before them, with here and there a group of dark firs that only showed spreading branches on the side away from the storm. These firs that cowered so timidly were trees that had been planted there; they were hardly higher than the heather, and only recognisable on account of their different colour. And, here and there, there was a stray grey boulder and a cross that the wind had carried to the side of it. And a calm lay over the whole in the pale midday autumn light as though it were God's acre.

When they had climbed up the tower they saw still more. From the plateau they looked down into the valley: a blue expanse around them, blue from the darkness of the forests and from autumn vapours, and in the beautiful blue outstretched villages the white houses half hidden behind tall hedges. And here, looking down on Belgium, with its grey fumes hanging like a cloud in the clear transparent autumn air, lay the large town of Verviers with its church-towers and factory chimneys towering above it.

Käte heaved a sigh and shuddered involuntarily: oh, was the workaday world so near? Was grey life already approaching nearer and nearer to her wonderful fairy world?

Her husband gave a slight cough; he found it very cold up there. They went down from the tower, but when he wanted to take her back to the inn she resisted: "No, not yet, not yet. That's only the midday bell."

[Pg 20] The bell was ringing in Fischbach Chapel, that ancient little church with its slated roof, in whose tower the great red lantern was formerly hoisted to point out the safe harbour to the wanderer swimming in the wild sea of mists, and the bell rung unceasingly to save the man who had lost his way through his ear should his eye fail him. The bell rang out clear and penetrating in the solitude, the only sound in the vast stillness.

"How touching that sound is." Käte stood with folded hands and looked into the wide expanse, her eyes swimming in tears. What a charm there was in this Venn. It encircled the soul as the tough underwood of the heather and the creeping tendrils of the club moss entangled the foot. When she thought of how soon she would have to leave it, to go away from that immense stillness that seemed to be concealing a secret, to be cherishing something marvellous in its deep lap, her heart contracted in sudden fear. What would happen to her, what would become of her? Her seeking soul stood like a child on the threshold of fairyland asking for something--was there to be no gift for her?

"What was that?" All at once she seized hold of her husband's arm with a low cry of terror. "Didn't you hear it as well?"

She had grown quite pale; she stood there with dilated eyes, raising herself on her toes with an involuntary movement and craning her neck forward.

"There it is again. Do you hear it?" Something like a child's soft whimpering had penetrated to her ear.

No, he had not heard anything. "I suppose there are some people in the neighbourhood. How you do frighten a body, Käte." He shook his head a little angrily. "You know very well that all the women and children have left their villages in the Venn to gather cranberries. That's all the harvest they have, you see. Look, the berries are quite ripe." Stooping down he took up a plant.

[Pg 21] The small cluster of berries of a deep coral in colour formed a beautiful contrast to the glossy dark green of the small oval leaf. But there were also some flowers on the plant, small pure white flowers.

"Like myrtle, just like the flower on a myrtle," she said, taking the plant out of his hand. "And the leaves are also exactly like myrtle leaves." Twisting the stalk round between her finger and thumb she gazed at it thoughtfully. "The Venn myrtle." And, raising the little flower to her mouth, she kissed it, full of delight.

"Do you still remember--that time--on the evening of our wedding-day, do you still remember? You kissed the myrtle that had been in my wreath and I kissed it too, and then we kissed each other. Then--then--oh, how happy we were then." She said it very softly, as though lost in sweet memories.

He smiled, and as she swayed towards him, with a dreamy look in her eyes that were fixed the whole time on the little green plant, he drew her closer and laid his arm round her. "And are we not-not"--he wanted to say "not just as happy," but all he said was: "not happy to-day, too?"

She did not answer, she remained silent. But then, hurling the plant with its glossy leaves away with a sudden movement, she turned and ran away from him blindly into the Venn, without noticing where she was going.

"What's the matter, Käte?" He hurried after her, terrified. She ran so quickly that he could not overtake her at once. "Käte, you'll fall. Wait, I say. Käte, what is the matter with you?"

[Pg 22] No answer. But he saw from the convulsive movements of her shoulders that she was weeping violently. Oh dear, what was the matter now? He looked troubled as he ran after her across the desolate Venn. Was she never to get any better? It was really enough to make a fellow lose all pleasure in life. How stupid it had been to bring her to the Venn--real madness. There was no brightness to be found there. A hopelessness lurked in that unlimited expanse, a terrible hardness in that sharp aromatic air, an unbearable melancholy in that vast stillness.

The man only heard his own quickened breathing. He ran more and more quickly, all at once he became very anxious about his wife. Now he had almost reached her--he had already stretched out his hand to seize hold of her fluttering dress--then she turned round, threw herself into his arms and sobbed: "Oh, here's both, blossom and fruit. But our myrtle has faded and not borne fruit--not fruit--we poor people."

So that was it--the same thing again? Confound it. He who as a rule was so temperate stamped his foot violently. Anger, shame, and a certain feeling of pain drove the blood to his head. There he stood now in that lonely place with his wife in his arms weeping most pitifully, whilst he himself was deserving of much pity in his own opinion.

"Don't be angry, don't be angry," she implored, clinging more closely to him. "You see, I had

hoped--oh, hoped for certain--expected--I don't know myself what, but still I had expected something here--and today--just now everything has become clear. All, all was in vain. Let me cry."

And she wept as one in whom all hope is dead.

What was he to say to her? How console her? He did not venture to say a word, only stroked her hot face softly whilst he, too, became conscious of a certain feeling, that feeling that he had not always the strength to push aside.

[Pg 23] They stood like that for a long time without saying a word, until he, pulling himself together, said in a voice that he tried to make calm and indifferent: "We shall have to return, we have got quite into the wilds. Come, take my arm. You are overtired, and when we--"

"Hush," she said, interrupting him, letting go of his arm quickly. "The same as before. Somebody is in trouble."

Now he heard it as well. They both listened. Was it an animal? Or a child's voice, the voice of quite a small child?

"My God!" Käte said nothing more, but making up her mind quickly, she turned to the right and ran down into a small hollow, without heeding that she stumbled several times among the bushes, through which it was impossible for her to force a passage.

Her quick ear had led her right. There was the child lying on the ground. It had no pillow, no covering, and was miserably wrapt up in a woman's old torn skirt. The little head with its dark hair lay in the heather that was covered with hoar-frost; the child was gazing fixedly into the luminous space between the heavens and the Venn with its large clear eyes.

There was no veil, nothing to protect it; no mother either--only the Venn.

Nevertheless they had deceived themselves. It was not crying, it was only talking to itself as quiet contented children generally do. It had stretched out its little hands, which were not wrapped up like the rest of its body, and had seized hold of some of the red berries and squashed them. Then its little fists had wandered up to the hungry mouth; there were drops of the juice from the berries on its baby lips.

[Pg 24] "Quite alone?" Käte had sunk down on her knees, her hands trembled as they embraced the bundle. "Oh, the poor child. How sweet it is. Look, Paul. How has it come here? It will die of cold, of hunger. Do call out, Paul. The poor little mite. If its mother came now I would give her a piece of my mind it's disgraceful to let the helpless little mite lie like this. Call--loud--louder."

He called, he shouted: "Heigh! Hallo! Is nobody there?"

No voice answered, nobody came. The whole Venn was as quiet as though it were an extinct, long-forgotten world.

"Nobody is coming," whispered Käte quite softly, and there was an expression of fear and at the same time trembling exultation in her voice. "Its mother does not trouble--who knows where the woman is? I wonder if she's coming?" She looked round searchingly, turned her head in all directions, and then stooped over the child again with a sigh of contentment.

What unpardonable thoughtlessness--no, what unspeakable barbarity to abandon such a mite in that place. If they had come only a few hours--only an hour later. It might already have been bitten by a snake then, might even have been torn to pieces by a wolf.

Then her husband had to laugh, although the sight of her over-excitement had slightly annoyed him. "No, my child, there are no poisonous snakes here and no more wolves either, so you can be at rest about that. But when the mists begin to rise, they would have done for him."

"Oh!" Käte pressed the foundling to her bosom. She was sitting on her heels holding the child in her lap; she stroked its rosy cheeks, its little downy head, and showered caresses and flattering words on it, but the child continued to gaze into the luminous space with its large, dark, and yet so clear eyes. It did not smile, but it did not cry either; it took no notice whatever of the strangers.

[Pg 25] "Do you think it has been left here intentionally?" asked Käte suddenly, opening her eyes wide. The blood flew to her head in a hot wave. "Oh then--then"--she drew a trembling breath and pressed the child to her bosom, as though she did not want to let it go again.

"It will all be cleared up somehow," said the man evasively. "The mother will be sure to come."

"Do you see her--do you see her?" she inquired almost anxiously.

"No."

"No." She repeated it in a relieved tone of voice, and then she laughed. After that her eyes and ears belonged entirely to the helpless little creature. "Where's baby--where is he then? Laugh a

little, do. Look at me once with those big, staring eyes. Oh, you little darling, oh, you sweet child." She played with it and pressed kisses on its hands without noticing that they were dirty.

"What are we to do now?" said the man, perplexed.

"We can't leave it here. We shall have to take it with us, of course." There was something very energetic about the delicate-looking woman all at once. "Do you think I would forsake the child?" Her cheeks glowed, her eyes gleamed.

Paul Schlieben looked at his wife with a certain awe. How beautiful she was at that moment. Beautiful, healthy, happy. He had not seen her like that for a long time. Not since he had folded her in his arms as a happy bride. Her bosom rose and fell quickly with every trembling breath she took, and the child lay on her breast and the Venn myrtle bloomed at her feet.

[Pg 26] A strange emotion came over him; but he turned away: what had that strange child to do with them? Still he admitted in a hesitating voice: "We certainly can't leave it here. But do you know what we can do? We'll take it with us to the inn. Give it to me, I'll carry it."

But she wanted to carry it herself, she only let him help her up. "There--there--come, my sweet little babe." She raised her foot cautiously to take the first step--then a shout tied her to the spot.

"Hallo!"

A rough voice had shouted it. And now a woman came up to them; the figure in the fluttering skirt was outlined big and clear against the rarefied ether that flowed around it.

Where had she come from so suddenly? From there, from behind the mound of earth that had been thrown up near the peat pit. She had been creeping on all fours plucking berries; a pail that was almost full hung on her arm, and in her right hand she carried the wooden measure and the large bone curry-comb with which she stripped off the berries.

That was the mother! Käte got a terrible fright; she turned pale.

Her husband was taken by surprise too. But then he gave a sigh of relief: that was decidedly the best way out of it. Of course, they might have known it at once, how should the child have come into the desolate Venn all alone? The mother had been looking for berries, and had put it down there meanwhile.

But the woman did not seem to take it kindly that they had looked so carefully after the child during her absence. The strong bony arms took it away from the lady somewhat roughly. The woman's eyes examined the strangers suspiciously.

[Pg 27] "Is it your child?" asked Paul. He need not have asked the question; it had exactly the same dark eyes as the woman, only the child's were brighter, not dulled as yet by life's dust as the mother's were.

The woman made no answer. It was only when the man asked once more, "Are you the mother?" and put his hand into his pocket at the same time, that she found it worth while to give a curt nod:

"C'est l' mi'n."^[A] Her face retained its gloomy expression; there was no movement of pride or joy.

^AC'est le mien.

Käte noticed it with a certain angry surprise. How indifferent the woman was. Was she not holding the child as though it were a useless burden? She was filled with envy, torturing envy, and at the same time with hot anger. That woman certainly did not deserve the child. She would have liked to have torn it out of her arms. How rough she looked, what coarse features she had, what a hard expression. She might really frighten anybody terribly with her black looks. But now--now her expression brightened; ah, she had seen the piece of money Paul had taken out of his purse.

Ugh, what a greedy expression she had now.

The fruit-picker stretched out her hand--there was a large shining silver coin--and when it was given to her, when she held it in her hand she drew a deep breath; her brown fingers closed round it tightly.

"Merci." A smile passed quickly across the sullen face in which the corners of the mouth drooped morosely, her blunted expression grew animated for a moment or two. And then she prepared to trudge away, the shapeless bundle containing the child on one arm, the heavy pail on the other.

[Pg 28] They now saw for the first time how poor her skirt was; it had patches of all colours and sizes. Dried heather and fir-needles stuck to her matted and untidy plaits, as they hung out from the gaudily spotted cotton handkerchief; she had an old pair of men's hobnailed shoes on her feet. They did not know whether she was old or young; her stout body and hanging breasts disfigured her, but that her face had not been ugly once upon a time could still be seen. The little one resembled her.

"You've got a pretty child," said Paul. To please his wife he started a conversation again with this woman who was so inaccessible. "How old is the boy?"

The fruit-picker shook her head and looked past the questioner apathetically. There was no getting anything out of the woman, how terribly stupid she was. The man wanted to let her go, but Käte pressed up against him and whispered: "Ask her where she lives. Where she lives--do you hear?"

"Heigh, where do you live, my good woman?"

She shook her head once more without saying a word.

"Where do you come from, I mean? From what village?"

"Je ne co'pr nay,"^[A] she said curtly. But then, becoming more approachable--perhaps she hoped for a second gift of money--she began in a whining, plaintive voice: "Ne n'ava nay de pan et tat d's e'fa'ts."^[B]

"You're a Walloon, aren't you?"

"Ay^[C]-Longfaye." And she raised her arm and pointed in a direction in which nothing was to be seen but the heavens and the Venn.

Longfaye was a very poor village in the Venn. Paul Schlieben knew that, and was about to put his hand into his pocket again, but Käte held him back, "No, not her--not the woman--you must hand it over to the vestryman for the child, the poor child."

AJe ne comprends pas.

BNous n'avons pas de pain et tant d'enfants.

CYes.

[Pg 29] She whispered softly and very quickly in her excitement.

It was impossible for the woman to have understood anything, but her black eyes flew as quick as lightning from the gentleman to the lady, and remained fixed on the fine lady from the town full of suspicion: if she would not give her anything, why should she let them ask her any more questions? What did they want with her? With the curtest of nods and a brusque "adieu" the Walloon turned away. She walked away across the marsh calmly but with long strides; she got on quickly, her figure became smaller and smaller, and soon the faded colour of her miserable skirt was no longer recognisable in the colourless Venn.

The sun had disappeared with the child; suddenly everything became grey.

Käte stood motionless looking in the direction of Longfaye. She stood until she shivered with cold, and then hung heavily on her husband's arm; she went along to the inn with dragging feet, as though she had grown tired all at once.

The mist began to conceal the bright midday. Cold damp air, which wets more than rain, made their clothes clammy. The stinging flies from the swamps flew in big swarms through the door and windows of the inn; a smouldering peat-fire was burning within, fanned to a bright flame by means of dry fir twigs, and the flies clung to the wall near the fire-place and to the ceiling--no, they would not die yet.

Autumn had come, sun and warmth had disappeared from the Venn, it was wise to flee now.

But outside, in the depths of the wilds above the highest point in the Venn, a lonely buzzard was moving round and round in a circle, uttering the piercing triumphant cry of a wild bird. He was happy there in summer as in winter. He did not want to leave.

[Pg 30]

CHAPTER III

The vestryman of the small village in the Venn felt somewhat surprised and embarrassed when such a fine lady and gentleman drove up to his house and wished to speak to him. He went out to them, walking through the filthy water in his yard that splashed up to his knees. He did not know where he should take them to, as the little pigs and the calf were in the house and the old sow was wallowing in front of the door.

So they walked up and down the quiet village street from which the few farms lay somewhat back, whilst the carriage jolted slowly along in the deep ruts behind them.

Käte was pale, you could see from her eyes that she had only had very little sleep. But she was smiling, and a happy excitement full of expectation was written on her features, spoke in her gait; she was always a little ahead of the others.

Her husband's face was very grave. Was he not committing a great imprudence, acting in an extremely hasty manner for the sake of his wife? If it did not turn out all right?

[Pg 31] They had had a bad night. He had brought Käte home from the inn the day before in a strangely silent and absent-minded mood. She had eaten nothing, and, feigning extreme fatigue, had gone early to bed. But when he retired to rest a few hours later he found her still awake. She was sitting up in bed with her beautiful hair hanging down her back in two long plaits, which gave her quite a youthful appearance. Her bewildered eyes gazed at him full of a strange longing, and then she threw both arms round his neck and drew his head down to her.

Her manner had been so strange, so gentle and yet so impetuous, that he asked her anxiously whether there was anything the matter with her. But she had only shaken her head and held him close in a silent embrace.

At last he thought she had fallen asleep--and she was asleep, but only for quite a short time. Then she woke again with a loud cry. She had dreamt, dreamt so vividly--oh, if he knew what she had been dreaming. Dreaming--dreaming--she sighed and tossed about, and then laughed softly to herself.

He noticed that she had something on her mind, which she would like to tell him but which she had hardly the courage to say. So he asked her.

Then she had confessed it to him, hesitatingly, shyly, and yet with so much passion that it terrified him. It was the child of which she had been thinking the whole time, of which she always must think--oh, if only she had it. She would have it, must have it. The woman had so many other children, and she--she had none. And she would be so happy with it, so unspeakably happy.

[Pg 32] She had become more and more agitated in the darkness of the night, uninterrupted by a single word from him, by any movement--he had lain quite quietly, almost as though the surprise had paralysed him, although it could not really be called a surprise any more. What was her whole life? she had said. A constant longing. All the love he showered on her could not replace the one thing: a child, a child.

"My dear, good husband, don't refuse it. Make me happy. No other mother on earth will be so happy--my darling husband, give me the child." Her tears were falling, her arms clasped him, her kisses rained down on his face.

"But why just *that* child? And why decide so quickly? It's no trifle--we must think it over very carefully first."

He had made objections, excuses, but she had pertinent answers ready for all. What was to be thought over very carefully? They would not come to any other result. And how could he think for a moment that the woman would perhaps not give them the child? If she did not love it, she would be glad to give it, and if she did love it, then all the more reason for her to be glad to give

it, and to thank God that she knew it was so well taken care of.

"But the father, the father. Who knows whether he will agree to it?"

"Oh, the father. If the mother gives it, the father is sure to agree. One bread-eater less is always a good thing for such poor people. The poor child, perhaps it will die for want of food, and it would be so well"--she broke off--"isn't it like a dispensation of Providence that just we should come to the Venn, that just we should find it?"

He felt that she was persuading him, and he strove against it in his heart. No, if she allowed herself to be carried away by her feelings in such a manner--she was only a woman--then he, as a man, must subordinate his feelings to common sense.

[Pg 33] And he enumerated all the difficulties to her again and again, and finally said to her: "You can't guess what troubles you may be preparing for yourself. If the affection you now think you feel for the child should not last? If he is not congenial to you when he grows older? Bear in mind, he is and will always be the child you have adopted."

But then she had almost flown into a passion. "How can you say such things? Do you think I am narrow-minded? Whether it is my own child or a child I have adopted is quite immaterial, as it becomes mine through its training. I will train it in my own way. That it is of your own flesh and blood has nothing to do with it. Am I only to love a child because I have borne it? Oh no. I love the child because--because it is so small, so innocent, because it must be so extremely sweet when such a helpless little creature stretches out its arms to you." And she spread out her arms and then folded them across her breast, as though she was already holding a child to her heart. "You're a man, you do not understand it. But you are so anxious to make me happy make me happy now. Dear, darling husband, you will very soon forget that it is not our own child, you will soon not remember it any more. It will say 'Father,' 'Mother' to us--and we will be its father and mother."

If she were right! He was silent, thrilled by a strange emotion. And why should she not be right? A child that one trains according to one's own method from its first year, that is removed entirely from the surroundings in which it was born, that does not know but what it is the child of its present parents, that learns to think with their thoughts and feel with their feelings, cannot have anything strange about it any more. It will become part of oneself, will be as dear, as beloved as though one had begotten it oneself.

[Pg 34] Pictures arose before his mind's eye which he no longer expected to see, no longer ventured to hope for. He saw his smiling wife with a smiling child on her lap; he saw himself smile, and felt a pride he had never known when he heard its soft childish voice lisp: "Fa-ther." Yes, Käte was right, all the other things that go by the name of happiness are nothing compared to this happiness. Only a father, a mother, knows what joy is.

He kissed his wife, and this kiss already meant half consent; she felt that.

"Let us drive there to-morrow, the first thing to-morrow morning," she implored, in a tone of suppressed rapture.

He endeavoured to remain calm: after they had maturely considered the matter, they would first have to talk it over with their lawyer in Berlin, and other intimate friends.

Then she lost her temper. She pouted, and then she laughed at him: was this a business matter? What had the lawyer and other people to do with such a very important, quite personal and private matter? Nobody was to be asked about it, nobody was to interfere with it. Not a single person must suspect where the child came from or who were its parents. They, he and she, were its parents, they were responsible for it, its life had begun when they took it, and they vouched for its future. This child was their work, their work entirely.

"We'll fetch it the first thing to-morrow. The sooner it gets out of that dirt and misery the better--don't you agree with me, Paul?" She did not give him a chance of saying anything more, she overwhelmed him with plans and proposals, in her sparkling vivacity; and her exuberant spirits overcame his scruples.

[Pg 35] One can have too many scruples, be too cautious, and thus embitter every pleasure in life, he said to himself. There was surely nothing extraordinary in what they were doing? They only picked up something that had been laid at their feet; in that way they were obeying a hint given them by Fate. And there were really no difficulties in connection with it. If they did not betray it themselves nobody would find out about the child's antecedents, and there would not be any questions asked in the village either as to what had become of it. It was a nameless, homeless little creature they were going to take away with them, of which they would make what they liked. Later on when the little one was old enough they would formally adopt it, and thus confirm also in writing what their hearts had already approved of long ago. Now the only thing left to do was to get hold of the vestryman at Longfaye, and make arrangements with the parents for the surrender of the child with his assistance.

When Paul Schlieben had come to this decision, he was troubled with the same restlessness as his wife. Oh, if only it were morning, she groaned. If anybody should steal a march on them now,

if the child should no longer be there next morning? She tossed about in her impatience and fear. But her husband also turned from side to side without sleeping. How could they know whether the child was healthy? For a moment he weighed anxiously in his mind whether it would not be advisable to confide in the doctor at the baths at Spa--he might drive with them and examine the child first of all--but then he rejected the thought again. The child looked so strong. He recalled its sturdy fists, the clear look in its bright eyes--it had lain on the bare ground in the cold and wind without any protection--it must have a strong constitution. They need not trouble about that.

[Pg 36] It was very early in the morning when husband and wife rose--weary as though all their limbs were bruised, but driven on by a kind of joyful determination.

Käte ran about the room at the hotel, so busy, so happy and excited, as though she were expecting a dear guest. She felt so sure they would bring the child back with them straightway. At all events she would commence packing the trunks, for when they had got it they would want to get home, home as quickly as possible. "The hotel is no place for such a little darling. It must have its nursery, a bright room with flowered curtains--but dark ones besides to draw in front of the windows so as to subdue the light when it goes to sleep--otherwise everything must be bright, light, airy. And there must be a baby's chest-of-drawers there with all the many bottles and basins, and its little bath, its bed with the white muslin curtains behind which you can see it lying with red cheeks, its little fist near its head, slumbering soundly."

She was so young-looking, so lovely in her joyful expectation, that her husband was charmed with her. Did not the sunshine seem to be coming now for which he had been waiting so long in vain? It preceded the child, fell on its path, making it clear and bright.

Both husband and wife were full of excitement as they drove to Longfaye. They had taken a comfortable landau that could be closed that day, instead of the light carriage for two in which they generally made their excursions. It might be too cold for the child on the way back. Rugs and cloaks and shawls were packed in it, quite a large choice.

[Pg 37] Paul Schlieben had taken his papers with him. They would hardly be likely to want any proof of his identity, but he stuck them into his pocket as a precaution, so as to provide against any delay that might be caused by their absence. He had been told that the vestryman was quite a sensible man, so everything would be settled smoothly.

As the rowan trees on both sides of the road bowed their tops under their autumn load of red berries, so the heads of both husband and wife were bowed under a flood of thoughts full of promise. The trees flew quickly past the carriage as it rolled along, and so did their lives' different stages past their agitated minds. Fifteen years of married life--long years when one is expecting something first with confidence, then with patience, then with faint-heartedness, then with longing, with a longing that is kept more and more secret as the years go by, and that becomes more and more burning on account of the secrecy. Now the fulfilment was at hand--a fulfilment certainly different from what husbands and wives who love each other picture to themselves, but still a fulfilment.

That old sentence in the Bible came into the woman's mind and would not be banished: *But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son.* Oh, this child from a strange, from an unknown land, from a land that had neither fields nor fruits, and was not blessed with rich harvests, this child was a gift from God, given by His goodness. She bowed her head full of gratitude, as though she had received a blessing.

And the man pressed his wife's hand gently, and she returned the pressure. They remained sitting hand in hand. His glance sought hers and she blushed. She loved him again as in the first year of her marriage--no, she loved him much more now, for now, now he gave her the happiness of her life, the child.

Her eyes that were full of bliss swept over the poor Venn district, which looked brown and desolate, and which was still a fairyland full of the most glorious wonders.

[Pg 38] "Didn't I know it?" she murmured triumphantly, although trembling with an agitation that was almost superstitious. "I felt it--here--here."

She could hardly wait until they reached the village hi the Venn, oh, how far away from the world it lay, so quite forgotten. And so poor. But the poverty did not terrify her, nor the dirt--the result of the poverty; she was going to take the child away with her now, to take him where there was culture and prosperity, and he would never know that he had lain on the bare ground instead of in a soft bed. She thought of Moses. As he had been found in the bulrushes on the banks of the Nile, so she had found him on the grass in the Venn--would he become a great man like him? Desires, prayers, hopes, and a hundred feelings she had not known before agitated her mind.

Paul Schlieben had some difficulty in making the vestryman understand him. It was not because the man was a Walloon who hardly understood German, for Nikolas Rocherath of "Good Hope"--his house having received that name because it could be seen a good distance off in the Venn, it being the largest in the village--was a German, but because he could not understand what the gentleman meant.

What did he want with Lisa Solheid's Jean-Pierre? Adopt him? He looked quite puzzled at first,

and then he got offended. No, even if he was nothing but a simple peasant, he would not let the gentleman make a fool of him.

[Pg 39] It was only by degrees that Schlieben could convince him that his intentions were serious. But the old man still continued to rub his stubbly chin doubtfully and cast suspicious glances at the lady and gentleman, who had broken in on his solitude so unexpectedly. It was only when Käte, wearied and tortured by the long explanation, seized hold of his arm impatiently, and looking into his face cried impetuously, almost angrily, "For goodness' sake do understand. We have no child, but we want a child--now do you understand it?"--that he understood.

No child--oh dear! No child! Then people do not know what they are living for. Now he nodded comprehendingly, and, casting a compassionate look at the lady who was so rich, so finely dressed and still had no children, he became much more approachable. So they were so pleased with Lisa Solheid's Jean-Pierre that they wanted to take him to Berlin with them? How lucky the boy was. Lisa would not be able to believe it. But nobody would begrudge her it. Nobody in Longfaye was as poor as she; many a day she did not know how to get sufficient food for herself and her five. Formerly, whilst her husband was alive----

What, her husband was not alive? She was a widow? Paul Schlieben interrupted the vestryman, and drew a long breath as though of relief. Although he had never spoken of it, he had always had a secret fear of the father: if he turned out to be a drunkard or a ne'er-do-well? A load fell from his mind now--he was dead, he could not do any more harm. Or had he died of an illness after all, of a wasting disease that is handed down to children and children's children? He had been told that the mists on the Venn and the sudden changes in the temperature may easily be injurious to the lungs and throat--added to that hard work and bad food--surely the young man had not died of consumption? He asked the question anxiously.

[Pg 40] But Nikolas Rocherath laughed. No, Michel Solheid had never known a day's illness all his life, and had not died of any illness. He had worked at the machine factory at Verviers, covered with black soot and naked to the waist. Cold and heat had had no effect on him. And he used to come over from Verviers every Saturday and spend Sunday with his family. And it had been the Saturday before the festival of St. Peter and St. Paul somewhat over a year ago now, and Michel had bought his wife a side of bacon and one or two pounds of coffee for the money he had earned for overtime.

"You must know, sir, everything is much too dear for us here, and it is much cheaper on the other side of the frontier," said the old man in a troubled voice; then, raising his fist slowly, he shook it at the Venn that lay there so peaceful and remote from the world. "But they were soon on his tracks. They came after him from the Baraque--the accursed douaniers. Three, four of them. Now you must know that Michel could run as well as any of them. If he had thrown his parcel behind a bush and run, they would never have caught him. But no, he would not, he would have felt ashamed of himself if he had done so. So in order not to let them know where he was going, he ran to the left through the Walloon Venn in the direction of Hill instead of to the right. Then on through Clefay and Neckel, [\[A\]](#) and so on in all directions, and in this manner he got away from the neighbourhood he knew as well as he knew his own pocket. They were close at his heels above the Pannensterz. And they ran after him calling out 'Stop!'

[A](#)Wooded districts in the High Venn.

"Look you, sir, if he had run into the Great Haard then and hidden in the thicket there, they would never have found him without a dog. But he lost his head, and ran out of the bushes straight across the Venn.

[Pg 41] "Halt!--Stop!--and a third time 'Halt!' But he bounded along like a stag. Then one of them pulled his trigger and--Jesus Christ have mercy upon us, now and at the hour of our death!--the vestryman devoutly made the sign of the cross and then wiped his nose with the back of his hand--"the shot pierced the side of bacon and went into his back, in from behind, out at the front. Then Solheid turned a somersault. It was a shame. Such a fine fellow, for a side of bacon.

"He still lived for over an hour. He told them that he was Solheid from Longfaye, and that they should fetch his wife.

"I was just cutting my hedge that day, when somebody came running up. And I started off with Lisa, who was six months gone with Jean-Pierre at the time. But when we came there it was already too late.

"They had left him lying not far from the large cross. They had wanted to carry him to a house at Ruitzhof, but he had said 'Leave me. I'll die here.' And he gazed at the sun.

"Sir, it was as large and red in the sky that day--as large--as it will be on the Day of Judgment.

Sir, he was bathed in sweat and blood--they had chased him for hours--but he still enjoyed gazing at the sun.

"Sir, the fellow who had shot him was almost out of his mind; he held him on his knees and wept. Sir, no,"--the vestryman gave himself a shake and his gestures expressed the aversion he felt--"I would not like to be a douanier!"

The old man's voice had grown deeper and hoarser--it was a sign of the sympathy he felt--now it got its former even-tempered ring again. "If it's agreeable to you, ma'am, we'll go now."

"Oh, the child, the poor child," whispered Käte, quite shaken.

[Pg 42] "Do you think the widow will part with her youngest child?" asked Paul Schlieben, seized with a sudden fear. This child that had been born after its father's death--was it possible?

"Oh!" the old man rocked his head to and fro and chuckled. "If you give a good sum for it. She has enough of them."

Nikolas Rocherath was quite the peasant again now; it was no longer the same man who had spoken of the sun in the Venn and Solheid's death. The point now was to get as much out of these people as possible, to fleece a stranger and a townsman into the bargain to the best of his ability.

"Hundred thalers would not be too much to ask," he said, blinking sideways at the gentleman's grave face. What a lot of money he must have, why, not a muscle of his face had moved.

The old peasant had been used to haggling all his life when trading in cattle, now he gazed at the strange gentleman full of admiration for such wealth. He led the way to Solheid's cottage with alacrity.

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CHAPTER IV

Like all the houses in the village, the Solheids' cottage stood quite alone behind a hedge that reached as high as the gable. But the hedge, which was to protect it against the storms that raged in the Venn and the heavy snowdrifts, was not thick any longer; you could see that there was no man's hand there to take care of it. The hornbeams had shot up irregularly; dead branches lashed by the wind from the Venn stretched themselves in the air like accusing fingers.

Ugh, it must be icy cold there in the winter. Käte involuntarily drew her cloak of soft cloth lined with silk more tightly round her. And it must be doubly dark there on dark days. Hardly any light found its way through the tiny windows owing to the protecting hedge, and the roof hung low over the entrance. There were no steps, you walked straight into the room.

The vestryman rattled the iron knocker on the door, which had once been painted green but had no colour left now. The sound reverberated through the building, but the door did not open when they tried it. The woman was probably among the berries, and the children with her. The hungry screams of the youngest one was all that was heard inside the locked cottage.

The poor child--oh, she had left it alone again. Käte trembled with excitement, its screams sounded to her like a call for help.

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The vestryman sat down calmly on the chopping-block in front of the door and drew his pipe out of the pocket of his blue linen smock, which he had hastily drawn over his working coat in honour of the lady and the gentleman. Now they would have to wait.

The husband and wife looked at each other much disappointed. Wait? Käte had refused the seat on the chopping-block, which the old man had offered her with a certain gallantry. She could not rest, she walked restlessly up and down in front of the little window, trying in vain to look through the dark pane.

The child inside screamed more and more loudly. Old Rocherath laughed: what a roar that was to be sure, Jean-Pierre had powerful lungs.

Käte could not listen to the screams any longer, they tortured her both bodily and mentally. Oh, how they made her ears tingle. She covered them with her hands. And her heart trembled with compassion and anger: how could its mother remain away so long?

Her brow was wet with perspiration. She stared at the Venn, at the bare, treeless, tortuous path with burning impatient eyes. At last she saw some figures--at last!--and yet her breath stopped all at once, her heart ceased to beat and then suddenly went hammering on at a furious pace as if mad. There came the child's mother!

Lisa Solheid was carrying a bundle of fagots on her back, which was fastened round her shoulders with a rope. The load was so heavy that it quite weighed her down, bending her head forward. Three children--their small feet in clumsy shoes with big nails in them--stamped along in front of their mother, whilst a fourth was clinging to her skirt. It had also been looking for cranberries, and its little hands were coloured red like those of its older sister and brothers, who were carrying pails, measure and comb.

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Pretty children, all four of them. They had the same dark eyes as little Jean-Pierre, and they stared with them half boldly, half timidly at the strange lady who was smiling at them.

The woman did not recognise the lady and gentleman again who had given her a present in the Venn the day before--or did she only pretend not to?

The rope which had kept the bundle together had cut deep into her shoulders and bosom, now she undid it and threw off the burden with a powerful jerk; and then, seizing hold of the axe lying near the chopping-block, she began to chop up a couple of big branches with powerful strokes.

"Hallo, Lisa," said the vestryman, "when you have chopped sufficient wood to cook the cranberries, just wait a bit."

She looked up at him for a moment. The strange lady and gentleman had gone a little aside--without previous arrangement. Let the vestryman tell her first. It was not so simple a matter as they had imagined. She was not very approachable.

Not a feature changed in the woman's reserved face; she went on with her work in silence, her lips compressed. The wood was split up by means of her powerful blows, and the pieces flew around her. Was she listening at all to what the man was saying to her?

Yes--the spectators exchanged a hasty glance--and now she was answering too in a more lively manner than they would have supposed, judging from her sullen appearance.

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Lisa Solheid raised her arm and pointed to the cottage in which the little one was still screaming. Her speech--an almost barbaric dialect--sounded rough, they understood nothing of it except a French word here and there. The vestryman spoke Walloon too. Both of them became excited, raised their voices and spoke to each other in a loud voice; it sounded almost like quarrelling.

They did not seem to agree. Käte listened in suppressed terror. Would she give it? Would he get it from her?

She pulled her husband's sleeve when nobody was looking. "Offer more, give her some more, a hundred thalers is much too little." And he must also promise the peasant something for his trouble. A hundred, two hundred, three hundred, a hundred times a hundred would not be too much. Oh, how the poor child was screaming. She could hardly bear to stand outside the door doing nothing any longer.

Little Jean-Pierre's sister and brothers--a beautiful girl with untidy hair and three younger brothers--stood with their fingers in their mouths, their dirty noses unwiped, and did not move from the spot.

Their mother spoke to them angrily, "Off with you!" And they darted off, one almost tumbling over another. They scraped the key out of the little hole under the door, and the biggest of them thrust it into the rusty lock, and, standing on her toes, turned it with all the strength of her small hands.

Then the woman turned to the strange lady and gentleman; she made a gesture of invitation with her thin right hand: "Entrez."

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They stepped in. It was so low inside that Paul Schlieben had to bend his head so as not to knock against the beams in the ceiling, and so dark that it took a considerable time before they could distinguish anything at all. It could not have been poorer anywhere--one single room in all. The hearth was formed of unhewn stones roughly put together, above it hung the kettle in an iron chain that was made fast to the blackened beam; the smoke from the smouldering peat ascended into the wide sooty chimney. A couple of earthenware plates in the plate-rack--cracked but with gay-coloured flowers on them--a couple of dented pewter vessels, a milk-pail, a wooden tub, a long bench behind the table, on the table half a loaf of bread and a knife, a few clothes on some nails, the double bed built half into the wall, in which the widow no doubt slept with the children now, and little Jean-Pierre's clumsy wooden cradle in front of it--that was all.

Really all? Käte looked round, shivering a little in the cold dark room that was as damp as a cellar. Oh, how poor and comfortless. There were no ornaments, nothing to decorate it. Oh yes, there was a glaringly gaudy picture of the Virgin Mary--a coarse colour-print on thin paper--a

vessel for holy water made of white china beneath it, and there on the other wall close to the window so that the sparse light fell on it the picture of a soldier. A framed and glazed picture in three divisions; the same foot-soldier taken three times. To the left, shouldering his arms, on guard before the black and white sentry-box--to the right, ready to march with knapsack and cooking utensils strapped on his back, bread-bag and field-flask at his side, gun at his feet--in the centre, in full dress uniform as a lance-corporal, with his hand to his helmet saluting.

That was no doubt the man, Michel Solheid as a soldier. Käte cast a timid glance at the picture--that man had been shot in the Venn whilst smuggling. How terrible! She heard the old man tell the story once more, saw the bleeding man lying in the heather, and the horror of his tragic end made her shudder. Her glance fell on the picture again and again, the usual picture of a soldier which told nothing whatever in its stereotyped inanity, and then on little Jean-Pierre's cradle. Did he resemble his father much?

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Paul Schlieben had expected his wife to speak--she would of course know best what to say to the other woman--but she was silent. And the vestryman did not say anything either; as he had started the negotiations he considered it polite to let the gentleman speak now. And Lisa Solheid was also silent. All she did was to drive away the children, who wanted to fall upon the hard bread on the table with ravenous appetites, with a silent gesture. Then she stood quietly beside the cradle, her right hand, which still held the axe with which she had cut the wood, hanging loosely by her side. Her face was gloomy, forbidding, and still a struggle was reflected on it.

Paul Schlieben cleared his throat. He would have preferred some other person to have settled the matter for him, but, as this other person was not there and the vestryman only looked at him expectantly, he was compelled to speak. With an affability which might have been taken for condescension but which was nothing but embarrassment he said: "Frau Solheid, the vestryman will have told you what has brought us to you--do you understand me, my good woman?"

She nodded.

"It's our intention to take your youngest child away with us"--he hesitated, for she had made a movement as though she wanted to deny it--"as our own, to adopt it. Do you understand?"

She did not answer, but he continued with as much haste as if she had said yes. "We will treat it as if it really were our own. We shall be able to do more for it than you would, of course, and we----"

"Oh, and we'll love it so," his wife broke in.

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The black-eyed woman turned her head slowly to the side where the fair-haired lady was standing. It was a peculiar look with which she scanned the stranger, who had now approached the cradle. Was it a scrutinising look or a forbidding one? A friendly or unfriendly one?

Käte looked at the child with longing eyes. It was no longer crying, it even smiled, and now--now it stretched out its little arms. Oh, it was already so intelligent, it was looking at her, it noticed already that she was fond of it. It tried to get up--oh, it wanted to go to her, to her!

Her face flushed with joy. She had already stretched out her hands to take the child, when its mother pushed herself in front of the cradle like a wall.

"Neni,"^[A] she said in Walloon, in a hard voice. She raised her empty left hand to ward Käte off. And then she made the sign of the cross on the child's forehead and then on its breast.

^ANon.

But why, why would she not give it all at once? Käte trembled with dismay. She cast an imploring look at her husband, as much as to say: "Help me. I must have the child."

And then her husband said what he wanted to say before when his wife had cut him short: "We will secure your child's future. Do you know what that means, my good woman? It will never have to trouble about its daily bread--never have to hunger. Never have to work to prolong its life--only work for the pleasure of working. Do you understand?"

Work--for the pleasure of working? The woman shook her head, she did not understand him. But then the words came into her mind: never hunger!--and a light shone in her dull eyes. Never hunger--ah, the woman understood that; and still she shook her head again: "Neni!"

She pointed to herself and the other children, and then to the great Venn outside with a comprehensive gesture:

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"Nos avans tortos faim."^[A] She shrugged her shoulders with the equanimity of one who is accustomed to it, and it even looked as though she wanted to smile; the corners of her sullen mouth did not droop quite so much, her lips that were generally tightly closed showed her strong healthy teeth.

The vestryman stepped in now: "Pon my word, Lisa, to hunger is surely no pleasure. Good heavens, how can you be so foolish! The child will be taken from hell to heaven. Remember what I've told you, the lady and gentleman are rich, very rich, and they are mad on the child--quick, give it to them, you still have four."

Still four! She nodded reflectively, but then she threw her head back, and a look--now it was plain, something like hatred flickered in it--flew to the others standing there so rich, so fine, with rings on their fingers, and at whom her Jean-Pierre was peeping. "Neni!" She repeated it once more and still more curtly and more obstinately than before.

But the vestryman was tenacious, he knew the people he had to deal with. "You must think it over," he said persuasively. "And they'll give you a good sum, I tell you--won't you?" he asked, turning to the gentleman. "Haven't you said you weren't particular to a coin or two in the case of such a poor woman?"

"No, certainly not," assured Paul. And Käte was too precipitate again. "It does not matter at all to us--we will gladly give what she asks--oh, the dear child!"

"Dju n' vous nin,"^[B] muttered the woman.

^ANous avons tous faim.

^BJe ne veux pas.

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"You won't? Oh, nonsense." The old peasant almost laughed at her. "You are just like my Mayflower when she won't stand, and kicks the milk-pail with her hind foot. Don't offend the people. What advantage will it be to you if they grow impatient and go away? None at all. Then you will have five who call out for bread, and the winter is near at hand. Do you want to have such a winter as you had last year? Didn't Jean-Pierre almost die of cold? The four others are already older, it's easier to rear them. And you can get a cow for yourself--just think of that, a cow. And you could have a better roof put on the house, which won't let the rain and the snow come through, and could have enough cranberries as well. It would certainly be a good stroke of business, Lisa."

Käte wanted to add something more--oh, what a lot of good she would do the woman, if she would only give the child to her!--but the old man cleared his throat and winked at her covertly to warn her that she was to be silent.

"Kubin m'e dinroz--ve?"^[A] inquired the woman all at once.

^ACombien me donnerez-vous donc?

She had been standing undecided for a long time with her head bowed, and a deep silence had reigned around her. The strange lady and gentleman had not moved, nor had the vestryman; no wind had whistled in the chimney, no fire crackled. A silent expectation weighed on them all. Now she raised her head, and her gloomy eyes glanced at the miserable room, the small quantity of bread on the table and then at the hungry four, as though examining everything. She no longer looked at the fifth child. She had grown pale, the deep sunburn on her face had turned a greyish

colour.

[Pg 52] "What's he going to give you? Well, what will you give her?" said the peasant encouragingly. "I think you'll see that two hundred is too little. The woman is very much attached to the child, it will not be easy for her to give it up." He watched Paul Schlieben out of the corner of his eye, and called out as they call out at an auction: "Two hundred, two hundred and fifty, three hundred. 'Pon my word, it isn't too much. Jean-Pierre is a fine boy--just look at his fists. And his thighs. A splendid fellow." He noticed the longing expression in Käte's eyes--"Three hundred thalers is not worth talking about for the boy, is it, ma'am?"

Käte had tears in her eyes and was very pale. The air in the cottage oppressed her, it was all very repugnant to her--let them only get away quickly from there. But not without the child. "Four hundred--five hundred," she jerked out, and she gazed imploringly at her husband as though to say: "Do settle it quickly."

"Five hundred, willingly." Paul Schlieben drew out his pocket-book.

The peasant craned his neck forward the better to see. His eyes were quite stiff in his head, he had never seen anybody pay so willingly before. The children, too, stared with wide-open eyes.

The woman cast a hasty glance at the notes the gentleman spread on the table near the bread; but the covetous light that flashed in her eyes disappeared suddenly again. "Neni," she said sullenly.

"Offer her some more--more," whispered the old man.

And Schlieben laid another couple of notes on the table beside the others; his fingers trembled a little as he did it, the whole thing was so unspeakably repugnant to him. He had never thought of haggling; they should have what they wanted, only let them get done with it.

[Pg 53] Nikolas Rocherath could not contain himself any longer at the sight of such generosity--so much money on the table, and that woman could still hesitate? He rushed up to her and shook her by the shoulders: "Are you quite mad? Six hundred thalers on the table and you don't take them? What man here can say he has six hundred thalers in cash? What money, what a sum of money!" His emaciated face, which had grown very haggard from years of toil and a life lived in wind and storm and which was as sharply outlined as though cut out of hard wood, twitched. His fingers moved convulsively: how was it possible that anybody could still hesitate?

The axe which the woman still held fell out of her hand with a loud noise. Without raising her head, without looking at the table or at the cradle she said in a loud voice--but there was no ring in the voice: "Allons bon. Djhan-Pire est da vosse."[\[A\]](#)

[A](#)Eh bien. Jean-Pierre est à vous.

And she turned away, walked to the hearth with a heavy tread and raked up the smouldering peat.

What indifference! This woman certainly did not deserve to be a mother. Käte's gentle eyes began to blaze. Schlieben was angry too; no, they need not have any scruples about taking the child away from there. He was filled with disgust.

The woman behaved now as though the whole affair did not concern her any longer. She busied herself at the hearth whilst the vestryman counted the notes--licking his fingers repeatedly and examining both sides of each one--and then put them carefully into the envelope which the gentleman had given him.

"There they are, Lisa, put them into your pocket."

She tore them out of his hand with a violent gesture, and, lifting up her dress to a good height, she slipped them into her miserable ragged petticoat.

[Pg 54] The last thing had still to be settled. Even if Paul Schlieben felt certain that nobody there would inquire about the child any more, the formalities had to be observed. Loosening his pencil from his watch-chain--for where was ink to come from there?--he drew up the mother's deed of surrender on a leaf from his pocketbook. The vestryman signed it as witness. Then the woman put her three crosses below; she had learnt to write once, but had forgotten it again.

"There!" Paul Schlieben rose from the hard bench on which he had sat whilst writing with a sigh of relief. Thank goodness, now everything was settled, now the vestryman had only to procure him the birth and baptismal certificates and send them to him. "Here--this is my address. And here--this is for any outlay." He covertly pressed a couple of gold coins into the old man's hand, who smiled when he felt them there.

Well, now they would take the boy with them at once? he supposed.

Käte, who had been standing motionless staring at the mother with big eyes as though she could not understand what she saw, woke up. Of course they would take the child with them at once, she would not leave it a single hour longer there. And she took it quickly out of the cradle, pressed it caressingly to her bosom and wrapped it up in the warm wide cloak she was wearing. Now it was her child that she had fought such a hard battle for, had snatched from thousands of dangers, her darling, her sweet little one.

Little Jean-Pierre's sister and brothers stood there in silence with eyes wide open. Had they understood that their brother was going away, going for ever? No, they could not have understood it, otherwise they would have shown how grieved they were. Their big eyes were only interested in the bread on the table.

Paul Schlieben pitied the little ones greatly--they would remain there in their wretchedness, their hunger, their poverty. He stuck a present into the hands of all four. None of the four thanked him for it, but their small fingers clasped the money tightly.

[Pg 55] The woman did not thank him either. When the strange lady took Jean-Pierre out of the cradle--she had seen it without looking in that direction--she had started. But now she stood motionless near the empty cradle, on the spot where the axe had fallen out of her right hand before with a loud noise, looking on in silence whilst Jean-Pierre was being wrapped up in the soft cloak. She had nothing to give him.

Paul Schlieben had feared there would be a scene at the very last in spite of the mother's indifference--she surely could not remain so totally void of feeling, when they carried her youngest child away with them?--but the woman remained calm. She stood there motionless, her left hand pressed against the place in her skirt where she felt the pocket. Did not that money in her pocket--Paul felt very disturbed--give the lie to all the traditions about a mother's love? And still--the woman was so demoralised by her great poverty, half brutalised in the hard struggle for her daily bread, that even the feeling she had for the child she had borne had vanished. Oh, what a different mother Käte would be to the child now. And he pushed his wife, who had the little one in her arms, towards the door, in his tender anxiety for her.

Let them only get away, it was not a nice place to be in.

They hastened away. Käte turned her head once more when she reached the threshold. She would have to cast a glance at the woman who remained behind so stiff and silent. Even if she were incomprehensible to her, a compassionate glance was her due.

Then ... a short cry, but loud, penetrating, terrible in its brevity, a cry that went through nerve and bone. One single inarticulate cry that agony and hatred had wrung from her.

The woman had stooped down. She had snatched up the axe with which she had chopped the wood. She raised her arm as though to throw something--the sharp edge flashed past the lady's head as she hurried away, and buried itself in the door-post with a crash.

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CHAPTER V

They had hastened away with the child as though they were running away. They had bundled it into the carriage--quick, quick--the coachman had whipped up the horses, the wheels had turned round with a creaking noise. The village in the Venn remained behind them, buried like a bad dream one wants to forget.

A dull grey lay over the Venn. The sun, which had been shining in the morning, had quite disappeared, as though not a single beam had ever been seen there. The Venn mist, which rises so suddenly, was there covering everything. There was a wall now where there had been a wide outlook before. A wall not of stone and not of bricks, but much stronger. It did not crack, it did not burst, it did not totter, it did not give way before the hammer wielded by the strongest hand.

It shaped itself out of the morasses, powerful and impenetrable, and stretched from the moor up to the clouds--or was it the clouds that had lowered themselves to the earth?

[Pg 57] The heavens and the Venn, both alike. Nothing but grey, a tough, damp, cold, liquid and still firm, unfathomable, mysterious, awful grey. A grey from which those who lose themselves on the moor never find their way out. The mist is too tenacious. It has arms that grip, that embrace so tightly, that one can neither see forward nor backward any more, neither to the left nor to the right, that the cry that wants to escape from a throat that is well-nigh choked with terror is drowned, and that the eye becomes blind to every road, every footprint.

The driver cursed and beat his horses. There was nothing more to be seen of the road, nothing whatever, no ditch at the side of it, no telegraph poles, no small rowan trees. The broad road that had been made with such difficulty had disappeared in the grey that enfolded the Venn. It was fortunate that the horses had not lost their way as yet. They followed their noses, shook their long tails, neighed shrilly and trotted courageously into the sea of mist.

Käte shuddered as she wrapped herself and the child up more tightly; they required all the warm covering now which they had taken with them so providently. Her husband packed her up still more securely, and then laid his arm round her as though to protect her. It was a terrible journey.

They had had the carriage closed, but the cold grey forced its way in notwithstanding. It penetrated through all the crevices, through the window-panes, filled the space inside so that their faces swam in the damp twilight like pale spots, and laid itself heavily, obstructively on their breath.

[Pg 58] Käte coughed and then trembled. There was no joy in her heart now, all she felt was terror, terror on account of the possession she had had to fight so hard to obtain. If the mother were to come after them now--oh, that terrible woman with the glittering axe. She closed her eyes tightly, full of a horror she had never felt the like to before--oh, she could not see it again! And still she opened her eyes wide once more, and felt the cold perspiration on her brow and her heart trembling--alas, that sight would pursue her even in her dreams. She would not get rid of it until her last hour--never, never again--she would always see that woman with the glittering axe.

It had whizzed close past her head--the draught of air caused by it had made the hair on her temples tremble. It had done nothing to her, it had only buried itself in the door-post with a loud noise, splitting it. And still she had come to harm. Käte pressed both her hands to her temples in horror: she would never, never get rid of that fear.

Her heart was filled with an almost superstitious dread, a dread as though of a ghost that haunted the place. Let them only get away from there, never to return. Let them only destroy every trace as they went along. That woman must never know where they had gone. She knew it was to Berlin--they had unfortunately given the vestryman their address--but Berlin was so far away, the woman from the Venn would never come there.

And the Venn itself? Ugh! Käte looked out into the grey mist, trembling with horror. Thank God, that would remain behind, that would soon be forgotten again. How could she ever have considered this desolate Venn beautiful? She could not understand it. What charm was there about these inhospitable plains, on which nothing could grow except the coarse grass and tough heather? On which no corn waved its spikes, no singing-bird piped its little song, no happy people lived sociably; where there was, in short, no brightness, no loud tones, only the silence of the dead and crosses along the road. It was awful there.

"Paul, let us leave to-day--as quickly as possible," she jerked out, full of terror, whilst her eyes sought in vain for a glimpse of light.

[Pg 59] He was quite willing. He felt ill at ease too. If this woman, this fury, had hit his wife in her sudden outburst of rage? But he could not help blaming himself: who had bade him have anything to do with such people? They were not a match for such barbarous folk.

And he was seized with a feeling of aversion for the child sleeping so peacefully on his wife's arm. He looked gloomily at the little face; would he ever be able to love it? Would not the memory of its antecedents always deter him from liking it? Yes, he had been too precipitate. How much better it would have been if he had dissuaded his wife from her wish, if he had energetically opposed her romantic idea of adopting this child, this particular child.

He frowned as he looked out of the window, whilst the grey mist clung to the pane and ran down it in large drops.

The wind howled outside; it had risen all at once. And it howled still louder the nearer they approached the top of the high Venn, whined round their carriage like an angry dog and hurled itself against the horses' chests. The horses had to fight against it, to slacken their trot; the carriage only advanced with difficulty.

The child must never, never know from whence it came, as otherwise--the new father was wrapped in thought as he stared into the Venn, whose wall of mist was now and then torn asunder by a furious gust of wind--as otherwise--what was he going to say? He passed his hand

over his brow and drew his breath heavily. Something like fear crept over him, but he did not know why.

[Pg 60] As he cast a look at his wife, he saw that she was quite absorbed in the contemplation of the sleeping child, which did not lessen his ill humour. He drew away her right hand, with which she was supporting its head that had fallen back: "Don't do that, don't tire yourself like that. It will sleep on even without that." And as she gave an anxious "Hush!" terrified at the thought that the little sleeper might have been disturbed, he said emphatically, "I must tell you one thing, my child, and must warn you against it, don't give him your whole heart at once--wait a little first."

"Why?" Something in his voice struck her and she looked at him in surprise. "Why do you say that so--so--well, as if you were vexed?" Then she laughed in happy forgetfulness. "Do you know--yes, it was horrible, awful in those surroundings--but thank God, now it's over. A mother forgets all she has suffered at the birth of her child so quickly--why should I not forget those horrors to-day too? Do look"--and she stroked little Jean-Pierre's warm rosy cheek carefully and caressingly as he slept--"how innocent, how lovely. I am so happy. Come, do be happy too, Paul, you are generally so very kind. And now let's think about what we are to call the boy"--her voice was very tender--"our boy."

They no longer heard the wind that had increased to a storm by now. They had so much to consider. "Jean-Pierre," no, that name should not be kept in any case. And they would go from Spa to Cologne that evening, as they would not dare to engage a nurse before they were there; not a single person there would have any idea about the Venn, of course. And they would also buy all the things they required for the child in Cologne as soon as possible.

[Pg 61] How were they to get on until then? Paul looked at his wife quite anxiously: she knew nothing whatever about little children. But she laughed at him and gave herself airs: when Providence gives you something to do, it also gives you the necessary understanding. And this little darling was so good, he had not uttered a sound since they left. He had slept the whole time as though there was nothing called hunger or thirst, as though there was nothing but her heart on which he felt quite at ease.

It gradually became more comfortable in the carriage. It seemed as though a beneficial warmth streamed forth from the child's body, as it rested there so quietly. The breath of life ascended from its strong little chest that rose and fell so regularly; the joy of life glowed in its cheeks that were growing redder and redder; the blessings of life dropped from those tiny hands that it had clenched in its sleep. The woman mused in silence and with bated breath as she gazed at the child in her lap, and the man, who felt strangely moved, took its tiny fist in his large hand and examined it, smiling. Yes, now they were parents.

But outside the carriage the air was full of horrors. It is only in the wild Venn that there can be such storms in autumn. Summer does not depart gently and sadly there, winter does not approach with soft, stealthy steps, there is no mild preparatory transition. The bad weather sets in noisily there, and the warmth of summer changes suddenly into the icy cold of winter. The storm whistles so fiercely across the brown plateau that the low heather bends still lower and the small juniper trees make themselves still smaller. The wind in the Venn chases along whistling and shrieking, clamouring and howling, pries into the quagmires and turf pits, whips up the muddy puddles, throws itself forcibly into the thickets of fir trees that have just been replanted, so that they groan and moan and creak as they cower, and then rages on round the weather-worn crosses.

[Pg 62] The blast roars across the moor like the sound of an organ or is it like the roar of the foaming breakers? No, there is no water there that rises and falls and washes the beach with its white waves, there is nothing but the Venn; but it resembles the sea in its wide expanse. And its air is as strong as the air that blows from the sea, and the shrill scream of its birds is like the scream of the sea-mew, and nature plays--here as there--the song of her omnipotence on the organ of the storm with powerful touch.

The small carriage crept over the top of the high Venn. The winds wanted to blow it down, as though it were a tiny beetle. They hurled themselves against it, more and more furiously, yelped and howled as though they were wolves, whined round its wheels, snuffed round its sides, made a stand against it in front and tugged at it from behind as though with greedy teeth: away with it! And away with those sitting inside it! Those intruders, those thieves, they were taking something away with them that belonged to the Venn, to the great Venn alone.

It was a struggle. Although the driver lashed away at them the brave horses shied, then remained standing, snorting with terror. The man was obliged to jump off and lead them some distance, and still they continued to tremble.

Something rose out of the pits and beckoned with waving gauzy garments, and tried to hold fast with moist arms. There was a snatching, a catching, a reaching, a tearing asunder of mists and a treacherous rolling together again, a chaos of whirling, twirling, brewing grey vapours; and plaintive tones from beings that could not be seen.

Had all those in the graves come to life again? Were those rising who had slept there, wakened by the snorting of the horses and the crack of the whip, indignant at being disturbed in

their rest? What were those sounds?

[Pg 63] The quiet Venn had become alive. Piercing sounds and whistling shrill cries and groaning and the flapping of wings and indignant screams mingled with the dull roar of the organ of the storm.

A flight of birds swam through the sea of mist. They rowed to the right, they rowed to the left, looked down uneasily at the strange carriage, remained poised above it for some moments with wings spread out ready to strike it to the ground, and then uttered their cry, the startled, penetrating cry of a wild bird. There was nothing triumphant about it to-day--it sounded like a lamentation.

And the Venn wept. Large drops fell from the mist. The mist itself turned into tears, to slowly falling and then to rushing, streaming, never-ending tears.

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CHAPTER VI

The Schliebens had reached Berlin safely. Käte was exhausted when she got out of the train; her hair was untidy, she did not look quite so smart as usual. It had been no trifle to make that long journey with the child. But they had been fortunate in finding a good nurse so quickly in Cologne--a widow, fond of children and experienced, a typical, comfortable-looking nurse; however, the mother had had enough to see to all the same. Had the child caught cold, or did it not like its bottle? It had cried with all the strength of its lungs--no carrying about, rocking, dandling, singing to it had been of any avail--it had cried with all its might the whole way to Berlin.

But, thank goodness, now they were at home. And everything was arranged as quickly as if by magic. True, the comfortable house they had had before was let, but there was villa after villa in the Grunewald, and, as they required so much more room now, they moved into one of those. They rented it to begin with. Later on they would no doubt buy it, as it was quite impossible to take a child like this one into a town. It would have to have a garden.

[Pg 65] They called him Wolfgang. "Wolf" had something so concise, vigorous, energetic about it, and--Käte gave a slight happy shudder as she thought of it--it was like a secret memory of the Venn, of that desolate spot over which they had triumphed, and to which they made only this slight concession. And did not "Wölfchen"--if they made that the diminutive of Wolf--sound extremely affectionate?

"Wölfchen"--the young mother said it about a hundred times every day.

The young mother? Oh yes, Käte felt young. Her child had made her young again, quite young. Nobody would have taken her for thirty-five, and she herself least of all. How she could run, how she could fly upstairs when they said: "The child is awake. It's screaming for its bottle."

She, who had formerly spent so many hours on the sofa, never found a moment's time to lie down the whole day; she slept all the more soundly at night as a result. It was quite true what she had heard other women say: a little child claims its mother's whole attention. Oh, how empty, colourless those days had been in which she had only existed. It was only now that there was meaning, warmth, brilliancy in her life.

[Pg 66] She walked every day beside the child's perambulator, which the nurse pushed, and it was a special pleasure to her to wheel the light little carriage with its white lacquer, gilt buttons and blue silk curtains herself now and then. How the people stared and turned round when they saw the handsome perambulator--no, the beautiful child. Her heart beat with pleasure, and when her flattered ear caught the cries of admiration, "What a fine child!" "How beautifully dressed!" "What splendid eyes!"--it used to beat even more quickly, and a feeling of blissful pride took possession of her, so that she walked along with head erect and eyes beaming with happiness. Everybody took her to be the mother, of course, the young child's young mother, the beautiful child's beautiful mother. How often strangers had already spoken to her of the likeness: "The exact image of you, Frau Schlieben, only its hair is darker than yours." Then she had smiled every time and blushed deeply. She could not tell the people that it really could not resemble her at all. She hardly remembered herself now that not a drop of her blood flowed in Wölfchen's veins.

It looked at her the first thing when it awoke. Its little bed with its muslin curtains stood near the nurse's, but its first look was for its mother and also its last, for nobody knew how to sing it to

sleep as well as she did.

"Sleep sound, sweetest child,
Yonder wind howls wild.
Hearken, how the rain makes sprays
And how neighbour's doggie bays.
Doggie has gripped the man forlorn
Has the beggar's tatter torn----"

sounded softly and soothingly in the nursery evening after evening, and little Wolf fell quietly asleep to the sound of it, to the song of the wind and the rain round defenceless heads, and of beggars whose garments the dog had torn.

Paul Schlieben had no longer any cause to complain of his wife's moods. Everything had changed; her health, too, had become new, as it were, as though a second life had begun. And he himself? He felt much more inclination for work now. Now that he had returned to business he felt a pleasure he had never experienced before when he saw that they were successful in their new ventures. He had never been enterprising before--what was the good? He and his wife had ample for all their requirements. Of course he had always been glad to hear when they had done a good stroke of business, but he could not say it had ever pleased him to make money. He had always found more pleasure in spending it.

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His father had been quite different in that respect. He had never been so easy-going, and as long as he lived he had always reproached himself for having let his only son serve as a soldier in a cavalry regiment. Something of a cavalryman's extravagance had clung to him, which did not exactly agree with the views of the very respectable well-to-do merchant of the middle class. And his daughter-in-law? Hm, the old gentleman did not exactly approve of her either in his heart. She had too much modern stuff in her head, and Paul had followed her lead entirely. You could be cultured--why not?--and also take an interest in art without necessarily having so little understanding for the real things of life.

This honest man, this merchant of the old stamp and true son of Berlin, had not had the joy of seeing what his partners now saw with unbounded astonishment. They had no need to shrug their shoulders at the man's lack of interest in the business any longer, and make pointed remarks about the wife who took up his attention so entirely; now he felt the interest they wished him to have. He was pleased to fall in with their plans now. He himself seemed to want, nay, even found it necessary to form new connections, to extend the calm routine of their business right and left, on all sides. He showed a capacity for business and became practical all at once. And in the middle of his calculations, whilst sitting absorbed at his desk, he would catch himself thinking: "that will be of use to the boy in the future." But at times this thought could irritate him so much that he would throw down his pen and jump up angrily from his desk: no, he had only adopted the child to please his wife, he would not love him.

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And yet when he came home to dinner on those delightful afternoons, on which he could smell the pines round his house and the pure air still more increased the appetite he had got from his strenuous work, and the boy would toddle up to him patting his little stomach and cry: "Daddy--eat--taste good," and Käte appear at the window, laughing, he could not refrain from swinging the hungry little chatterbox high up into the air, and only put him down on his feet again after he had given him a friendly slap. He was a splendid little chap, and always hungry. Well, he would always have sufficient to eat, thank God.

A certain feeling of contentment would come over the man on those occasions. He felt now what he had never felt before, that one's own home means happiness. And he felt the benefit of having an assured income, that allowed him to enrich his life with all sorts of comforts. The house was pretty. But when he bought it shortly he would certainly add to it, and buy the piece of ground next to it as well. It would be extremely disagreeable if anybody settled down just under their noses.

It had been difficult for Paul to make up his mind to take a house in the Grunewald at the time, after he had lived in Berlin itself as long as he could remember. But now he looked upon his wife's idea of going out there as a very good one. And not only for the child's sake. One enjoyed one's home in quite a different manner out there; one realised much more what it meant to have a home. And how much healthier it was--one's appetite certainly became enormous. In time one would think of nothing but material comforts. And the man followed the hungry boy into the house, as he also felt quite ready for his dinner.

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Wolfgang Solheid, called Schlieben, received his first trousers. It was a grand day for the whole house. Käte had him photographed in secret, as there had never been a boy who looked prettier in his first trousers. And she placed the picture of the little fellow who was not yet three years old--white trousers, white pleated tunic, horse under his arm, whip in his hand--in the middle of her husband's birthday table, surrounded by a wreath of roses. That was the best she could give him among all the many presents. How robust Wölfchen was. They had not noticed it so much before; he was as big as a boy of four. And how defiant he looked, as bold as a boy of five, who is already dreaming of fighting other boys.

The woman showed the man the picture full of delight, and there was such a gleam in her eyes

that he felt very happy. He thanked her many times for the surprise and kissed her: yes, this picture should stand near hers on his writing-table. And then they both played with the boy, who romped about on the carpet in his first pair of trousers, which he still found rather uncomfortable.

Paul Schlieben could not remember ever having spent such a pleasant birthday as this one. There was so much brightness around him, so much merriment. And even if Wolf had torn his first pair of trousers by noon--how and where it had been done was quite incomprehensible to the dismayed nurse--that did not disturb the birthday; on the contrary, the laughter became all the gayer. "Tear your trousers, my boy, tear away," whispered his mother, smiling to herself as the damage was pointed out to her, "just you be happy and strong."

There was a party in the evening. The windows of the pretty villa were lighted up and the garden as well. The air was balmy, the pines spread their branches motionless under the starry sky, and bright coloured lanterns glittered in the bushes and along the paths that were overgrown with trees like large glow-worms.

[Pg 70] Wölfchen was asleep on the first floor of the villa, in the only room that was not brightly lighted up. There was nothing but a hanging lamp of opal there, and every noise was kept away by thick curtains and Venetian blinds. But they drank his health downstairs.

The guests had already drunk the health of the master of the house at the table, and then that of his amiable wife--what greater honour could they pay their popular host and hostess now than to drink the health of the boy--their boy?

Dr. Hofmann, the tried doctor and friend of the family for many years, asked if he might have the privilege of saying a few words. He, as doctor, as counsellor on many an occasion, was best able to say what had always been wanting there. Everything had been there, love and complete understanding and also outward happiness, everything except--here he paused for a moment and nodded to his hostess who was sitting opposite to him, in a friendly manner full of comprehension--except a child's laughter. And now that was there too.

"A child's laughter--oh, what a salvation!" he cried with twinkling eyes and voice full of emotion, as he thought of his own three, who were certainly already independent and had chosen their paths in life, but their laughter still sounded in his heart and ear.

[Pg 71] "No child--no happiness. But a child brings happiness, great happiness. And especially in this case. For I, as a doctor, have hardly ever feasted my eyes on a more magnificent chest, a more splendidly developed skull, straighter legs and brighter eyes. All his senses are sharp; the lad hears like a lynx, sees like a falcon, smells like a stag, feels--well, I've been told that he is already up in arms against the slightest corporal punishment. It is only his taste that is not so finely developed as yet--the boy eats everything. However, this is again a new proof to me of his very great physical superiority, for, ladies and gentlemen"--at this point the doctor gave a jovial wink--"who does not agree with me? a good stomach that can stand everything is the greatest gift a kind Providence can give us on our journey through life. The boy is a favourite of fortune. A favourite of fortune in the two-fold meaning of the word for not only is he perfectly happy in himself, but his entry on the scene has also brought happiness to those around him. Our dear hostess, for example, have we ever seen her like this before? So young with those who are young, so happy with those who are happy? And our honoured friend here--nobody could imagine that he had climbed to the middle of the forties--he is as full of energy, of plans and enterprise as a man of twenty. And at the same time he has the beautiful calm, the comfortable appearance of the happy father who has had his desires gratified. And this fortunate boy is the cause of it all. Therefore thanks be to the hour that gave him, the wind that brought him here. From whence---?"

[Pg 72] The doctor, who had a small vein of malice in his nature, here made a pause intentionally, cleared his throat and straightened his waistcoat, for he saw many curious eyes fixed on him full of expectation. But he also saw the quick perturbed look the husband and wife exchanged, saw that Frau Schlieben had grown pale and was hanging anxiously, almost imploringly, on his lips, so he continued hastily with a good-natured laugh: "From whence, ladies--only have patience. I'll tell you now: he fell from the skies. Just as the falling star falls to earth on a summer night. And our dear hostess, who was just going for a walk, held out her apron and carried him home to her house. And so he has become the star of this house, and we all and I especially--even if I have become superfluous here in my capacity of doctor--are pleased with him without asking from whence he came. All good gifts come from above--we learnt that already in our childhood--so here's to the health of the boy who fell down to our friends from the sky."

The doctor had grown serious, there was a certain solemnity about him as he raised his champagne glass and emptied it: "God bless him! To the health of the child, the son of the house. May this fortunate lad grow, thrive and prosper."

The finely cut glasses gave a clear and melodious sound as they clinked them. There was a buzzing, laughter and cheering at the table, so that the little fellow upstairs in his bed began to toss about restlessly. He murmured impatiently in his sleep, pouted and lowered his brow.

The chairs were moved downstairs. The guests had risen, and, going up to the parents, had

shaken hands with them as though to congratulate them. Dr. Hofmann had done that really very nicely, really exceedingly well. But the little fellow was awfully sweet. All the women present agreed they had rarely seen such a pretty child.

Käte's heart had beaten a little anxiously when the doctor commenced to speak--surely he would not betray what had only been confided to him and the lawyer under the influence of a good glass of wine and a good dinner?--but it was now full of happiness. Her eyes sought her husband's, and sent him tender, grateful glances covertly. And then she went to their old friend, the doctor, and thanked him for all his good, kind words. "Also in Wölfchen's name," she said in a soft, cordial voice.

[Pg 73] "So you are satisfied with me all the same? Well, I'm glad." He drew her arm into his and walked up and down with her somewhat apart from the others. "I saw, my dear lady, that you grew uneasy when I began about the boy's antecedents. What kind of an opinion can you have of me? But I did so intentionally, I have been burning to find an opportunity to say what I did for a long time. Believe me, if I got a two-shilling bit every time I've been questioned about the boy's parentage--either openly or in a roundabout way--I should be a well-to-do man by now. I've often felt annoyed at the questions; what I said just now was the answer to them all. I trust they have understood it. They can keep their surmises to themselves in the future."

"Surmises?" Käte knit her brows and pressed the doctor's arm. What did those people surmise?--did they already know something, did they guess about the Venn? She was seized with a sudden terror. Pictures passed before her mental vision with lightning speed--there in that bright festive room--dark pictures of which she did not want to know anything more.

"How terrible," she said in a low voice that quivered. If the people got to know anything, oh, then she did not put her thought into words, for the sudden dread was almost choking her--then they would not get rid of the past. Then that woman would come and demand her right, and could not be shaken off any more. "Do you think," she whispered hesitatingly, "do you think they--they guess--the truth?"

"Oh no, they're very far off the mark," laughed the doctor, but then he grew grave again directly. "My dear lady, let us leave those people and their surmises alone." Oh dear, now he had meddled with a delicate subject, he felt quite hot--what if she knew that they thought that her Paul, that most faithful of husbands, had duties of a special kind towards the child?

[Pg 74] "Surmises--oh, what is it they surmise?" She urged him to tell her, whilst her eyes scrutinised his, full of terror.

"Nonsense," he said curtly. "Why do you want to trouble about that? But I told you and your husband that at once. If you make such a secret of the boy's parentage, all kinds of interpretations will be placed on it. Well, you would not hear of anything else."

"No." Käte closed her eyes and gave a slight shudder. "He's our child--our child alone," she said with a strange hardness in her voice. "And nobody else has anything to do with him."

He shook his head and looked at her questioningly, surprised at her tone.

Then she jerked out: "I'm afraid."

He felt how the hand that was lying on his arm trembled slightly.

Amid the gaiety of the evening something had fallen on Käte's joy that paralysed it, as it were. Many questions were asked her about little Wolf--that was so natural, they showed her their friendly interest by means of these questions--and they watched her quietly at the same time: it was marvellous how she behaved. They had hardly believed the delicate woman capable of such heroism. How much she must love her husband, that she took his child--for the boy must be his child, the resemblance was too marked, exactly the same features, the same dark hair--this child of a weak hour to her heart without showing any ill-will or jealousy. She, the childless woman, to take another woman's child. That was grand, almost too grand. They did not understand it quite.

[Pg 75] And Käte felt instinctively that there was something concealed behind the questions they asked her--was it admiration or compassion, approval or disapproval?--something one could not get hold of, not even name, only suspect. And that embarrassed her. So she only gave reserved answers to their friendly questions about Wölfchen, was concise in what she told them, cool in her tone, and still she could not hinder her voice vibrating secretly. That was the tender happiness she felt, the mother's pride she could not suppress, the warmth of her feelings, which lent her voice its undertone of emotion. The others took it for quite a different emotion.

The ladies, who took a walk in the garden after the dinner was over, were chatting confidentially together. The paths that smelt of the pines and in which the coloured lanterns gave a gentle subdued light were just suitable for that. They wandered about in twos and threes, arm in arm, and first of all looked carefully to see if there were any listeners, for their hostess must on no account hear it. There was hardly one among the ladies who had not made her observations. How well she bore up. It was really pathetic to see how resentment and affection, dislike and warmth struggled to get the mastery as soon as there was any talk about the child. And how a restless look would steal into her bright eyes--ah, she must have had and still have much to

contend with, poor thing.

[Pg 76] There was only one lady there who said she had known Paul Schlieben much too long and well not to feel sure that it was ridiculous--nay, even monstrous--to suppose he would do such a thing. He who was always such a perfect gentleman, not only in his outward behaviour and appearance but also in his thoughts, he, the most faithful of husbands, who even now, after a long married life, was as much in love with his wife as though they had just been married. The thing was quite different. They had always wished for children, what was more natural than that they should adopt one, now that they had finally given up all hope? Did not other people do the same?

Of course that happened, there was no doubt about it. But then the particulars were always given as to whether it was an orphan or the illegitimate offspring of some one moving in the highest circles, whether it had been offered in the newspaper--"to be given away to noble-minded people"--or whether it was the child of a girl who had been left in the lurch or the unwished-for child of parents belonging to the labouring classes, who had already been too richly blessed with children, and so on. Something at least was always known about it. But in this case why was such a secret made of it? Why did they not say openly: we have got it from there or there, it happened in such and such a manner?

It was difficult to question Frau Schlieben quite openly about the little one's parentage. They had already gone to her once with that intention, but as soon as they had introduced the subject such a terrified expression had come into the woman's eyes, something so shy and reserved into her manner, that it would have been more than tactless to continue the conversation. They were compelled to desist from questioning her--but it was peculiar, very peculiar.

And the gentlemen in the smoking-room, whom the host had left alone for a moment, discussed the same theme. The doctor was catechised.

[Pg 77] "I say, doctor, your speech was excellent, worthy of a diplomatist, but you can't deceive us. You don't know anything about the little chap's antecedents either? Now come!" It especially puzzled both partners that Schlieben had told them so little. When everything under the sun was discussed in business, one had also a certain right to know the man's private affairs too, especially as they had already worked with the old gentleman. Where would Paul have been now, if they two had not safeguarded his interests so energetically at the time when he put everything else before business? Herr Meier, who was already elderly and very corpulent, and whose good-natured, intelligent face bore signs of his fondness for a glass of wine, felt really very hurt at such a want of confidence: "As though we should have placed any difficulties in the way--absurd! Doctor, just tell us one thing. Did he get the boy here?"

But the other partner, Herr Bormann, who was somewhat choleric and had to go to Carlsbad every year, interrupted him sharply. "Well, really, Meier! And what's it to us? They say they have brought him with them from their last journey, when they were away so long--good. Where were they last? They went from Switzerland to the Black Forest and then to Spa, didn't they?"

"No, to the North Sea," said the doctor quietly. "You can see it as well, the boy has quite the Frisian type."

"That boy? With his black eyes?" No, there was nothing to be got out of Hofmann. He looked so innocent that you might have thought he was speaking seriously instead of joking. Aha, he had taken his stand; he had made up his mind not to say anything. They would have to let the subject drop.

The doctor, who had already taxed himself with stupidity in his heart--oh dear, now he had aroused everybody's curiosity instead of helping the Schliebens--heard the gentlemen pass on to politics with great relief.

It was midnight before the last guests left the villa. Their bright talk and laughter could still be heard distinctly from the end of the street in the silence of the night, as husband and wife met at the foot of the stairs leading up to the first floor.

[Pg 78] All the windows of the lower rooms were still open, the silver was still on the table, the costly china stood about--let the servants put it away for the time being. Käte felt a great longing to see the child. She had seen so little of him that day--there had been visitors the whole day. And then what a number of questions she had had to listen to, what a number of answers she had had to give. Her head was burning.

As she and her husband met--the man was hurrying out of his room, he had not even given himself time to lock away the cigars--she had to laugh: aha, he wanted to go upstairs too. She hung on his arm and they went up together keeping step.

"To Wölfchen," she said softly, pressing his arm. And he said, as though excusing himself: "I shall have to see if the noise has not awakened the boy."

They spoke in an undertone and moved along cautiously like thieves. They stole into the nursery--there he lay, so quietly. He had thrown off the covering in his sleep so that his naked rosy little legs were visible, and a warm, strong and wonderfully fresh smell ascended from the child's clean healthy body and mingled with the powerful odour of the pines, that the night sent

into the room through the slightly open window.

Käte could not restrain herself, she bent down and kissed the little knee that showed dimples in its firm roundness. As she looked up again, she saw her husband's eyes fixed on the sleeping child with a thoughtful expression.

She was so used to knowing everything that affected him, that she asked, "What are you thinking of, Paul? Does anything trouble you?"

[Pg 79] He looked at her absently for a few moments and then past her; he was so lost in thought that he had not heard her question at all. At last he murmured, "I wonder if it would not be better to be open about it? Hm." Then he shook his head and thoughtfully stroked his beard into a point.

"What are you saying? What do you mean? Paul!" She laid her hand on his.

That aroused him. He smiled at her and said then: "Käte, we must tell people the truth. Why shouldn't we say where he comes from? Yes, yes, it's much better, otherwise I fear we shall have a good deal of unpleasantness. And if the boy does find out in good time that he is not really our child--I mean our own child--what does it matter?"

"Good gracious!" She threw up her hands as though horrified. "No--not for the world--no! Never, never!" She sank down on the bed, spread both her arms over the child's body as though protecting it, and nestled her head on the warm little breast. "Then he would be lost to us, Paul."

She took a deep breath and trembled. Her voice expressed such horror, such a terrible fear and prophetic gravity that it startled the man.

"I only thought--I mean--I have really long felt it to be my duty," he said hesitatingly, as though making a stand against her fear. "I don't like that the--that people--well, that they talk. Don't be so funny about it, Käte; why shouldn't we tell?"

"Not tell! You ask why we shouldn't tell? Paul, you know that yourself. If he gets to know it--oh, that mother! that Venn!"

She clasped the boy even more tightly; but she had raised her head from his breast. Her face was pale, and her eyes looked quite bewildered as they stared at her husband. "Have you forgotten her?"

[Pg 80] Her tremulous voice grew hard. "No, he must never know it. And I swear it and you must promise me it as well, promise it sacredly now, here at his bedside whilst he's sleeping peacefully--and if I should die, not then either, Paul"--her voice grew louder and louder in her excitement, and its hard tone became almost a scream--"we'll never tell him it. And I won't give him up. He's my child *alone*, our child alone."

Then her voice changed. "Wölfchen, my Wölfchen, surely you'll never leave your mother?"

Her tears began to stream now, and whilst she wept she kissed the child so passionately, so fervently that he awoke. But he did not cry as he generally did when he was disturbed in his sleep.

He smiled and, throwing both his little arms round her neck as she bent down to him, he said, still heavy with sleep, but yet clearly, plainly, "Mammy."

She gave a cry of rapture, of triumphant joy. "Do you hear it? He says 'Mammy.'"

She laughed and cried at the same time in her excessive joy, and caught hold of her husband's hand and held it fast. "Paul--daddy--come, give our child a kiss as well."

And the man also bent down. His wife threw her arm round his neck and drew his head still further down quite close to hers. Then the child laid the one arm round his neck and the other round hers.

They were all three so close to each other in that calm summer night, in which all the stars were gleaming and the moonbeams building silver bridges from the peaceful heavens down to the peaceful earth.

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CHAPTER VII

Those were days of the purest happiness at the Schliebens'. The villa had been bought now, some rooms had been built on to it, and another piece of land had been added to the garden as a play-ground. They could not think of not giving the boy sufficient space to romp about in. Some sand was brought there, a heap as high as a dune in which to dig. And when he was big enough to do gymnastics they got him a swing and horizontal and parallel bars.

But still it was not sufficient. He climbed over all the fences round the neighbouring villas, over all the walls that were protected by barbed wire and pieces of glass.

"A splendid lad," said Dr. Hofmann when he spoke of Wolfgang. When he spoke to him he certainly said: "What a little ruffian you are! Just you wait till you go to school and they'll soon teach you to sit still."

Wolf was wild--rather too wild, his mother considered. The boy's high spirits amused her husband: that was because there was such a large amount of surplus energy in him. But Käte felt somewhat surprised at so much wildness--no, she was not really surprised, she knew too well where all that wildness came from; it frightened her.

[Pg 82] She did not scold him when he tore his trousers--oh, they could be replaced--but when he came home with the first hole in his head she became incredibly agitated. She scolded him angrily, she became unjust. She was quite unable to stop the blood--ugh, how it ran!--she felt as if she were going to have a fit; she dragged herself into her room with difficulty and remained sitting silently in a corner, her eyes staring into space.

When her husband reproached her for exaggerating in that manner, she never answered a word. Then he comforted her: she could feel quite easy now, the thing was of no moment, the hole was sewn up and the lad as happy as though it had never happened.

But she shuddered nervously and her cheeks were pale. Oh, if Paul knew what she had been thinking of, was forced to think of the whole time! How strange that the same memory did not obtrude itself on him. Oh, Michel Solheid had laid bleeding on the Venn--blood had dripped on the ground to-day as on that day. The little boy had not complained, just as little as his--she fought against using the word even in her thoughts--as his father, as Michel Solheid had complained. And still the red blood had gushed out as though it were a spring. How much more natural it would have been for him to have cried. Did Wolf feel differently from other children?

[Pg 83] Käte went through the list of her acquaintances; there was not a single child that would not have cried if he had got such a wound, and he would not have been considered a coward on that account. There was no doubt about it, Wölfchen was less sensitive. Not only more insensible to bodily pain, no--and she thought she had noticed it several times--also more insensible to emotion. Even in the case of joy. Did not other children show their happiness by clapping their hands and shouting? Did not they dance round the thing they wanted--the toy, the doll, the cake--with shouts of delight? He only held out his hand for it in silence.

He took it because he had been told to do so, without all the childish chatter, without the rapturous delight that makes it so attractive and satisfactory to give children gifts.

"As a peasant," her husband used to say. That cut her to the quick every time he said it. Was Wölfchen really made of such different material? No, Paul must not say "peasant." Wölfchen was not stupid, only perhaps a little slow in thinking, and he was shrewd enough. He had not been born in a large town, that was it; where they lived now was just like the country.

"You peasant!" The next time his father said it--it was said in praise and not to blame him, because he was pleased the boy kept his little garden so well--Käte flew into a passion. Why? Her husband did not understand the reason for it. Why should he not be pleased? Had not the boy put a splendid fence round his garden? He had made a palisade of hazel-sticks into which he had woven flexible willow-twigs, and then he had covered the whole with pine branches to make it close. And he had put beans and peas in his garden, which he had begged the cook to give him; and now he meant to plant potatoes there as well. Had anybody told him how to do it? No, nobody. The first-rate cook and the housemaid were both from a town, what did they know about sowing peas and planting potatoes?

"He's a born farmer," said the father laughing.

But the mother turned away as though in pain. She would much, much rather have seen her son's garden a mass of weeds than that he should plant, weed and water so busily.

[Pg 84] She had made him a present of some flowers; but they did not interest him and he was not so successful with them either. There was only a large sunflower that grew and grew. It was soon as high as the boy, soon even higher, and he often stood in front of it, his childish face raised, gazing earnestly into its golden disc for quite a long time.

When the sunflower's golden petals withered--then its seeds ripened instead and were examined every day and finally gathered--Wolfgang went to school. He was already in his seventh year, and was big and strong; why should he not learn with other children now?

His mother had thought how wonderful it would be to teach him the rudiments herself, for when she was a young girl with nothing to do at home and a great wish to continue her studies, she had gone to a training college and even passed her examination as a teacher with distinction; but--perhaps that was too long ago, for her strength was not equal to the task. Especially her patience. He made so little progress, was so exceedingly slow. Was the boy stupid? No, but dull, very dull. And it often seemed to her as though she were facing a wall when she spoke to him.

"You are much too eager," said her husband. But how on earth was she to make it clear to him that that was an "A" and that an "O," and how was she to explain to him that if you put one and one together it makes two without getting eager? She became excited, she took the ball-frame and counted the blue and red balls that looked like round beads on a string for the boy. She got hot and red, almost hoarse, and would have liked to cry with impatience and discouragement, when Wölfchen sat looking at her with his large eyes without showing any interest, and still did not know that one bead and one bead more make two beads after they had worked at it for hours.

[Pg 85] She saw to her sorrow that she would have to give up the lessons. "He'll do better with a master," said her husband, consolingly. And it was better, although it could not exactly be termed "good."

Wolfgang was not lazy, but his thoughts were always wandering. Learning did not interest him. He had other things to think about: would the last leaves in the garden have fallen when he got home from school at noon? And would the starling, for whom he had nailed the little box high up in the pine-tree, come again next spring? It had picked off all the black berries from the elderberry, and had then gone away screaming; if it did not find any more elderberries, what would it eat then? And the boy's heart was heavy with grief--if only he had given it a little bag of berries when it went away.

Now the pines in the Grunewald were covered with snow. When Wolfgang had gone to school that morning, his knapsack on his back, the housemaid at his side, the white layer had crackled and broken under his boots. It was very cold. And then he had heard a bird's shriek, that sounded like a hungry croak. The housemaid thought it was an owl--pooh, what did she know about it? It was a raven, the hungry beggar in the jet-black coat, like the one in the primer.

And the boy was thinking of it now as he sat on the bench, staring with big eyes at the blackboard, on which the teacher was writing words they were to find out. How nice it must be under the pines now. There flew the raven; brushing the snow off the branches with its black wings, so that it looked like powder as it fell. Where was he going to fly to? His thoughts flew far, far away after the raven, as they had done after the starling. The boy's eyes shone, his chest rose with the deep breath he drew--at that moment the teacher called to him.

[Pg 86] "Wolfgang, are you asleep with your eyes open? What's this?" The boy gave a start, got red, then pale and knew nothing.

The other boys almost died of laughing--"Are you asleep with your eyes open?"--that had been too funny.

The teacher did not punish him, but Wolfgang crept home as though he had been punished. He had hidden from the housemaid, who always came to fetch him--no, he would not go with her to-day. He had also run away from his comrades--let them fight without him today, to-morrow he would throw all the more snowballs at them.

He walked quite alone, turned off from the street and wandered about aimlessly among the pines. He looked for the raven, but it was far away, and so he began to run too, run as quickly as he could, and tore the knapsack off his back with a loud cry, hurling it far from him up into the broad branches of a pine, so that it hung there and nothing but snow fell down silently in large lumps. That amused him. He filled both his hands with snow, made hard balls of it and began to regularly bombard the pine that kept his knapsack a prisoner. But it did not give it up, and when he had grown hot and red and tired but very much cheered, he had to go home without his knapsack.

The housemaid had been back a long time when he arrived. She opened the door for him with a red face--she had run so hard after him--and an angry look. "Hm," she said irritably, "you've been kept, I suppose?"

He pushed her aside. "Hold your tongue!" He could not bear her at that moment, when coming in from outside where everything had been so quiet, so free.

[Pg 87] His parents were already at table. His father frowned as he looked at him, his mother asked in a voice of gentle reproach in which there was also a little anxiety: "Where have you been so long? Lisbeth has been looking for you everywhere."

"Well?" His father's voice sounded severe.

The boy did not give any answer, it seemed to him all at once as though his tongue were paralysed. What should he tell those people sitting indoors about what he had been doing outside?

"He's sure to have been kept at school, ma'am," whispered the housemaid when she handed the meat. "I'll find it out from the other boys to-morrow, and tell you about it, ma'am."

"Oh, you!" The boy jumped up; although she had whispered it in a low voice, he had heard it all the same. His chair fell down behind him with a crash, and rushing up to the girl with clenched fist he seized hold of her so roughly that she gave a shrill scream and let the dish fall out of her hand.

"You goose, you goose!" he howled in a loud voice, and wanted to strike her. His father only pulled him away with difficulty.

"Wölfchen!" Käte's fork had fallen out of her hand with a clatter, and she was staring at her boy with dilated eyes.

The maid complained bitterly. He was always like that, he was unbearable, he had said before to her: "Hold your tongue!" No, she could not put up with it, she would rather leave. And she ran out of the room crying.

Paul Schlieben was extremely angry. "You are to be civil to inferiors. You are to be polite to them, just because they have to serve. Do you hear?" And he seized hold of the boy with a strong hand, laid him across his knees and gave him the whipping he so well deserved.

[Pg 88] Wolfgang ground his teeth together and bore the punishment without uttering a sound and without a tear.

But every stroke fell on his mother's heart. She felt as if she herself had been beaten and severely bruised. When her husband took his usual rest after the stormy dinner, smoked, read the paper and took a little nap between whiles, she crept up to the nursery in which the boy had been locked. Was he crying?

She turned the key softly--he was kneeling on the chair near the window, his nose pressed flat against the pane, looking attentively out at the snow. He did not notice her at all. Then she went away again cautiously. She went downstairs again, but her mind was not sufficiently at rest to read in her room; she crept about the house softly as though she had no peace. Then she heard Lisbeth say to the cook in the kitchen between the rattling of plates: "I shall certainly not put up with it. Not from such a rude boy. What has he got to do here?"

Käte stood rigid, overcome by a terror that paralysed her: what did she know? She became glowing hot and then icy cold. "Not from such a rude boy--what has he got to do here?" oh, God, was that the way she spoke about him?

She ran up to the nursery; Wölfchen was still kneeling at the window.

No other villa obstructed the view there as yet; from the window one looked out on a large piece of waste ground, where dandelions and nettles grew in the sand between hedge mustard in the summer time, but where the snow lay now, deep and clean, untouched by any footstep. The short winter evening was already drawing to a close, that white field was the only thing that still glittered, and it seemed to the mother that the child's face was very wan in the pale light of the luminous snow.

[Pg 89] "Wölfchen," she called softly. And then "Wölfchen, how could you say 'goose' and 'hold your tongue' to Lisbeth? Oh, for shame! Where did you get those words from?" Her voice was gentle and sad as she questioned him.

Then he turned round to her, and she saw how his eyes burned. Something flickered in them, that looked like a terrified, restless longing.

She noticed that as well, and quite against all rules of pedagogy she opened her arms and whispered--after it had escaped from her lips she did not know herself why she had said it, for he had everything, everything his heart desired--"You poor child!"

And he ran into her arms.

They held each other tightly, heart beating against heart. They were both sad, but neither of them knew the reason why, nor why the other one was sad.

"It's not the whipping," he murmured.

She stroked his straight hair away from his forehead with her soft hand; she did not ask him any more questions. For--did not something rise out of that field covered with snow, hover outside the window and lay its finger on its lips: "Be quiet, do not ask, do not touch it"?

[Pg 90] But she remained with the boy and played with him; she felt as though she ought not to leave him alone to-day. Yes, she must pay still more attention to him in the future. All at once the thought fell on her heart like a heavy weight: she had already left him much too much to himself. But then she consoled herself again: he was still so young, his mind was still a piece of quite soft wax, which she could mould as she liked. He must never again be allowed to stand at the window staring out at that desolate field with such burning eyes. What was he longing for? Was not a

wealth of love showered on him? And everything else that delights a child's heart?

She looked round his pretty room. Such a quantity of toys were piled up in it, trains and steamers, tin soldiers and picture books and all the newest games.

"Come, we'll play," she said.

He was quite ready to do so; she was surprised how quickly he had forgotten his sorrow. Thank God, he was still quite an innocent, unsuspecting child. But how restlessly he threw the toys about. "That's stupid," and "that's tiresome"--nothing really absorbed his attention. She soon felt quite exhausted with all her proposals and her endeavours to induce him to play this or that game. She did not think she had been so difficult to satisfy as a child. She had wanted to get up and go away half a dozen times already--no, she really could not stand it any longer, she had a frantic headache, it had got on her nerves, it was certainly much easier to stand at the fire and cook or do housework than play with a child--but her sense of duty and her love kept her back every time.

She must not leave him alone, for--she felt it with a gloomy dread--for then somebody else would come and take him away from her.

She remained sitting with him, pale and exhausted; he had tormented her a great deal. At last he found a woolly sheep that had been quite forgotten in the corner of the toy cupboard, a dilapidated old toy from his childhood with only three legs left. And he amused himself with that; that pleased him more than the other costly toys. He sat on the carpet as though he were quite a little child, held the sheep between his knees and stroked it.

When he lay in bed at last, she still sat beside him holding his hand. She sang the song with which she had so often sung him to sleep:

[Pg 91]

"Sleep sound, sweetest child,
Yonder wind howls wild.
Hearken, how the rain makes sprays
And how neighbour's doggie bays.
Doggie has gripped the man forlorn,
Has the beggar's tatter torn--"

She sang it more and more softly. At last she thought he had fallen asleep, but then he tore his hand away impatiently: "Stop that song! I'm not a baby any longer!"

* * * * *

It was fortunate that there were no street boys in the Grunewald colony, as Wölfchen would assuredly have played with them; as it was, his playfellows were only a hall-porter's children. There was certainly no want of nicer children to play with; school-fellows whose parents lived in similar villas to theirs used to invite him; and the families in Berlin, with whom the Schliebens were on friendly terms and who were pleased when their children could get out to the Grunewald on their holidays, often asked him to come and see them too.

All children liked to come to the shady garden, where Auntie Käte was always so kind to them. There was always plenty of cakes and fruit and hoops and balls and croquet and tennis, ninepins and gymnastic appliances. On sunny afternoons gay laughter and shrieks used to ascend high up into the green tops of the pines, but--Käte noticed it with surprise--her boy, who was generally so wild, was the quietest of them all on those occasions. He did not care for those visits. He did not care for those well-behaved boys in white and blue sailor-suits, with their fresh faces showing above their dazzling collars; he never felt really at home with them. He would have preferred to have run away to a place far away from there, where nobody else went except now and then a beggar with a large bag, who would turn over every bit of paper with his wire hook to see whether something of value had not been left there the Sunday before. He would have liked to help that man. Or fill the large bag with pine-cones.

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But still Wolfgang had some friends. There was Hans Flebbe--his father was coachman at the banker's, who owned the splendid villa on the other side of the road and lived in Bellevuestrasse in Berlin in the winter--and there were also Artur and Frida. But their father was only porter in a villa that was let out to different families.

As soon as these three came home from school, they would stand outside the Schliebens' villa. They could not be driven away, they would wait there patiently until Wolfgang joined them.

"He's like a brother to my Hans," the coachman used to say, and he would greet him with a specially condescending flick of his whip from his high seat. And the porter and his wife used to state with much satisfaction: "Yes, old Schlieben always touches his hat, and she, his lady, also says 'how do you do?' to us in a very friendly style, but the little one, oh, he's quite different."

Those were wild games the four comrades played together, and in which Frida was reckoned to be quite a boy: catch, hide and seek, but best of all, robbers and policemen. How Wolf's eyes sparkled when he, as the robber captain, gave the policeman, Hans Flebbe, a kick in the stomach, so that he fell backwards on the ground and lay for a time without moving from pain.

"I've shot him," he said to his mother proudly.

[Pg 93] Käte, who had been called to the window by the noisy shrieks of the children who were rushing about wildly in the waste field behind the villa, had beckoned to her boy to come in. He had come unwillingly; but he had come. Now he stood breathless before her, and she stroked the damp hair away from the face that was wet with perspiration: "What a sight you look! And here--look."

She pointed reproachfully to his white blouse that was covered with dirt. Where in all the world had he made himself so filthy? there were no real pools there. And his trousers. The right leg was slit open the whole way down, the left one had a three-cornered hole in the knee.

Pooh, that was nothing. He wanted to rush away again, he was trembling with impatience; his playfellows were crouching behind the bush, they dared not come out before he, their captain, came back to them. He strove against the hand that was holding him; but his struggles were of no avail that time, his father came out of the next room.

"You are to stop here. You ought to feel ashamed of yourself to resist your mother like that. Off with you, go to your room and prepare your lessons for tomorrow."

Paul Schlieben spoke sharply. It had made him angry to see how the boy had striven with hands and feet against his delicate wife.

"You rude boy, I'll teach you how to behave to your mother. Here"--he seized hold of him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him up to her--"here, beg her pardon. Kiss your good mother's hand. And promise not to be so wild again, not to behave like a street-boy. Be quick--well, are you soon going to do it?"

[Pg 94] The veins on the man's forehead began to swell with anger. What a stubborn fellow he was. There he stood, his blouse torn open at front so that you could see the rapid rise and fall of his chest that was wet with perspiration--he was not breathing quietly even now, he was still panting from the rough game--and looking so wild, so turbulent, not at all like the child of nice parents. This could not go on any longer.

"You must not tear about like that any more, do you hear?" said his father severely. "I forbid it. Play other games. You have your garden, your gymnastic appliances and a hundred things others would envy you. And now come here, beg your mother's pardon."

The boy went to his mother. She met him half way, she held out her hand to him already. He kissed it, he mumbled also, "I won't do it again," but the man did not hear any repentance in his voice. There was something in the sullen way he said it that irritated him. And he lost control of himself a little.

"That wasn't an apology. Ask your mother's pardon again--and distinctly."

The boy repeated it.

"And now promise that you will not rush about like that again. 'Dear mother, I promise'--well?"

Not a word, no promise.

"What's the meaning of this?" The man shook the boy, beside himself with anger. But the boy pressed his lips together. He gave his father an upward look out of his dark eyes.

The woman caught the look--oh, God, that was the look!--that look--the woman's look!

She put both her arms round the boy protectingly: "Don't, don't irritate him." She drew him nearer to her and covered his eyes with her hands, so that he had to close them, and then she cast an imploring glance at her husband: "Go, do go."

Paul Schlieben went, but he shook his head angrily.

[Pg 95] "You'll see what your training will make of the boy." He raised his hand menacingly once more: "Boy, I tell you, you'll have to obey." And then he closed the door behind him--he could not even have his midday rest undisturbed now.

He heard his wife's voice in the next room. It sounded so gentle and trembled as though with a secret dread. "Wölfchen, Wölfchen, aren't you my good boy?"

No answer. Good heavens, had the unfeeling scamp no answer to give to that question uttered in that tone?

Then again the soft trembling voice: "Won't you be my good boy?"

If the boy did not answer now, then--! The blood surged to his head as he listened against his will, his fingers twitched, he wanted to jump up and rush in again and--ah, he must have answered now. It was probably nothing but a silent nod, but Käte's voice sounded intensely happy: "There you see, I knew you were my good boy, my darling child, my--my----"

Hm, it was certainly not necessary for Käte to lavish such endearing tones on the boy, after he had just been so naughty. And she must have kissed him, put her arms round him. Her voice had died away in a tender breath.

Paul Schlieben did not hear anything more now; neither the rustling of her dress nor any other sound--ah, she was probably whispering to him now. How she spoiled the scamp.

But now--somebody was weeping softly. Was that Wolf's hard, defiant voice? Yes, he was actually crying loudly now, and between his sobs he jerked out pitifully--you could hardly understand what he was saying: "I had to--to shoot him--he's the policeman, you know."

[Pg 96] And now everything was quiet again. The man took up his paper once more, which he had thrown aside before, and commenced to read. But he could not fix his attention on it, his thoughts wandered obstinately again and again to the next room. Had the scamp come to his senses now? Did he see that he had been naughty? And was not Käte much too weak? There was nothing to be heard, nothing whatever. But still--was not that the door that creaked? No, imagination. Everything was quiet.

After waiting a little longer he went into the next room. It was indeed very quiet there, for Käte was quite alone. She was sitting at the window, her hands in her lap, pondering. Her thoughts seemed to be far away.

"Where's the boy?"

She gave a terrified start, and thrust both hands forward as though to ward off something.

He saw now that she was pale. The vexation she had had on account of the child had probably shaken her a good deal--just let him wait until he got hold of him, he should do twice as many sums to-day as a punishment.

"Is the boy at his lessons?"

She shook her head and got red. "No."

"No? Why not?" He looked at her in amazement. "Didn't I tell him that he was to go to his lessons at once?"

"You said so. But I told him to run away. Paul, don't be angry." She saw that he was about to fly into a passion, and laid her hand on his arm soothingly. "If you love me, leave him. Oh Paul, believe me, do believe me when I say he can't help it, he must run about, rush about, be out of doors--he must."

[Pg 97] "You always have some excuse. Just think of the story of the knapsack when first he went to school--the rascal had thrown it up into a pine-tree. If a labourer had not found it by accident and brought it to us, because he read our name on the primer, we might have looked for it for a long time. You excused that--well, that was nothing very bad--a fit of wantonness--but now you are excusing something quite different; and everything." The man, who generally yielded to his wife in all points, grew angry in his grave anxiety. "I implore you, Käte, don't be so incredibly weak with the boy. Where will it lead to?"

"It will lead him to you and me." She pointed gravely to him and herself. And then she laid her hand on her heart with an expression of deep emotion.

"What do you mean? I don't understand you. Please express yourself a little more clearly, I'm not in a humour to guess riddles."

"If you can't guess it, you'll not understand it either if I say it more clearly." She bent her head and then went back to her former seat. But she was not lost in thought any longer, it seemed to him as if she were leaning forward to catch the shrill shouts of triumph that rose high above the roof from the waste field at the back of the house.

"You'll never be able to manage the boy."

"Oh yes, I shall."

"Of course you will, if you let him do exactly what he likes." The man strode quickly out of the room; his anger was getting the mastery of him.

Paul Schlieben was seriously angry with his wife, perhaps for the first time in their married life. How could Käte be so unreasonable? take so little notice of his orders, as though he had never given them--nay, even act in direct opposition to him? Oh, the rascal was cunning enough, he drew his conclusions from it already. And if he did not do so as yet, still he felt instinctively what a support he had in his mother. It was simply incredible how weak Käte was.

[Pg 98] His wife's soft sensitive nature, which had attracted him to her in the first instance and which had had the same charm for him all the years they had been married, now seemed exaggerated all at once--childish. Yes, this timorousness, this everlasting dread of what was over and done with was childish. They had not heard anything more about the boy's mother, why then conjure

up her shade on all occasions? They had the boy's birth and baptismal certificates safely in their hands, and the Venn was far away--he would never see it--why then this constant, tremulous anxiety? There was no reason whatever for it. They lived in such pleasant surroundings, their financial position was so sound, Wolf possessed everything that fills and gladdens a child's heart, that it was real madness for Käte to suppose that he had a kind of longing for his home. How in the world should he have got that longing? He had no idea that this was not really his home. It was sad that Käte was so hypersensitive. She could positively make others nervous as well.

And the man passed his hand over his forehead, as though to drive disagreeable thoughts away with a movement of his hand. He lighted a cigar. It was an extra fine one to-day, those he generally left for his guests; he had the feeling that he must have something to help him over an unpleasant hour. For the thing was unpleasant, really unpleasant and difficult, even if he hoped in time to solve the question of how to train such a child satisfactorily. At any rate not as Käte was doing. That was clear to him already.

[Pg 99] Paul Schlieben sat in the corner of the sofa in his study, blowing blue rings of smoke into the air. His brows were still knit. He had come home very tired from the office that day, where there had been all sorts of complications--quite enough annoyance--he had had to dictate some hurried letters, had not allowed himself a moment's repose, and had hoped to have a pleasant rest at home--but in vain. Strange how one child can alter the whole household, one's whole life. If the boy had not been there?... Ah, then he would have had a short peaceful nap by now, stretched out on the divan with the newspaper in front of his face, and would be going across to Käte's room for a cosy chat and a cup of coffee, which she prepared herself so gracefully on the humming Viennese coffee-machine. He had always liked to sit and watch her slender, well-cared-for hands move about so noiselessly. It was a pity.

He sighed. But then he conquered the feeling: no, one ought not to wish he were away because of a momentary annoyance. How many happy hours little Wölfchen had given them. It had been charming to watch his first steps, to listen to his first connected words. And had not Käte been very happy to have him--oh, who said *been* happy?--she was still so. Nothing could be compared to the boy. And that the hours of cloudless happiness they had had through him were not so numerous now as formerly was quite natural. He was not the same little boy any longer, who had taken his first bold run from that corner over there to this sofa, and had clung to his father's legs rejoicing at his own daring; that was all. He was now beginning to be an independent person, a person with wishes of his own, no longer with those that had been inculcated; he showed a will of his very own. Now he wanted this and now he wanted that, and no longer what his teachers wanted. But was not that natural? On the whole, when a child begins to go to school, what a great many changes take place. One would have to make allowances, even if one did not wish to have one's whole way of living influenced by it first the parents, then the child.

[Pg 100] The man felt how he gradually became calmer. A boy--what a compound of wildness, roughness, unrestraint, ay, unmannerliness is included in that word! And all, all who were now men had once been boys.

His cigar went out; he had forgotten to smoke it. The man thought of his own boyhood with a strangely gentle feeling not entirely free from a faint longing. Let him only be honest: had he not also rushed about and made a terrible noise, dirtied himself, got hot and torn his trousers and been up to pranks, more than enough pranks?

Strange how he all at once remembered some of the severe lectures he had had given him and the tears he had forced from his mother's eyes; he also very clearly remembered the whipping he had once got for telling a lie. His father had said at the time--all at once he seemed to hear his voice, which had generally sounded anything but solemn, in fact very commonplace, but which had then been ennobled by the gravity of the situation, echo in the room: "Boy, I can forgive you everything else except lies." Ah, it had been very uncomfortable that day in the small office, where his father had leant against the high wooden desk holding the stick behind his back. He had pushed the little cap he wore on account of his baldness to one side in his agitation, his friendly blue eyes had looked at him penetratingly, and at the same time sadly.

"One can forgive everything except lies"--well, had the boy, had Wolfgang told a lie? Certainly not. He had only been naughty, as the best children are now and then.

The man felt ashamed of himself: and he, he had been so displeased with the boy simply because he had been naughty?

He got up from the sofa, threw the remains of his cigar into the ash-tray and went out to look for Wolfgang.

[Pg 101] He came across the four in the height of the game. They had lighted a small fire on the waste piece of ground close behind the garden railing, so that the overhanging bushes in the garden formed a kind of roof over them.

They were crouching close together; they were in camp now. Frida had some potatoes in her pinafore, which were to be roasted in the ashes; but the fire would not burn, the twigs only smouldered. Wolfgang lay on his stomach on the ground, resting on his elbows, and was blowing

with all the strength of his lungs. But it was not enough, the fire would not burn on any account.

Paul Schlieben had come up softly, the children had not noticed him at all in their eagerness. "Won't it burn?" he asked.

Wolfgang jerked himself up, and was on his feet in a moment. He had been red and fresh-looking, but now he grew pale, his frank look fell timidly, a miserable expression lengthened his round, childish face and made him look older.

"Have I to go in?" It sounded pitiful.

The man pretended not to hear the question; he had really intended fetching him in, but all at once he hesitated to say so. It was hard for the boy to have to go away now before the fire burnt, before the potatoes were roasted. So he said nothing, but stooped down, and as he was not far enough down even then he knelt down and blew the fire, that was faintly crackling, with all the breath he had in his broad chest. Sparks began to leap out at once, and a small flame shot up and soon turned into a big one.

There was a shout of glee. Frida hopped about in the circle, her plaits flying: "It's burning, it's burning!" Artur and Hans chimed in too; they also hopped from the one foot to the other, clapped their dirty hands and shouted loudly: "It's burning, it's burning!"

[Pg 102] "Be quiet, children." The man was amused at their happiness. "Bring me some twigs, but very dry ones," he ordered, full of eagerness, too, to keep alive this still uncertain flame, that now disappeared, now flared up again. He blew and poked and added more twigs. The wind drove the smoke into his face so that he had to cough, but he wiped his eyes, that were full of tears, and did not mind that his trousers got wet green spots from kneeling on the ground, and that chance passers-by would be greatly surprised to see Herr Paul Schlieben occupied in that manner. He, too, found it fun now to keep up a fire for roasting potatoes under the pale, blue autumn sky, in which the white clouds were scudding along and the twittering swallows flying. He had never known such a thing--he had always lived in a town--but it was splendid, really splendid.

The children brought twigs. Wolfgang took them and broke them across his knee--crack!--the sticks broke like glass. What a knack the boy had at it.

The flames flared up, the little fire emitted an agreeable warmth; one could warm one's hands at it--ah, that was really very nice.

And then the man followed the smoke, which the wind raised from the field like a light cloud, with his eyes. It seemed grey at first, but the higher it flew the lighter it became, and the friendly sunshine shone through it, transforming it. It floated upwards, ever upwards, ever more immaterial, more intangible, until it flew away entirely--a puff, a whiff.

[Pg 103] Now it was about time to bury the potatoes; Wolfgang busied himself with it. They had not poked the fire any more, the flame had sunk down, but the ashes hid all the heat. The children stood round with wide-open eyes, quite quiet, almost holding their breath and yet trembling with expectation: when would the first potatoes be done? Oh, did they not smell nice already? They distended their nostrils so as to smell them. But Paul Schlieben brushed his trousers now and prepared to go away--it would take too long before the potatoes were ready. He felt something that resembled regret. But it really would not do for him to stand about any longer; what would people think of him?

He was himself again now. "That's enough now," he said, and he went away, carefully avoiding the impracticable parts of the field where the puddles were. Then he heard steps close behind him. He turned round. "Wolf? Well, what do you want?"

The boy looked at him sadly out of his dark eyes.

"Are you going home too?" There was astonishment in the man's question--he had not said that the boy was to go with him.

The pines emitted a splendid smell, you could breathe the air so freely, so easily, and that pale blue sky with the fleecy white clouds had something wonderfully clear about it, something that filled the eyes with light. White threads floated over the countryside, driven from the clean east, and hung fast to the green branches of the pines, shimmering there like a fairy web. And the sun was still agreeably warm without burning, and an invigorating pungent odour streamed from the golden-coloured leaves of the bushes that enclosed the gardens at the back.

The man drew a deep breath; he felt as if he had suddenly grown ten, twenty--no, thirty years younger. Even more.

"Well, run along," he said.

The boy looked at him as if he had not quite understood him.

"Run," he said once more curtly, smiling at the same time.

[Pg 104] Then the boy gave a shout, such a shrill, triumphant shout that his playfellows, who were

crouching round the potato fire, joined in immediately without knowing why.

There was a gleam in the dark eyes of the boy, who loved freedom, the free air and to run about free. He did not say his father had made him happy, but he drew a deep breath as if a load had fallen off his chest. And the man noticed something in his face, that was now commencing to grow coarser, to lose the soft contours of childhood and get the sharp ones of youth, that made it refined and beautiful.

Wolfgang flew back across the field as quick as lightning, as if shot from a tightly strung bow.

The man went back into his garden. He opened the gate cautiously so that it should not creak, and closed it again just as quietly--Käte need not know where he had been. But she was already standing at the window.

There was something touchingly helpless in her attitude, such an anxious scrutiny in her eyes--no, she need not look at him like that, he was not angry with her.

And he nodded to her.

When the housemaid asked whether the master did not know where the young gentleman was--she had had the milk warmed three times already for him and had run up and downstairs with it--he said in a low voice with an excuse in the tone: "Oh, that does not matter, Lisbeth. Warm it for a fourth time later on. It is so healthy for him to be out of doors."

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BOOK II

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CHAPTER VIII

It was Frida Lämke's birthday. "If you may come we are to have buns with raisins in, but if you mayn't there'll only be rolls like we have every day," she said to her friend Wolfgang. "Mind you get them to let you come." It was of most importance to her that Wolfgang came; no differences were made on account of Flebbe, although he always said he was going to marry her.

And Wolfgang teased his mother. "Let me go--why not? I should like to so much--why mayn't I?"

Yes, why not? He had kept dinning this "why not?" into her ears for the last twenty-four hours; it had quite worn her out. What should she say to him? that she disliked Frida? But what had the girl done that she had taken a dislike to her? Nothing. She always curtsied politely, was always tidily dressed, had even plaited the blue ribbon into her fair hair with a certain taste. The parents were also quite respectable people, and still--these children always hung about the streets, always, both summer and winter. You could pass their house whenever you liked, those Lämkes were always outside their door. Was it the life of the streets this snub-nosed girl, who was very developed for her age, reminded her of? No, he must not go to those people's house, go down into the atmosphere of the porter's room.

[Pg 208] "I don't wish you to go there," she said. She had not the heart to say: "I won't allow it," when he looked at her with those beseeching eyes.

And the boy saw his advantage. He felt distinctly: she is struggling with herself; and he followed it up with cruel pertinacity.

"Let me--oh, do let me. I shall be so sorry if I can't. Then I shan't care to do anything. Why mayn't I? Mammy, I'll love you so, if you'll only let me go. Do let me--will you? But I will."

She could not escape from him any more, he followed her wherever she went, he took hold of her dress, and even if she forbade him to ask her any more, she felt that he only thought of the one thing the whole time. So he forced her in that way.

Paul Schlieben was not so averse to his accepting the invitation from the Lämkes. "Why not? They're quite respectable people. It won't harm the boy to cast a glance at those circles for once in a way. I also went to our hall-porter's home as a boy. And why not?"

[Pg 109] She wanted to say: "But that was something quite different, there was no danger in your case"--but then she thought better of it and said nothing. She did not want to bring him her fears, her doubts, her secret gnawing dread so soon again, as there was no manifest reason for them, and they could not be explained as every other feeling can be after all. Something like a depressing mist always hung over her. But why should she tell him so? She neither wanted to be scolded nor laughed at for it; she would resent both. He was not the same man he used to be. Oh--she felt it with a slight bitterness--how he used to understand her. He had shared every emotion with her, every vibration of her soul. But he had not the gift of understanding her thoughts now--or did she perhaps not understand him any longer?

But he was still her dear husband, her good, faithful husband whom she loved more than anyone else in the world--no, whom she loved as she loved Wölfchen. The child, oh, the child was the sun round which her life revolved.

If Paul only had been as he was formerly. She had to cast a covert glance at him very frequently now, and, with a certain surprise, also grow accustomed to his outward appearance. Not that his broadening-out did not suit him; the slight stoutness his slender figure with its formerly somewhat stiff but always perfect carriage had assumed suited his years, and the silver threads that commenced to gleam in his beard and at his temples. It suited also the comfortable velvet coat he always put on as soon as he came home, suited his whole manner of being. Strange that anybody could become such a practical person, to whom everything relating to business had formerly been such a burden, nay, even most repugnant. He would not have picked up the strange child from the Venn now, and--Käte gave her husband a long look--he would not have taken it home with him now as a gift from fairyland.

[Pg 110] Had the years also changed her in the same manner? Her looking-glass did not show her any very great change. There was still the same girlish figure, which seemed twice as slender beside her husband's stoutness. Her hair was still fair, and she still blushed like a young girl to whom a stray look is enough to make the blood, that flows so easily, invade her delicate cheeks. Yes, she had still remained young outwardly. But her mind was often weary. Wolf caused her too much anxiety. A mother, who was ten, fifteen years younger than she, would not perhaps feel how every nerve becomes strained when dealing with such a child as she did. Would not such a mother often have laughed when she felt ready to cry?

Oh, what a boisterous, inexhaustible vital power there was in that boy! She was amazed, bewildered, exhausted by it. Was he never tired? Always on his legs, out of bed at six, always out, out. She heard him tossing about restlessly at daybreak. He slept in the next room to theirs, and the door between the rooms always stood open, although her husband scolded her for it. The boy was big enough, did not want supervising. They need not have that disturbance at night, at any rate.

But she wanted to watch over his sleep too; she must do so. She often heard him talk in his dreams, draw his breath so heavily, as though something were distressing him. Then she would slip out of bed, softly, softly, so that her husband should not hear her; she did not light any candle, she groped her way into the other room on bare feet. And then she would stand at his bedside. He still had the pretty railed cot from his first boyhood--but how long would it be before

it was too small? How quickly he was growing, how terribly quickly. She passed her hand cautiously and lightly over the cover, and felt the boy's long body underneath it. Then he began to toss about, groan, stiffen himself like one who is struggling with something. What could be the matter with him? Then he spoke indistinctly. Of what was he dreaming so vividly? He was wet through with perspiration.

If only she could see him. But she dared not light a candle. What should she say to her husband if he, awakened by the light, asked her what she was doing there? And Wölfchen would also wake and ask her what she wanted.

[Pg 111] Yes, what did she really want? She had no answer ready even for herself. She would only have liked to know what was occupying his mind in his dream to such an extent that he sighed and struggled. Of what was he dreaming? Of whom? Where was he in his dream?

She trembled as she stood at his bedside on her bare feet listening. And then she bent over him so closely that his breath, uneven and hot, blew into her face, and she breathed on him again--did not they mingle their breath in that manner? Was she not giving him breath of her breath in that manner?--and whispered softly and yet so earnestly, imploringly and at the same time urgently: "Your mother is here, your mother is near you."

But he threw himself over to the other side with a jerk, turned his back on her and mumbled something. Nothing but incomprehensible words, rarely anything that was distinct, but even that was enough; she felt he was not there, not with her, that he was far away. Did his soul seek the home he did not know in his dreams? that he could not even know about, and that still had such a powerful influence that it drew him there even unconsciously?

Käte stood at Wolfgang's bedside tortured by such an anxiety as she had never felt before: a mother and still not mother. Alas, she was only a strange woman at the bedside of a strange child.

She crept back to her bed and buried her throbbing brows deep in the pillows. She felt her heart beat tumultuously, and she scolded herself for allowing her thoughts to dwell on such unavailing things. She did not change anything by it, it only made her weary and sad.

[Pg 112] When Käte rose after such a night she felt her husband's eyes resting on her anxiously, and her hands trembled as she coiled up her thick hair. It was fortunate that she dropped a hair-pin, then she could stoop quickly and withdraw her tired face with the dark lines under the eyes from his scrutinising glance.

"I'm not at all satisfied with my wife's health again," Paul Schlieben complained to the doctor. "She's in a terribly nervous state again."

"Really?" Dr. Hofmann's friendly face became energetic. "I'll tell you one thing, my dear friend, you must take vigorous measures against it at once."

"That's no use." The man shook his head. "I know my wife. It's the boy's doing, that confounded boy!"

And he took Wolfgang in hand. "Now listen, you must not always be worrying your mother like that. If I notice once more that she is grieving about you because you are naughty, you shall see what I'll do to you."

Did he worry his mother? Wolfgang looked very blank. And surely it was not naughty of him to want to go to the Lämkes? It worried him to have to sit indoors, whilst the wind was whistling outside and playing about with one's hair in such a jolly manner. And it worried him, too, that he was not going to the Lämkes that day.

"Well then, go," said Käte. She even drove into Berlin before dinner and bought a doll, a pretty doll with fair locks, eyes that opened and shut, and a pink dress. "Take it to Frida for her birthday when you go," she said in the afternoon, putting it into the boy's hands. "Stop! Be careful!"

[Pg 113] He had seized hold of it impetuously, he was so delighted to be able to bring Frida something. And in a rare fit of emotion--he was no friend of caresses--he put up his face in an outburst of gratitude and let his mother kiss him. He did not want her kiss, but he submitted to it, she felt that very well, but still she was glad, and she followed him with her eyes with a smile that lighted up her whole face.

"But you must be home again before dark," she called out to him at the last moment. Had he heard her?

How he ran off, as light-footed as a stag. She had never seen any child run so quickly. He threw up his straight legs that his heels touched his thighs every time. The wind blew his broad-brimmed sailor hat back, then he tore it off and ran on bareheaded, he was in such a hurry.

What was it that drew him so powerfully to those people?

The smile disappeared from Käte's face; she left the window.

Wolfgang was happy. He was sitting with the Lämkes, in the room in which they also did the cooking when the weather was cold. The parents' bed was divided off by means of a curtain, Frida slept on the sofa, and Artur in the little room next to it in which were also kept the shovels and brooms which Lämke used for cleaning the house and street.

[Pg 114] It was not winter yet, still pleasant autumn, but the room was already warm and cosy. The stronger smell of the coffee, which Frau Lämke was making in the large enamelled pot, mingled with the delicate fragrance of the pale monthly rose and carnation, myrtle and geranium, which had been pushed close to the window that was almost level with the ground and were all in flower. At home Wolfgang never got coffee, but he got some there; and he sipped it as he saw the others do, only he was even more delighted with it than they. And no fine pastry had ever tasted so good as did that plain bun, that was more like bread than like a cake. He ate it with his mouth open, and when Mrs. Lämke pushed a second one to him, the guest of honour, he took it with radiant eyes.

Frau Lämke felt much flattered at his visit. But she had not made much of the doll; she had taken it from Frida at once and locked it into the cupboard: "So that you don't smash it at once. Besides, your father isn't a gentleman that you can play with dolls every day." But later on when her husband came down from the lodge, in which he sat in his leisure hours mending boots and shoes, to drink a cup of coffee and eat a bun on Frida's birthday, the doll was fetched out again and shown him.

"Fine, isn't it? She's got it from Wolfgang's mamma. Just look, Lämke"--the woman lifted the doll's pink dress up and showed the white petticoat trimmed with a frill edged with narrow lace--"such trimming. Just like that I sewed round the dress Frida wore at her christening. She was the first one; bless you, and you think at the time it's something wonderful. Oh dear!"--she sighed and laid the doll back in the cupboard in which the clean pillowcases and Frida's and her Sunday hats were together with all kinds of odds and ends--"how time flies. Now she's already nine."

"Ten," corrected Frida. "I'm ten to-day, mother."

"Right--dear me, are you already ten?" The woman laughed and shook her head, surprised at her own forgetfulness. And then she nodded to her husband: "Do you still remember, Lämke, when she was born?"

"If I remember!" he said, pouring another cup out of the inexhaustible coffee-pot. "Those were nice carryings-on when she was born--none of that again, thanks. The girl gave you a lot of trouble. And me too; I was terribly afraid. But that's ten years since, old woman--why, it's almost forgotten."

[Pg 115] "And if it had happened a hundred years ago I shouldn't have forgotten it, oh no." The woman put out her hand as though to ward off something. "I was just going to make myself some coffee about four o'clock in the afternoon, like to-day, I had got such a longing for it, and then it started. I just got as far as the passage--do you remember, you were still working in Stiller's workshop at the time, and we lived in the Alte Jakob, fifth storey to the left?--and I knocked at Fritze's, the necktie maker's, whose door was opposite ours, and said: 'Oh, please,' I said, 'send your little one as quickly as you can to Frau Wadlern, 10, Spittelmarkt, she knows all about it'--oh dear, how bad I felt. And I fell down on the nearest chair; they had the greatest difficulty to get me home again. And now it began, I could not control myself however much I tried; I believe they heard me scream three houses off. And it lasted, it lasted--evening came on--you came home--it was midnight--five, six, seven in the morning--then at last at nine o'clock Frau Wadlern said: 'The child, it'll soon be----'"

"That's enough now, mother," interrupted the man, glancing sideways at the children, who were sitting very quietly round the table listening, with wide-open, inquisitive eyes. "All that's over long ago, the girl's here, and has been a credit to you so far."

"She was born at eleven sharp," said Frau Lämke dreamily, nodding her head at the same time and then drawing a deep breath as if she had climbed a high mountain. And then, overwhelmed by the pain and pleasure of a memory that was still so extremely vivid after the lapse of ten years, she called her daughter, her first-born, to come to her on this her tenth birthday.

"Come here, Frida." And she gave her a kiss.

[Pg 116] Frida, who was quite abashed at this unexpected caress, giggled as she cast a glance at her brother Artur and the two other boys, and then ran to the door: "Can we go and play now?"

"Be off with you."

Then they rushed out of the dark cellar, where the Lämkes lived, in high spirits.

It was so light in the street, the sun shone brightly, a fresh wind was blowing and somebody was flying a kite far away across the field. There were very few people on foot and no carriages. The road belonged to them, and they rushed to it with a loud hallo. The one who reached the lamp-post at the corner first was captain.

Wolfgang had never allowed anyone to deprive him of this honour before, but he had to be

policeman to-day, he had been the last. He had followed the others slowly and silently. He had got something in his head to think about, which made him dull and hindered him from running; he had to think about it the whole time. He could not get rid of it even when he was in the midst of his favourite game; the only time he forgot it was when he was having a good scuffle with Hans Flebbe. The latter had scratched him in the face, and so he tore a handful of his hair out. They gripped hold of each other near the next garden-gate.

Artur, a feeble little creature, had not taken part in the fight, but he stood with his hands in his pockets giving advice in a screeching voice to the two who fought in silence.

"Give him it hard, Flebbe. Your fist under his nose--hard."

"On with you, Wolfgang. Settle him. Show him what you can do."

[Pg 117] Frida hopped from one leg to the other, laughing, her fair plait dancing on her back. But all at once her laugh became somewhat forced and anxious: Hans, who was several years older than Wolfgang, had got him down on the ground and was hammering him in the face with his fist.

"Flebbe, you--!" She pulled his blouse, and as that did not help she nimbly put her foot out. He stumbled over it, and Wolfgang, quickly taking advantage of it, swung himself up and belaboured his enemy.

It was no game any longer, no ordinary scuffle between two boys. Wolfgang felt his face burn like fire, he had a scratch on his cheek that went down to his chin, there were sparks before his eyes. All that had made him so silent before was forgotten, he felt a wild delight and gave a loud roar.

"Wolfgang, Wolfgang, no, that's not fair," cried the umpire. "That's no longer fun." Artur prepared to catch hold of Wolfgang, who was kneeling on his opponent's chest, by his two legs.

A jerk and off he flew. Wolf now turned against him, trembling with rage; his black eyes gleamed. This was no longer a well-dressed child of better-class parents, this was quite an elementary, unbridled, unconquered force. He snorted, he panted--at that moment somebody called.

"Wolfgang, Wolfgang."

"Wolfgang," cried Frida warningly, "mother's calling. And your maid is standing near her beckoning."

Frau Lämke's voice was again heard, coming from the door of her house: "Wolfgang, Wolfgang." And now Lisbeth's sharp tones were also heard: "Well, are you soon coming? You're to come home."

[Pg 118] Frau Lämke laughed. "Oh, leave them, they were so happy." But she got a fright all the same when she saw the boy's dirty clothes, and began to brush them. "My goodness, what a sight your pretty blouse looks--and the trousers." She turned red, and still redder when she noticed the fiery scratch on the young gentleman's cheek. "They've made a nice mess of you, the brats. Just you wait until I get hold of you." She shook her fist at Hans Flebbe and her own children, but her threat was not meant seriously. Then she said to Lisbeth in an undertone and with a twitching smile round the corners of her mouth, as she stood there motionless with indignation: "Wild brats, aren't they? Well, it'll always be like that, we were all like that when we were young." And, turning to Wolfgang again, she passed her gnarled hand over his fiery scratch: "That was fine fun, eh, Wolfgang?"

"Yes," he said from the bottom of his heart. And when he saw her looking at him with eyes so friendly and full of comprehension, a great liking for the woman sprang up in his heart.

It had been a splendid afternoon. But he did not speak of it as he went home with Lisbeth; she would have been sure to have turned up her nose at it.

"Hm, the mistress is nice and angry," said Lisbeth--she never said anything but "the mistress" when speaking to the boy. "Why did you stop there such an everlasting time? Didn't you hear the mistress say you were to come home before it was dark?"

He did not answer. Let her chatter, it was not at all true. He stared past her into the twilight. But when he came into the room on reaching home, he noticed that his mother had waited for him. She was certainly not angry, but his evening meal, an egg, a ham sandwich, the milk in a silver mug, everything neatly prepared, was already there, and she sat opposite his place with her hands folded on the white table cloth, frowning impatiently.

[Pg 119] The large hanging-lamp, which cast a bright light on the table and made her bent head gleam like gold, did not brighten up her face.

His mother was in silk, in light silk, in a dress trimmed with lace, which only had something that looked like a very transparent veil over the neck and arms. Oh, now he remembered, she was to meet his father, who had not come home to dinner that day, in town at eight o'clock, and go to

a party with him. Oh, that was why he had had to come home so early. As if he could not have got into bed alone.

"You've come so late," she said.

"You could have gone," he said.

"You know, my child, that I'm uneasy if I don't know that you are at home." She sighed: "How could I have gone?"

He looked at her in surprise: why did she say that? Had somebody been telling tales about him again? Why was she so funny?

He gazed at her with wide-open eyes, as though she were a perfect stranger to him in that dress that left her neck and arms so bare. He put his food into his mouth lost in thought, and munched it slowly. All at once he had to think a great deal of what he had heard Frau Lämke tell. His father and mother had never told anything about when *he* was born.

And suddenly he stopped eating and launched the question into the stillness of the room, into the stillness that reigned between him and her: "When I was born, did it last such a long time too?"

"When what?--who?--you?" She stared at him.

She did not seem to have understood him. So he quickly swallowed the food he still had in his mouth and said very loudly and distinctly: "Did it last such a long time when I was born? It lasted very long when Frida was. Did you scream too, like Frau Lämke?"

[Pg 120] "I?--who?--I?" She turned crimson and then very pale. She closed her eyes for a moment, she felt dizzy; there was a buzzing in her ears. She jumped up from her chair, she felt she must run away, and still she could not. She clutched hold of the table with shaking hands, but the strong oak table had turned into something that shook uncertainly, that moved up and down, slid about. What--what was the boy saying? O God!

She bit her lips, drew a deep breath, and was about to say: "Leave off asking such stupid questions," and yet could not say it. She struggled with herself. At last she jerked out: "Nonsense. Be quick, finish eating. Then off to bed at once." Her voice sounded quite hoarse.

The boy's astonished look fell on her once more. "Why are you all at once so--so--so horrid? Can't I even ask a question?" And he pushed his plate aside sulkily and stopped eating.

Why did she not answer him? Why did she not tell him something like what Frau Lämke had told her Frida? Had he not been born as well? And had not his mother been pleased, too, when he was born? It was very nasty of her that she did not tell him anything about it. Could she not see how much, how awfully much he wanted to know something about it?

A burning curiosity was aroused in the child all at once. It tortured him, positively devoured him. He would not be able to sleep the whole night, he would have to think of it again and again. And he wanted to sleep, it was tiresome to lie awake--he wanted to know it he must know it.

[Pg 121] Käte saw how gloomy the boy's face had grown. Oh, the poor, poor boy. If only she had not let him go to those people. What had he been told there? What did he know? Had they made him suspicious? What

did those people know? Oh, they had made him suspicious, otherwise why should he have tormented her with such questions?

A burning dread filled her mind, and yet her hands and feet were growing as cold as ice. But her compassion was even greater than her dread--there he sat, looking so sad and with tears in his eyes. The poor child, who wanted to know something about his birth, and whom she could not, would not, dared not tell anything. Oh, if only she could think of something to say, only find the right word.

"Wölfchen," she said gently, "you are still too young to hear about it--I can't tell you about it yet. Another time. You don't understand it yet. When you're older--I'll tell you it another time."

"No, now." She had gone up to him, and he caught hold of her dress and held her fast. He persisted with the dull obstinacy that was peculiar to him: "Now. I will know it--I must know it."

"But I--I've no time, Wölfchen. I have to go--yes, I really must go, it's high time." Her eyes wandered about the room, and she felt quite flustered: "I--no, I can't tell you anything."

"You will not," he said. "And still Frau Lämke told her Frida it." The sulky peevish expression had disappeared from the boy's dark face, and made way for one of real sadness. "You don't love me half so much, not in the same way as Frau Lämke loves her Frida."

She did not love him?--she did not love him?--Käte could have screamed. If any mother loved her child it was surely she, and still this child felt instinctively that something was wanting. And

was not that mysterious bond wanting that binds a real mother so indissolubly and mysteriously, so intimately to her real child?

[Pg 122] "Wölfchen," she said in a soft tremulous voice, "my dear Wölfchen," and she stroked his hot forehead with her icy cold hand. "You don't mean what you are saying. We love each other so much, don't we? My child--my darling child, tell me."

She sought his glance, she hung on his answer.

But the answer she longed for did not come. He looked past her. "You see, you won't tell me anything."

He seemed to harp on that. This burning desire had taken possession of him all at once. Somebody had instilled it into him, there could be no other explanation for it. "Who--" she asked hesitatingly--"who has told you--you should question me in this manner? Who?"

She had taken hold of his shoulders, but he wriggled away from under her touch. "Oh, why are you so funny? No-nobody. But I should like to know it. I tell you, I should like to know it. It worries me so. I don't know why it worries me, that's all."

It worried him--already? So early? Oh, then it was a suspicion, a suspicion--who knew from whence it came? He suspected what had happened in his earliest childhood unconsciously. What would happen? "O God, help me!" she cried to herself. The point now was to invent something, make something up, devise something. Those torturing questions must never, never be asked again.

And she forced herself to smile, and when she felt that her smile was no smile, she stepped behind his chair and laid her cheek on the top of his head and both her hands round his neck. He could not look round at her in that way. And she spoke in the low voice in which fairy tales are told to children.

[Pg 123] "Father and I had been married a long time--just think, almost fifteen years!--and father and I wanted so much to have a dear boy or a dear little girl, so that we should not be so much alone. One day I was very sad, for all the other women had a dear child, and I was the only one who had not, and I walked about outside and cried, and then I suddenly heard a voice it came from heaven--no, a voice--a voice that--and--and----" She got bewildered, stammered and hesitated: what was she to say now?

"Hm," he said impatiently. "And--? Tell me some more. And--?"

"And next day you were lying in our cradle," she concluded hastily and awkwardly, in an almost stifled voice.

"And"--he had pushed her hands away, and had turned round and was looking into her face now--"that's all?"

"Well--and we--we were very happy."

"How stupid!" he said, offended. "That's not 'being born.' Frau Lämke told it quite differently. You don't know anything about it." He looked at her doubtfully.

She evaded his glance, but he kept his eyes fixed on hers. It seemed to her as if those scrutinising eyes were looking right down into her soul. She stood there like a liar, and did not know what more to say.

"You don't know anything about it," he repeated once more, bitterly disappointed. "Good night." And he slouched to the door.

She let him go, she did not call him back to give her his good-night kiss. She remained sitting without moving. She heard his steps in the room above. Now he opened the door to throw his boots into the corner outside, now she heard them fall--now everything was quiet.

Oh, what was she to say to him later on when he asked her questions with full knowledge, a man justified in asking questions and demanding an answer to them? She let herself fall into the chair on which he had been sitting, and rested her head in her hands.

[Pg 124]

CHAPTER IX

The boy's friendship with the Lämkes was restricted. Her boy should never go there again. In a manner Käte had grown jealous of the woman who spoke of such improper things and did not mind what she said when children were present.

Frau Lämke could not boast any longer of receiving a friendly greeting from the fine lady. Frau Schlieben walked past her house now without looking at her, and did not seem to hear her respectful: "Good morning, ma'am."

"Tell me, Wolfgang, what have I done to your mother?" she asked the boy one day when she had been out shopping and saw him again for the first time for several months. He was leaning against the railing that enclosed the plot of ground opposite their house, staring fixedly at their door.

He gave a start; he had not heard her coming. And then he pretended not to see her, and stood flicking the whip he held in his hand.

"Are you never coming to see us again?" she went on. "Have you been having a fight with Artur or been quarrelling with Frida? No, it can't be that, as they've been looking out for you so long. I suppose your mother won't let you, is that it? Hm, we're not good enough any more, I suppose? Of course not. Lämke's only a porter and our children only a porter's children." [Pg 125]

Her good-natured voice sounded mortified, and the boy listened attentively. He turned scarlet.

"Oh, I see, you are not allowed to. All right, stop away then, it's all the same to me." She turned round to go, full of anger.

"Well, what do you want now?" A sound from him made her stop; she remained against her will. There was something in the glance the boy gave her, as he looked her full in the face, that kept her standing. "I know, my dear," she said good-naturedly, "it's not your fault. I know that."

"She won't let me," he muttered between his teeth, cracking his whip with a loud noise.

"Why not?" inquired the woman. "Hasn't she said why you're not to play with Artur and Frida any more? Artur has got a new humming top--oh my, how it dances. And Frida a splendid ball from the lady who lives in our house."

The boy's eyes flashed. He put out his foot and gave such a violent kick to a stone in front of him that it flew over to the other side of the street. "I shall play with them all the same."

"Come, come, not so defiant," said the woman admonishingly. "It may be the children were naughty--bless you, you can't be answerable for all they do. Listen, little Wolfgang, you must obey your mother if she won't hear of your coming." She sighed. "We've been very fond of you, my dear. But it's always like that, the friendship is very warm to begin with, and then all of a sudden the rich think better of it. And you really are too big to sit with us in the cellar now---"

She was chattering on, when she felt someone seize hold of her hand. The boy held it in a very firm grip. Bending down to him--for she was tall and thin and her eyes were no longer very good owing to the demi-obscurity of their room--she saw that he had tears in his eyes. She had never seen him cry before, and got quite a fright. [Pg 126]

"Hush, hush, Wölfchen. Now don't cry, for goodness' sake don't, it isn't worth it." Taking hold of a corner of her coarse blue working-apron--she had just run away from the wash-tub--she wiped his eyes and then his cheeks, and then she stroked the hair that grew so straight and thick on his round head.

He stood quite still in the street that was already so sunny, so spring-like, as though rooted to the spot. He who had shrunk from caresses allowed her to stroke him, and did not mind if others saw it too.

"I shall come to see you again, Frau Lämke. She can say what she likes. I will come to you."

As he went away, not running as he usually did, but slowly and deliberately, the woman followed him with her eyes, and was surprised to see how big he had grown.

Käte had no easy time. However much she fought against Wölfchen having any intercourse with the Lämkes--positively stood out against it--the boy was stronger than she. He succeeded in gaining his end; the children were to come to him, even if he might not go to them. In the garden, at any rate--he had wrung that concession from his mother.

They had had a struggle, as it were--no loud words and violent scenes, it is true, no direct prohibitions on her side, no entreaties on his, but a much more serious, silent struggle. She had felt that he was setting her at defiance, that the opposition in him increased more and more until it became dislike--yes, dislike of her. Or did she only imagine it?

She would have liked to speak to her husband about it--oh, how she wanted to do it!--but she dreaded his smile, or his indirect reproach. He had said a short time ago: "It's no trifle to train a [Pg 127]

child. One's own is difficult enough, how much more difficult"--no, he should not say "somebody else's" again, no, never again. This child was not somebody else's, it was their own--their beloved child. She gave way to Wolfgang. Anyhow there was no danger if the children came to him in the garden; she could always see and hear them there. And she would be good to them, she made up her mind the children should not suffer because she had already had to weep many a secret tear at night on her pillow on account of their friendship. She would make her boy fond of the garden, so fond that he would never long to go out into the street again.

[Pg 128] But when she hid the coloured eggs on Easter Sunday, the day she had given Wölfchen permission to invite the Lämkes and also the coachman's son into the garden, and put the nests and hares and chickens into the box-tree that was covered with shoots and among the clusters of blue scyllas that had just commenced to flower, something like anger rose in her heart. Now these children would come with their bad manners and clumsy shoes and tread down her beds, those flower-beds with which they had taken so much trouble, and in which the hyacinths were already showing buds under the branches that protected them and the tulips lifting up their heads. What a pity! And what a pity they would not be able to enjoy this first really spring day quietly, listening undisturbed to the piping blackbird. And they had even refused to come. Hans Flebbe had certainly accepted the invitation without showing any resentment--the coachman knew what was the right thing to do--but the Lämkes did not want to come on any account--that is to say, their mother did not wish it. Lisbeth had been sent there twice; the second time she had come back quite indignant: "Really, what notions such people have." "Dear boy, it's no good, they won't come," Käte had had to say. But then she had noticed how downcast he looked, and in the night she had heard him sigh and toss about. No, that would not do. She wanted to feel his arm, which he had flung so impetuously round her waist when she gave him permission to invite the children, round her neck too. And then she had sat down and written--written to this uneducated woman, addressing her as "Dear Madam," and had asked her to let the children look for eggs to please Wolfgang.

Now they were there. They stood stiff and silent on the path dressed in their best clothes, and did not even look at the flower-beds. Käte had always imagined she understood how to draw out children extremely well, but she did not understand it in this case. She had praised Frida's bran-new, many coloured check frock, and had lifted up her fair plait on which the blue bow was dangling: "Oh, how thick!"--and she had remarked on Artur's shiny boots and Flebbe's hair, which was covered with pomade and which he wore plastered down on both sides of his healthy-looking footman's face with a parting in the middle. She had also made inquiries about their school report at Easter, but had never got any longer answer than "yes" and "no."

[Pg 129] The children were shy. Especially Frida. She was the eldest, and she felt how forced the friendly inquiries were. She made her curtsey as she always did, quickly and pertly like a water wagtail bobbing up and down, but her high girl's voice did not sound so clear to-day; the tone was more subdued, almost depressed. And she did not laugh. Artur copied his sister, and Hans Flebbe copied the girl too, for he always considered all she did worthy of imitation. The two boys stood there, poor little wretches, staring fixedly at the points of their boots and sniffing, as they dared not take out their handkerchiefs and use them.

Käte was in despair. She could not understand that her Wolfgang could find pleasure in having such playfellows. Moreover, he was exactly like the others that day, taciturn and awkward. Even when they commenced to look for the eggs, the children set about it very stupidly; she had positively to push them to the hiding-place.

At last, tired out and almost irritable, Käte went indoors; she would only stop there a short time. No, she could not stand it any longer, always to have to talk and talk to the children and still not get any answer out of them.

But hardly had she reached her room, when she pricked up her ears; a cry reached her from outside that was as clear, as piercing and triumphant as a swallow's when on the wing. Children shouted like that when they were thoroughly happy--oh, she knew that from former times, from the time before Wölfchen had come. Then she had often listened to such shouts full of longing. Oh--*she* had only to go, then the children were merry, then Wolfgang was merry. She felt very bitter.

[Pg 130] She had gone to the window and was looking out into the garden, with her forehead pressed against the pane. How they ran, jumped, hopped, laughed. As though they had been set free. They were trying to catch each other. Frida darted behind the bushes like a weasel, came into sight again with a sharp piercing laugh, and then disappeared once more with a shriek. Wolfgang set off after her wildly. He took no notice of the beds in which the flowers were growing, his mother's delight; he jumped into the middle of them, caring little whether he broke the hyacinths or the tulips, his one thought being to prevent Frida escaping.

And the two others copied him. Oh, how they trampled on the beds now. All three boys were after the girl. The fair plait flew up and down in the sunshine like a golden cord, now here, now there. At last Wolfgang seized hold of it with a triumphant shout. Frida endeavoured to get it away, but the boy held it fast. Then she turned round as quick as lightning, and, laughing all over her face, grasped him firmly round the body with both hands.

It was a harmless merry embrace, a trick of the game--the girl did not wish to be caught, she

wanted to pretend that she had been the captor--it was quite a childish innocent embrace, but Käte reddened. She frowned: hardly had she turned her back, when the girl from the street showed herself.

And the mother went into the garden again with a feeling of hatred towards the girl who, in spite of her youth, already endeavoured to attract her boy.

If Käte had thought she would earn her boy's boisterous gratitude that evening after the children had gone home, loaded with Easter eggs and having had plenty to eat, she was disappointed. Wolfgang did not say a word.

She had to ask him: "Well, was it nice?"

"Hm."

[Pg 131] That might just as well mean yes as no. But she learnt that it had meant no when she bade him goodnight. It was his father's wish that he should kiss her hand; he did so that evening as usual with an awkward, already so thoroughly boyish, somewhat clumsy gesture. His dark smooth head bent before her for a moment-- only a short moment--his lips just brushed her hand. There was no pressure in the kiss, no warmth.

"Haven't you enjoyed yourself at all?" She could not help it, she had to ask once more. And he, who was candid, said straight out:

"You always came just when it was nice."

"Well then, I won't disturb you in the future." She tried to smile. "Good night, my son." She kissed him, but after he had gone there was a great terror in her heart, besides a certain feeling of jealousy at the thought of being superfluous. If he were like that now, what would he be later on?

Wolfgang could not complain, his mother let the children come to him in the garden as often as he wanted them--and he wanted them almost every day. The friendship that had languished during the winter became warmer than ever now that it was summer.

"Pray leave them," Paul Schlieben had said to his wife, as she looked at him with anxious eyes: what would he say? Would he really not mind Wolfgang rushing about with those children in his garden? "I think it's nice to see how the boy behaves to those children," he said. "I would never have thought he could attach himself to anybody like that."

"You don't think it will do him any harm only to associate with those--those--well, with those children who belong to quite a different sphere?"

"Nonsense. Harm?" He laughed. "That will stop of its own accord later on. I infinitely prefer him to keep to the children of such people than to those of snobs. He'll remain a simple child much longer in that manner."

[Pg 132] "Do you think so?" Well, Paul might be right in a manner. Wölfchen was not at all fanciful, he liked an apple, a plain piece of bread and butter just as much as cake. But all the same it would have been better, and she would have preferred it, had he shown himself more dainty with regard to his food--as well as to other things. She took great trouble to make him more fastidious.

When the cook came to her quite indignant one day: "Master Wolfgang won't have any more of the good saveloy on his bread now, nor of the joint from dinner either, ma'am he says it's 'always the same.' What am I to do now?" she was delighted. At last she had succeeded in instilling into him that people do not swallow everything thoughtlessly without making any choice, just for the sake of eating something.

If she had seen how he stuffed bread and dripping with liver and onion sausage on it down his throat at Frau Lämke's, or gobbled up potato cake baked in oil hot from the pan, she would not have been so delighted. But now she was grateful for every finer feeling she thought she observed in him, be it ever so small. She did not notice at all what tortures she caused herself in this manner.

Oh, why did not her husband help her to train him? If only he would. But he no longer understood her.

[Pg 133] Paul Schlieben had given up remonstrating with his wife. He had done so several times, but what he had said had had no effect owing to the obstinacy with which she held fast to her principles. Why should he quarrel with her? They had lived so many years happily together--it would soon be their silver wedding--and was this child, this boy who could hardly write correctly as yet, into whose head the master was just drilling the first rules in Latin--this child who after all had nothing to do either with her or him--this outsider to separate him and his wife now after they had been married so long? Rather than that it would be better to let many things pass which it would perhaps have been better for Käte to have done differently. Let her see how she could manage the boy in her way--she was so very fond of him. And when he, no longer the plaything, had outgrown her delicate hands, then he, the man, was still there to make him feel a more

vigorous hand. Fortunately there was no deceit in the boy.

Paul Schlieben was not dissatisfied with Wolfgang. He certainly did not show any brilliancy at school, he did not belong to the top boys of his form by any means, but still he kept quite respectably in the middle of it. Well, there was no need for him to be a scholar.

Paul Schlieben had not the same opinion as formerly of the things he used to find in his younger years the only ones worth considering: science, art, and their study. Now he was content with his calling as merchant. And as this child had come into his life, had come into that position without having done anything to bring it about himself, it was the duty of him who allowed himself to be called "father" by him to prepare a future for him. So the man mapped out a certain plan. When the boy had got so far as to pass the examination that entitled him to one year's service in the army, he would take him away from school, send him a year to France, England and possibly also to America, to firms of high standing in each country, and then, when he had started from the bottom and learnt something, he would make him a partner. He thought how nice it would be then to be able to lay many things on younger shoulders. And the boy would no doubt be reliable; one could see that already.

If only Käte did not expect such a ridiculous amount of him. She was always after the boy--if not in person, then in her thoughts, at any rate. She worried him--it could not be helped, he was not an affectionate child--and did it make her happy?

[Pg 134] He had many a time given the boy an imperceptible, pacifying nod, when his eyes had sought his across the table as though asking for help. Yes, it was really getting more and more difficult to get on with Käte.

* * * * *

The Schliebens went away. The husband had consulted the doctor with regard to his wife, and he had ordered Franzensbad. But it was absolutely impossible for him to accompany her there. He would employ the time making some excursions on foot in the Tyrol, as it was a long time since he had had a holiday. A couple of pounds less in weight would do him no harm.

But where was Wolfgang to be meanwhile?

"At home," said his father. "He's old enough; eleven years. He is at school in the morning and in the garden in the afternoons, and Hofmann can come and see him every other day--to reassure you."

It was an unbearable thought for the mother to leave the child alone. She would have preferred to take him with her. But Paul had got vexed: "What next?" And the doctor had said. "On no account."

Then Käte had wanted to induce her husband to take the boy with him: "How healthy it would be for him to run about to his heart's content for once in a way."

"It seems to me he does enough of that here. Really, Käte, the boy is as strong as can be, don't always make such a fuss about him. Besides, I'm not going to take him away from school when it's quite unnecessary."

To be sure, he must not lose his place in the form, and possibly become one of the last. Käte was so ambitious on her son's account. But as the July holidays were almost over and she had not gone away with him during that time, which would have been more suitable, she would remain at home for the present. She declared she could not go away.

[Pg 135] However, the doctor and her husband arranged everything without her; the more nervously and anxiously she refused to go, the more urgent a thorough cure seemed to be to them. The day of departure had already been proposed.

But Lisbeth gave notice beforehand: no, if the mistress was going away for so long and the master too, she would go as well. Remain alone with Wolfgang, with *that* boy? No, that she wouldn't.

She must have saved a tidy little sum during the well-nigh ten years she had been in the house, for even the promise of a rise could not keep her. She persisted in her wish to leave, and threw an angry look at the boy, whose laughing face appeared outside above the windowsill at that moment.

Käte was beside herself. Not only because she did not want the servant she had had so long to leave her, but she had reckoned so firmly on Lisbeth keeping a watchful eye on the boy during her absence. And it pained her that she spoke of Wolfgang in such a tone full of hate. What had the child done to her?

But Lisbeth only shrugged her shoulders without speaking, and looked sulky and offended.

Paul Schlieben took the boy in hand. "Just tell me, my boy, what's been the trouble between you and Lisbeth? She has given notice, and it seems to me she's leaving on your account. Listen"-

-he cast a keen glance at him--"I suppose you've been cheeky to her?"

The boy's face brightened: "Oh, that's nice, that's nice that she's going." He did not answer the question that had been put to him at all.

His father caught him by the ear. "Answer me, have you been cheeky to her?"

[Pg 136] "Hm." Wolfgang nodded and laughed. And then he said, still triumphing in the remembrance: "It was only yesterday. I gave her a smack in the face. Why does she always say I've no right here?"

The man did not tell anything of this to his wife; she would only have brooded over it. He had not punished the boy either, only shaken his finger at him a little.

Lisbeth went away. She left the house, in which she had served so long and faithfully and in which she had had to put up with so much--as she weepingly assured her mistress, who was also overcome with emotion--like an offended queen.

Another maid had been engaged, one in whom Käte had certainly not much confidence from the commencement--Lisbeth had straightway given her the impression of being much more intelligent--but there was no choice, as it was not the time of year when servants generally leave; and she had to go to the baths as quickly as possible.

So Cilia Pioschek from the Warthe district came to the Schliebens.

She was a big, strong girl with a face that was round and healthy, white and red. She was only eighteen, but she had already been in service a long time, three years as nurse at the farm bailiff's whilst she still went to school. Paul Schlieben was amused at her--she did not understand a joke, took everything literally and said everything straight out just as it came into her head--but Käte called her behaviour "forward." On the other hand the new maid was on better terms with the old cook and the man-servant than Lisbeth, as she put up with a good deal.

[Pg 137] "You can go away with your mind at rest," said Paul. "Do me this favour, Käte, don't oppose our plan any longer. In six weeks you will be back again quite well, God willing, and I shall not see these"--he gave a slight tap with his finger--"these small wrinkles at the corners of your eyes any more." He kissed her.

And she returned his kiss, now when she was to be separated from him for the first time since their marriage for so long; for they had always, always travelled together before, and since Wölfchen had come to the house he had only once asked permission to leave her for a fortnight at the most. She had never left the child alone. And now she was to leave her dear ones for six long weeks. She clung to him. She had it on the tip of her tongue to ask him: "Why don't you go with me as you used to? Franzensbad and Spa--there's surely no great difference between those two?" But why say it if he had never thought of doing so for a moment? Years had gone by, and some of the tenderness that had united them so closely before, that they could only enjoy things together, and that made them feel they never could be separated, had disappeared under the winged flight of time.

She sighed and withdrew quietly from the arm that he had thrown round her. "If anybody should come in and see us like this. Such an old couple," she said, trying to joke. And he gave a somewhat embarrassed laugh, as she thought, and did not try to hold her.

But when the carriage which was to take her to the station in Berlin stood before the door early one morning, when the two large trunks as well as the small luggage had been put on the top of it, when he held out his hand to help her in and then took a seat beside her, she could not refrain from saying: "Oh, if only you were going with me. I don't like travelling alone."

"If only you had said so a little earlier." He felt quite perturbed; he was exceedingly sorry. "How easily I could have taken you there the one day, seen you settled there and come back the next."

[Pg 138] Oh, he did not understand what she meant by "if only you were going with me." Stay with her there as well--that was what she had meant.

Her sorrowful eyes sought the upstairs window behind which Wölfchen was sleeping. She had had to say goodbye to him the evening before, as she was leaving so early. She had only stood at his bedside with a mute good-bye that morning, and her gloved hand had passed cautiously over his head, that rested so heavily on the pillow, so as not to waken him. Oh, how she would have liked to have said some loving words to him now.

"Give my love to the boy, give my love to the boy," she said quickly, hastily, several times after each other, to the cook and Friedrich, who were standing near the carriage. "And take good care of him. Do you hear? Give my love to the boy, give my love to the boy." She could not say anything more or think of anything more. "Give my love to----"

Then the upstairs window rattled. Stretching both her arms out she rose half out of her seat.

The boy put his head out. His cheeks, that were hot with sleep, showed ruddy above his white night-shirt.

"Good-bye, good-bye. Come back well. And be sure to write to me."

He called it out in a very contented voice and nodded down to her; and she saw Cilia's round, healthy, white and red face behind his and heard her friendly laugh.

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CHAPTER X

Käte did not know herself how she got over those weeks in which she was separated from her home. It was not so bad as she had imagined. She felt that a greater tranquillity had come over her, a tranquillity she never could feel at home; and this feeling of tranquillity did her good. She wrote quite contented letters, and her husband's bright accounts of "magnificent mountains" and "magnificent weather" delighted her. She also heard good news from Dr. Hofmann, who used to send her his reports most faithfully, as he had promised.

"The boy is in the best of health," he wrote, "you need not worry about him, my dear lady. He certainly has to do without his playfellows at present, for a boy and girl are ill, and he feels bored when alone with the fat boy who is still left. He is generally by himself in the garden; Friedrich has given him some lettuce plants, and he has also sown some radishes. I have found him at his lessons as well."

Thank God! It seemed to the woman as if she could breathe freely now, as though free from a load. She carried the letter from her old friend about in her pocket for a long time, read it whilst out for a walk, when sitting on a bench and in the evening when lying in bed. "A boy and girl are ill"--oh, the poor children. What could be the matter with them? But thank God, he was mostly by himself in the garden now. That was the best.

She wrote a letter to her boy, a very bright one, and he answered her in the same strain. The letter in itself was certainly rather funny. "Beloved mother"--how comical. And the whole wording as though copied from a polite letter-writer. She made up her mind to enclose it in her next letter to her husband what would he say to it? "Beloved mother"--but it pleased her all the same, and also "Your obedient son" at the end of it. Otherwise the letter really contained nothing, nothing of what he was doing, not even anything about the Lämkes, also no longing "come back soon"; but it was written carefully, tidily and clearly, not such a scrawl as he usually wrote. And that showed her that he loved her.

He had also enclosed a little picture, a small square with a border of lace paper, on which there was a snow-white lamb holding a pink flag. Under it stood in golden letters, "Agnus Dei, miserere nobis."

Where could he have got that from? Never mind from where, he had wanted to give her something. And the small tasteless picture touched her deeply. The good boy.

She put the picture with the lamb of God carefully among her treasures; it should always remain there. A tender longing came over her for the boy, and she could not imagine how she had been able to stand it so long without him.

* * * * *

August was over and September already almost half gone when Käte returned home. Her husband, who had returned before her, came to meet her; they met in Dresden, and their meeting was a very cordial one. He could never get tired of looking at her bright colour, her bright eyes; and she on her side found him very sunburnt, more youthful-looking and almost as slender as formerly.

They sat hand in hand in the compartment he had had reserved for them; quite alone like two young lovers. They had an enormous amount to say to each other--there was nothing, nothing whatever that disturbed them. They gazed at each other very tenderly.

"How delighted I am to have you again," she said, after he had told her a lot about his journey in a lively manner.

"And I you." He nodded to her and pressed her hand. Yes, it really seemed to both of them as if

they had been separated from each other for an eternity. He drew her still closer, held her as tightly as though she were a precious possession that had been half snatched away from him, and she clung to him, leant her head on his shoulder and smiled dreamily.

Innumerable golden atoms danced on a slender slanting sunbeam before her half-closed eyes. The even rattling of the carriages and the calm feeling of a great joy in her heart lulled her to sleep.

Suddenly she started up--was it a jolt, a shock? She had all at once got a fright, as it were: she had not asked anything about the child as yet!

"Wölfchen--what's Wölfchen doing?"

"Oh, he's all right. But now tell me, darling, how did you spend the whole day there? How was it divided? In the morning to the spring--first one glass, after that a second--and then? Well?"

She did not tell him. "Wölfchen is surely well?" she asked hastily. "There must be something wrong--you say so little about him. I've had such a misgiving the whole time. Oh dear, do tell me." Her voice sounded almost irritable--how could Paul be so indifferent. "What's the matter with Wölfchen?"

[Pg 142] "The matter?" He looked at her in great surprise. "But why must there be something the matter with him? He's as strong as a horse."

"Really? But tell me, tell me something about him."

He smiled at her impatience. "What is there to tell about such a boy? He sleeps, eats, drinks, goes to school, comes home, runs out into the garden, sleeps, eats, drinks again and so on, vegetates like the plants in the sunshine. It's much better for you to tell me how you are."

"Oh, I--I--" that seemed so superfluous to her all at once--"I--quite well, you can see that." How indifferent he was with regard to the child. And she--his mother--had been able to forget him so long too? She felt so ashamed of herself that she hastily raised her head from her husband's shoulder and sat up straight. Now they were not lovers any longer, only parents who had to think about their child.

And she only spoke of the boy.

Paul felt the sudden change in his wife. It depressed him: had they gone back to where they were before? Did she already feel no interest again in anything but the boy? He no longer felt any inclination to speak of his journey.

The conversation became more and more monosyllabic; he bought a paper at the next station, and she leant back in her corner and tried to sleep. But she did not succeed in doing so, in spite of feeling very tired; her thoughts continued to revolve round the one point: so there was nothing the matter with him. Thank God! How indifferent Paul was, to be sure. Would Wölfchen be very delighted when she came home? The dear boy--the darling boy.

[Pg 143] She must have slept a little at last nevertheless, for she suddenly heard her husband's voice, as though far away, saying: "Get ready, darling; Berlin," and she started up.

They were already among the innumerable lines that cross each other there. Then the train rushed into the glass-roofed station.

"So we've got so far." He helped her out, and she began to tremble with impatience. Would this running up and down stairs, this crossing to the other side of the station, and then the waiting and watching for the train to the suburbs never come to an end? Would not Wölfchen be asleep? It would be dark before they got home.

"Is the train soon coming? What time is it? Oh dear, what a long time we have to wait."

"Calm yourself, the boy is waiting for you, never fear. He sits a long time with Cilia every evening; she hasn't much time for him during the day. A nice girl. You've been very fortunate there."

She did not catch what he said, she was thinking the whole time how she would find him. Would he have grown very much? Have changed? Children at his age are said to change constantly--had he grown ugly, or was he still so handsome? But never mind! she used to attach more importance to his outward appearance--as long as he was good, very good, that was all that mattered now. In her thoughts she could already hear his shout of joy, already feel his arms round her neck, his kiss on her mouth.

[Pg 144] The wind, which had become pleasant towards evening after a day that had been hot in spite of it already being autumn, fanned her face without being able to cool her cheeks that glowed with emotion. As they stopped in front of the house, which, with its balconies full of bright red geraniums, lay prettily concealed behind the evergreen pines under the starry September sky, her heart beat as though she had run much too far and too quickly. At last! She drew a deep breath--now she was with him again.

But he did not come running to meet her. How strange that he had not watched for her.

"They'll be sitting in the veranda at the back," said her husband. "They always sit there in the evening." He remained behind a little. Let Käte see the boy alone first.

And she hurried through the hall past the beaming cook and without seeing Friedrich, who had donned his livery after decorating all the rooms with the flowers he had raised himself; she neither admired his successes in the garden nor the cake the cook had placed on the festive-looking table. She ran from the hall into her small sitting-room and from thence through the dining-room, the door of which led to the verandah. The door was open--now she stood on the threshold--those outside did not see her.

There was only one of the shaded lamps on the veranda table that was burning, but it was bright enough to light up the space around it. But Cilia was doing nothing. The stocking she was to darn lay in her lap; her right hand in which she held the long darning-needle rested idly on the edge of the table. She was leaning back a little; her face, which looked more refined and prettier in the twilight, was raised; she seemed to be lost in thought with her mouth half open.

Nothing was to be seen of Wolfgang. But now his mother heard him speak in a tone full of regret: "Don't you know any more? Oh!" And then urgently: "Go on, Cilia, go on, it was so beautiful."

[Pg 145] Ah, now she saw him too. He was sitting at the girl's feet, on quite a low footstool, leaning against her knee. And he was looking up at her imploringly, longingly at that moment, looking at her with eyes that gleamed like dark polished agate, and speaking to her in a tone his mother thought she had never heard from him before: "Sing, Cillchen. Dear Cillchen, sing."

The girl began:

"Quoth she with voice subdued, 'Cease from quaking--

"Oh no.

"Not in wrath am I before thee standing--

"No, not that, either.

"Only why did I, weak one, believe thy vows--

"No, I don't know any more. Well, I never! And I've sung it so often when I was at home. At home in the village when me and my sweetheart went for a walk together. Dear, dear"--she stamped her foot angrily--"that I could forget like that."

"Don't be vexed, Cillchen. You mustn't be vexed. Begin again from the beginning, that doesn't matter. I would love to hear it again, again and again. It's splendid."

"Cillchen--Cillchen"--how playful that sounded, positively affectionate. And how he hung on her lips.

Käte craned her neck forward; she was in the veranda now, but the two had not noticed her yet.

The girl sang in a drawling, sing-song voice as she had sung in the village street at home, but the boy's eyes glistened and grew big as he listened to her. His lips moved as though he were singing as well:

"Satin and silk new-wed Henry cover;
Wealthy his bride, brought from land o' Rhine
But serpent stings tease the perjured lover,
Bid slumbers sweet his rich bed decline.

"The clock strikes twelve: sudden are appearing
Through curtain fringe, fingers, slender, white.
Whom sees he now? His once dear----"

The singer came to a standstill--suddenly the sound of a deep-drawn breath passed through the veranda. The boy gave a terrified shriek--there she stood, there she stood!

[Pg 146] "Why, Wolfgang! Wölfchen!" His mother stretched out her arms to him, but he buried his head in the girl's lap.

Käte frowned at the girl: what nonsense to sing such songs to him.

"Oh, the mistress!" Cilia jumped up, her face crimson, and let everything she had on her lap stocking, darning ball, wool and scissors--fall on the floor; the boy as well.

Why were they both so terrified? Wolfgang stared at her as if she were a ghost.

He had risen now, had kissed his mother's hand, and mechanically raised his face to receive her kiss; but his face did not show that he was glad to see her. Or was it embarrassment, a boyish shame because she had taken him by surprise? His eyes did not gaze straight at her, but always sideways. Did he look upon her as a stranger--quite a stranger?

An inexpressible disappointment filled the heart of the woman who had just returned home, and her voice sounded harsh without intending it as she told the girl to go away. She sat down on the seat near the table, which she had just vacated, and drew her boy toward her.

"How have you got on, Wölfchen? Tell me--well?"

He nodded.

"Have you missed your mother a little?"

He nodded again.

"I've brought such a lot of pretty things for you."

Then he grew animated. "Have you also brought something for Cilia? She could find use for a workbasket with all kinds of things in it very well: she has only an old one she used at school, you know. Oh, she can tell such splendid stories--ugh, that make you shiver. And how she can sing. Let her sing this one for you:

[Pg 147] "A smart pretty maiden, quite a young sprig,
A farmer did choose for his bride;
Her favours, however, to a soldier man jig,
And sly to her old man she cried--

"It's perfectly ripping, I can tell you."

And he began to hum the continuation with a laugh:

"He had much better toss the hay, hooray,
The hay, hooray----"

"Hush!" She put her hand to his mouth. "That's not at all a nice song--it's a horrid one. You mustn't sing that any more."

"But why not?" He gazed at her with eyes round with amazement.

"Because I don't wish it," she said curtly. She was indignant: she would give the girl a bit of her mind to-morrow, yes, to-morrow.

Her cheeks were no longer hot. A cold wind blew through the veranda, which pierced her to the very heart. When her husband called out: "Why, Käte, what have you been doing with yourself? Do take off your things first," she quickly answered his call.

The boy remained alone behind, and looked out into the mild night that was now quite dark, with blinking, dreamy eyes. Oh, how beautifully Cilia had sung. She would have to sing and tell him stories to-morrow as well. But if she were to come there again! Never mind, they would be sure to be able to find a place where they would be undisturbed.

Käte did not sleep at all that first night, although she was dead-tired. Perhaps too tired. She had had a long talk about it with Paul after they were in bed. He had said she was right, that neither the one nor the other song was very suitable, but: "Good gracious, what a lot of things one hears as a child that never leave any trace whatever," he had said.

[Pg 148] "Not on *him*." And then she had said plaintively: "I've so often tried to read something really beautiful to him, the best our poets have written but he takes no interest in it, he has no understanding for it as yet. And for such--such"--she sought for an expression and did not find it--"for such things he goes into raptures. But I won't allow it, I won't stand it. Such things may not come near him."

"Then let her go," he had said testily. He was on the point of falling asleep, and did not want to be disturbed any more. "Good night, darling, have a good night's rest. Now that you've come home again you'll do what you think right."

Yes, that she would!

From that day forth she never let the boy out of her sight. And her ears were everywhere. There was no reason to send the girl away--she was honest and clean and did her duty--only she must not be alone with Wölfchen again. Wolfgang was now in his twelfth year, it was not a maid's place to look after him any more.

But it was difficult for Käte to live up to her resolutions. Her husband, of course, had claims on her too, and also her house and her social life; it was not possible to shake off, give up, neglect everything else for the one, for the child's sake. Besides, it might make her husband seriously

angry with the child, if she constantly went against his wishes; she trembled at the thought of it. She had to go into society with him now and then, he was pleased when she--always well dressed--was in request as an agreeable woman. He was fond of going out--and went, alas, much, much too often. So she instructed the cook and the man-servant--even begged them earnestly to keep a watch on what was going on. They were quite amazed; if the mistress was so little satisfied with

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Cilia, she should give her notice; there would be girls enough on the 1st of January.

Käte turned away angrily: how horrid of the servants to want to drive the other away. And if another one came into the house, might it not be exactly the same with her? Servants are always a danger to children.

Wolfgang was developing quickly, especially physically. It was not that he was growing so tall, but he was getting broader, becoming robust, with a strong neck. When he threw snowballs with the Lämkes outside the door he looked older than Artur, who was of the same age, even older than Frida. He was differently fed from these children. His mother was delighted to notice his clear, fresh-looking skin, and saw that he had plenty of warm baths and a cold sponge down every morning. And he had to go to the hairdresser every fortnight, where his thick, smooth mop of dark hair, which remained somewhat coarse in spite of all the care expended on it, was washed and a strengthening lotion rubbed into it. The Lämkes looked almost starved when compared with him; they had not recovered from the effects of scarlet fever very long. If only Wölfchen did not get it too. His mother had a great dread of it. She had kept him away from the Lämkes until quite recently; but there was always the danger of infection at school. Oh dear, one never had peace, owing to the child.

* * * * *

They had had a splendid time out of doors. The lake that lies below the villas like a calm eye between the dark edges of the woods was frozen; Wolfgang and half of his form had been skating there. Käte had also walked up and down the shore for some time after their midday meal,

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watching her boy. How nicely he skated already. He was more secure on his legs and skated better than many of the lads who were describing the figure eight and circles, skating in the Dutch style and dancing with ladies. He was always trying to do all kinds of tricks already, he was certainly courageous. If only he did not fall down or tumble into the water! And he was always skating into the middle of the lake, where the wisps of straw had been placed to show that it was dangerous. It seemed to the mother that nothing could happen to him as long as she stood on the shore watching him incessantly. But at last her feet were quite frozen, and she had to go home.

When the boy came home, as it was commencing to grow dark, he was very bright. He spoke of the skating with great glee. "Oh, that was ripping. I should like to run like that for ever--to-morrow, the day after to-morrow--every day--and further and further every time. The lake is much too small."

"Aren't you tired at all?" inquired his mother, smiling at him. She never grew weary of gazing at him, he looked so beaming.

"Tired?" The corners of his mouth drooped with a smile that was almost contemptuous. "I'm never tired. Not of such things. Cilia said she would like to skate with me some time."

"Well, why not?" His father, who was sitting at the table drinking his coffee, smiled good-humouredly; it amused him to tease the lively boy a little. "Then your mother will have to engage a second housemaid, as long as there's ice on the ground."

Wolfgang did not understand that he was bantering. He cried out, quite happy: "Yes, she must do that." But then his face grew long: "But she has no skates, she says. Father, you'll have to buy her some."

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"I'll be hanged if I will--well, what next?" His father gave a loud laugh. "No, my boy, with all due respect to Cilia, it would be carrying it a little too far to let her skate. Don't you agree with me?"

He looked at his wife, who was rattling the cups loudly, quite contrary to her custom. She said nothing, she only gave a silent nod, but her face had quite changed and grown cold.

The boy could not understand it. Why should Cilia not skate? Did not his mother like her? Funny. It was always like that, whenever there was anything he liked very, very much, she did not like it.

He rested his head on both hands as he sat working at his desk: it felt so heavy. His eyes burnt and watered when he fixed them on his exercise-book--he must be tired, he supposed. His Latin would not be good. In his mind's eye he already saw the master shrug his shoulders and hurl his book on to the bench over so many heads: "Schlieben, ten faults. Boy, ten faults! If you don't pull yourself together, you'll not get your remove to Form IV. with the others at Easter."

Pooh, he did not mind much--no, really not at all. On the whole nothing was of any importance to him whatever. All at once he felt so dead-tired. Why did she begrudge Cilia everything? She told such ripping stories. What was it she had told last night when his parents were out and she

had crept to his bedside? About--about--? He could not collect his thoughts any more, everything was confused.

His head sank on his desk; he fell asleep, with his arms stretched out over his books.

When he awoke an hour might have passed by, but he did not feel rested all the same. He stared round the room and shivered. All his limbs ached.

And they hurt him the whole night through, he could not sleep; his feet were heavy as he dragged himself to the lake to skate next afternoon.

[Pg 152] He returned home from skating much earlier than usual. He did not want to eat or drink anything, he constantly felt sick. "How green the boy looks to-day," said his father. His mother brushed his hair away from his forehead anxiously: "Is anything the matter with you, Wölfchen?" He said no.

But when evening came round again and the wind whispered in the pine-trees outside and a ghostly hand tapped at the window--ugh, a small white hand as in Cilia's song--he lay in bed, shivered with cold in spite of the soft warm blankets, and felt his throat ache and his ears tingle and burn.

"He's ill," his mother said very anxiously next morning. "We'll get the doctor to come at once."

"Oh, it can't be anything much," said the man reassuringly. "Leave him in bed, give him some lemon to drink so that he can perspire, and then an aperient. He has eaten something that has disagreed with him, or he's caught cold."

But the doctor had to be telephoned for at noon. The boy was slightly delirious and had a great deal of fever.

"Scarlet fever!" The doctor examined his chest and then pulled up the cover again very carefully. "But the rash isn't quite out yet."

"Scarlet fever?" Käte thought she would have sunk down on her knees--oh, she had always been so terribly afraid of that.

* * * * *

The clear frosty weather with the bright sunshine and a sky that was almost as blue as in summer was over. Grey days with a heavy atmosphere hung over the roof of the villa; Käte, who was standing at the window in the sick-room, staring out at the tops of the pines that were mourning in the dull mist with tired eyes, thought she had never seen anything greyer.

[Pg 153] The disease had seized hold of the boy with powerful grip, as though his vigorous, well-nourished body were just the sort of hot-bed for the flames of the fever to rage in. The doctor shook his head: the scarlet fever had taken such a mild form everywhere else except in this case. And he warned them against the boy catching cold, prescribed this and that, did his best--not only as his duty, no, but because he felt such deep and hearty sympathy for them--he had always been so fond of the robust lad. They all did their best. Every precaution was taken, every care--everything, everything was to be done for him.

Käte was untiring. She had refused the assistance of a nurse; she violently opposed the wishes both of her husband and her old friend; no, she wanted to nurse her child alone. A mother does not grow tired, oh no.

Paul had never believed that his wife could do so much and be so patient at the same time--she, that nervous woman, to be so untiring, so undaunted. She had always had a light step, now she could not even be heard when she glided through the sick-room; now she was on the left side of the bed, now on the right. She, whose strength gave way so easily even if her intentions were good, was always, always on the spot. There were many nights in which she did not get an hour's sleep. Next morning she would sit like a shadow in the large arm-chair near the bed, but still she was full of joy: Wolfgang had slept almost two hours!

"Don't do too much, don't do too much," implored her husband.

She put him off with: "I don't feel it. I'm so fond of doing it."

How long was it to go on? Would, could her strength hold out? "Let the girl sit up with him for one night at least. She would be so glad to take your place."

[Pg 154] "Cilia? No."

Cilia had offered her services again and again: oh, she would take such good care of him, she knew how, for a little brother of hers had died of scarlet fever. "Let me do it," she implored, "I shall not fall asleep, I'll take such good care of him."

But Käte refused. It cut her to the heart every time she heard her boy say in his feverish dreams during the nights that were so long and so black: "Cillchen--we'll toss the hay--hooray--"

Cillchen."

Oh, how she hated that round-cheeked girl with her bright eyes. But she feared her more than she hated her. In the hours of darkness, in those hours in which she heard nothing but the sick boy's moans and the restless beating of her own heart, this girl seemed to wander about in another form. She appeared to her out of the night, large and broad, she stationed herself boldly near the child's bed, and something of the triumph of power flashed in her eyes, that were otherwise so dull and unintelligent.

Then the tired-out woman would press her hands to her throbbing temples, and stretch out her arms as though to ward her off: no, no, you there, go away! But the phantom remained standing at the child's bed. Who was it: the mother--the Venn--the maid--Frau Lämke? Oh, they were all one.

Tears of anguish rolled down Käte's cheeks. How the boy laughed now. She stooped over him so closely that their breaths intermingled, as she had done once before, and whispered to him: "Your mammy is here, your mammy is with you."

But he made no sign of recognition.

[Pg 155] Cilia's face was swollen with weeping as she opened the kitchen door in the basement on hearing somebody give a gentle knock. Frau Lämke greeted her in a whisper; she had always sent the children so far, but they had come home the day before with such a confusing report, that her anxiety impelled her to come herself. She wanted to ask how he was getting on. Two doctors' carriages stood outside the gate, and that had terrified her anew.

"How is he? How is he to-day?"

The girl burst into tears. She drew the woman into the kitchen in silence, where she found the cook leaning against the fireplace without stirring any pan, and Friedrich just rushing upstairs to answer the electric bell as if somebody were in pursuit of him.

"Dear, dear!" Frau Lämke clasped her hands. "Is the boy so bad, really so bad?"

Cilia only nodded and hid her streaming eyes in her apron, but the cook said dully: "It's about over."

"About over? Will he really die Wolfgang, the boy?" The woman stared incredulously: that was impossible. But she had turned terribly pale.

"Well, it's bad enough," said the cook. "Our doctor has called in another professor, a very well-known one--he was here yesterday--but they don't believe that they can do anything more. The illness has attacked the kidneys and heart. He no longer knows anybody, you know. I was in the room this morning, I wanted to see him once more--there he lay quite stiff and silent, as though made of wax. I don't believe he'll pull through." The good-natured woman wept.

They all three wept, sitting round the kitchen table. Frau Lämke entirely forgot that she had made up her mind never to enter that kitchen again, and that her cabbage, that she had put on for their dinner, was probably burning. "Oh, dear, oh dear," she repeated again and again, "how will she get over it? Such a child--and an only child, whom she adored so."

[Pg 156] Upstairs the doctors were standing at the sick-bed, the old family doctor and the great authority, who was still a young man. They were standing on the right and the left of it.

The rash had quite disappeared; there was not a trace of red on the boy's face now, and his eyes with their extremely black lashes remained persistently closed. His lips were blue. His broad chest, which was quite sunken now, trembled and laboured.

At every gasping breath he took his mother gasped too. She was sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed, stiffly erect; she had sat like that the whole night. Her piercing eyes with their terrified expression flew to the doctors' grave faces, and then stared past them into space. There they stood, to the right and to the left--but there, there!--did they not see it?--there at the head of the bed stood Death!

She started up with an inarticulate sound, then sank down again as though broken in spirit.

The doctors had given the child, who was so dangerously ill, an injection; his heart was very weak, which made them fear the worst. Then the authority took leave: "I'll come again to-morrow"--but a shrug of the shoulders and a "Who knows?" lay in that "I'll come again to-morrow."

The family doctor was still there; he could not leave them, as he was their friend. Käte had clung to him: "Help! Help my child!" Now he was sitting with Paul Schlieben downstairs in his study; Käte had wished to remain alone with the sick boy, she only wanted to know that he was near.

The two men sat in silence with a glass of strong wine before them. "Drink, do drink, my dear friend," Paul Schlieben had said to the doctor; but he did not drink himself. How will she stand it,

[Pg 157] how will she stand it? That buzzed in his head the whole time. He was wrapped in thought, and there were deep lines on his forehead. And the doctor did not disturb him.

Käte was on her knees upstairs. She had sunk down in front of the chair in which she had watched through all those anxious nights, and was holding her hands pressed against her upturned face. She was seeking the God on high who had once upon a time laid the child so benignantly in her path, and was now going to cruelly tear it away from her again. She cried to God in her heart.

"O God, O God, don't take him from me. Thou must not take him from me. I have nothing else in the world beside him. God, God!"

Her surroundings, all her other possessions--also her husband--were forgotten. She had only the child now. That one child that was so dear, so good, so clever, so excellent, so obedient, so beautiful, so charming, so extremely lovable, that had made her life so happy, so rich that she would be poor, poor as a beggar were he to leave her.

"Wölfchen, my Wölfchen!"

How dear he had always, always been; so entirely her child. She did not remember anything more about the tears she had shed on his account; if she had ever shed any, they had been tears of joy, yes, only tears of joy. No, she could not do without him.

[Pg 158] Starting up from the position in which she had been praying she dragged herself to his bedside. She took his body, which was growing cold, into her arms and laid it on her breast in her despair, and her glowing breath passed all over him. She wanted to let all her warmth stream into him, to hold him fast to this earth with the force of her will-power. When his breast fought for air, her breast fought too, when his heart-beat flagged, hers flagged too. She felt that his coldness was making her cold, that her arms were stiffening. But she did not let him go. She fought with Death standing at the head of the bed--who was stronger, Death or her love, the mother's love?

Nobody could get her away from the boy's bed, not even the nurse whom Dr. Hofmann had sent out when he had at last been compelled to go to town that afternoon. The nurse and her husband attempted to raise her by gentle force: "Only an hour's rest, only half an hour's. In the next room or here on the sofa."

But she shook her head and remained on her knees: "I'm holding him, I'm holding him."

Evening came on. Then midnight. It had blown a good deal earlier in the day, but it was very quiet outside now. As quiet as death. There was no longer any wind to shake the pines around the house; they stood bolt upright against the clear, frosty sky, their tops as though cut out of stiff cardboard. The stars blinked mercilessly; the full moon was reflected on the glittering silvery surface of the frozen lake, from which the strong wind had swept all the damp snow the day before and made it clean. A terrible cold had set hi all at once, which seemed to lay hold of everything with its icy breath.

The watchers shivered with cold. When Paul Schlieben looked at the thermometer, he was horrified to see how little it registered even in the room. Was the heating apparatus not in order? You could see your own breath. Had the servants forgotten to put coals on?

He went down into the basement himself; he could have rung, but he felt he must do something. Oh, how terribly little you could do. His wife cowered in the arm-chair in silence now, with large, staring eyes; the nurse was half asleep, nothing stirred in the room. The boy, too, was lying as quietly as if he were already dead.

[Pg 159] A great dread took possession of the man, as he groped his way through the dark house. There was something so paralysing in the silence; all at once everything, the rooms, the staircase, the hall seemed so strange to him. Strange and empty. How the breath of youth had filled them with life before, filled them with the whole untamed thoughtlessness of a wild boy!

He leant heavily on the banisters as he groped his way downstairs. Would the servants still be up?

He found them all there. They sat shivering round the table in the kitchen, which was as cold as though there had not been a bright, blazing fire there all day. The cook had made some strong coffee, but even that did not make them any warmer. An icy cold crept through the whole house; it was as though the ice and snow from outside had come in, as though the chill breath of frozen nature were sweeping through the house too, from attic to cellar.

It was no use throwing more coals into the jaws of the huge stove, or that the water that streamed through all the pipes was hotter. Nobody's feet or hands were any warmer.

"We will try what a very hot bath will do for the patient," said the nurse. She had often seen this last remedy rewarded with success in similar cases.

All hands were busy. The cook made a fire, the other two dragged the boiling water upstairs;

but Cilia carried more and was quicker about it than Friedrich. She felt all the inexhaustible strength of youth in her that is glad to be able to do something. How willingly she did it for that good boy. And she murmured a short prayer in a low voice every time she poured a bucketful into the tub that had been placed near the bed. She could not make the sign of the cross, as neither of her hands was at liberty, but she was sure the saints would hear her all the same.

[Pg 160] "Holy Mary! Holy Joseph! Holy Barbara! Holy guardian angel! Holy Michael, fight for him!"

The cook, who remained downstairs in the kitchen, looked for her hymn-book; she was a Protestant and did not use it every day. When she found it she opened it at random: the words would be sure to suit. Oh dear! She showed it to Friedrich, trembling. There was written:

"When my end is drawing nigh,
Ah, leave me not----"

Oh dear, the boy was to die. They were both as though paralysed with terror.

Meanwhile nimble Cilia was flying up and down stairs. She did not feel so dismayed any longer. He would not die, she was sure of that now.

Whilst those who were in the room lifted him into the bath, Paul Schlieben and the nurse, and his mother placed her feeble hands underneath him to support him, Cilia stood outside the door and called upon all her saints. She would have liked to have had her manual of devotion, her "Angels' Bread," but there was no time to fetch it. So she only stammered her "Help" and "Have mercy," her "Hail" and "Fight for him," with all the fervour of her faith.

And the boy's pallid cheeks began to redden. A sigh passed his lips, which had not opened to utter a sound for so long. He was warm when they put him back into the bed. Very soon he was hot; the fever commenced again.

The nurse looked anxious: "Now ice. We shall have to try what ice-bags will do."

Ice! Ice!

"Is there any ice in the house?" Paul Schlieben hurried from the sick-room. He almost hit the girl's forehead with the door as she stood praying outside.

[Pg 161] Ice! Ice! They both ran down together. But the cook was at her wits' end too; no, there was no ice, they had not thought any would be required.

"Go and get some, quick."

The man-servant rushed off, but oh! before he could reach the shop, awake somebody and return, the flame upstairs might have burnt so fiercely that there was nothing left of the poor little candle. The man looked round, almost out of his mind with anxiety, and he saw Cilia with a chopper and pail running to the back-door.

"I'm going to fetch some ice."

"But where?"

"Down there." She laughed and raised her arm so that the chopper glittered. "There's plenty of ice in the lake. I'm going to chop some."

She was already out of the kitchen; he ran after her without a hat, without a cap, with only the thin coat on he wore in the house.

The terrors of the night gave way before the faint hope, and he did not feel the cold at first. But when the villas were lost sight of behind the pines, when he stood quit alone on the banks of the frozen lake that shone like a hard shield of metal, surrounded by silent black giants, he felt so cold that he thought he should freeze to death. And he was filled with a terror he had never felt the like to before a--deadly fear.

Was not that a voice he heard? Hallo! Did it not come from the wood that had the appearance of a thicket in the blue, confusing glitter of the moonlight? And it mocked and bantered, half laughed, half moaned. Terrible. Who was shrieking so?

"The owl's screeching," said Cilia, and she raised the chopper over her shoulder with both hands and let it whiz down with all her might. The ice at the edge splintered, it cracked and broke; the sound was heard far out on the lake, a growling, a grumbling, a voice out of the deep.

[Pg 162] Would the boy die--would he live?

The man gazed around him with a distraught look. O God! Yes, that was also in vain--would also be in vain. Despite all his courage he felt weak as he stood there. Here was night and loneliness and the wood and the water--he had seen it all before, it was familiar to him--but it had never been like this, so quiet and still, so alive with terrors. The trees had never been so high before, the lake never so large, the world in which they lived never so far away.

Something seemed to be lurking behind that large pine--was a gamekeeper not standing there aiming at him, ready to shoot an arrow through his heart? The silence terrified him. This deep silence was awful. True, the blows of the chopper resounded, he could hear the echo across the lake, and nothing deterred Cilia from doing her work--he admired the girl's calmness--but the menace that lay in the silence did not grow any less.

The distracted man shuddered again and again: no, he knew it now--oh, how distinctly he felt it--nobody could do anything against that invisible power. Everything was in vain.

He was filled with a great grief. He seized hold of the pieces of ice the girl had chopped off with both hands, and put them into the pail; he tore his clothes, he cut himself on the jagged edges that were as sharp as glass, but he did not feel any physical pain. The blood dripped down from his fingers.

And now something began to flow from his eyes, to drip down his cheeks, heavy and clammy--slow, almost reluctant tears. But still the hot tears of a father who is weeping for his child.

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CHAPTER XI

"Dear me, how big you've grown!" said Frau Lämke. "I suppose we shall soon have to treat you as a grown-up gentleman and say 'sir' to you?"

"Never!" Wolfgang threw his arms round her neck.

The woman was quite taken aback: was that Wolfgang? He was hardly to be recognised after his illness so approachable. And although he had always been a good boy, he had never been so affectionate as he was now. And how merry he was, he laughed, his eyes positively sparkled as if they had been polished.

Wolfgang was full of animal spirits and a never-ending, indomitable joyousness. He did not know what to do with himself. He could not sit still for a moment, his arms twitched, his feet scraped the ground.

His master stood in terror of him. He alone, the one boy, made the whole of the fourth form that had always been so exemplary run wild. And still one could not really be downright angry with him. When the tired man, who had had to give the same lessons year after year, sit at the same desk, give the same dictations, set the same tasks, hear the same pieces read, repeat the same things, had to reprove the boy, something like a gentle sadness was mingled with the reproof, which softened it: yes, that was delight in existence, health, liveliness, unconsumed force--that was youth.

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Wolfgang did not mind the scoldings he got, he had no ambition to become head of his form. He laughed at the master, and could not even get himself to lower his head and look sad when his mother waved a bad report in his face in her nervous excitement: "So that's all one gets in return for all one's worry?"

How ambitious women are! Paul Schlieben smiled; he took it more calmly. Well, he had not had the hard work that Käte had had. As the boy had missed so many lessons owing to his illness, she had sat with him every day, and written and read and done sums and learnt words and rules and repeated them with him indefatigably, and set him exercises herself besides the schoolwork, and in this manner he had succeeded in getting his remove into the fourth form with the others at Easter, in spite of the weeks and weeks he had been away from school. She had drawn a deep breath of relief: ah, a mountain had been climbed. But still the road was not straight by any means. When the first blackbirds began to sing in the garden he became No. 15 in his form--that is to say, an average pupil--when the first nightingale trilled he was not even among the average, and when summer came he was among the last in his form.

It was too tempting to sow, plant, and water the garden, to lie on the grass in the warm sunshine and have a sun bath. And still better to rove about out of doors along the edges of the wood or bathe in the lake and swim far out, so far that the other boys would call out to him: "Come back, Schlieben, you'll be drowned."

"Be thankful that there is so much life in him," said Paul to his wife. "Who would have thought only six months ago that he would ever be like this? It is fortunate that he isn't fond of sitting indoors. 'Plenty of fresh air,' Hofmann said, 'plenty of movement. Such a severe illness always

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does some harm to the constitution.' So let us choose the lesser of two evils. But still the rascal must remember that he has duties to perform as well."

It was difficult to combine the two. Käte felt she was becoming powerless. When the boy's eyes, which were as bright as sloes, implored her to let him go out, she dared not keep him back. She knew he had not finished his school-work, had perhaps not even commenced it; but had not Paul said: "One must choose the lesser of two evils," and the doctor: "Such a severe illness always leaves some weakness behind, therefore a good deal of liberty"?

She suddenly trembled for his life; the horror of his illness was still fresh in her mind. Oh, those nights! Those last terrible hours in which the fever had risen higher and higher after the hot bath, the pulse and the poor heart had rushed along at a mad pace, until the ice from the lake had at last, at last brought coolness, and he had fallen into a sound sleep, which, when the sky commenced to glow in the east and a new day had looked in through the window, had turned into a beneficial, miraculous perspiration.

So she had to let the boy run about.

But that he hung on Cilia's arm when she had to go an errand in the evening, that he hurried after her when she only took a letter to the box, or that he brought her a chair when she wanted to sit with her mending-basket under the elderberry bush near the kitchen door was not to be tolerated. When Käte heard that Cilia had not gone further than the nearest pines on the edge of the wood when it was her Sunday out, and had sat there for hours with the boy on the grass, there was a scene.

Cilia wept bitter tears. What had she done? She had only told Wölfchen about her home.

[Pg 166] "What's your home to him? He is to mind his own business and you yours." Käte was about to say still more, to cry out: "Leave off telling him your private concerns, I won't have it," but she controlled herself, although with difficulty. She could have boxed this round-cheeked girl's ears, as she looked at her so boldly with her bright eyes. Even Frida Lämke was preferable to her.

But Frida did not show herself very often now. She already wore a dress that reached to her ankles, attended a sewing class out of school-hours, and after her confirmation, which was to be a year next Easter she was to go "to business," as she said very importantly.

"I shall give her notice," said Käte one evening, when Cilia had cleared the table and she was sitting quite alone with her husband.

"Oh!" He had not really been listening. "Why?"

"Because of her behaviour." The woman's voice vibrated with suppressed indignation more than that, with passionate excitement. Her eyes, which were generally golden brown and gentle, became dark and sombre.

"Why, you're actually trembling! What is the matter now?" He laid the paper he was about to read aside, quite depressed. There was some trouble with the boy again; nothing else excited her in that manner.

[Pg 167] "I can't have it any longer." Her voice was hard, had lost its charm. "And I won't stand it. Just think, when I came home to-day I was away an hour towards evening, hardly an hour good gracious, you cannot always be spying, you demean yourself in your own eyes." Her hands closed over each other, gripped each other so tightly that the knuckles showed quite white. "I had left him at his desk, he had so much to do, and when I returned not a stroke had been done. But I heard--heard them downstairs, at the back of the house near the kitchen door."

"Heard whom?"

"Wolfgang and her, of course--Cilia. I had only been away quite a short time."

"Well--and then?"

She had stopped and sighed, full of a deep distress which drove away the anger from her eyes.

"He put his arms round her neck from behind. And he kissed her. 'Dear Cillchen,' he said. And she drew him towards her, took him almost on her lap--he is much too big for that, much too big--and spoke softly to him the whole time."

"Did you understand what she said?"

"No. But they laughed. And then she gave him a slap behind--you should only have seen it--and then he gave her one. They took turns to slap each other. Do you consider that proper?"

"That goes too far, you are right. But it's nothing bad. She is a good girl, quite unspoilt as yet, and he a stupid boy. Surely you don't intend to send the girl away for that? For goodness' sake, Käte, think it well over. Did they see you?"

"No."

"Well, then, don't do it. It's much wiser. I'll speak to the boy some time when I find an opportunity."

"And you think I couldn't--I can't--I mustn't send her away?" Käte had grown quite dejected in the presence of his calmness.

[Pg 168] "There's no reason whatever for it." He was fully convinced of what he said, and wanted to take up his paper again. Then he caught her eyes, and stretched out his hand to her across the table. "Dear child, don't take everything so much to heart. You're making your life miserable--your own, the boy's--and--yes, mine too. Take things easier. There! And now I'll read my paper at last."

Käte got up quietly--he was all right, he was reading. She had not given him her hand. His calmness hurt her. It was more than calmness, it was indifference, slackness. But she would not be slack, no, she would not get tired of doing her duty.

And she went after her boy.

Wolfgang was already upstairs in his room. But he had first crept softly up to Cilia, who was drying the plates and dishes in the kitchen, from behind, had given her a pinch and then thrown both arms round her and begged for a story: "Tell me something"--but she would not.

"I don't know anything."

"Oh, do tell me something. About the procession. Or even if it's only about your sow. How many little ones did she have last time?"

"Thirteen." Cilia could not resist *that* question, but still she remained taciturn.

"Is your cow going to calve this year too? How many cows has the biggest farmer near you? You know, the one down near the Warthe, Hauländer. Do tell me." He knew all about everything, knew all the people at her home and all the cattle. He could never get tired of hearing about them and about the country where the bells tinkle for matins and vespers or call with a deep, solemn sound for high mass on Sundays. He was so very fond of hearing about the country, about the large fields in which the blue flax and golden rye grow, about the bluish line of forest on the horizon, about the wide, wide stretches of heath, where the bees buzz busily over the blooming heather and the fen-fowls screech near the quiet waters in the evening, when the sky and the sun are reflected red in them.

[Pg 169] "Tell me about it," he begged and urged her.

But she was reluctant and shook her head. "No, go away; no, I won't. The mistress has been looking at me like that again this evening--oh, like--no, I can't explain. I believe she's going to give me notice."

He had crept up to his room in a sulk and undressed himself. He had grown so accustomed to it that he could not sleep now when Cilia did not tell him something first. Then he fell into such a quiet sleep, and dreamt so beautifully of wide stretches of heather covered with red blossoms, and of quiet waters near which the fen-fowls screeched, which he went out to shoot.

Oh, that Cilia, what was the matter with her to-day? How stupid! "The mistress is going to give me notice." Nonsense, as if he would stand that. And he clenched his hand.

Then the door creaked.

He craned his neck forward: was it she? Was she coming, after all? It was his mother. He slipped hastily into bed and drew the covering up to his forehead. Let her think he was already asleep.

But she did not think so and said: "So you're still awake?" and she sat down on the chair near his bed on which his things were. Cilia always sat there too. He compared the two faces in silence. Oh, Cilia was much prettier, so white and red, and she had dimples in her fat cheeks when she laughed, and she was so jolly. But his mother was not ugly either.

He looked at her attentively; and then suddenly a hitherto quite unknown feeling came over him: oh, what narrow cheeks she had. And the soft hair near her temples--was--was---

"You're getting quite grey," he said all at once, quite dismayed, and stretched out his finger. "There, quite grey."

[Pg 170] She nodded. A look of displeasure lengthened her delicate face, and made it appear still narrower.

"You should laugh more," he advised. "Then people would never see you had wrinkles."

Wrinkles--oh yes, wrinkles. She passed her hand over her forehead nervously. What uncharitable eyes children had. Youth and beauty had no doubt disappeared for ever--but it was this boy who had deprived her of the last remnant of them. And it sounded like a reproach as she

said: "Sorrow has done that. Your serious illness and--and----" she hesitated: should she begin now about what troubled her so?"--and many other things," she concluded with a sigh.

"I can understand that," he said naïvely. "You're so old, too."

Well, he was honest, she had to confess that; but he said it without a trace of tender feeling. She could not suppress a slight irritation; it was not pleasant to be reminded of your age by your child. "I'm not so old as all that," she said.

"Oh, I don't mean either that you're *very* old. But still much older than Cilia, for example."

She winced--he always brought in that person.

"Cilia is a pretty girl, don't you think so, mother?"

She got so angry that she lost control of herself. "Do you think so?" she said curtly, rising. "She's leaving on the first of October."

"She's leaving? Oh no!" He stared at her incredulously.

"Yes, yes." She felt she was cruel, but could she be otherwise? His disbelieving tone expressed such terror. "She's leaving. I'm going to give her notice."

"Oh no, you won't." He laughed. "You won't do that."

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"Yes, I will." She emphasised each word; it sounded irrevocable.

He still shook his head incredulously: it could not be. But then he suddenly remembered Cilia's depression and her words that evening: "I suppose she's going to give me notice." "No, you shan't do so." He started up in bed.

"I shall not ask you."

"No, you shan't, you shan't," he cried. All at once Cilia moved across his mental vision, her ingenuous eyes looked at him so sadly--he liked her so much--and she was to go? He was seized with fury.

"She shan't go, she shan't go," he howled, and shouted it louder and louder: "She shan't go." He was in a mad, indescribable frame of mind. He threw himself back, stretched himself out and struck the bedstead with his feet, so that it creaked in all the joints.

Käte was terrified; she had never seen him so violent before. But how right she was. His behaviour showed her that plainly. No, she must not call herself cruel even if his tears flowed; it was necessary that Cilia went. But she was sorry for him.

"Wölfchen," she said persuasively, "why, Wölfchen. She tried to soothe him, and drew up his cover that had fallen down with gentle hand. But as soon as she touched him he pushed her away.

"Wölfchen--Wölfchen--you with your Wölfchen! As if I were a baby still. My name is Wolfgang. And you are unjust--envious--you only want her to go away because I like her better, much better than you."

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He shouted in her face, and she became deathly white. She felt as though she must scream with pain. She who had suffered so much for his sake was of less account than Cilia in his opinion? All at once she remembered all the burning and inefaceable tears she had already shed for his sake. And of all the hard hours during his illness none had been so hard as this one.

She forgot that he was still a child, a naughty boy. Had he not said himself: "I'm not a child any longer"? His behaviour seemed unpardonable. She left the room without a word.

He followed her with eyes full of dismay: had he hurt her? All at once he was conscious that he had done so--oh no, he did not want to do that. He had already got half out of bed to run after her on his bare feet, to hold her fast by her dress and say: "Are you angry?"--when he suddenly remembered Cilia again. No, it was too bad of her to tell her to go.

He wept as he crept under the bed-clothes and folded his hands. Cilia had told him he was to pray to the Holy Virgin, to that smiling woman in the blue mantle covered with stars, who sits on a throne over the altar with the crown on her head. She healed everything. And when she asked God in Heaven for anything, He did it. He would pray to her now.

Cilia had once taken him to her church, when his mother was at the baths and his father in the Tyrol. He had had to promise her not to tell anybody about it, and the charm of the secrecy had increased the charm of the church. An unconscious longing drew him to those altars, where the saints looked so beautiful and where you could see God incarnate, to whom he had been told to pray as to a father. He had never liked the church so much which his mother sometimes went to, and in which he had also been.

That longing, which had clung to him ever since like a fairy tale, now came over him forcibly and vividly. Yes, it was beautiful to be able to kneel like that before the Holy Virgin, who was [Pg 173] lovelier than all women on earth, and hardly had you laid your request before her when its fulfilment was insured. Splendid!

"Hail Mary!" Cilia's prayer began like that. He did not know any more, but he repeated the words many times. And now he smelt the incense again, which had filled the whole church with perfume, heard again the little bell announcing the transubstantiation, saw the Lord's anointed with the splendid stole over his chasuble bow first to the left of the altar, then to the right. Oh, how he envied the boys in their white surplices, who were allowed to kneel near him. Blessed harmonies floated under the high, arched dome:

"Procedenti ab utroque
Compar sit laudatio----"

They had sung something like that. And then the priest had raised the gleaming monstrance on high, and all the people had bowed deeply: *Qui vivis et regnas in sæcula sæculorum*. Yes, he had remembered *that* Latin well. He would never forget it all his life.

Cilia had had to nudge him and whisper: "Come, we're going now," otherwise he would have remained kneeling much longer in the magnificent and still cosy church, in which nothing was cold and strange.

If only he could go there again. Cilia had certainly promised to take him if she found an opportunity--but now she was to go away, and the opportunity would never come. What a pity. He was filled with a great regret and defiance at the same time; no, he would not go to the church his mother went to, and where the boys from his school went.

And he whispered again, "Hail, Mary!" and the hot and angry tears that had been running down his cheeks ceased as he whispered it.

He had climbed out of his bed, and was kneeling by the side of it on the carpet, his clasped [Pg 174] hands raised in prayer, as he had seen the angels do in the altar-piece. His eyes sparkled and were wide open, his defiance melted into fervour.

When he at last got into bed again, and his excessive fatigue had calmed his agitation and he had fallen asleep, he dreamt of the beautiful Virgin Mary, whose features were well known to him, and he felt his heart burn for her.

* * * * *

It was a fortnight later, the first of October, that Cilla left her situation. Käte had given her a good character; it was still not clear to the girl why she had been dismissed, even when she stood in the street. The lady wanted an older, more experienced maid--that was what she had said--but Cilia did not quite believe that, she felt vaguely that there was another reason: she simply did not like her. She would go home for a short time before taking another situation, she felt homesick, and it had been difficult for her to leave the place--on account of the boy. How he had cried, even yesterday evening. He had hung on her neck and kissed her many times like a little child, that big boy. And there was so much he still wanted to say to her. They had been standing together upstairs in the dark passage, and then the mistress's step as she came up the stairs had driven them away; he was just able to escape to his room.

And she had not even been able to say good-bye to him to-day, the good boy. For he had hardly gone to school when her mistress said: "There, now you can go." She was quite taken aback, for she had not reckoned on getting away before the afternoon. But the new housemaid, an elderly [Pg 175] person with a pointed face, had already come, so what was there for her to do? So all she had done was to wrap up all the pictures of the saints she kept in her prayer-book quickly in paper, and stick them into the drawer in the table that stood at the boy's bedside--he would be sure to find them there--after she had written "Love from Cilia" on them. Then she had gone away.

Cilia had sent her basket on by goods train, and she had nothing to carry now but a little leather bag and a cardboard box tied with string. So she could get on quickly. But on her way to the station she stopped all at once: the school would be over at one o'clock, it was almost eleven now, it really did not matter if she left somewhat later. How pleased he would be if she said good-bye to him once more and begged him not to forget her.

She turned round. She would be sure to find a bench near the school, and there she would wait for him.

The passers-by looked curiously at the young girl who had posted herself near the school like a soldier, stiff and silent. Cilia had not found a bench; she dared not go far from the entrance for fear of missing him. So she placed the cardboard box on the ground, and stood with her little bag on her arm. Now and then she asked somebody what time it was. The time passed slowly. At last it was almost one. Then she felt her heart beat: the good boy! In her thoughts she could already see his dark eyes flash with joy, hear his amazed: "Cillchen! You?"

Cilia pushed her hat straight on her beautiful fair hair, and stared fixedly at the school-door

with a more vivid red on her red cheeks: the bell would soon ring--then he would come rushing out--then--. All at once she saw the boy's mother. She? Frau Schlieben was approaching the door with quick steps. Oh dear!

[Pg 176] A few quick bounds brought her behind a bush: did she intend fetching her Wolfgang herself to-day? Oh, then she would have to go. And she stole away to the station, full of grief. The joy that had made her heart beat had all disappeared; but she still had one consolation: Wolfgang would not forget her. No, never!

Wolfgang was much surprised to see his mother. Surely he need not be fetched? She had never done that herself before. He was disagreeably impressed. Was he a baby? The others would make fun of him. He felt very indignant, but his mother's kindness disarmed him.

She was specially tender that day, and very talkative. She inquired about everything they had been doing at school, she did not even scold when he confessed he had had ten faults in his Latin composition; on the contrary, she promised he should make an excursion to Schildhorn that afternoon. It was such a beautiful, sunny autumn day, almost like summer. The boy sauntered along beside her, quite content, dangling his books at the end of the long strap. He had quite forgotten for the moment that Cilia was to leave that day.

But when they came home and the strange maid answered the door, he opened his eyes wide, and when they sat down at table and the new girl with the pointed face, who did not look at all like a servant, brought in the dishes, he could not contain himself any longer.

"Where's Cilia?" he asked.

"She has gone away--you know it," said his mother in a casual tone of voice.

"Away?" He turned pale and then crimson. So she had gone without saying good-bye to him! All at once he had no appetite, although he had been so hungry before. Every mouthful choked him; he looked stiffly at his plate--he dared not look up for fear of crying.

[Pg 177] His parents spoke of this and that--all trivial matters --and a voice within him cried: "Why has she gone without saying good-bye to me?" It hurt him very much. He could not understand it--she was so fond of him. How could she have found it in her heart to go away without letting him know where he could find her? His Cillchen to leave him like that! Oh, she could not have done so--not of her own free will, oh no, no. And just when he was at school.

He was seized with a sudden suspicion: he had not thought of such a thing before, but now it was clear to him--oh, he was not so stupid as all that--she had had to go just because he was at school. His mother had never liked Cilia, and she had not wanted her to say good-bye to him.

The boy cast angry glances at his mother from under his lowered lashes: that was horrid of her.

He rose from the table full of suppressed wrath, and dragged his feet up the stairs to his room. He found the pictures of the saints that had been stuck into his drawer at once--"With love from Cilia"--and then he gave way to his fury and his grief. He stamped with his feet and kissed the gaudy pictures, and his tears made lots of dark spots on them. Then he rushed downstairs into the dining-room, where his father was still sitting at the table and his mother packing cakes and fruit into her small bag. Oh, she had wanted to go for a walk with him. That would be the very last thing he would do.

"Where has Cilia gone? Why haven't you let her say good-bye to me?"

[Pg 178] His mother gazed at him, petrified; how did the boy guess her innermost thoughts? She could not utter a word. But he did not let her speak either, his boy's voice, which was still high, cracked and then became deep and hoarse: "Yes, you--oh, I know it quite well --you did not want her to say good-bye to me. You've sent her away so that I should not see her any more--yes, you! That's horrid of you! That's--that's vile!" He went towards her.

She shrank back slowly--he raised his hands--was he going to strike her?

"You rascal!" His father's hand seized him by the scruff of his neck. "How dare you? Raise your hand against your mother?" The angry man shook the boy until his teeth chattered, and did so again and again. "You--you rascal, you good-for-nothing!"

"She didn't let her say good-bye to me," the boy screamed as an answer. "She's sent her away because--because----"

"You still dare to speak to----"

"Yes! Why didn't she let Cilia say good-bye to me? She never did anything to her. I loved her and it was for that, only for that----"

"Silence!" He gave the boy a violent blow on the mouth. The man no longer recognised himself; his calmness had abandoned him, the boy's obstinacy made him lose his temper. How he struggled against the hand that was holding him, how he stared at him with his bold eyes. How

dared he shout at him like that? "You"--he shook him--"so you are so insolent? So ungrateful? What would have become of you? You would have died in misery--yes--it's she who has made something out of you--who picked you up out of---"

[Pg 179] "Paul!" His wife's scream interrupted the man. Käte seized hold of his arm as though she were out of her mind: "No, no, leave him. You are not to--no!" She held her hand in front of his mouth. And when he pushed her away angrily and seized hold of the boy more firmly, she tore him away from him and pressed his head against her dress as if to protect him. She held her hand before his ears. Her face was deathly white, and, turning her dilated eyes to her husband, she implored him full of terror: "Not a word! I beseech you, I beseech you!"

The man's anger had not yet cooled. Käte must really have lost her senses. Why did she take the boy away from the punishment he so richly deserved? He approached the boy once more with a hard: "Well, really, Käte I'm not going to condone this."

Then she fled with him to the door and pushed him outside, bolted it and then placed herself in front of it, as though to bar her husband's egress.

Now Wolfgang had gone. They were both alone now, she and her husband, and with a cry full of reproach: "You had almost betrayed it to him," she tottered to the sofa. She fell rather than sat down on it, and broke out in hopeless weeping.

Paul Schlieben strode up and down the room. He had indeed almost allowed himself to be carried away by his indignation. But would it have been a misfortune if he had told the boy about it? Let him know where he came from, and that he had nothing, really nothing whatever to do there. That he received everything as a favour. It was absolutely unnecessary--in fact, more prejudicial than desirable--to keep it a secret from him. But if she would not allow it on any account!

He interrupted his walk to and fro, remained standing before his wife, who was weeping in the corner of the sofa, and looked down at her. He felt so extremely sorry for her. That was the reward for all her kindness, her unselfishness, for all her devotion! He laid his hand softly on her drooping head without saying a word.

[Pg 180] Then she started up suddenly and caught hold of his hand: "And don't do anything to him, please. Don't hit him. It's my fault--he guessed it. I did not like her, I gave her notice, and then I sent her away secretly--only because he loved her, only for that reason. I feared her. Paul, Paul"--she wrung her hands repentantly--"oh, Paul, I stand abashed before the child, I stand abashed before myself."

Wolfgang was sitting huddled up in his room, holding the pictures of the saints in his hand. Those were now his most costly, his only possessions; a precious memory. Where could she be now? Still in the Grunewald? Already in Berlin? Or much further? Oh, how he longed for her. He missed the friendly face that was always smiling secretly at him, and his longing for her increased until he could not bear it any longer. There was no one there who loved him as she did whom he loved as he had loved her.

Now that Cilia was gone he forgot that he had often laughed at her and played tricks on her, and had also quarrelled with her in a boyish manner. His longing for her grew and grew, and her figure grew as well. It became so large and so strong, so powerful that it took his eyes away from everything else that still surrounded him. He threw himself on the carpet and dug his fingers into it; he had to hold himself in that manner, otherwise he would have broken everything to bits, everything, big and small.

That was his father's step on the stairs. He shook the door-handle. Let him shake it. Wolfgang had locked himself in.

"Open at once!"

Ah, now he was to have a whipping. Wolfgang wiped his tears away hastily, gnashed his teeth and closed his lips tightly.

"Well, are you soon going to do it?" The handle was shaken louder and louder.

[Pg 181] Then he went and opened it. His father stepped in. Not with the stick the boy expected to see in his hand, but with anger and grief written on his brow.

"Come down at once. You have hurt your poor, good--much too good--mother very much. Come to her and ask her pardon. Show her that you are sorry; do you hear? Come."

The boy did not move. He stared past his father into space with an unutterably unhappy, but at the same time obstinate expression on his face.

"You are to come--don't you hear? Your mother is waiting."

"I'm not coming," Wolfgang muttered; he hardly opened his lips at all.

"What?" The man stared at the boy without speaking, quite dismayed at so much audacity.

The boy returned his look, straight and bold. His young face was so pale that his dark eyes appeared still darker, a dense black.

"Bad eyes," said the man to himself. And suddenly a suspicion took possession of him, a suspicion that was old and long forgotten, but still had slumbered in the recesses of his heart in spite of everything and had now all at once been roused again, and he seized hold of the boy, gripped hold of his chest so tightly that he made no further resistance.

"Boy! Rascal! Have you no heart? She who has done so much for you, she, she is waiting for you and you, you won't come? On your knees, I say. Go on in front--ask her pardon. At once." And he seized the boy, who showed no emotion whatever, by the scruff of his neck instead of by his chest, and shoved him along in front of him down the stairs and into the room where Käte was sitting buried in her grief, her eyes red with weeping.

[Pg 182] "Here's somebody who wants to beg your pardon," said the man, pushing the boy down in front of her.

Wolfgang would have liked to cry out: "No, I won't beg her pardon, and especially not now"--and then all at once he felt so sorry for her. Oh, she was just as unhappy as he--they did not suit each other, that was it. This knowledge came to him all at once, and it deepened his glance and sharpened the features of his young face so much that he looked old beyond his years.

He jerked out with a sob: "Beg your pardon." He did not hear himself how much agony was expressed in his voice, he hardly felt either that her arms lifted him up, that he lay on her breast for some moments and she stroked his hair away from his burning brow. It was as if he were half unconscious; he only felt a great emptiness and a vague misery.

As in a dream he heard his father say: "There, that's right. Now go and work. And be a better boy." And his mother's soft voice: "Yes, he's sure to be that." He went upstairs as though he were walking in his sleep. He was to work now--why? What was the object? Everything was so immaterial to him. It was immaterial whether these people praised or blamed him--what did it matter to him what they did? On the whole he did not like being there any longer, he did not want to stay there any more--no, no! He shook himself as though with loathing.

Then he stood a long time on one spot, staring into space. And gradually a large, an immeasurable expanse appeared before his staring eyes--cornfields and heather in bloom, heather in which the sun sets, quiet waters near which a lonely bird is calling, and over all the solemn, beautiful sound of bells. He must go there. He stretched out his arms longingly, the eyes that were swollen with weeping flashed.

[Pg 183] If they were to keep him with them, keep hold of him! No, they could not hold him. He must go there.

He crept nearer to the window as though drawn there. It was high up, too high for a jump, but he would get down nevertheless. He could not go down the stairs of course, they would hear him--but like this, ah, like this.

Kneeling on the window-sill he groped about with his feet to find the water-pipe that ran down the whole side of the house close to the window. Ah, he felt it. Then he slid down from the sill, only hanging on to it by the tips of his fingers, dangled in the air for a few moments, then got the water-pipe between his knees, let go of the window-sill altogether, grasped hold of the pipe and slid down it quickly and noiselessly.

He looked round timidly: nobody had seen him. There was nobody in the street, and there were only a few people walking in the distance. He bent his head and crept past the windows on the ground-floor--now he was in the garden behind the bushes--now over the hedge his trousers slit, that did not matter--now he looked back at the house with a feeling of wild triumph. He stood in the waste field, in which no houses had been built as yet, stood there hidden behind an elderberry-bush, of which he had planted the first shoot years before as a child. He did not feel the slightest regret. He rushed away into the sheltering wood like a wild animal that hears shots.

[Pg 184] He ran and ran, ran even when it was not necessary to run any more. He did not stop until complete exhaustion forced him to do so. He had run straight across the wood without following any path; now he no longer knew where he was. But he was far away, so much was certain. He had not got so far into the wood on his robber expeditions with his play-fellows, and, in his walks, had never gone into the parts where there were no paths whatever and where it was quite lonely. He could rest a little now in peace.

He threw himself on the ground, where the sand showed nothing but fine grass and some bracken in small hollows. Trees in which there was not the slightest motion towered above him all around, like slender pillars that seemed to support the heavens.

He lay there for some time on his back, and let his blood, which was coursing through his veins like mad, cool down. He thought he could hear his heart throb quite distinctly, although he could not account for it--oh, it was pounding and stabbing so unpleasantly in his breast; he had never felt it do like that before. But he had never run like that before, at any rate since his illness. He had to fight for air, he thought he was going to choke. But at last he was able to breathe again

more comfortably; now he had not to distend his nostrils and pant for breath any more. He could enjoy the feeling of ease and comfort that gradually came over him now.

It was not yet dusk when he set out again, but still the light began to show that it was October. There was a sweet softness, something extremely gentle and glorified about the sunshine that fell through the red branches of the pines, which also softened the wild runaway. He went in a dream--whither? He did not know, he did not think of it either, he only walked on and on, in pursuit of a longing that drew him on irresistibly, that fluttered in front of him and cooed and called like a dove seeking her nest. And the dove's wings were stronger than the wings of an eagle.

[Pg 185] There were no people where the longing flew. It was so peaceful and quiet there. Not even his foot made any noise as it sank into the moss and short grass. The pines stood in the glow of the setting sun like slender lighted candles. No autumn leaves lay on the ground in which the wind might have rustled; the air swept noiselessly over the smooth pine-needles and the colourless cones that had dropped down from the tree-tops.

Wolfgang had never known it was so beautiful there. He looked round with amazed delight. It had never seemed so beautiful before. But it was not like this, of course, where the villas were and the roads. His eyes glanced curiously now to the right, now to the left and then in front of him into the twilight of the wood. There, where the last gold of the setting sun did not cling to the cleft bark like red blood and the light did not penetrate, there was a soft mysterious dusk, in which the mossy dark-green stems gleamed nevertheless. And there was a perfume there, so moist and cool, so pungent and fresh, that the boy drew a deep breath as though a weight had been lifted from his chest and a new strength ran through his veins.

The memory of all he had gone through during the day came back to Wolfgang now in the deep calm. He pressed his hands to his hot forehead--ah, now he noticed he had not even a cap on. But what did that matter? He was free, free! He hurried on, shouting with glee, and then he got terrified at the sound of his own loud voice: hush, be quiet! Let him only not be shut up again, let him be free, free!

[Pg 186] He did not feel any more longing now. He was filled with a great repose, with a boundless happiness. His eyes sparkled--he opened them wide--he could not stare enough at the world, it was as though he saw it for the first time to-day. He ran up to the trunks that seemed to be supporting the heavens, and threw both arms round them; he pressed his face against the resinous bark. Was it not soft? Did it not cling to his glowing cheek like a caressing hand?

He threw himself down on the moss and stretched his limbs and tossed from side to side in high glee, and then jumped up again--he did not like being there, after all--he must look about, enjoy his liberty.

A single red stripe over the wood that was turning blue still showed where the sun had been, when he became conscious of his actual whereabouts for the first time. Here the former high-road from Spandau to Potsdam had been; ruddy brown and yellow chestnuts formed an avenue through the desolate country. The sand lay a foot deep in the ruts that were seldom used now. Ah, from here you came to Potsdam or Spandau, according to the road you took--alas, could you not already hear cocks crowing and a noise as of wheels turning slowly?

Deciding quickly, the boy turned off from the old high-road to the left, crept through a bent barbed wire fence, that was to protect a clearing which had lately been replanted, bounded like a stag over the small plants that were hardly a hand's-breadth high, and looked out for a cover.

He did not require any, nobody came there. He walked more slowly between the small trees; he took care not to tread on them, stooped down and examined them, measured them out by steps as a farmer does his furrows.

And all at once it was evening. A mist had crept over the earth, light and hardly visible at first, then it had risen and increased in size, had slipped across the piece of clearing on the night wind that was coming up, and had hung on to each gnarl like the beckoning veils of spectres.

[Pg 187] But Wolfgang was not afraid; he did not feel any terror. What could happen to him there, where the distant whistle of a train was only heard at intervals, and where the wind carried the smoke it had torn away from the locomotive like a light cloud that rapidly vanishes?

Just as if you were on the prairie, on the steppes, the boy thought to himself, where there are no longer any huts and only the camp fires send their little bit of smoke up as a token. A certain love of adventure was mingled with the bliss of being free. He had always wished to camp out. Of course he would not be able to light a fire and cook by it; he had nothing to do it with. But he did not feel hungry. There was only one thing he needed now, to sleep long and soundly.

He lay down without hesitating. The ground was already cool, but his clothes were thick and prevented the cold from penetrating. He made a sort of pillow for his head, and lay with his face turned towards the evening sky. Pale stars gradually appeared on it, and smiled down at him.

He had thought he would fall asleep at once, he felt tired out, but he lay a long time with open eyes. An inexplicable sensation kept him awake: this was too beautiful, too beautiful, it was like a

splendid dream. Golden eyes protected him, a velvety mantle enveloped him, a mother rocked him gently.

Longing, defiance, pain, fury, everything that hurt had disappeared. Only happiness remained in this infinite peace.

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CHAPTER XII

Frida Lämke had now been confirmed. She wore a dress that almost touched the ground, and when she saw Wolfgang Schlieben for the first time after a long interval, her greeting was no longer the familiar nod of childhood. But she stopped when she came up to her former play-fellow.

"Hallo, Wolfgang," she said, laughing, and at the same time a little condescendingly--she felt so infinitely superior to him--"well, how are you getting along?"

"All right." He put on a bold air which did not exactly suit the look in his eyes.

She examined him; what a fine fellow Wolfgang had grown. But he held himself so badly, he bent forward so. "Hold yourself up, for goodness' sake," she exhorted, and she straightened her own rush-like figure. "Why do you make such a round back? And you blink your eyes as if you were short-sighted. Hm, you should be with my employer--oh my, she would make you sit up." She chuckled to herself, her whole slender figure shook with a secret inclination to laugh.

"You're so happy," he said slowly.

"Well, why shouldn't I be? Do you think such an old dragon can spoil my good humour? Come, that would be stupid. When she scolds I lower my head, I don't say a word, but I laugh to myself. Ha ha!" Her clear voice sounded very gay.

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How pretty she was. The boy's dark eyes were fixed on Frida Lämke as though he had never seen her before. The sun was shining on her fair hair, which she no longer wore in a long plait, but in a thick knot at the back of her head. Her face was so round, so blooming.

"You never come to see me now," he said.

"How can I?" She shrugged her shoulders and assumed an air of importance. "What do you think I have to do? Into town with the car before eight in the morning, and then only two hours for my dinner always in and out and in the evening I'm hardly ever at home before ten, often still later. Then I'm so tired, I sleep as sound as a top. But on Sundays mother lets me sleep as long as I like, and in the afternoon I go out with Artur and Flebbe. We----"

"Where do you go?" he asked hastily. "I could go with you some time."

"Oh, you!" She laughed at him. "You mayn't, you know."

"No." He bowed his head.

"Come, don't look so glum," she said encouragingly, stroking his chin with her fore-finger, and disclosing a hole in her shabby kid glove. "You go to college, you see. Artur is to be apprenticed too, next autumn. Mother thinks to a hairdresser. And Flebbe is already learning to be a grocer--his father can afford to do that--who knows? perhaps he may have a shop of his own in time."

"Yes," said Wolfgang in a monotonous voice, breaking into her chatter. He stood in the street as though lost in thought, his books pressed under his arm. Oh, how far, far this girl, all three of them, had gone from him all at once. Those three, with whom he had once played every day, whose captain he had always been, were already so big, and he, he was still a silly school-boy.

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"Oh, hang it all!" He hurled his pile of books away from him with a violent gesture, so that the strap that held them together came undone. All the books and exercise-books flew apart, and lay spread out in the dust of the street.

"Oh dear, Wölfchen!" Frida stooped down, quite terrified, and gathered them all up.

He did not help her to collect them. He stared in front of him with an angry look.

"There--now you've got them again," said the girl, who had grown quite red with stooping so busily. She blew off the dust and pressed them under his arm again.

"I don't want them." He let them fall again.

"Hm, you're a nice fellow. What can you be thinking of?--those expensive books." She felt really quite angry with him. "Don't you know that they cost money?"

"Pooh!" He made a gesture as if to say, what did that matter? "Then some new ones will be bought."

"Even if your father has sufficient money," she said, firing up, "it's still not right of you to treat these good books like that."

He did not say a word to that, but took them up and fastened the strap round them again. They stood together, both feeling embarrassed. She glanced sideways at him: how he had changed. And he felt vexed that he had got into a passion: what would she think of him now?

"I shall have to go now," she said all at once, "or I shan't even get my dinner eaten ugh, how hungry I am!" She put her hand on her stomach. "How good it'll taste! Mother has potatoes in their jackets and herrings to-day."

"I shall go too." Suiting his step to hers he trotted beside her as she tripped hastily along.

[Pg 191] She got quite red: what would her mother say if she brought Wolfgang with her? No, that would really not do, this was just the day when their room had not been tidied. And she had told a fib too: there were no herrings, only onion sauce with the potatoes in their jackets.

She felt ashamed that Wolfgang should find it out.

"No, you go home," she said, intrenching herself behind a pout. "As you've not been to see us for so long, you needn't come to-day either. I'm angry with you."

"Angry with me--me? What have I done? I wasn't allowed to come to you, I mightn't--that's not my fault, surely. Frida!"

She commenced to run, her face quite scarlet; he ran beside her. "Frida! Frida, surely you can't be angry with *me*? Oh, Frida, don't be angry. Frida, let me go with you. At last I've met you, and then you behave like this?"

There was sorrow in his voice. She felt it, but she was angry all the same: why should he cling to her like that? Flebbe would not like it at all. And so she said in a pert voice: "We don't suit each other and never shall. You go with your young ladies. You belong to them."

"Say that once more--dare to do it!" He shouted in a rough voice, and raised his hand as though he would strike her. "Affected creatures, what are they to me?"

He was right--she had to confess it in her heart--he had never taken any notice of the young girls who lived in the villas around him. She knew very well that he preferred them to them all, and her vanity felt flattered; she said soothingly, but at the same time evasively: "No, Wölfchen, you can't go with me any more, it's not proper any more." And she held out her hand: "Good-bye, Wolfgang."

[Pg 192] They were among the bushes in a small public garden in which there were benches, the villas lying at a good distance from it, quite hidden behind their front gardens. There was nobody in sight in the quiet radiance of the noonday sun. But even if somebody had come, it would not have made any difference; he seized hold of her with both hands in a kind of rage. "I am going with you--I shall not let you go."

She resisted forcibly: what was the stupid boy thinking of? "Let me go," she said, spitting at him like a little cat, "will you let me go at once? You hurt me. Just you wait, I'll tell Flebbe about it, he'll be after you. Leave me in peace."

He did not let her go. He held her clasped in his arms without saying a word, his books were again lying in the dust.

Did he want to kiss or strike her? She did not know; but she was afraid of him and defended herself as best she could. "You runaway!" she hissed, "hm, you're a nice one. Runs away from home, hides himself in the wood. But they got you all the same--and it served you right."

All at once he let her go; she stood in front of him mocking him. She could easily have run away now, but she preferred to stand there and scold him: "You runaway!"

He got very red and hung his head.

"How could you think of doing such a thing?" she continued with a certain cruelty. "So silly. Everybody laughed at you. We positively could not believe it at first. Well I never, said I, the boy runs away without money, without a cap, without a piece of bread in his pocket. You wanted to go

to America like that, I suppose, eh?" She eyed him from top to toe and then threw her head back and laughed loudly: "To think of doing such a thing."

He did not raise his head, only murmured half to himself: "You shouldn't laugh at it, no, you shouldn't."

[Pg 193] "Come, what next? Cry, perhaps? What does it matter to me? Your mother cried enough about it, and your father ran about as if he were crazy. All the rangers in the district were on their legs. Tell me, didn't you get a good thrashing when they dragged you home by the collar?"

"No." He suddenly raised his head and looked straight into the eyes that were sparkling a little maliciously.

There was something in his glance--a mute reproach--that compelled her to lower her lids.

"They didn't beat me--I wouldn't have stood it either--no, they didn't beat me."

"Shut you up?" she asked curiously.

He did not answer; what was he to say? No, they had not shut him up, he might go about as he liked in the house and garden, in the street, to school--and still, still he was not free.

Tears suddenly started to his eyes. "You--you shouldn't--shouldn't taunt me--Frida," he cried, stammering and faltering. "I'm so--so----"

He wanted to say "unhappy"; but the word seemed to mean too little and in another way too much. And he felt ashamed of saying it aloud. So he stood silent, colouring up to the eyes. And only his tears, which he could not restrain any longer, rolled down his cheeks and fell into the dust of the street.

[Pg 194] They were tears of sorrow and of rage. It was already more than six months ago--oh, even longer--but it still enraged him as though it had happened the day before. He had never forgotten for a moment that they had caught him so easily. They had found him so soon, at daybreak, ere the sun had risen on a new day. And they had carried him home in triumph. What he had looked upon as a great deed, an heroic deed, was a stupid boy's trick to them. His mother had certainly cried a good deal, but his father had only pulled his ear: "Once, but not more, my son. Remember that."

Wolfgang was crying quietly but bitterly. Frida stood in front of him, watching him cry, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears as well--she had always been his good friend. Now she cried with him.

"Don't cry, Wölfchen," she sobbed. "It isn't so bad. People don't remember anything more about it--such things are forgotten. You certainly need not feel ashamed of it--why should you? There's no harm in your having frightened your people a little for once in a way. Simply say to them: 'Then I'll run away again,' if they won't let you come to us. Come next Sunday afternoon. Then I won't go with Artur and Flebbe--no, I'll wait for you."

She wiped her own tears away with the one hand and his with the other.

They stood thus in the bright sunshine amidst the flowering bushes. The lilac spread its fragrance around; a red may and a laburnum strewed their beautifully coloured petals over them, shaken by the soft wind of May. The dark and the light head were close to each other.

"Frida," he said, seizing hold of her hand firmly, as though clinging to it, "Frida, are *you* still fond of me, at any rate?"

"Of course." She nodded, and her clear merry laugh was heard once more, although there were still traces of tears on her face. "That would be a nice sort of friendship, if it disappeared so quickly. There!" She pursed up her mouth and gave him a kiss.

He looked very embarrassed; she had never given him a kiss before.

"There!" She gave him another one. "And now be happy again, my boy. It's such beautiful weather."

* * * * *

[Pg 195] "You're late to-day," said his mother, when Wolfgang came home from school at two instead of at one o'clock. "You've not been kept, I hope?"

A feeling of indignation rose in him: how she supervised him. The good temper in which his friend Frida had put him had disappeared; the chains galled him again. But he still thought a good deal of Frida. When he was doing his lessons in the afternoon, her head with its thick knot of hair would constantly appear behind his desk, and bend over his book and interrupt him; but it was a pleasant interruption. What a pity that Frida had so little time now. How nice it had been when they were children. He had always been most fond of her; he had been able to play better with her than with the two boys, she had always understood him and stuck to him--alas!

He felt as though he must envy, from the bottom of his heart, the boy who had been the captain when they played at robbers in those days and roasted potatoes in the ashes, nay, even the boy who had once been so ill that they had to wheel him in a bath-chair the first time he went out into the open air. The boy who sat at the desk now, staring absently into space over the top of his exercise-book, was no longer the same. He was no longer a child. All at once it seemed to Wolfgang as though a golden time had gone for ever and lay far behind him, as though there were no pleasures in store for him. Had not the clergyman who was preparing him for confirmation also said: "You are no longer children"? And had he not gone on to say: "You will soon have your share of life's gravity"? Alas, he already had it.

[Pg 196] Wolfgang sat with knit brows, the chewed end of his penholder between his teeth, disinclined to work. He was brooding. All manner of thoughts occurred to him that he had never had before; all at once words came into his mind that he had never thought of seriously before. Why did the boys in his form constantly ask him such strange questions? They asked about his parents--well, was there anything peculiar about them?--and then they exchanged glances among themselves and looked at him so curiously. What was so funny about him? Lehmann was the most curious--and so cheeky. Quite lately he had blinked at him sideways so slyly, and puffed up his cheeks as though they must burst with laughter when he made the specially witty remark: "I'll be hanged if I can see any likeness between you and your governor!" Was he really not like his father or his mother? Not like either of them?

When Wolfgang undressed that evening, he stood a long time in front of the looking-glass that hung over his washstand, with a light in his hand, holding it first to the right, then to the left, then higher, then lower. A bright light fell on his face. The glass was good, and reflected every feature faithfully on its clear surface--but there was no resemblance whatever between his big nose and his mother's fine one. His father's nose was also quite different. And neither of his parents had such a broad forehead with hair growing far down on it, and such brows that almost met. His father had certainly dark eyes, but they did not resemble those he saw in the glass, that were so black that even the light from the candle, which he held quite close, could not make them any lighter.

At last the boy turned away with a look full of doubt. And still there was something that resembled a slight feeling of relief in the sigh he now uttered. If he were so little like them externally, need he wonder then that his thoughts and feelings were often so quite, quite different from theirs?

[Pg 197] It was strange how the boys at school were an exact copy of their parents; and how the big boys were still tied to their mothers' apron-strings. There was Kullrich, for example; he had been away for a fortnight because his mother had died, and when he came to school again for the first time--with a black band round his coat-sleeve--the whole form went almost crazy. They treated him as though he were a raw egg, and spoke quite low, and nobody made a joke. And when the passage, *When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up*, happened to occur in the Bible-lessons, in which Kullrich also took part, they all looked at him as though at the word of command, and Kullrich laid his head down on his Bible, and did not raise it again during the whole lesson. Afterwards the master went up to him and spoke a long time to him, and laid his hand on his head.

That was already a long time ago, but Kullrich was still not happy. When they all walked in the playground during the interval, eating their bread and butter, he stood at some distance and did not eat. Was it really so hard to lose one's mother?

There was a wonderful moon shining over the silent pines that night; the boy lay half out of the window for a long, long time. His eyes were burning: his thoughts buzzed in his head like a swarm of gnats that whirl round and round and up and down in the air like a cloud. Where did they come from all at once?

He exposed his hot forehead, his chest, from which his nightshirt had slipped, to the cool night air in May--ah, that did him good. That was the best, the only thing that soothed, that gave peace. Oh, how delightful the air was, so pure, so fresh.

[Pg 198] Where could Cilia be now? he wondered. He had never heard anything more about her, She was where he would like to have been--oh, how he would have liked it. Something that resembled the sound of bells came floating along, and he stretched out his arms and bent further and further out of the window.

Wolfgang had such a vivid dream about Cilia that night that when he awoke he thought she was standing at his bedside, that she had not left him yet. But after he had rubbed his eyes, he saw that the spot on which she had just been standing smiling so pleasantly was empty.

After school was over he had to go to the Bible-lesson; he was to be confirmed the following Easter. True, he was still young, but Paul Schlieben had said to his wife: "He is so developed physically. We can't have him confirmed when he is outwardly, at any rate, a grown-up man. Besides, his age is just right. It is much better for him if he does not begin to reflect first."

Did he not reflect already? It often seemed to Käte as if the boy evaded her questions, when she asked him about the Bible-lesson. Did his teacher not understand how to make an impression

on him? Dr. Baumann was looked upon as an excellent theologian, everybody rushed to hear his sermons; to be allowed to join his confirmation classes, that were always so crowded, was a special favour; all his pupils raved about him, people who had been confirmed by him ten, fifteen years before, still spoke of it as an event in their lives.

[Pg 199] Käte made a point of going to hear this popular clergyman's sermons very often. Formerly she had only gone to church at Christmas and on Good Friday, now she went almost every Sunday to please her boy, for he had to go now. They left the house together every Sunday, drove to church together, sat next to each other; but whilst she thought: "How clever, how thought-out, what fervour, surely he must carry a youthful mind away with him"? Wolfgang thought: "If only it were over!" He felt bored. And his soul had never soared there as when the little bell rang when the monstrance had been raised, when he had smelt the odour of incense before dim altars.

There was something in him that drove him to the church he had once visited with Cilia. When he went to the Bible-class he had to pass close by it; but even if the road had been longer, he would still have made it possible to go there. Only to stand a few minutes, a few seconds in a corner, only to draw his breath once or twice in that sweet, mysterious, soothing air laden with incense. He always found the church door open; and then when he stepped out again into the noise of Berlin, he went through the streets with their hurry and their rush like one come from another world. After that he did not take any notice of what he was told about the doctrines and the history of the Church--what were Martin Luther, Calvin and other reformers to him? His soul had been caught, his thoughts submerged in a feeling of gloomy faith.

Thus the summer and winter passed. When the days grew longer, and the mild warmth of the sun promised to dry up all the moisture winter had left behind ere long, Paul Schlieben had his villa cleaned and painted. It was to put on a festive garment for their son's great day, too.

[Pg 200] The white house looked extremely pretty with its red roofs and green shutters, as it peeped out from behind the pines; there would almost have been something rustic about it, had it not been for the large plate-glass windows and the conservatory, with its palms and flowering azaleas, that had lately been built on. Friedrich was sowing fresh grass in the garden, and an assistant was tidying up the flower-beds; they were digging and hoeing everywhere. The sparrows were chirping noisily, bold and happy; but strips of paper tied to long pieces of string and stretched across the lawns that had just been sown fluttered in the purifying wind and frightened the impudent birds away from the welcome food. All the gardens were waking up. The stems of the roses had not yet been released from their coverings, in which they looked like a chrysalis made of straw, but the young shoots had appeared on the fruit-trees, and the spurge-laurel made a fine show with its peach-coloured blossoms. Perambulators painted white and sky-blue were being driven up and down the street, the baby inside was already peeping out from behind the curtains, and little feet tripped along by the side. Nurses and children came out of all the doors, the boys with hoops, the girls with their balls in a knitted net. Giggling young girls went off to tennis, and big boys from the third form made love to them.

Brightness and gaiety everywhere. There was a glad excited rustling in the tops of the pines, and the sap rose and fell in the willows along the shores of the lake. A flight of starlings passed over the Grunewald colony, and each bird looked down and chose in which box on the tall pine stems it would prefer to nest.

The new suit of clothes--black trousers and coat--Wolfgang was to wear at his confirmation lay spread out on his bed upstairs. Now he was to try it on.

Käte was filled with a strange emotion, and her pulse quickened as she helped him to put on his new suit. So far he had always been dressed like a boy, in knickers and a sailor blouse, now he was to be dressed like a man all at once. The festive black suit of fine cloth did not suit him; for the first time one noticed that he was thick-set. He stood there stiffly, he felt cramped in the trousers, the coat was uncomfortable, too: he looked miserable.

[Pg 201] "Look at yourself, just look at yourself," said Käte, pushing him in front of the glass.

He looked into it. But he did not see the clothes, he only saw his mother's face as she looked into the glass at the same time as he, and he saw they had not a single feature in common.

"We're not a bit alike," he murmured.

"Hm? What did you say?" She had not understood him.

He did not answer.

"Don't you like the suit?"

"It's awful!" And then he stared at himself absently. What had they been saying again that morning? They had been jeering at him, Lehmann and von Kesselborn, who were to be confirmed with him. Was it because their fathers were not so rich as his? Kesselborn's father was a retired officer, who now filled the post of registrar, but Kesselborn was terribly proud of his "von"; and Lehmann was his bosom friend. However, he had told them that he had already had a silver watch since he was eight years old, and that he was to have a real gold one for his confirmation, which he would then wear every day--that had vexed them awfully.

It was before the lesson had commenced--they were all three waiting--and Kesselborn had suddenly said: "Schlieben gives himself airs," and had then turned to him and said: "You needn't be so stuck-up." And then Lehmann had added, also quite loudly so that everybody must have heard it: "Don't put on so much side, we know all about it."

[Pg 202] "What do you know?" He had wanted to jump on Lehmann like a tiger, but the clergyman had just then come in and they began prayers. And when the lesson, of which he had hardly heard anything--he heard the other words all the time--was over, he had wanted to tackle Kesselborn and Lehmann, but they had been sitting near the door, and had already gone before he could get out of his bench. He did not see them again. But he noticed glances in which there was a certain curiosity and spitefulness--or did he only imagine it? He was not quite sure about it, and he had not thought any more about it either. But now when he saw his mother's face so close to his in the glass, he suddenly remembered it all again. And it all came back to him, plumped like a stone into his thoughts.

"I'm not at all like you," he said once more. And then he watched her face: "Not like father either."

"Oh yes," she said hastily, "you are very much like your father."

"Not the slightest bit."

Her face had flamed, and then he noticed that she suddenly turned pale. Then she laughed, but there was something forced in her laugh. "There are many children who hardly resemble their parents at all--that has nothing to do with the matter."

"No, but---" All at once he stopped and frowned, as he always did when he exerted himself to think. And he shot such sharp, such suspicious, such scrutinising glances at the glass under his knit brows that Käte involuntarily moved aside, so that her head could not be seen near his in the glass any more.

She was seized with a sudden fear: what did he mean? Had he spoken like that intentionally, or had he said it quite unconsciously? What had they said to him? What did he know?

Her hands that had found something to do to his clothes--she was on her knees pulling down his trousers--were full of nervous haste, and were pulling here, pulling there, and trembling.

[Pg 203] He was not looking into the glass now, he was gazing at the kneeling woman with an indefinable look. As a rule, his face had not much expression and was neither handsome nor ugly, neither fine nor insignificant--it was still a smooth, immature boy's face without a line on it--but now there was something in it, something doubting, restless, which made it appear older, which drew furrows on his forehead and lines round his mouth. Thoughts seemed to be whirling round behind that lowered brow; the broad nostrils quivered slightly, the trembling lips were pressed tightly together.

A deep silence reigned in the room. The mother did not utter a word, nor did the son. The birds were twittering outside, even the faintest chirp could be heard as well as the soft rustling of the spring wind in the tops of the pines.

Käte rose slowly from her knees. She found difficulty in getting up, all her limbs felt as if they were paralysed. She stretched out her hand gropingly, caught hold of the nearest piece of furniture and helped herself up.

"You can take it off again now," she said in a low voice.

He was already doing so, visibly glad at being able to throw off the clothes he was so unused to.

She would have liked so much to say something to him, something quite unimportant--only to speak, speak--but she felt so strangely timid. It was as though he might say to her: "What have I to do with you, woman?" And her fear kept her silent.

[Pg 204] He had taken off his new suit now, and was standing before her showing his broad chest, which the unbuttoned shirt had left exposed, his strong legs, from which the stockings had slipped down, and all his big-boned, only half-clothed robustness. She averted her glance--what a big fellow he was already!--but then she looked at him again almost immediately: why should a mother feel shy at looking at her child? A mother?

Her eyes flickered. As she walked to the door she said, without turning her head to him again: "I'm going down now. You'll be able to finish without me, no doubt."

He mumbled something she could not understand. And then he stood a long time, half dressed as he was, and stared into the glass, as though the pupils of his eyes could not move.

The day of his confirmation drew near; it was to take place on Palm Sunday. Dr. Baumann had laid the importance of the step they were about to take very clearly before the boys' eyes. Now a certain feeling of solemnity took the place of Wolfgang's former indifference. He was more

attentive during the last lessons; the empty bare room with the few pictures on the plain walls did not seem so bare to him any longer. Was it only because he had grown accustomed to it? A softer light fell through the dreary windows and glided over the monotonous rows of benches, beautifying them.

Even Lehmann and Kesselborn were not quite so unsympathetic lately. All his thoughts grew gentler, more forgiving. The boy's hard heart became soft. When the clergyman spoke of the Commandments and specially emphasised the one, "Honour thy father and thy mother," it seemed to Wolfgang there was much for which he must ask forgiveness; especially his mother's forgiveness.

But then when he came home and wanted to say something loving to her--something quite unprepared, quite spontaneous--he could not do it, for she had not perceived his intention.

[Pg 205] Käte often went to the station to meet him--oh, how tired the poor boy must be when he came home. It was really too great a rush for him to have to go to town for his Bible-lessons so often, and there was always twice as much work at school before the end of the term. She would have liked to have caressed him, to have fondled him as she formerly did little Wölfchen. But when she saw him come sauntering along, never looking out for her, never imagining that she was there waiting for him, she would turn quickly down the first street or remain standing quietly behind a tree and let him pass by. He did not notice her at all.

The popular clergyman had to prepare a great many boys for confirmation, too many; he could not interest himself in each individual one of them; nevertheless he thought he could assure Wolfgang's mother, who came to see him full of a certain anxiety in order to ask him how her son was getting on, that he was satisfied with him.

"I know, I know, Frau Schlieben. Your husband considered it his duty to explain it to me--I have also seen the boy's Catholic certificate of baptism. But I think I can assure you with a clear conscience that the lad is a sincere, evangelical Christian. What, you still have some doubts about it?" Her doubtful mien, the questioning anxiety in her eyes astonished him.

She nodded: yes, she had a doubt. Odd that she should have got it quite lately. But a stranger, anybody else would not understand it, not even this man with the clever eyes and the gentle smile. And she could hardly have expressed her doubt in words. And she would have had to tell her tale quite from the beginning, from the time when she took the child away from its mother, took it into her own hands, the whole child, body and soul.

So she only said: "So you believe--you really believe--oh, how happy I am, Dr. Baumann, that you believe we have done right." She looked at him expectantly--oh, how she yearned for him to confirm it and he bowed his head:

[Pg 206] "So far as our knowledge and understanding go--yes."

Wolfgang did not sleep the night before Palm Sunday. He had been told at the last lesson that day that he was to prepare his thoughts. And he felt, too, that the next day was an important day, a fresh chapter in his life. He did his best to think of everything a boy preparing for his confirmation ought to think of. He was very tired and could not help yawning, but he forced his eyes open every time. However, he could not help his thoughts wandering again and again; his head was no longer clear.

What text would he get next day in remembrance of his confirmation? he wondered. They had often talked about it at school, each one had his favourite text which he hoped to get. And would he get the gold watch early in the morning before going to church? Of course. Oh, how angry Kesselborn and Lehmann would be then--those wretches! He would hold it up before their eyes: there, look! They should be green with envy--why should they always be whispering about him, meddling with things that did not concern them at all? Pooh, they could not make him trouble about it all the same, not even make him angry.

And still all at once he saw his own face so plainly before his mind's eye and his mother's near it, as he had seen them in the glass. There was not a single feature alike--no, not one.

[Pg 207] It was really odd that mother and son resembled each other so little. Now he was wide awake, and commenced to ponder, his brows knit, his hands clenched. What did they really mean by their offensive remarks? If only he knew it. He would be quite satisfied then, quite easy. But he could not think of anything else as things were now, with everything so obscure. All his thoughts turned round and round the same point. It was a horrible feeling that tormented him now, a great uncertainty in which he groped about in the dark. Light, light, he must have light. Ah, he would see that he got some.

He tossed about restlessly, quite tortured by his thoughts, and considered and pondered how he was to find it out, where he was to find it out. Who would tell him for certain whether he was his parents' child or not? Why should he not be their child? Yes, he was their child--no, he was not. But why not? If he was not their real child, would he be very sorry? No, no!--but still, it terrified him.

The perspiration stood out on the excited boy's body, and still he felt icy-cold. He drew the

cover up and shook as though with fever. His heart behaved strangely too, it fluttered in his breast as though with restless wings. Oh, if only he could sleep and forget everything. Then there would be no thought of it next day, and everything would be as it had always been.

He pressed his eyes together tightly, but the sleep he had driven away did not come again. He heard the clocks strike, the old clock resounded in the dining-room downstairs, and the bronze one called from his mother's room with its silvery voice. The silence of the night exaggerated every sound; he had never heard the clocks strike so loudly before.

Was the morning never coming? Was it not light yet? He longed for the day to come, and still he dreaded it. All at once he was seized with an inexplicable terror--why, what was it he feared so much?

[Pg 208] If only he were already at church--no, if only it were all over. He was filled with reluctance, a sudden disinclination. The same thought continued to rush madly through his brain, and his heart rushed with it; it was impossible to collect his thoughts. He sighed as he tossed and turned on his bed; he felt so extremely lonely, terrified, nay, persecuted.

If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea--alas, he could not escape from that thought, it was everywhere and always, always there.

As the morning sun stole through the shutters that were still closed on Palm Sunday, forcing its way into the room in delicate, golden rays, Käte came into her son's room. She was pale, for she had been struggling with herself the whole night: should she tell him something, now that he was to enter upon this new chapter of his life or should she tell him nothing? Something within her whispered: "The day has come, tell him it, you owe it to him"--but when the morning sun appeared she bade the voice of the night be silent. Why tell him it? What did it matter to him? What he did not know could not grieve him; but if he knew it, then--perhaps he would then--oh, God, she must keep silent, she could not lose him!

But she longed to let him feel her love. When she came in with soft steps she was amazed, for he was standing already quite dressed in the new black coat and trousers at the window, gazing fixedly at the field in which they were beginning to build a villa now. The ground floor was already finished, there was a high scaffolding round it; it was going to be an enormous building.

"Good morning, my dear son," she said.

He did not hear her.

"Wolfgang!"

Then he turned round quickly and looked at her, terrified and as though he did not know her.

[Pg 209] "Oh, you're already dressed." Her voice seemed to express disappointment; she would have been so pleased to have helped him just on that day. There was a strange feeling in her heart; she had never thought the day would have affected her so. Was it not a day like other days, a festival, of course, but one of many? And now it seemed as though the day were unique, and as though there would never be another like it again.

She went up to Wolfgang, laid her arms round his neck and looked deep into his eyes: "My child!" And then she smiled at him. "I wish you joy."

"Why?" He looked past her with such a strange expression that all the heartfelt things she had wanted to say to him remained unsaid. He was still quite a child although he was almost taller than she, much too much of a child, he did not understand the importance of the day as yet. So all she did was to improve on his appearance a little, to take away a thread from his clothes here, to blow away some dust there and pull his tie straight. And then he had to bend his head; she made a parting again in his stiff obstinate hair, that never would remain straight. And then she could not restrain herself, but took his round face between both her hands and pressed a quick kiss on his forehead.

"Why not on my mouth?" he thought to himself. "A mother would have kissed her child on his mouth."

They went down to breakfast. There were flowers on the table; his father, who was wearing a frock coat, was already seated, and the gold watch lay on Wolfgang's plate. A splendid watch. He examined it critically; yes, he liked it. "In remembrance of April 1, 1901," was engraved inside the gold case. Neither Kesselborn nor Lehmann would get such a watch, none of the boys who were to be confirmed would get anything like such a beauty. It was awfully heavy--he really ought to have a gold chain now.

[Pg 210] Wolfgang's parents watched him as he stood there with the watch in his hand, looking at it yes, he was pleased. And that pleased them, especially Käte. She had wanted to have a text engraved inside it as well, but Paul did not wish it: don't let them get sentimental about it. But it was all right as it was, the boy was pleased with the gift, and so they had gained their object.

"It strikes as well," she said to him eagerly. "You can know what time it is in the dark. Look. If you press here--do you see?"

"Yes. Give it to me--you've to press here." He knew all about it.

They had lost count of the time; they had to be going. Wolfgang walked to the station between his parents. When they passed the house where Lämke was hall-porter, Frida was standing at the door. She must have got up earlier than usual this Sunday; she was already in her finery, looked very nice and smiled and nodded. Then Frau Lämke stuck her head out of the low cellar-window, and followed the boy with her eyes.

"There he goes," she philosophised. "Who knows what life has in store for him?" She felt quite moved.

It was splendid weather, a real spring day. The tasteful villas looked so festive and bright; all the bushes were shooting, and the crocuses, tulips and primroses were in bloom. Even Berlin with its large grey houses and its noise and traffic showed a Sunday face. It was so much quieter in the streets; true, the electric cars were rushing along and there were cabs and carriages, but there were no waggons about, no brewers' and butchers' carts. Everything was so much quieter, as though subdued, softened. The streets seemed broader than usual because they were emptier, and the faces of the people who walked there looked different from what they generally did.

[Pg 211] The candidates for confirmation were streaming to the church; there was a large number of boys and girls. Most of the girls drove, for they all belonged to good families.

Ah, all those boys and girls. Käte could hardly suppress a slight feeling of longing, almost of envy: oh, to be as young as they were. But then every selfish thought was swallowed up in the one feeling: the boy, the boy was stepping out of childhood's land now. God be with him!

Feelings she had not known for a long time, childlike, devout, quite artless feelings crowded in upon her; everything the years and her worldly life had brought with them fell from her. To-day she was young again, as young as those kneeling at the altar, full of confidence, full of hope.

Dr. Baumann spoke grave words full of advice to the boys and girls; many of the young children sobbed, and their mothers, too. A shudder passed through the crowded church, the young dark and fair heads bent low. Käte's eyes sought Wolfgang; his head was the darkest of all. But he did not keep it bent, his eyes wandered restlessly all over the church until they came to a certain window; there they remained fixed. What was he looking for there? Of what was he thinking? She imagined she could see that his thoughts were far away, and that made her uneasy. Moving nearer to her husband she whispered: "Do you see him?"

[Pg 212] He nodded and whispered: "Certainly. He's bigger than all the others." There was something of a father's pride in the man's whisper. Yes, to-day it came home to him: even if they had had many a sorrow they would not have had under other circumstances, many a discomfort and unpleasantness, still they had had many a joy they would otherwise have missed. In spite of everything the boy might in time be all right. How he was growing. There was an expression about his mouth that was almost manly. It had never struck his father before--was it the black clothes that made the boy look so grave?

Wolfgang's thoughts went along paths of their own; not along those prescribed there. He had many sensations, but he could not keep hold of any; he was lost in thought. He saw a bit of the sky through a square in the window-pane, and the flitting figures of his father, mother, Frida, his masters and school-fellows appeared to him in it. But they all glided past, no vision remained. All at once he felt quite alone among all that crowd of people.

When his turn came he stepped mechanically up to the altar with Kullrich beside him; Lehmann and Kesselborn were in front of him. How he hated those two again all at once. He would have liked to throw his watch, his gold watch at their feet: there, take it! But take back what you've said, take it back! Ugh, what a terrible night that had been--horrible. He felt it still in all his limbs; his feet were heavy, and as he knelt down on the cushion on the step leading up to the altar his knees were stiff. Kullrich was crying the whole time. Ah, he was no doubt thinking of his mother, who was not with him any longer. Poor fellow! And Wolfgang felt suddenly that something moist and hot forced its way into his eyes.

The organ above them was being played very softly, and the clergyman repeated the texts he had chosen for the candidates in a low voice to the accompaniment of its gentle tones:

"Revelation, 21st chapter, 4th verse. *And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*"

[Pg 213] Ah, that was for Kullrich. He raised his face, that was wet with tears and so red and hot, to receive the comforting words. But now, now--Wolfgang stopped breathing--now *his* text was coming. What kind of a text would he get, what would he say to *him*?

"Hebrews, 13th chapter, 14th verse. *For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.*"

That was to be for him--that? What was the meaning of it? A terrible disappointment came over Wolfgang, for--had he not waited for the text as for a revelation? The text was to be a judgment of God. It was to tell him what was true--or what was not true. And now?

Here have we no continuing city, we seek one to come. That did not tell him anything.

He got up from the steps mechanically, deceived in all his hopes. He did not see that his mother's eyes sent him a covert greeting, that his father was surreptitiously nodding to him with a friendly expression on his face; he felt quite disillusioned, quite bewildered by this disappointment.

If only it had been over now. How tiring it was to sit quiet for so long. Wolfgang was pale and yawned covertly; the long night during which he had not slept made itself felt, he could hardly keep himself from falling asleep. At last, at last the "Amen" was said, at last, at last the final hymn pealed from the organ.

The enormous crowd poured out of the church like a never-ending flood. Each child joined its parents and passed through the church porch between its father and mother.

[Pg 214] Wolfgang walked like that, too, as he had done before. He saw Kullrich in front of him--with his father only; both of them still wore the broad mourning-band. Then he left his father and mother and hurried after Kullrich. He had never been on specially friendly terms with him, but he took hold of his hand now and pressed and shook it in silence, without a word, and then went back again quickly.

Her boy's impulsive sympathy touched Käte greatly; altogether she was very much moved that day. When Wolfgang walked beside her again, she looked at him sideways the whole time with deep emotion: oh, he was so good, so good. And her heart sent up burning hopes and desires to heaven.

The sky was bright, so blue, there was not a cloud on it.

They took a carriage so as to drive home, as both parents felt they could not be crowded together in the train with so many indifferent, chattering people; they wanted to be alone with their son. Wolfgang was silent. He sat opposite his mother and allowed his hand to remain in hers, which she kept on her lap, but his fingers did not return her tender, warm pressure. He sat as quiet as though his thoughts were not there at all.

They drove past the house again in which Lämke was porter; Frida sprang to the window on hearing the noise the carriage made on the hard, sun-baked road, and smiled and nodded once more. But there was nothing to be seen of Frau Lämke now, and Wolfgang missed her. Well, that afternoon as soon as he could get free he would go to the Lämkes.

[Pg 215] Some guests were already waiting for them at the villa. They did not wish to invite a lot of outsiders in honour of the confirmation, but still the good old doctor, his wife, and the two partners had to be asked--all elderly people. Wolfgang sat between them without saying much more than "yes" and "no," when questions were put to him. But he ate and drank a good deal; the food was always good, but still you did not get caviar and plovers' eggs every day. His face grew redder and redder, and then his head began to swim. At last his health was drunk in champagne, and Braumüller, the oldest partner, a very jovial man, had amused himself by filling the boy's glass again and again.

"Well, Wolfgang, that will be grand when you come to the office. Your health, my boy."

It was almost five o'clock when they got up from table. The ladies sat down in the drawing-room to have a cup of coffee, the gentlemen went to the smoking-room. Wolfgang stole away, he felt such a longing for the Lämkes. First of all he wanted to show them the gold watch, and then he wanted to ask what text Frida had got at her confirmation, and then, then--what would Frau Lämke say to him?

Here have we no continuing city, we seek one to come; that was really a stupid text. And still he could not get it out of his head. He thought of it the whole time whilst sauntering slowly along through the soft silvery air of spring, that is so full of presages. No, the text was not so stupid, after all. He knit his brows thoughtfully, looked up at the motionless tops of the pines and then around him--"Here have we no continuing city"--could not that also mean, here is not your home? But where then--where?

A strange gleam came into his dark eyes, a look as if seeking for something. And then his face, which the wine had flushed, grew pale. If it were true what the two had said? Oh, and so many other things occurred to him all at once: there had been that Lisbeth, that horrid woman who had been with them before Cilia came--what was all that Lisbeth had always been babbling about when she was in a bad humour? "You've no right here"--"you're here on sufferance"--and so on, only he could not remember it all now. What a pity! At that time he had been too young and too innocent, but now--now?

[Pg 216] "Hang that woman!" He clenched his hand. But oh, if he only had her there now. He would not call her names, oh no, he would get it out of her quite gently and coaxingly, for he must, he must

know it now.

A violent longing, a burning curiosity had suddenly been roused in him, and would not be repressed any longer. There must be some truth in it, or how could they have taunted him like that? And he must know the truth; he had a right to know it now. His figure grew taller. Self-will and defiance engraved deep, firm lines round his mouth. And even if it were ever so terrible, he must know it. But was it terrible? The lines round his lips became softer. "Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come"--very well then, he would seek it.

He gave up sauntering and began to stride along more quickly. What would Frau Lämke say? And if he should ask her now--she meant so well by him--if he should ask her in the way a man is asked when he has to swear to anything, if he asked her whether--yes, but what was it he really wanted to ask her?

His heart throbbed. Oh, that stupid heart. It often behaved as if it were a wild bird that has been shut up in a small cage.

He had commenced to run again; now he had to slacken his pace. And still he was quite breathless when he came to the Lämkes. The father and son had gone out, but the mother and daughter were sitting there as though waiting for him.

Frida jumped up, so that the edging she had been crocheting for the kitchen fell to the ground, seized hold of both his hands, and her blue eyes sparkled with admiration. "Oh, how fine you are, Wolfgang! Like a gentleman--awfully grand."

He smiled: that was nice of her to say it.

[Pg 217] But when Frau Lämke said in a voice full of feeling: "Now I shall have to treat you as a grown-up, Wolfgang--you're getting too big now--but I like you none the less for that, you may be sure, I could hardly be fonder of my own children"--he felt happier than he had done the whole day. His face grew tender and full of emotion, and he pressed the gnarled hand that gave his such a hearty shake firmly.

Then he sat down near them; they wanted to hear about everything.

He showed them his gold watch and let it strike the hour; but he did not talk much, the atmosphere of the room filled him with a vague feeling of delight, and he sat quite still. There was the same smell of freshly-made coffee as once before, and the myrtle in the window and the pale monthly rose mingled their fainter perfume with it. He had quite forgotten that he had already been there some time; all at once it occurred to him with a sudden feeling of dread that he had something to ask. He cast a searching glance at the woman. She was just saying: "Oh, how pleased your mother will be to have such a big son," when he jerked out: "Am I her son?" And as she did not answer, but only looked at him uncertainly with her eyes full of dismay, he almost shouted it: "Am I her son?"

The mother and daughter exchanged a rapid glance; Frau Lämke had turned scarlet and looked very embarrassed. The boy had got hold of her arms with both hands and was bending over her. There was no getting out of it.

"Don't tell me any lies," he said hastily. "I shall find it out all the same. I must find it out. Is she my mother? Answer. And my father--he isn't my real father either?"

"Good gracious, Wolfgang, what makes you think of such a thing?" Frau Lämke hid her embarrassment under a forced laugh. "That's all nonsense."

[Pg 218] "Oh no." He remained quite serious. "I'm old enough now. I must know it. I must."

The woman positively writhed: oh, how disagreeable it was for her; let the boy go somewhere else and ask. "I should get into nice trouble with them if I told tales," she said, trying to get out of it. "Ask your parents themselves, they'll tell you all you want to know. I'll take care not to meddle with such things."

Frida opened her mouth as though she wanted to say something, but a warning glance made her remain silent. Her mother flew at her angrily: "Will you be quiet? To think of you mixing yourself up with it. What next. On the whole, what do chits like you know about such things? Wolfgang's father knows very well what the boy is to him and where he got him from. And if the lady is satisfied with it, no one else has a word to say about it."

Wolfgang stared at the gossip. "The boys say--Lisbeth said--and now you say--you too"--he jumped up--"I'll go and ask--them." He pointed with his finger as though pointing at something at a great distance of which he knew nothing. "Now I must know it."

"But Wolfgang--no, for God's sake!" Frau Lämke pressed him down into the chair again, quite terrified. "Lämke will beat me if he gets to know what I've done. He may possibly lose his situation as porter because of it--now, straightway, and the children don't earn anything as yet. I've not said anything, have I? How can I help that other people make you suspicious and uneasy? I don't know your mother at all and your father will, of course, have lost sight of her long ago. Let

the whole thing lie, my boy." She wanted to soothe him, but he was not listening.

"My--my father?" he stammered. "So he is my real father?"

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Frau Lämke nodded.

"But my--my real m--" He could not say the word "mother." He held his hands before his face and his whole body quivered. He was suddenly seized with a longing, that great passionate longing, for a mother who had borne him. He did not say a word, but he uttered sighs that sounded like groans.

Frau Lämke was frightened to death; she wanted to clear herself but made it much worse. "Tut, tut, my dear boy, such a thing often happens in life--very decent of him that he doesn't disown you; there are heaps who do. And you would have far to go to find anybody like the lady who has adopted you as her own child. Splendid--simply splendid!" Frau Lämke had often been vexed with the fine lady, but now she felt she wanted to do her justice. "Such a mother ought to be set in gold--there isn't such another to be found." She exhausted herself in praise. "And who knows if it's true after all?" And with that she concluded.

Oh, it was all true. Wolfgang had grown quiet--at least his face no longer showed any special emotion when he let his hands fall. "I shall have to be going now," he said.

Frida stood there looking very distressed. She had known it all a long time--who did not know it?--but she was very sorry indeed that *he* knew it now. Her clear eyes grew dim, and she looked at her friend full of compassion. Oh, how much more beautiful her own confirmation last Easter had been. She had not had any gold watch, only quite a small brooch of imitation gold--it had cost one shilling and sixpence, for she had chosen it herself with her mother--but she had been so happy, so happy.

"What text did you get?" she asked quickly, so as to take his thoughts away from it.

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"I don't know it by heart," he said evasively, and his cheeks that had grown pale flamed. "But it suited." And with that he went out of the door.

He went straight home--why should he waste any more time? the matter was urgent. He did not notice the starlings flying in and out of their boxes on the tall pines, did not notice that there was already a bright crescent in the evening sky that was growing darker and darker, and a golden star near it, he only noticed with satisfaction as he entered the hall at the villa that the coats and hats had disappeared from the pegs. That was good, the visitors had left. He rushed to the drawing-room, he almost fell into the room. His father and mother were still sitting there--no, his father and she, the--the---

"Come, tell us where you've been such along time," inquired his father, not without a touch of vexation in his voice.

"To-day, just on this day," said his mother. "They all sent you their love, they waited for you. But it's almost eight o'clock now."

Wolfgang cast an involuntary glance at the clock on the mantel-piece--right, nearly eight o'clock. But all that was immaterial now. And, staring straight in front of him as though his eyes were fixed on some object, he placed himself in front of the two.

"I have something to ask you," he said. And then--it came out quite suddenly, quite abruptly. "Whose child am I?"

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Now it was said. The young voice sounded hard. Or did it only sound so cutting to Käte's ears? She heard something terribly shrill, like the dissonant blast of a trumpet. O God, there it was, that awful question. A sudden wave of blood laid a thick veil covered with glittering spots before her eyes; she could not see her boy any more, she only heard his question. She stretched out her hand gropingly, helplessly--thank God, there was her husband! He was still there. And now she heard him speak.

"What makes you ask that question?" said Paul Schlieben. "Our son of course. Whose child could you be otherwise?"

"I don't know. That's just what I want to know from you," the boy went on in his hard voice.

It was strange how calm the voice sounded, but it seemed doubly terrible to Käte in its monotony.

Now it became a little louder: "Give me an answer--I will--I must know it."

Käte shuddered. What inexorableness, what obstinacy lay in that "I will"--"I must!" He would never stop asking again. She sank down as though crushed, and shuddered.

Even the man's quiet voice betrayed a secret tremor. "Dear boy, somebody--I will not ask who, there are always enough gossips and abettors--has again put something into your head. Why do you treat us as if we were your enemies? Haven't we always been like a father and mother to

you?"

Oh, that was wrong--*like* a father and mother? Quite wrong. Käte started up. She stretched out her arms: "My boy!"

But he remained standing as though he did not see those outstretched arms; his brows were contracted, he only looked at the man. "I know very well that you are my father, but she"--he cast a quick sidelong glance at her--"she's not my mother."

"Who says that?" Käte shrieked it.

"Everybody."

"No, nobody. That's not true. It's a lie, a lie! You are my child, my son, our son I And the one who denies that lies, deceives, slanders!----"

[Pg 222] "Käte!" Her husband looked at her very gravely, and there was a reproach in his voice and a warning. "Käte!"

And then he turned to the boy, who stood there so sullenly, almost defiantly--drawn up to his full height, with one foot outstretched, his head thrown back--and said: "Your mother is naturally very much agitated, you must take care of her--to-day especially. Go now, and to-morrow we will--"

"No, no!" Käte did not let him finish speaking, she cried in the greatest excitement: "No, don't postpone it. Let him speak--now--let him. And answer him--now--at once that he is our son, our son alone. Wolfgang--Wölfchen!" She used the old pet name from his childhood again for the first time for months. "Wölfchen, don't you love us any more? Wölfchen, come to me."

She stretched out her arms to him once more, but he did not see those longing, loving, outstretched arms again. He was very pale and his eyes were fixed on the ground.

"Wölfchen, come."

"I cannot."

His face never moved, and his voice had still the same monotonous tone which sounded so terrible to her. She sobbed aloud, and her eyes clung to her husband--he must help her now. But he looked at her with a frown; she could plainly read the reproach in his face: "Why did you not follow my advice? Had we told him in time--" No, she would not find any help in him either. And now--what was it Paul was saying now? Her eyes dilated with a sudden fear, she grasped the arms of her chair with both hands, she wanted to sink back and still she started up to ward off what must come now Was Paul out of his mind? He was saying: "You are not our son."

[Pg 223] "Not your son?" The boy stammered. He had made up his mind that nothing should disconcert him, but this answer disconcerted him all the same. It bewildered him; he turned red, then white, and his eyes wandered uncertainly from the man to the woman, from the woman to the man.

So he, too--that man--was not his father either? But Frau Lämke had said so? Oh, so he wanted to disown him now? He looked suspiciously at the man, and then something that resembled mortification arose within him. If he were not his father, then he had really no--no right whatever to be there?

And, drawing a step nearer, he said hastily: "You must be my father. You only don't want to say it now. But she"--he gave a curt nod in the direction of the chair--"she's not my mother." His eyes gleamed; then he added, drawing a long breath as though it were a relief: "I've always known that."

"You've been wrongly informed. If I had had my way, I would have told you the truth long ago. But as the right moment--unfortunately--has been neglected, I will tell you it to-day. I tell you it--on my word of honour, as one man speaking to another--I am not your father, just as little as she is your mother. You have nothing to do with us by birth, nothing whatever. But we have adopted you as our child because we wanted to have a child and had not one. We took you from----"

"Paul!" Käte fell on her husband's breast with a loud cry, as she had done at the time when he wanted to disclose something to the boy, because he was indignant at his ingratitude. She clasped her arms round his neck, she whispered hastily, passionately in his ear with trembling breath: "Don't tell him from where. For God's sake not from where. Then he'll go away, then I shall lose him entirely. I can't bear it--have mercy, have pity on me--only don't tell him from where."

[Pg 224] He wanted to push her away, but she would not let go of him. She repeated her weeping, stammering entreaty, her trembling, terrified, desperate prayer: only not from where, only not from where.

He felt a great compassion for her. His poor, poor wife--was this to happen to her? And then he was filled with anger against the boy, who stood there so bold--arrogant--yes, arrogant--who demanded where he had to ask, and looked at them unmoved with large, cold eyes.

His voice, which had hitherto been grave but gentle whilst speaking to Wolfgang, now became severe: "Besides, I won't allow you to question me in this manner."

"I have a right to question you."

"Yes, you have." The man was quite taken aback. Yes, the lad had the right. It was quite clear who was wrong. And so he said, thinking better of it and in a more friendly voice again: "But even if you are not our son by birth, I think the training and the care you have received from our hands during all these years have made you our child in spirit. Come, my son--and even if they all say you are not our son, I tell you you are our son in truth."

"No," he said. And then he walked slowly backwards to the door, his dry eyes fixed on those he had called parents for so long.

"Boy, where are you going? Stop!" the man called after him in a kind voice. The boy was certainly in a terrible position, they must have patience with him. And he called out once more "Stop, Wolfgang!"

But Wolfgang shook his head: "I cannot. You have deceived me. Let me go." He shook off the man's hand that he had laid on his sleeve with a violent gesture.

And then he screamed out like a wounded animal: "Why do you still worry me? Let me go, I want to think of my mother--where is she?"

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BOOK III

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CHAPTER XIII

The clocks in the house ticked terribly loudly. They could be heard through the silence of the night like warning voices.

Oh, how quickly the time flew. It had quite lately been evening--midnight--and now the clock on the mantel-piece already struck a short, clear, hard one.

The lonely woman pressed her hands to her temples with a shudder. How they throbbed, and how her thoughts--torturing thoughts--hurried along, madly, restlessly, like the hasty tick of the clocks.

Everybody in the house was asleep--the manservant, the maids, her husband too--long ago.

Only she, she alone had not found any sleep as yet.

And everything was asleep outside as well. The pines stood around the house motionless, and their dark outlines, as stiff as though cut out of cardboard, stood out clearly against the silvery sky of night.

No shouts, no footsteps, no sound of wheels, no singing, no laughter, not even a dog's bark came from the sleeping colony in the Grunewald. But something that sounded like a gentle sighing was heard around the white villa with the red roof and the green shutters.

The mother, who was waiting for her son, listened: was anybody there? No, it was the breeze that was trying to move the branches of the old gnarled pines.

[Pg 228] Käte Schlieben was standing at the window now. She had torn it open impatiently some time before, and now she leant out of it. As far as her eye could reach there was nobody to be seen, nobody whatever. There was still no sign of him.

The clock struck two. The woman gazed round at the mantel-piece with an almost desperate look: oh, that unbearable clock, how it tortured her. It must be wrong. It could not be so late.

Käte had sat up waiting for Wolfgang many an evening, but he had never remained out so long as to-day. Paul had no objection to the boy going his own way. "My child," he had said, "you can't alter it. Lie down and go to sleep, that is much more sensible. The boy has the key, he will come home all right. You can't keep a young fellow of his age in leading-strings any longer. Leave him, or you'll make him dislike our house--do leave him in peace."

What strange thoughts Paul had. He was certainly quite right, she must not keep the boy in leading-strings any longer. She was not able to do so either--had never been able to do so. But how could she go to bed quietly? She would not be able to sleep. Where could he be?

Käte had grown grey. In the three years that had elapsed since her son's confirmation she had changed considerably outwardly. Whilst Wolfgang had grown taller and stronger and broader like a young tree, her figure had drooped like a flower that is heavy with rain or is about to wither. Her fine features had remained the same, but her skin, which had retained almost the delicate smoothness of a young girl's for so long, had become looser; her eyes looked as if she had wept a great deal. Her acquaintances found Frau Schlieben had grown much older.

[Pg 229] When Käte saw herself in the glass now, she did not blush with pleasure at the sight of her own well-preserved looks; she did not like looking at herself any more. Something had given her a shock both inwardly and outwardly. What that had been nobody guessed. Her husband knew it certainly, but he did not speak of it to his wife. Why agitate her again? Why tear open old wounds?

He took good care never again to mention the day on which the boy had been confirmed. It was also best not to do so. He had certainly taken him very severely to task on account of his ungrateful behaviour at the time, and had demanded of him that he should treat them more considerately and his mother also more affectionately. And the lad, who had no doubt repented of his conduct long ago, had stood there like a poor sinner; he had said nothing and had not raised his eyes. And when his father had finally led him to his mother, he had allowed himself to be led and to be embraced by his mother, who had thrown both her arms round his neck. She had wept over him and then kissed him.

And then nothing more had ever been said about it.

[Pg 230] The white house with its bright green and red, which was always being embellished and improved, both inside and out, struck everybody who passed by as extremely cosy. The trippers on Sundays used to stand outside the wrought iron railing and admire the abundance of flowers, the ivy-leaved geraniums on the balconies and the splendid show of fine rose-trees in summer, the azaleas and camellias behind the thick glass of the conservatory and the rows of coloured primulas and early hyacinths and tulips between the double windows in winter. The lady in her dress of soft cloth and with the wavy grey hair and the gentle face, with its rather sad smile, suited the house and the flowers and her peaceful surroundings well. "Delightful," the people used to say.

When Wolfgang heard such things in former years when he was a boy, he used to make faces at the people: the house and garden were no concern of theirs, there was nothing to admire about them. Now it flattered him when they remained standing, when they even envied him. Oh yes, the place was quite nice. He felt very important.

Paul Schlieben and his wife had never placed any special value on money, they had always had enough, a competency was simply a matter of course to them; and they never guessed that their son placed any value on wealth. When Wolfgang used to think now of how little he had once cared for it all in his boyish impetuosity, and that he had run away without money, without bread, he had to smile. How childish. And when he remembered that he once, when he was already older and able to reflect upon his actions, had asked impetuously for something that would have been equivalent to giving up all that made his life so comfortable, he shook his head now. Too silly.

To compare himself with others afforded him a certain satisfaction. Kesselborn was still sweating in the top form--his people made a point of his studying theology, possibly in order to become court chaplain on account of his noble birth--Lehmann had to help his father in his forwarding business in spite of the very good examination he had passed on leaving school, and look after the furniture-vans. And Kullrich--ah, poor Kullrich, he had consumption, like his mother.

The corners of Wolfgang's mouth drooped with a half-contemptuous, half-compassionate smile when he thought of his school-fellows. Was that living? Oh, and to live, to live was so beautiful!

[Pg 231] Wolfgang was conscious of his strength: he could tear up trees by the roots, blow down walls that stood in his way with his breath as though they were cards.

School was no longer the place for him, his limbs and his inclinations had outgrown the benches. Besides, he was already growing a moustache. There had long been a black shadow on the upper lip that made one guess it was coming, and now it had come, it had come!

Surely such a grown-up person could not remain in the second form any longer? And why should he? He was not to be a scholar. Wolfgang left school after passing the examination that admitted him to the top form.

Paul Schlieben had given up, for the present, his intention of sending him abroad as soon as he had finished school; he wished to keep him a little longer under his own eye first. Not that he wanted to guard him as carefully as Käte did, but the old doctor, their good friend whom he esteemed so highly, had warned him in confidence once when they were sitting quite alone over a glass of wine: "Listen, Schlieben," he had said, "you had better take care of the boy. I wouldn't let him go so far away as yet--he is so young. And he is a rampageous fellow and--after what he went through as a child, you know--hm, one can never tell if his heart will hold out."

"Why not?" Schlieben had asked in surprise. "So you look upon him as ill?"

"No, certainly not." The doctor had grown quite angry: at once this exaggeration! "Who says anything about 'ill'? All the same, the lad must not do everything in a rush. Well, and boys will be boys. We know that from our time."

And both men had nodded to each other, had brightened up and laughed.

[Pg 232] Wolfgang had a horse to ride on, rode first at the riding-school and then a couple of hours each day out of doors. His father made a point of his not sitting too much at the office. He would easily learn what was necessary for him to know as a merchant, and arithmetic he knew already.

The two partners, old bachelors, were delighted with the lively lad, who came to the office with his whip in his hand and sat on his stool as if it were a horse.

Paul Schlieben did not hear any complaints of his son; the whole staff, men who had been ten, twenty years with the firm, all well-oiled machines that worked irreproachably, hung round the young fellow: he was their future chief. Everything worked smoothly.

Both father and mother were complimented on their son. "A splendid fellow. What life there is in him." "He's only in the making," the man would answer, but still you could see that he was pleased to hear it in his heart. He did not feel the torturing anxiety his wife felt. Käte only raised her eyebrows a little and gave a slight, somewhat sad smile of consent.

She could not rejoice in the big lad any longer, as she had once rejoiced in the little fellow on her lap. It seemed to her as though she had altogether lost the capacity for rejoicing, slowly, it is true, quite gradually, but still steadily, until the last remnant of the capacity had been torn out by the roots on one particular day, in one particular hour, at the disastrous moment when he had said: "I will go, I want to think of my mother--where is she?" Ever since then. She still wished him to have the best the earth could give, but she had become more indifferent, tired. He had trodden too heavily on her heart, more heavily than when in days gone by his small vigorous feet had stamped on her lap.

[Pg 233] She bent further out of the window with a deep sigh, as she waited all alone for him. Was it not unheard of, unpardonable of him to come home so late? Did he not know that she was waiting for him?

She clenched her hand, which rested on the windowsill, in such a paroxysm of anger as she had rarely felt. It was foolish of her to wait for him. Was he not old enough--eighteen? Did he still want waiting for like a boy coming home alone from a children's party for the first time? He had made an appointment with some other young fellows in Berlin--who knew in what café they were spending their night?

She stamped her foot. Her hot breath rose like smoke in the cold clear night in spring, she shivered with exhaustion and discomfort. And then she thought of the hours, all the hours during which she had watched for him already, and her heart was filled with a great bitterness. Even her tongue had a bitter taste--that was gall. No, she did not feel the love of former years for him any longer. In those days, yes, in those days she had felt a rapture--even when she suffered on his

account; but now she only felt a dull animosity. Why had he forced himself into her life? Oh, how smooth, how free from sorrow, how--yes, how much happier it had been formerly. How he had broken her spirit--would she ever be able to rise again?

No. A hard curt no. And then she thought of her husband. He had also robbed her of him. Had not he and she been one formerly, one in everything? Now this third one had forced his way between them, pushed her husband and her further and further apart--until he went on this side and she on that.

[Pg 234] A sudden pain seized the woman as she stood there pondering, a great compassion for herself drove the tears into her eyes; they felt hot as they dripped down on her hands that she had clenched on the window-sill. If he--if he had only never come into their lives---

At that moment a hand touched her shoulder and made her start. She turned round like lightning: "Are you there at last?"

"It's I," said her husband. He had woke up, and when he did not hear her breathing beside him he had got vexed: really, now she was sitting downstairs again, waiting for the lad. Such want of sense. And after lying a little time longer waiting for her and vexed with her, he had cast on a few necessary garments, stuck on his slippers and groped his way through the dark house. He shivered with cold and was in a bad humour. That he had been disturbed in his best sleep and that she would have a sick headache next day was not all; no, what was worse was that Wolfgang must find it downright intolerable to be watched in that manner.

It was natural that he scolded her. "What wrong is there if he remains away a little longer for once in a way, I should like to know, Käte? It's really absurd of you. I used also to loaf about as a young fellow, but thank goodness, my mother was sensible enough not to mind. Come, Käte, come to bed now."

She drew back. "Yes--you!" she said slowly, and he did not know what she meant by it. She turned her back on him and leant out of the window again.

He stood a few moments longer waiting, but as she did not come, did not even turn round to him, he shook his head. He would have to leave her, she really was getting quite peculiar.

[Pg 235] He was half asleep as he went upstairs again alone; he almost stumbled with fatigue, and his limbs were heavy. But in spite of that his thoughts were clearer, more inexorable than in the daytime, when there is so much around one to distract one's attention. At that hour his heart was filled with longing for a wife who would lead him quietly and gently along a soft track in his old age, and whose smiles were not only outward as the smiles on Käte's face. A wife whose heart laughed--and, alas, his Käte was not one of those.

The man lay down again with a sigh of disappointment and shivered as he drew up the covering. But it was a long time before he could fall asleep. If only the lad would come. It really was rather late to-day. Such loafing about really went too far.

The morning was dawning as a cab drove slowly down the street. It stopped outside the white villa, and two gentlemen helped a third out of it. The two, who were holding the third under his arms, were laughing, and the driver on his seat, who was looking down at them full of interest, also laughed slyly: "Shall I help you, gentlemen? Well, can you do it?"

They leant him up against the railing that enclosed the front garden, rang the bell gently, then jumped hastily into the cab again and banged the door. "Home now, cabby."

The bell had only vibrated softly--a sound like a terrified breath--but Käte had heard it, although she had fallen asleep in her chair; not firmly, only dozing a little. She jumped up in terror, it sounded shrill in her ears. She rushed to the window. Somebody was leaning against the railing outside. Wolfgang? Yes, yes, it was. But why did he not open the gate and come in?

What had happened to him? All at once she felt as though she must call for help--Friedrich! Paul! Paul!--must ring for the maids. Something had happened to him, something must have happened to him--why did he not come in?

[Pg 236] He leant so heavily against the railing, so strangely. His head hung down on his chest, his hat was at the back of his head. Was he ill?

Or had some vagrants attacked him? The strangest ideas shot suddenly through her head. Was he wounded? O God, what had happened to him?

Fears, at which she would have laughed at any other time, filled her mind in this hour, in which it was not night any longer and not day either. Her feet were cold and stiff as though frozen, she could hardly get to the door; she could not find the key at first, and when her trembling hands stuck it into the lock, she could not turn it. She was so awkward in her haste, so beside herself in her fear. Something terrible must have happened. An accident. She felt it.

At last, at last! At last she was able to turn the key. And now she rushed through the front garden to the gate; a chilling icy wind like the breath of winter met her. She opened the gate:

"Wolfgang!"

He did not answer. She could not quite see his face; he stood there without moving.

She took hold of his hand: "Good gracious, what's the matter with you?"

He did not move.

"Wolfgang! Wolfgang!" She shook him in the greatest terror. Then he fell against her so heavily that he almost knocked her down, and faltered, lisped like an idiot whose heavy tongue has been taught to say a few words: "Beg--par--don."

She had to lead him. His breath, which smelt strongly of spirits, blew across her face. A great disgust, more terrible than the fear she had had before, took possession of her. This was the awful thing she had been expecting no, this was still more awful, more intolerable. He was drunk, drunk! This was what a drunken man must look like.

[Pg 237] A drunken man had never been near her before; now she had one close to her. The horror she felt shook her so that her teeth chattered. Oh for shame, for shame, how disgusting, how vulgar! How degraded he seemed to her, and she felt degraded, too, through him. This was not her Wolfgang any more, the child whom she had adopted as her son. This was quite an ordinary, quite a common man from the street, with whom she had nothing, nothing whatever to do any more.

She wanted to push him away from her quickly, to hurry into the house and close the door behind her--let him find out for himself what to do. But he held her fast. He had laid his arm heavily round her neck, he almost weighed her down; thus he forced her to lead him.

And she led him reluctantly, revolting desperately in her heart, but still conquered. She could not leave him, exposed to the servants' scorn, the laughter of the street. If anybody should see him in that condition? It would not be long before the first people came past, the milk-boys, the girls with the bread, the men working in the street, those who drank Carlsbad water early in the morning. Oh, how terrible if anybody should guess how deeply he had sunk.

"Lean on me, lean heavily," she said in a trembling voice. "Pull yourself together--that's right." She almost broke down under his weight but she kept him on his feet. He was so drunk that he did not know what he was doing, he actually wanted to lie down in front of the door, at full length on the stone steps. But she snatched him up.

"You must--you must," she said, and he followed her like a child. Like a dog, she thought.

[Pg 238] Now she had got him into the hall--the front door was again locked--but now came the fear that the servants would see him. They were not up yet, but it would not be long before Friedrich would walk over from the gardener's lodge in his leather slippers, and the girls come down from their attics, and then the sweeping and tidying up would commence, the opening of the windows, the drawing up of the blinds, so that the bright light--the cruel light--might force its way into every crevice. She must get him up the stairs, into his room without anybody guessing anything, without asking anyone for help.

She had thought of her husband for one moment--but no, not him either, nobody must see him like that. She helped him upstairs with a strength for which she had never given herself credit; she positively carried him. And all the time she kept on entreating him to go quietly, whispering the words softly but persistently. She had to coax him, or he would not go on: "Quietly, Wölfchen. Go on, go on, Wölfchen--that's splendid, Wölfchen."

She suffered the torments of hell. He stumbled and was noisy; she gave a start every time he knocked his foot against the stairs, every time the banisters creaked when he fell against them helplessly, and a terrible fear almost paralysed her. If anybody should hear it, oh, if anybody should hear it. But let them get on, on.

"Quietly, Wölfchen, quite quietly." It sounded like an entreaty, and still it was a command. As he had conquered her before by means of his heavy arm, so she conquered him now by means of her will.

[Pg 239] Everybody in the house must be deaf, that they did not hear the noise. To the woman every step sounded like a clap of thunder that continues to roll and roll through the wide space and resounds in the furthest corner. Paul must be deaf as well. They passed his door. The intoxicated lad remained standing just outside his parents' bedroom, he would not on any account go further--in there--not a step further. She had to entice him, as she had enticed the child in bygone days, the sweet little child with the eyes like sloes that was to run from the chair to the next halting-place. "Come, Wölfchen, come." And she brought him past in safety.

At last they were in his room. "Thank God, thank God!" she stammered, when she had got him on the bed. She was as pale as the lad, whose face with its silly expression grew more and more livid as the day dawned. Ah, that was the same room in which she had once, many years ago--it was exceedingly long ago!--fought for the child's precious life with fear and trembling, where she had crawled before God's omnipotence like a worm: only let him live, O God, only let him live!

Alas, it would have been better had he died then.

As an arrow shot from a too tight bow whizzes along as quick as lightning, so that thought whizzed through her mind. She was horrified at the thought, she could not forgive herself for having had it, but she could not get rid of it again. She stood with shaking knees, terrified at her own heartlessness, and still the thought came: if only he had died at the time, it would have been better. This--this was also the room in which she had tried on the suit the boy, who was growing so fast, was to wear at his confirmation. Now she drew off the grown-up man's clothes, tore off his dinner jacket, his fine trousers--as well as she could in his present state of complete unconsciousness--and unlaced his glacé shoes.

[Pg 240] Where had he been? A smell of cigarettes and scent and the dregs of wine streamed from him; it almost took her breath away. There hung the same looking-glass in which she had seen the brown boy's face near her fair woman's face, fresh and round-cheeked, a little coarse, a little defiant, but still so nice-looking in its vigorous strength, so dear in its innocence. And now--?

Her eyes glanced at the livid face with the open mouth, from which the breath reeking with spirits came with a snore and a rattle, in the glass, and then at her own terrified, exhausted face, on which all the softness had been changed into hard lines that grief had worn. A shudder passed through her; she smoothed the untidy grey strands of hair away from her forehead with her cold hand; her eyes blinked as though she wanted to weep. But she forced her tears back; she must not cry any more now; that time was over.

She stood some time longer in the centre of the room, motionless, with bated breath, letting her tired arms hang down loosely; then she crept on her toes to the door. He was sleeping quite firmly. She locked the door from the outside and stuck the key in her pocket--nobody must go in.

Should she go to bed now? She could not sleep--oh, she was too restless--but she would have to lie down, oh yes, she must do so, or what would the maids think, and Paul? Then she would have to get up again as she did every day, wash herself, dress, sit at the breakfast-table, eat, talk, smile as she did every day, as though nothing, nothing whatever had happened. And still so much had happened!

[Pg 241] She felt so hopelessly isolated as she lay in bed beside her husband. There was nobody to whom she could complain. Paul had not understood her before, he would understand her even less now; he had changed so much in the course of time. Besides, was he not quite infatuated with the boy now? Strange, formerly when she had loved Wolfgang so, her love had always been too much of a good thing--how often he had reproached her for it!--and now, now!--no, they simply did not understand each other any longer. She would have to fight her battles alone, quite alone.

When Käte heard the first sounds in the house, she would have liked to get up, but she forced herself to remain in bed: it would attract their attention if they saw her so early. But a great fear tortured her. If that person--that, that intoxicated person over there should awake, make a noise, bang on the locked door? What should she say then to make excuses for him? What should she do? She lay in bed quite feverish with uneasiness. At last it was her usual time to get up.

"I suppose the boy came home terribly late--or rather early, eh?" said Paul at breakfast.

"Oh no. Just after you went upstairs."

"Really? But I lay awake quite a long time after that."

He had said it lightly, unsuspectingly, but she got a fright nevertheless. "We--we--he talked to me for quite a long time," she said hesitatingly.

"Foolish," he said, nothing more, and shook his head.

Oh, how difficult it was to tell lies. In what a position Wolfgang placed her.

When Schlieben had driven to town and the cook was busy in the kitchen and Friedrich in the garden, Käte kept an eye on the housemaid. What a long time she was in the bedroom to-day. "You must finish the rooms upstairs more quickly, you are excessively slow," she said in a sharp voice.

The maid looked at her mistress, quite astonished at the unusual way in which she spoke to her, and said later on to the cook downstairs: "Ugh, what a bad temper the mistress is in to-day. She has been after me."

[Pg 242] Käte had stood beside the girl until the bedroom was finished, she had positively rushed her. Now she was alone, quite alone with him up there, now she could see what was the matter with him.

Would he still be drunk? As she stood outside his door she held her breath; putting her ear to the door she listened. There was nothing to be heard inside, not even his breathing. After casting a glance around her she opened the door like a thief, crept inside and locked it again behind her. She approached the bed cautiously and softly; but she started back so hastily that the high-

backed chair she knocked against fell over with a loud noise. What was that--there? What was it?

A disgusting smell, which filled the closed room, made her feel sick. Staggering to the window she tore it open, thrust back the shutters--then she saw. There he lay like an animal--he, who had always been accustomed to so much attention, he who as a child had stretched out his little hands if only a crumb had stuck to them: "Make them clean!" and had cried. There he lay now as if he did not feel anything, as if he did not care anything whatever about what was going on around him, as if the bed on which he lay were fresh and clean; his eyes, with their jet-black lashes that fell like shadows on his pale cheeks, were firmly closed, and he slept the heavy sleep of exhaustion.

She did not know what she was doing. She raised her hand to strike him in the face, to throw a word at him--a violent word expressive of disgust and loathing; she felt how the saliva collected in her mouth, how she longed to spit. It was too horrible, too filthy, too terrible!

[Pg 243] A stream of light forced its way in through the open window, of light and sun; a blackbird was singing, full and clear. Outside was the sun, outside was beauty, but here, here? She would have liked to cover up her face and whimper, to run away and conceal herself. But who should do what was necessary? Who should make everything tidy and clean? The chair she had knocked down, the clothes she had drawn off him so hastily, the disgusting smell--alas, all reminded her only too distinctly of a wild night. It must not remain like that. And even if she did not love him any longer--no, no, there was no voice in her heart now that spoke of love--her pride bade her not to humble herself before the servants. Let her get it away quickly, quickly, let nobody else find out anything about it.

She set her teeth hard, pressing back the disgust that rose again and again as though to choke her, and commenced to wash, scrub, clean. She fetched water for herself again and again, the pitcher full, a whole pailful. She had to do it furtively, to creep across the passage on tiptoe. Oh dear, how the water splashed, how noisily it poured into the pail when she turned the tap on. If only nobody, nobody found out anything about it.

She had found a cloth to scour with, and what she had never done before in her life she did now, for she lay on her knees like a servant and rubbed the floor, and crept about in front of the bed and under the bed, and stretched out her arms so as to be sure to get into every corner. Nothing must be forgotten, everything must be flooded with fresh, clean, purifying water. Everything in the room seemed to her to be soiled--as though it were damaged and degraded--the floor, the furniture, the walls. She would have preferred to have washed the wall-paper too, that beautiful deep-coloured wall-paper, or to have torn it off entirely.

[Pg 244] She had never worked like that in her life before. Her pretty morning-gown with the silk insertions and lace clung to her body with the perspiration of exertion and fear. The dress had dark spots on the knees from slipping about in the wet, the hem of the train had got into the water; her hair was dishevelled; it had come undone and was hanging round her hot face. Nobody would have recognised Frau Schlieben as she was now.

At last, thank goodness! Käte looked round with a sigh of relief; the air in the room was quite different now. The fresh wind that blew in through the open window had cleared everything. Only he, he did not suit amid all that cleanliness. His forehead was covered with clammy sweat, his cheeks were livid, his lips swollen, cracked, his hair bristly, standing straight up in tufts. Then she washed him, too, cooled his forehead and dried it, rubbed his cheeks with soap and a sponge, fetched a brush and comb, combed and smoothed his hair, ran quickly across to her room, brought the Florida water that stood on her dressing-table and sprinkled it over him. Now she had only to put on another bed-spread. She could not do any more, it was too difficult for her to lift him. For he did not awake. He lay there like a tree that had been hewn down--dead, stiff, immovable--and noticed nothing of the trembling hands that glided over him, that pulled and smoothed now here, now there.

She did not know how long she had been engaged with him; a knock at the door brought her thoughts back to the present.

"Who is there?"

"I, Friedrich."

"What do you want?"

"The master wishes to know if you will come down to dinner, ma'am."

[Pg 245] "To dinner--the master?" She pressed her hands to her head. Was it possible? Paul back already--dinner-time? It could not be. "What time is it?" she cried in a shrill voice. She never thought of looking herself at the watch that lay on the table beside the bed; and it would not have been any use--the expensive gold watch, the gift he had received at his confirmation, had stopped. It had not been wound up.

"It's half past two, ma'am," said Friedrich outside. And then the man, who had been there for years, ventured to inquire respectfully: "Is the young master not well, as he has not got up? Could I perhaps be of some use, ma'am?"

She hesitated for a moment. Should she let him into the secret? It would be easier for her then. But the shame of it made her call out: "There's nothing to be done, you had better go. The young master has a headache, he will remain in bed for another hour. I'll come directly."

She rushed across to her room. There was no time to change her dress, but she would at any rate have to fasten up her hair that had fallen down, smooth it and put a little cap on trimmed with dainty ribbons.

"Still in your morning-gown?" said her husband in a tone of surprise, as she came into the dining-room. There was also a little reproach in his voice as he asked the question; he did not like people not to dress for dinner.

"You came exceptionally early to-day," she said in excuse. She did not dare to look up frankly, she felt so exceedingly humiliated. She could not eat, an intolerable memory rendered every drink, every mouthful loathsome.

"Where is Wolfgang?"

[Pg 246] There was the question for which she really ought to have been prepared and which crushed her nevertheless. She had no means of warding it off. What was she to answer? Should she say he was ill? Then his father would go up and see him. Should she say he was drunk and sleeping? Oh no, no, and still it could not remain a secret. She turned red and white, her lips quivered and not a word crossed them.

"Ha ha!" All at once her husband gave a loud laugh--a laugh partly good-natured and partly mocking--and then he stretched his hand to her across the table and eyed her calmly: "You must not agitate yourself like that if the boy feels a little seedy for once in a way. Such things do happen, every mother has to go through that."

"But not to that degree--not to that awful degree!" She screamed out aloud, overwhelmed with pain and anger. And then she seized her husband's hand and squeezed it between both hers that were cold and damp, and whispered, half stifled: "He was drunk--quite drunk--dead drunk!"

"Really?" The man frowned, but the smile did not quite disappear from his lips. "Well, I'll have a word with the boy when he has finished sleeping. Dead drunk, you say?"

She nodded.

"It won't have been quite as bad as that, I suppose. Still, to be drunk--that must not happen again. To take a little too much"--he shrugged his shoulders and a smile passed over his face as at some pleasant memory--"by Jove, who has been young and not taken a little too much for once in a way? Oh, I can still remember the first time I had done so. The headache after it was appalling, but the drop too much itself was fine, splendid! I would not like to have missed that."

"You--you've been drunk too?" She stared at him, with eyes distended.

[Pg 247] "Drunk--you mustn't call that drunk exactly. A little too much," he corrected. "You mustn't exaggerate like that, Käte." And then he went on with his dinner as if nothing had happened, as if the conversation had not succeeded in depriving him of his appetite.

She was in a fever. When would Wolfgang wake? And what would happen then?

Towards evening she heard his step upstairs, heard him close his window and then open it again, heard his low whistle that always sounded like a bird chirping. Paul was walking up and down in the garden, smoking his cigar. She was sitting in the veranda for the first time that spring, looking down at her husband in the garden. The weather was mild and warm. Then she heard Wolfgang approaching; she made up her mind she would not turn her head, she felt so ashamed, but she turned it nevertheless.

He was standing in the doorway leading from the dining-room to the veranda; behind him was twilight, in front of him the brightness of the evening sun. He blinked and pressed his eyes together, the sun shone on his face and made it flame--or was it red because he felt so ashamed? What would he say now? How would he begin? Her heart throbbed; she could not have spoken a single word, her throat felt as though she were choking.

"Good evening," he said in a loud and cheery voice. And then he cleared his throat as though swallowing a slight embarrassment and said in a low voice, approaching his mother a little more: "I beg your pardon, mater, I've overslept myself. I had no idea it was so late--I was dead tired."

Still she did not say anything.

He did not know how he stood with her. She was so quiet, that confused him a little. "The fact is, I came home very late last night."

[Pg 248] "Oh! did you?" She turned her head away from him and looked out into the garden again with eyes full of interest, where her husband was just speaking to Friedrich and pointing with his finger to an ornamental cherry-tree that was already in bloom.

"I think so, at least," he said. What was he to say? Was she angry? He must indeed have come home very late, he could not remember at what time, altogether he could not remember anything clearly, everything seemed rather blurred to him. He had also had a bad dream and had felt wretched, but now he was all right again, quite all right. Well, if she had any fault to find with him, she would have to come out with it.

Pointing his lips again so as to whistle like a bird and with his hands in the pockets of his smart, well-cut trousers, he was about to go down into the garden from the veranda when she called him back.

"Do you want anything, mater?"

"You were drunk," she said softly, vehemently.

"I--? Oh!" He was overcome with a sudden confusion. Had he really been drunk? He had no idea of it. But she might be right all the same, for he had no idea how he had come home.

"I suppose you've again been sitting up waiting for me?" He gave her a suspicious sidelong glance, and frowned so heavily that his dark eyebrows met. "You mustn't always wait up for me," he said with secret impatience, but outwardly his tone was anxious. "It makes me lose all liking to do anything with the others if I think you are sacrificing your night's rest. Please don't do so again, mater."

[Pg 249] "I won't do so again," she said, with her eyes fixed on her lap. She could not have looked at him, she despised him so. How broad and big and bold he had looked as he stood there saying good evening quite happily. He had behaved as if he knew nothing of all that had happened, that he had wanted to creep on all fours, stretch himself on the doorstep as if that were his bed or he a dog. He was as unembarrassed as though he had not been lying in his room at dinner-time in such--such a filthy condition; as though she had not seen him in his deep humiliation. No, she would never, never be able to kiss him again or caress him, to lay her arms round his neck as she had been so fond of doing when he was a boy. All at once he had become quite a stranger to her.

She did not say another word, did not reproach him. She heard what her husband said to him, when he joined him in the garden, as if it did not concern her.

Although Paul Schlieben had seemed very mild when speaking to his wife at dinner-time, he was not so now when face to face with his son. "I hear you came home drunk--what do you mean by that?" he said to him severely. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Who has said so?"

"That's nothing to do with you, I know it, and that is sufficient."

"*She*, of course," said the boy bitterly. "The mater always exaggerates everything. I was certainly not drunk, I only had a little too much--we all had--good gracious, pater, you must do what the others do! What else is one to do on such a long evening? But it was certainly nothing bad. See how fresh I am." And he took hold of the ornamental cherry-tree, under which they were standing, with both hands, as if he were going to root it up, and a whole shower of white blossoms fell down on him and on the path.

"Let my tree alone," said his father, smiling.

[Pg 250] Käte saw it. Could Paul laugh? So he did not take it very seriously, after all. But that did not provoke her as it would have done some time ago, she felt as if everything in her were cold and dead. She heard the two speak as though they were far, far away, their voices sounded quite low, and still they were speaking loudly and also animatedly.

All the same the conversation was not altogether friendly. Even if the man was not seriously angry with the lad, he still considered it his duty to expostulate with him. He concluded by saying: "Such immoderate drinking is disgusting!"--but he thought to himself: "It cannot have been so bad as Käte makes out, or I should have seen some signs of it." His brown cheeks were smooth and firm, so shiny and so lately washed, his eyes, which were not large but noticeable on account of their dark depths, were even more sparkling than usual.

The man laid his hand on his son's shoulder: "So we must have no more of that, Wolfgang, if we're to remain friends."

The boy shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "I really don't know what crime I've committed, pater. The whole thing is something of a mystery to me. But it shan't happen again, I promise you."

And they shook hands.

Now something really did stir in Käte. She would have liked to have jumped up, to have cried: "Don't believe him, Paul, don't believe him. He's sure to get drunk again. I don't trust him. I cannot trust him. If you had seen him as I saw him--oh, he was so vulgar!" And as in a vision a village tavern suddenly appeared before her eyes, a tavern she had never seen. Rough men sat

round the wooden table, leaning on their elbows, smoking evil-smelling tobacco, drinking heavily, bawling wildly ... ah, had not his father sat among them? His grandfather too? All those from whom he was descended? She was seized with a terrible fear. It could never, never end well.

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"You are so pale, Käte," her husband said at the evening meal. "You sat still too long; it is still too cold outside."

"Aren't you well, mater?" inquired Wolfgang, politely anxious.

Käte did not answer her son, she only looked at her husband and shook her head: "I am quite well."

That satisfied them.

Wolfgang ate with a good appetite, with a specially big one even; he was quite ravenous. There were also lots of good things of which he was fond: hot fricassee of chicken with sweetbread, force-meat balls and crawfish tails, and then some very good cold meat, butter and cheese and young radishes.

"Boy, don't drink so much," said Paul Schlieben, as Wolfgang seized the decanter again.

"I'm thirsty," said his son with a certain defiance, filling his glass to the brim and drinking it in one gulp.

"That comes of revelling." His father shook his finger at him, but smiled at the same time.

"It comes of swilling," thought Käte, and she shuddered with disgust again. She had never used such an expression before even in her thoughts, but now none seemed strong, blunt, contemptuous enough.

There was no pleasant conversation in spite of the room being so cosy, the appointments of the table so beautiful, the flowers so prettily arranged in a cut-glass bowl on the white tablecloth, and above it all a soft subdued light under a green silk shade. Käte was so monosyllabic that Paul soon seized the newspaper, and the boy, after trying to stifle his yawns, at last got up. It was really too awfully slow to have to sit there. Should he drive into Berlin again or go to bed? He did not quite know himself what to do.

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"You are going to bed now?" said his mother. It was intended for a question, but Käte heard herself that it did not sound like one.

"Of course he's going to bed now," said his father, looking up from his paper for a moment. "He's tired. Good night, my lad."

"I'm not tired." Wolfgang grew red and hot. What did they mean by wanting to persuade him that he was tired? He was no longer a child to be sent to bed. His mother's tone irritated him especially--"you are going to bed now"--that was an order.

The sparkle in his dark eyes became a blaze; the expression of defiance and refractoriness on his face was not pleasant to see. They could no doubt see in what a passion he was, but his father said "Good night," and held out his hand to him without looking up from the newspaper.

His mother also said "Good night."

And the son grasped first one hand and then the other--he imprinted the usual kiss on his mother's hand--and said "Good night."

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CHAPTER XIV

Paul Schlieben was sitting in his private office, in the red armchair he had had placed there for his comfort. But he was not leaning back in it, he was sitting very uncomfortably, straight up, and he looked like a man who has made a disagreeable discovery. How could the boy have contracted debts--with such ample pocket-money? And then that he had not the courage to come and say: "Father, I've spent too much, help me," was simply incomprehensible. Was he such a severe father that his son had reason to fear him? Did the fear drive out love? He reviewed his own conduct; he really could not reproach himself for having been too strict. If he had not always

been so yielding as Käte--she was too yielding--he had always thought he had repeatedly shown the boy that he was fond of him. And had he not also--just lately--thought the boy was fond of him too? More fond of him than before? Wolfgang had just grown sensible, had seen that they had his welfare at heart, that he was his parents' dear son, their ever-increasing delight, their hope--nay, now that they had grown old, their whole future. How was it that he preferred to go to others, to people with whom he had nothing to do, and borrow from them instead of asking his father?

[Pg 254] The man took up a letter from his writing-desk with a grieved look, read it through once more, although he had already read it three or four times, and then laid it back again with a gesture of vexation. In it Braumüller, who had lately retired from the firm and was at present in Switzerland for his health and recreation, wrote that the boy had already borrowed money from him several times. Not that he would not gladly give him it, that did not matter to him in the slightest, but still he considered it his duty--&c., &c.

"The fact is, dear Schlieben, the boy has got into a fast set. I'm awfully sorry to have to tell tales about him, but I cannot put it off any longer, as he goes to others just as well as he comes to me. And it would be extremely painful, of course, if the son of Messrs. Schlieben & Co., to whom I still count myself as belonging with the old devotion, should become common talk. Don't take it amiss, old friend. I make the boy a present of all he owes me; I am fond of him and have also been young. But I am quite pleased to have no children, it is a deucedly difficult job to train one. Good-bye, remember me very kindly to your wife, it is splendid here ..."

The man stared over the top of the paper with a frown; this letter, which had been written with such good intentions and was so kind, hurt him. It hurt him that Wolfgang had so little confidence in him with respect to this matter. Was he not straightforward? He remembered very distinctly that he had always been truthful as a child, had been so outspoken as to offend--he had been rude, but never given to lying. Could he have changed so now? How was that, and why?

The man resolved not to mention anything about the letter, but to ask Wolfgang when he found an opportunity--but it must be as soon as possible--in what condition his money matters were. Then he would hear.

[Pg 255] He quite longed to ask the question, and still he did not say a word when Wolfgang entered the private room soon afterwards without knocking, as all the others did, and with all the careless assurance of a son. He sat down astride on his father's writing-desk, quite unmindful of the fact that his light trousers came into unpleasant contact with the ink-stand. The air out of doors was clear and the sun shone brightly; he brought a large quantity of both with him into the room that was always kept dark, cool and secluded.

"Had something to vex you, pater?" What fancies could the old gentleman have got hold of now? Certainly nothing of importance. On the whole, who could feel vexed in such delightful, pleasant summer weather?

Wolfgang loved the sun. As he had gazed admiringly at the small copy of it when a child, the round yellow sunflower in his garden, so he still delighted in it. If the perspiration stood in drops on his brown skin, he would push his white panama hat a little further back from his forehead, but he never drew his breath more freely, easily, and felt less oppressed.

"It was splendid, pater," he said, and his eyes gleamed. "First of all I swam the whole width of the lake three times, there and back and there and back and there and back again without stopping. What do you say to that?"

"Much too tiring, very thoughtless," remarked Paul Schlieben, not without some anxiety. Indeed Hofmann was not at all anxious that the boy should swim.

"Thoughtless? Fatiguing? Ha ha!" Wolfgang thought it great fun. "That's a mere trifle to me. I've really missed my vocation, you know. You ought not to have put me into an office. I ought to have been a swimmer, a rider or--well, a cowboy in the Wild West."

[Pg 256] He had said it in joke without meaning anything, but it seemed to the man, who suddenly looked at him with eyes that had grown suspicious, that something serious, an accusation, was concealed behind the joke. What did he want then? Did he want to gallop through life like an unrestrained boy?

"Well, your sporting capacities will be of use to you when you are a soldier," he said coolly. "At present what you have to do here is of more importance. Have you drawn up the contract for delivery for White Brothers? Show it to me."

"Directly."

Wolfgang disappeared; but it was some time before he returned. Had he only done the work now, which he had been told was urgent and was to be done carefully? The ink was still quite fresh, the writing was very careless, even if legible; it was no business hand. Schlieben frowned; he was strangely irritable to-day. At any other time he would have been struck by the celerity with which the boy had finished the work he had neglected; but to-day the careless writing, the inkspots in the margin, the slipshod manner in which it had all been done, which seemed to him to point to a want of interest, vexed him.

"Hm!" He examined it once more critically. "When did you do this?"

"When you gave me it to do." The tone in which Wolfgang said this was so unabashed that it was impossible to doubt it.

The man felt quite ashamed of himself. How a seed of suspicion grows! He had really wronged his son this time. But that question of the money still remained, the boy had not been open and honest in that. It seemed to the father that he could not quite rely on his son any more now.

[Pg 257] It was hardly noon when Wolfgang left the office again. He had arranged to meet a couple of acquaintances in the Imperial Café not far from the Linden; he would have to have something to eat, and whether he had his lunch there or somewhere else was of no consequence; a sandwich, which was all his father took with him from home, was not sufficient for him after swimming and riding.

Then he showed himself again at the office for an hour in the afternoon, but in his tennis clothes this time, in white shoes, a racket in his hand.

[Pg 258] When Wolfgang left the West End tennis-ground that afternoon, hot and red--the games had been long and obstinate--and went across to the Zoological Gardens' Station, he hesitated as he stood at the entrance to it. He did not feel as if he wanted to go home at all. Should he not drive into town again instead? As a matter of fact he did not feel tempted to go into the streets either, which the drifting crowds made still closer; it was better in the suburbs, where there was at least a breath of fresh air blowing over the villa--but then he would have to sit with his parents. And if his father were in just as bad a humour as he had been at the office that morning, it would be awful. Then it would be better to find some friend or other in Berlin. If only he had not had his tennis suit on. That hindered him. He was still standing undecided when he suddenly saw in the crowd that now, when work was over and free-time come, was winding its way through the entrance to the station like a long worm and dividing itself into arms to go up the steps to the right and left, a mass of fair hair gleaming under a white sailor-hat trimmed with a blue velvet band and pressed down on a forehead, which seemed well-known to him. It was beautiful fair silky hair, smooth and shining; carelessly arranged in an enormous knot to all appearances, but in reality with much care. And now he recognised the blue eyes and the pert little nose under the straw hat. Frida Lämke! Oh, what a long time since he had seen her. He suddenly remembered the hundreds of times he had neglected them. How little he had troubled himself about those good people. That was very wrong of him. And all at once it seemed to him that he had missed them always, the whole time. He reached her side with one bound like an impetuous boy, not noticing that he trod on a dress here and that he gave somebody a shove in the side there.

"Frida!"

She gave a little start. Who had accosted her so boldly?

"How do, Frida. How are you?"

She did not recognise him at first, but then she blushed and pouted. What a gentleman Wolfgang had grown. And she answered a little pertly, a little affectedly: "Very well, thanks, Mr. Wolfgang. Are you quite well too?" and she threw her fair head back and laughed.

He would not hear of her calling him "Mr. Wolfgang." "Nonsense, what are you thinking of?" And he was so cordial, so quite the Wolfgang of former years, that she was soon on the old terms with him again. She dropped her affectation entirely. They walked beside each other as intimately as if almost a year had not passed since last they had talked together.

[Pg 259] "Young lovers," thought many a one who came across them strolling along near the coppices in the Tiergarten. They had let their train go--he had no wish to hurry home, at any rate--and so they walked further and further in among the green trees, where it was already dark and where even his light tennis suit and her light blouse could not be distinguished any longer. The nightingales had grown silent long ago; all that was heard was a girl's soft laugh now and then, which sounded like the cooing of a dove, and the low whispers of invisible couples. Whispers came from the benches that stood in the dark, summer dresses rustled, burning cigars gleamed like glow-worms; all the seats one came across were occupied. It was extremely close in the park.

Wolfgang and Frida spoke of Frau Lämke. "She's always ill, she has had to go to the doctor so often," said the girl, and her voice trembled with sincere grief. Wolfgang was very sorry.

When Frida came home that evening extremely late--the house had been closed long before; Frau Lämke had already begun to get nervous, and did not know how she should keep the roast potatoes warm--she threw her arms round her mother's neck: "Mother, mummy, don't scold." And then it came out with a rush, that she had met Wolfgang: "Wolfgang Schlieben, you know. He was so nice, mother, you can't think how nice he was. Not the slightest bit stuck-up. And he asked at once how you were, and when I told him you had something the matter with your stomach and your nerves, he was so sorry. And he said: 'You must get your mother out in this beautiful weather,' and he gave me this bank-note--here, do you see it, a green one. I did not want to take it on any account, what would people think of it?--but he was so strong, he stuffed it into my hand. I could have screamed, he pulled my fingers apart so--are you angry, mother, that I took it? I didn't want to, I really didn't want to. But he said, 'It's for your mother.' And 'Do be sensible,

Frida." Frida almost cried, she felt so touched and so grateful.

Frau Lämke took it more calmly. "Perhaps I can go to Eberswald to my brother, or even to my sister in the Riesengebirge. And I'll give up the places where I clean for a few weeks, that will do me an enormous amount of good. The good boy, that was nice of him, that he thought of his old friend. Hm, he can do it too. What are fifty marks to people like him?"

[Pg 260] When Wolfgang had taken Frida to her door he had strolled on slowly, his racket under his arm, his hands in the pockets of his wide trousers. A sky, richly spangled with stars, extended over his head, innumerable golden eyes watching him with a kind twinkle. There were no more wheels to be heard, no crowds of pedestrians whirled up the dust of the street any longer. What the dust-carts, passing backwards and forwards during the day, had not been able to do, the night-dew had done. The loose sand had been settled, a cool freshness rose up out of the earth, one could smell the trees and bushes; a fragrance of flowers ascended from the beds in the gardens that the darkness had swallowed up. Wolfgang drew a deep breath of delight and whistled softly; his heart was full of peace and joy; now it was a good thing he was not wandering about in Berlin. It had been so nice with Frida. What a lot they had had to talk about--and then--he was really awfully pleased to be able to help Frau Lämke a little.

He came home thoroughly happy.

"The master and mistress have had their supper long ago," Friedrich took the liberty of remarking with a certain reproach--the young gentleman was really too unpunctual.

"Well, can't be helped," said Wolfgang. "Tell the cook she's to prepare me something quickly, a cutlet or some beefsteak, or--what else was there for supper this evening? I'm ravenous."

Friedrich looked at him quite taken aback. Now! at half past ten? The master or the mistress had never thought of asking for such a thing--a warm supper at half past ten? He stood hesitating.

"Well, am I soon going to get something?" the young gentleman called to him over his shoulder, and went into the dining-room.

[Pg 261] His parents were still sitting at the table--both were reading--but the table was empty.

"Good evening," said the boy, "is the table cleared already?" You could plainly hear the surprise in his voice.

"So there you are!" His father nodded to him but did not look up; he seemed to be quite taken up with his reading. And his mother said: "Are you going to sit with us a little?"

All at once the lad shivered. It had been so nice and warm outside, here it was cool.

And then everything was quiet for a while, until Friedrich came in with a tray on which there was only a little cold meat, bread, butter and cheese beside the knife and fork. It struck Wolfgang how loudly he rattled the things; the housemaid generally waited. "Where's Marie?"

"In bed," said his mother curtly.

"Already?" Wolfgang wondered why to himself. Hark, the clock in his mother's room was just striking--eleven? Was it actually already eleven o'clock? They would really have to be quick and get him something to eat, he was dying for want of food. He fixed his eyes on the door through which Friedrich had disappeared. Was something soon coming?

He waited.

"Eat something." His mother pushed the dish with cold meat nearer to him.

"Why don't you eat?" asked his father suddenly.

"Oh, I am still waiting."

"There's nothing more," said his mother, and her face, which looked so extremely weary like the face of one who has waited long in vain, flushed slightly.

[Pg 262] "Nothing else?--nothing more?--why?" The boy looked exceedingly disappointed. He glanced from his mother to the table, then to the sideboard and then round the room as though searching for something.

"Haven't you had anything else to eat?"

"Yes, we have had something else--but if you don't come--" His father knit his brows, and then he looked straight at his son for the first time that evening, surveying him with a grave glance. "You can't possibly expect to find a warm supper, when you come home so unpunctually."

"But you--you are not obliged to"--the young man swallowed the rest--he would have much preferred it had his parents not sat there waiting for him; the servants would have done what

was expected of them.

"Perhaps you think the servants don't require their night's rest?" said his father, as though he had guessed his thought. "The maids, who have been in the kitchen the whole day, want to have done in the evening as well as other people. So you must come earlier if you want to have supper with us. Moreover, I don't suppose it will harm a young fellow to get nothing but a piece of bread and butter for his supper for once in a way. Besides, you who--" he was going to say "you who get such a good dinner"--but the young man's face, which expressed such immeasurable astonishment, irritated him, and he said in a loud and, contrary to his custom, angry voice, angrier than he had intended: "You--are you entitled to make such claims? How can you think of doing so, you especially?" A movement made by his wife, the rustling of her dress, reminded him of her presence, and he continued more temperately, but with a certain angry scorn: "Perhaps you do too much? Two hours at the office in the morning--hardly that--an hour in the afternoon--

[Pg 263] yes, that's an astonishing, an enormous amount of work, which must tax your powers greatly. Indeed, it requires quite special food. Well, what, what?"

Wolfgang had been going to say something, but his father did not allow him to speak: "Let me see a more modest look on your face first, and then you may speak. Lad, I tell you, if you apply to Braumüller for money more----!"

There, there, it was out. In his wrath he had forgotten the diplomatic questions he had intended asking, and all he had meant to find out by listening to his replies. The man felt quite a relief now he could say: "It's an unheard-of thing! It's a disgrace for you--and for me!" The excited voice had calmed down, the last words were almost choked by a sigh. The man rested his arm on the table and his head in his hand; one could see that he took it much to heart.

Käte sat silent and pale. Her eyes were distended with horror--so he had done that, that, borrowed money? That too? Not only that he got drunk, dead drunk but that, that too? It could not be possible--no! Her eyes sought Wolfgang's face imploringly. He must deny it.

"Why, really, pater," said Wolfgang, trying to smile, "I don't know what's the matter with you. I asked your partner to do me a little favour--besides, he offered to do it himself, he has always been most friendly to me. I was just going to send it back to him"--he glanced sideways at his father: did he know how much it was?--"I'll send it to him to-morrow."

"Oh, to-morrow." There was suspicion in the man's tone, but a certain relief nevertheless; he was so anxious to think the best of his son. "What other debts have you?" he asked. And then he was suddenly seized with the fear that the lad was deceiving him, and, terrified at the great

[Pg 264] responsibility he had taken on himself, he said in a voice that was harder than he really intended, much harder than was compatible with his feelings: "I would punish you as a good-for-nothing fellow if I heard you had! I would cast you off--then you could see how you got on. Disgraceful debts! To be in debt!"

Käte gazed at her husband the whole time. She had never seen him like that before. She wanted to call out, to interrupt him: "You are too strict, much too strict. You'll prevent him confessing anything if you speak like that"--but she could not say a word. She was mute under the burden of the fears that overwhelmed her. Her eyes, full of a terrible anxiety, hung on the young face that had grown pale.

Wolfgang's lips quivered; his thoughts were active. He wanted to speak, had already opened his mouth to do so, to confess that he had spent more than he had had. If only his father were not always so extremely proper. Good gracious, you cannot help pulling handfuls of money out of your pockets if you have got it to spend! But he did not say anything to these--these two about it. They were good people on the whole, but they could not put themselves into his place. Good people? No, they were not.

And now came his indignation. What possessed his father to treat him in that manner, to scold him in that tone of voice? Like a criminal. And she, why did she stare at him in that way with eyes in which he thought he read something that looked like contempt? Well, then, he would horrify them still more, hurl into their faces: "Of course I have debts, what does that matter?" But in the midst of his anger came the cool calculation: what had his father said: "I would cast you off"?

[Pg 265] All at once Wolfgang got a great fright. He had need of these people, he could not do without them. And so he pulled himself together quickly: he must not confess anything, by any means, he must be sure not to betray himself. And he said, in a quick transition from defiant passion to smooth calmness: "I don't know why you excite yourself so, pater. I have none."

"Really none?" His father looked at him gravely and inquiringly, but a glad hope shone already through the gravity.

And when his son answered "No," he stretched out his hand to him across the table: "I'm pleased to hear it."

They were very nice to him that evening. Wolfgang felt it with much satisfaction. Well, they owed him an apology, too. He allowed them to make much of him.

The father felt glad, quite relieved that nothing else, nothing worse had come to light, and the

mother had the feeling for the first time for many weeks that it was possible to love the lad again. Her voice had something of the old sound once more when she spoke to him. And she spoke a good deal to him, she felt the need to do so. She had not spoken so much to him during all those weeks. She felt as if a spring within her had been bricked up and had to discharge itself now. He had contracted no debts. Thank God, he was not quite so bad then! Now she was sorry she had sent the maids to bed, because she had been annoyed with him for coming home so late--for his loafing about, as she had called it in her thoughts--and had no proper supper for him. If she had not been afraid of her husband, she would have gone down into the kitchen and tried to prepare something better for him herself.

"Have you really had enough?" she said to him in a low voice.

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"Oh, it'll do." He felt his superiority.

Paul Schlieben put his paper aside that evening. When his son asked him politely if he would not read, he shook his head: "No, I've read the whole evening." He, too, felt the need of, nay, felt it his duty to have, a friendly talk to his son, even if he found that Käte was going too far, as usual. She really need not make such a fuss of the boy, he had done wrong hi any case; the Braumüller matter must not be forgotten, he ought to have come openly--but really, after all, it was only a stupidity, a thing that might happen ninety times out of every hundred.

The man resolved to raise his monthly allowance by 100 marks, when he paid him on the first of the month. Then he would certainly have ample, and there could be no more talk of not being able to make both ends meet and of secrecy.

It was already far past midnight when the parents and son at last parted. Käte stretched herself in her bed with a feeling of happiness she had not known for a long time: she would soon fall asleep; she would not have to lie so long waiting for sleep to come to her, she felt so relieved, so reassured, so soothed. Things were working better now, everything would still be right at last. And she whispered softly to her husband: "Paul!" He did not hear her, he was already half asleep. Then she whispered more urgently: "Paul, Paul!" And when he moved she said softly: "Paul, are you angry with me?"

"Angry? Why should I be?"

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"Oh, I only thought you might be." She did not want to give any explanation, besides it was hardly necessary, for she had the impression that he, too, felt that they themselves would be on better, pleasanter, more cordial and more united terms with each other in the future. Oh yes, if they were on better terms with him--the boy--then he and she would also be on better terms with each other.

The elderly woman was seized with a great longing for the days when they loved each other. She felt ashamed of herself, but she could not help it, she stretched out her hand to the bed that stood next to hers: "Give me your hand, Paul."

And as she groped about in the dark, she found his hand that was searching for hers. They clasped hands.

"Good night, dear husband."

"Good night, dear wife."

They fell asleep thus.

Wolfgang stood at the window of his room, looking out into the obscurity that hid all the stars and listening to the roar of the distant wind. Was the night so sultry, or was it only he who was so unbearably hot? A thunder-storm seemed to be coming on. Or was it only an inward restlessness that weighed him down? What was it that tortured him?

He thought he had hardly ever felt so uncomfortable before. He was vexed with his father, vexed with his mother--if they had been different from what they were, if everything had been different from what it was, he would not have been obliged to tell lies, to dissemble. He was vexed with himself. Oh, then he would have felt easier now, much freer. He knit his brows angrily; a sudden longing for something he could not name made him tremble. What did he want, what was he longing for? If he only knew!

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He gave a loud sigh, and stretched his arms with the strong hands out into the night. Everything was so narrow, so narrow. If he only were the boy again who had once climbed out of this window, yes, this window--he leant out and measured the height--who had run away, hurrah! without asking himself where he was going, simply on and on. That had been magnificent! A splendid run!

And he leant further and further out of the window. The night wind was whispering, it was like an alluring melody. He trembled with eagerness. He could not tear himself away, he had to remain there listening. The wind was rising, there was a rustling in the trees, it rose and rose, grew and grew. The rustling turned into a blustering.

He forgot he was in a room in a house, and that he had parents there who wanted to sleep. He gave a shout, a loud cry, half of triumph. How beautiful it was out there, ah!

A storm. The snorting wind, that had risen so suddenly, blew his hair about and ruffled it at the temples. Ah, how beautifully that cooled. It was unbearable in the house, so gloomy, so close. He felt so scared, so terrified. How his heart thumped. And he felt so out of temper: how unpleasant it had been that evening again. His father had said he ought to have confessed it to him--of course, it would have been better--but if he threatened him in that way after the thing was over in a manner, what would he have said before? This everlasting keeping him in leading strings was not to be borne. Was he still a child? Was he a grown-up man or was he not? Was he the son of rich parents or was he not? No, he was not. That was just what he was not.

The thunder rumbled afar in the dark night. Suddenly there was a brilliant flash--that was just what he was not, not the son, not the son of this house. Otherwise everything would have been different. He did not know in what way--but different, oh, quite different.

[Pg 269] Wolfgang had not thought of these things for a long time--the days were so full of distractions but now in this dark stormy night, in which he would not be able to sleep, he had to think. What he had always driven back because it was not pleasant, what he thought he had quite forgotten--perhaps because he wished to forget it--he would have to consider now. What had been repressed for so long broke out forcibly now, like the stormy wind that suddenly came rushing along, bending the tops of the pines so that they cowered with terror. Wolfgang would have liked to have made his voice heard above the roar of the storm.

He was furious, quite absurdly furious, quite thoughtlessly furious. Oh, how it lightened, crashed, rumbled, roared and snorted. What a conflict--but it was beautiful nevertheless. He raised himself up on his toes and exposed his hammering breast to the strong wind. He had hardly ever felt such delight as when those gusts of wind struck his chest like blows from a fist. He flung himself against them, he regularly caught them on his broad chest.

And still there was torture mingled with the delight. Face to face with this great storm, that became an event in his life as it were, everything else seemed so pitifully small to him, and he too. There he stood now in coat and trousers, his hands in his pockets, rattling his loose money; he was annoyed because he had let them lecture him, and still he had not the courage to throw everything aside and do exactly as he liked.

The lad followed the yellow and blue flashes of lightning that clove the dark stormy sky in zigzag, and poured a dazzling magic light over the world, with sparkling eyes. Oh, to be able to rush along like that flash of lightning. It rushed out of the clouds down to the earth, tore her lap open and buried itself in it.

[Pg 270] His young blood, whose unused vitality quivered in his clenched fists, his energy, which had not been spent on any work, groaned aloud. All at once Wolfgang cursed his life. Oh, he ought to be somewhere quite different, live at quite a different place, quite different.

And even if he were not so comfortable there, let him only get away from this place, away. It bored him so terribly to be here. He loathed it. He drew a deep breath, oh, if only he had some work he would like to do! That would tire him out, so that he had no other desire but to eat and then sleep. Better to be a day labourer than one who sits perched on a stool in an office and sees figures, nothing but figures and accounts and ledgers and cash-books--oh, only not let him be a merchant, no, that was the very worst of all.

Hitherto Wolfgang had never been conscious of the fact that he would never be any good as a merchant; now he knew it. No, he did not like it, he could not go on being a merchant. Everyone must surely become what nature has meant him to be.

He would say it in the morning--no, he would not go to the office any more, he would not do it any longer. He would be free. He leant out of the window once more, and scented the damp, pleasant smell that rose up out of the soaked earth with distended nostrils, panting greedily like a thirsty stag.

The rain had come after the thunder and lightning, and had saturated the thirsty earth and penetrated into it, filling all its pores with fertility. It rained and rained uninterruptedly, came down in torrents as if it would never end.

Something gave way in Wolfgang's soul; it became soft.

[Pg 271] "Mother," he whispered dreamily, stretching out his hot hands so that the cool rain bathed them. Then he stretched his head far out too, closed his eyes and raised his head, so that the falling drops refreshed his burning lids and the wide-open, thirsty lips drank the tears of heaven as though they were costly wine.

* * * * *

But in the morning, when the sand in the Grunewald had swallowed up all the rain, and nothing was left of the storm that had cleared the air during the night but the somewhat fresher green of the lawns, a stronger smell of the pines and many fallen acorns and chestnuts on the

promenade, Wolfgang thought differently again. The day was beautiful; he could swim, ride, go to the office for a short time, eat, drink, play tennis, make an appointment for the evening--there were so many places where you could amuse yourself--and why should he spoil this splendid day for himself and, after all, his father too? He thrust every graver thought aside as burdensome. But his soul was not at peace all the same. He tried to deaden thought.

Käte did not fall asleep so quickly as on the previous night; even if she had promised herself not to sit up and wait for him any more, she could not sleep if he were not at home. She heard the clocks strike terribly loudly, as she had done on a former occasion; every noise, even the slightest, penetrated to her ear through the stillness of the house, sounding much louder. She would hear him, she must hear him as soon as he stuck the key into the front door.

But she heard nothing, although she lay long awake listening. The hours crept on, the day dawned, a pale streak of light no broader than her thumb stole through the closed shutters; she saw it on the wall opposite to her bed. The light became gradually less and less wan, more decided in colour, a warm, sunny, ruddy gold. No cock proclaimed the new day with triumphant crow, the house was so quiet, the garden so silent, but the light betrayed that it was morning.

[Pg 272] She must have slept, however, without knowing it. What, was it already morning? She was sure now that he must have been at home a long time, she had simply not heard him come in. That calmed her. But she dressed hurriedly, without paying as much attention to her dress as usual, and she could not resist standing outside his door to listen before going down to breakfast. He was not up yet--of course not, he had come home so late--he was still asleep. She would be able to look at him without his knowing. She went in, but he was not asleep.

The woman looked at the bed with bewildered eyes--there it was, open, invitingly white and comfortable, but he was not in it. The bed had not been touched. The room was empty.

Then her heart grew cold with dread. So she had not slept, his return had not escaped her. On that former occasion he had come home--true, he was drunk, but still he had come home--but not this time!

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CHAPTER XV

"Wolfgang not here again?" said Paul Schlieben as he joined his wife in her room. "He comes so little to the office too. They always assure me that he has just been--but why doesn't he keep the same office-hours as I? Where is he?" He looked inquiringly and impatiently at his wife.

She shrugged her shoulders, and the evening sun, which was casting a last gleam through the tall window as it set, touched her cheek with red for a moment. "I don't know," she said in a low voice. And then she looked so lost as she gazed out into the autumn evening, that her husband felt that her thoughts were far away, looking for something outside.

"I've just come from town, Käte," he said somewhat annoyed, and the vexation he felt at his son's absence gave his voice a certain sharpness, "and I'm hungry and tired. It's already eight o'clock--we'll have our supper. And you've not even a friendly face to show me?"

She got up quickly to ring for supper, and tried to smile. But it was no real smile.

[Pg 274] He saw it, and that put him still more out of humour. "Never mind, don't try. Don't force yourself to smile." He sat down at the table with a weary movement. But his hunger did not seem to be so great, after all, as he only helped himself in a spiritless manner when the steaming dishes were brought in and placed in front of him, and ate in the same manner without knowing what he was eating.

The dining-room was much too large for the two lonely people; the handsome room looked uncomfortably empty on that cool evening in autumn. The woman shivered with cold.

"We shall have to start heating the house," said the man.

That was all that was said during the meal. After it was over he got up to go across to his study. He wanted to smoke there, the room was smaller and cosier; he did not notice that his wife's eyes had never left him.

If Paul would only tell her what he thought of Wolfgang staying away! Where could Wolfgang

be now? She became entirely absorbed in her wandering thoughts, and hardly noticed that she was alone in the cold empty room.

[Pg 275] She had a book in front of her, a book the whole world found interesting--an acquaintance had said to her: "I could not stop reading it; I had so much to think about, but I forgot everything owing to the book"--but it did not make her forget anything. She felt as though she were in great trouble, and that that was making her dull. Even duller, more indifferent to outward things than at the time of her father's and mother's deaths. She had read so much in those years of mourning, and with special interest, as though the old poems had been given to her anew and the new ones were a cheering revelation. She could not read anything now, could not follow another's thoughts. She clung to her own thoughts. True, her eyes flew over the page, but when she got to the bottom she did not know what she had read. It was an intolerable condition. Oh, how much she would have liked to have taken an interest in something. What would she not have given only to be able to laugh heartily for once; she had never experienced a similar longing for cheerfulness, gaiety and humour before. Oh, what a relief it would have been for her if she could have laughed and cried. Now she could not laugh, but--alas!--not cry either, and that was the worst: her eyes remained dry. But the tears of sorrow she had not wept burnt her heart and wore out her life with their unshed salty moisture.

No, death was not the most terrible that could happen. There were more terrible things than that. It was terrible when one had to say to oneself: "You have brought all your suffering on yourself. Why were you not satisfied? Why must you take by force what nature had refused?" It was more terrible when one felt how one's domestic happiness, one's married happiness, love, faith, unity, how all that intimately unites two people was beginning to totter--for did she not feel every day how her husband was getting colder and colder, and that she also treated him with more indifference? Oh, the son, that third person, it was he who parted them. How miserably all her theories about training, influence, about being born in the spirit had been overthrown. Wolfgang was not the child in which she and her husband were united in body and soul--he was and would remain of alien blood. And he had an alien soul. Poor son!

[Pg 276] All at once a discerning compassion shot up in the heart of the woman, who for days, weeks, months, even years, had felt nothing but bitterness and mortification, ay, many a time even something like revolt against the one who thus disturbed her days. How could she be so very angry with him, who was not bound to his parents' house by a hundred ties? It was not *his* parents' house, that was just the point. Maybe he unconsciously felt that the soil there was not his native soil--and now he was seeking, wandering.

Käte pondered, her head resting heavily in her hand: what was she to do first? Should she confess to him where he came from? Tell him everything? Perhaps things would be better then. But oh, it was so difficult. But it must be done. She must not remain silent any longer. She felt her trembling heart grow stronger, as she made the firm resolve to speak to him when he returned home. What she had kept as the greatest secret, what she had guarded with trembling, what nothing could have torn from her, as she thought, she was now prepared to reveal of her own free will. She must do so. Otherwise how could things ever be better? How could they ever end happily, or ever end at all?

Her eyes wandered about seeking something fervently; there was a terrified expression in them. But there was no other way out. Käte Schlieben prepared herself for the confession with a resoluteness that she would not have been capable of a year ago. For one moment the wish came to her to call Paul to help her. But she rejected the thought quickly--had he ever loved Wolfgang as she had done? Perhaps it would be a matter of no moment to him--no, perhaps it would be a triumph to him, he had always been of a different opinion to her. And then another thing. He might perhaps forestall her, tell Wolfgang himself, and he must not do that. She, she alone must do that, with all the love of which she was still capable, so that it might be told him in a forbearing, merciful and tender manner.

[Pg 277] She ran hastily across to her sitting-room. She kept the certificate of his baptism and the deed of surrender they had got from his native village in her writing-desk there; she had not even trusted the papers to her husband. Now she brought them out and put them ready. She would have to show him that everything was as she said.

The papers rustled in her trembling hands, but she repressed her agitation. She must be calm, quite calm and sensible; she must throw down the castle in the air she had built for herself and that had not turned out as in her dreams, knowing fully what she was doing. But even if this castle in the air collapsed, could not something be saved from the ruins? Something good rise from them? He would be grateful to her, he must be grateful to her. And that was the good that would rise.

She folded her hands over the common paper on which the evidence was written, and quivering sighs escaped from her breast that were like prayers. O God, help me! O God, help me!

But if he did not understand her property, if she did not find the words that must be found? If she should lose him thereby? She was overcome with terror, she turned pale, and stretched out her hands gropingly like one who requires a support. But she remained erect. Then rather lose him than that he should be lost.

For--and tears such as she had not been able to weep for a long, long time, dropped from her eyes and relieved her--she still loved him, after all, loved him more than she had considered possible.

So she waited for him. And even if she had to wait until dawn and if he came home drunk again--more drunk than the first time--she would still wait for him. She must tell him that day. She was burning to tell him.

[Pg 278] Paul Schlieben had gone to bed long ago. He was vexed with his wife, had only stuck his head into the room and given a little nod: "Good night," and gone upstairs. But she walked up and down the room downstairs with slow steps. That tired her physically, but gave her mind rest and thereby strength.

When she went to meet Wolfgang in the hall on hearing him close the door, her delicate figure looked as though it had grown, it was so straight and erect. The house slept with all in it, only he and she were still awake. They were never so alone, so undisturbed nowadays. The time had come.

And she held out her hand to him, which she would not have done on any other occasion had he come so late--thank God, he was not drunk!--and approached her face to his and kissed him on the cheek: "Good evening, my son."

He was no doubt somewhat taken aback at this reception, but his sunken eyes with the black lines under them looked past her indifferently.

He was terribly tired--one could see--or was he ill? But all that would soon be better now. Käte seized hold of his hand once more full of the joyful hope that had been awakened in her, and drew him after her into her room.

He allowed himself to be drawn without resisting, he only asked with a yawn: "What's the matter?"

"I must tell you something." And then quickly, as though he might escape her or she might lose courage, she added: "Something important--that concerns you your that concerns your--your birth."

What would he say--she had stopped involuntarily--what would he say now? The secret of his birth for which he had fought full of longing, fought strenuously--oh, what scenes those had been!--would now be revealed to him.

She leant towards him involuntarily, ready to support him.

[Pg 279] Then he yawned again: "Must it really be now, mater? There's plenty of time to-morrow. The fact is, I am dead beat. Good night." And he wheeled round, leaving her where she was, and went out of the room and up the stairs to his bedroom.

She stood there quite rigid. Then she put her hand up to her head: what, what was it? She must not have understood him properly, she must be deaf, blind or beside herself. Or he must be deaf, blind or beside himself. She had gone up to him with her heart in her mouth, she had held out her hand, she had wanted to speak to him about his birth--and he? He had yawned--had gone away, it evidently did not interest him in the slightest. And here, here, in this very room--it was not yet four years ago--he had stood almost on the same spot in the black clothes he had worn at his confirmation--almost as tall as he was now, only with a rounder, more childish face--and had screamed aloud: "Mother, mother, where is my mother?" And now he no longer wanted to know anything?

It was impossible, she could not have understood him aright or he not her. She must follow him, at once, without delay. It seemed to her that she must not neglect a moment.

She hurried noiselessly up the stairs in her grey dress. She saw her shadow gliding along in the dull light the electric bulb cast on the staircase-wall, but she smiled: no, she was not sorrow personified gliding along like a ghost any longer. Her heart was filled with nothing but joy, hope and confidence, for she was bringing him something good, nothing but good.

She went into his room without knocking, in great haste and without reflecting on what she was doing. He was already in bed, he was just going to put out the light. She sat down on the edge of his bed.

[Pg 280] "Wolfgang," she said gently. And as he gazed at her in surprise with a look that was almost unfriendly, her voice sounded still softer: "My son."

"Yes--what's the matter now?"

He was really annoyed, she noticed it in the impatient tone of his voice, and then she suddenly lost courage. Oh, if he looked at her like that, so coldly, and if his voice sounded so repellent, how difficult it was to find the right word. But it must be done, he looked so pale and was so thin, his round face had positively become long. What had struck her before struck her with double force

now, and she got a great fright. "Wolfgang," she said hastily, avoiding his glance almost with fear--oh, how he would accuse her, how reproachful he would be, and justifiably reproachful--"I must tell you at last--it's better--it won't surprise you much either. Do you still remember that Sunday it was the day of your confirmation--you--you asked us then----"

Oh, what along introduction it was. She called herself a coward; but it was so difficult, so unspeakably difficult.

He did not interrupt her with a single sound, he asked no questions, he did not sigh, he did not even move.

She did not venture to turn her eyes, which were fixed on one point straight in front of her, to look at him. His silence was terrible, more terrible than his passion. And she called out with the courage of despair: "You are not our son, not our own son."

He still did not say anything; did not make a single sound, did not move. Then she turned her eyes on him. And she saw how the lids fell over his tired, already glassy eyes, how he tore them open again with difficulty and how they closed once more, in short, how he fought with sleep.

[Pg 281] He could sleep whilst she told him this--this? A terrible feeling of disillusion came over her, but still she seized hold of his arm and shook him, whilst her own limbs trembled as though with fever: "Don't you hear--don't you hear me? You are not our son--not our own son."

"Yes, I know," he said in a weary voice. "Leave me, leave me." He made a gesture as if to thrust her away.

"And it--" her complete want of comprehension made her stammer like a child--"it does not affect you? It--it leaves you so cold?"

"Cold? Cold?" He shrugged his shoulders, and his tired, dull eyes began to gleam a little. "Cold? Who says it leaves me cold--has left me cold?" he amended hastily. "But you two have not asked about that. Now I won't hear anything more about it. I'm tired now. I want to sleep." He turned his back on her, turned his face to the wall and did not move any more.

There she stood--he was already asleep, or at least seemed to be so. She waited anxiously a few minutes longer--would he, would he not have to turn once more to her and say: "Tell me, I'm listening now." But he did not turn.

Then she crept out of the room like a condemned criminal. Too late, too late. She had spoken too late, and now he did not want to hear anything more about it, nothing more whatever.

In her dull wretchedness the words "too late" hurt her soul as if they had been branded on it.

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[Pg 282] Käte had no longer the courage to revert again to what she had wanted to confess to Wolfgang that night. Besides, what was the good? She had the vivid feeling that there was no getting at him any more, that he could not be helped any more. But she felt weighed down as though she had committed a terrible crime. And the feeling of this great crime made her gentler towards him than she would otherwise have been; she felt called upon to make excuses for his actions both to herself and her husband.

Paul Schlieben was very dissatisfied with Wolfgang. "If only I knew where he's always wandering about. I suppose he's at home at night--eh?"

An involuntary sound from his wife had interrupted him, now he looked at her inquiringly. But she did not change countenance in the slightest, she only gave an affirmative nod. So the husband relied upon his wife.

And now the last days of autumn had come, which are often so warm and beautiful, more beautiful than summer. Everybody streamed out into the Grunewald, to bathe themselves once more in the sun and air ere winter set in. The people came in crowds to Hundekehle and Paulsborn, to Uncle Tom and the Old Fisherman's Hut as though it were Sunday every day. There was laughter everywhere, often music too, and young girls in light dresses, in last summer's dresses that were not yet quite worn out. Children made less noise in the woods now than in summer; it grew dark too early now, but there were all the more couples wandering about, whom the early but still warm dusk gave an excellent opportunity to exchange caresses, and old people, who wanted to enjoy the sun once more ere the night perhaps came that is followed by no morning.

[Pg 283] Formerly Paul Schlieben had always detested leaving his house and garden on such days, when the Grunewald was overrun with people. He had always disliked swallowing the dust the crowd raised. But now he was broader-minded. Why should the people, who were shut up in cramped rooms on all the other days, not be out there too for once in a way, and inhale the smell of the pines for some hours, at any rate, which they, the privileged ones, enjoyed every day. It did one good to see how happy people could be.

He ordered a carriage, a comfortable landau, both to give himself a pleasure and also to distract his wife, who seemed to him to be graver and more lost in thought than ever, and went for a drive with her. They drove along the well-known roads through the Grunewald, and also got out now and then when the carriage forced its way more slowly through the sand, and walked beside it for a bit along the foot-path, which the fallen pine-needles had made smooth and firm.

They came to Schildhorn. The red glow of evening lay across the water; the sun could no longer be seen in all its splendour, a dusky, melancholy peace lay over the Havel and the pines. Käte had never thought the wood was so large. All at once she shivered: ah, the cemetery where they buried the suicides lay over there. She did not like to look in that direction, she pressed her eyes together nervously. All at once a young lad moved across her mental vision--young and fresh and yet ruined already--many a mother's son.

She shuddered and wanted to hurry past, and still something drew her feet irresistibly to the spot in the loose sand that had been enclosed. She could not help it, she had to stop. Her eyes rested thoughtfully on the ugly, uncared-for graves: had those who rested there found peace? A couple of branches covered with leaves and a few flowers that she had plucked on the way fell out of her hand. The evening wind blew them on to the nearest grave; she let them lie there. Her heart felt extremely sad.

"Käte, do come," Paul called. "The carriage has been waiting for us quite a long time."

[Pg 284] She felt very depressed. Fears and suspicions, that she could not speak of to anybody, crowded upon her. Wolfgang was unsteady--but was he bad? No, not bad--not yet. O God, no, she would not think that! Not bad! But what would happen? How would it end? Things could never be right again--how could they? A miracle would have to happen then, and miracles do not happen nowadays.

A gay laugh made her start. All the tables were occupied in the restaurant garden; there were so many young people there and so much light-heartedness, and so many lovers. They had got into their carriage again and were now driving slowly past the garden, so they saw all the light-coloured blouses and the gaily trimmed hats, all the finery of the lower middle-class.

Hark, there was that gay laugh again. A girl's loud laugh, a real hearty one, and now: "Aha, catch her, catch her!" on hearing which Käte held her breath as though frozen. She felt quite weak, all the blood left her heart. That was Wolfgang! Her Wolfgang!

Then he bounded after a girl who, with a cry of delight, flew across the road in front of him and into the wood on the other side among the tree-trunks. He rushed after her. For a moment the girl's light dress and Wolfgang's flying shadow were seen whisking round the pines, and then nothing more. But he must have reached her, for her shrill scream and his laugh were heard; both drove the blood into Käte's cheeks. It sounded so offensive to her, so vulgar. So he had got so far? He wandered about there with such, such--persons? Ah, a couple of others were following them, they belonged to the party, too. A hulking fellow with a very hot and red face and chubby cheeks followed the couple that had disappeared noisily shouting hallo, and the slender rascal who came last laughed so knowingly and slyly.

[Pg 285] "Paul, Paul!" Käte wanted to call out, "Paul, just look, look!" But then she did not call, and did not move. There was nothing more to be done. She leant back in her corner of the carriage quite silent: she had wanted the boy, she must not complain. Oh, if only she had left him where he was. Now she must be silent, close both her eyes firmly and pretend she had not seen anything.

But everything was spoilt for her. And when her husband pointed out the moon swimming in the light grey ether in an opening between the tops of two pines, and the bright, quietly gleaming star to the right of it, she had only an indifferent "Oh yes," in answer to his delighted: "Isn't that beautiful?"

That depressed him. She had taken such pleasure in nature formerly, the greatest, purest pleasure--now she no longer did so. Was that over too? Everything was over. He sighed.

And both remained silent, each leaning in a corner of the carriage. They gazed into the twilight that was growing deeper and deeper with sad eyes. Evening was coming on, the day--their day too--was over.

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[Pg 286] Wolfgang had gone on an excursion into the country, with Frida Lämke, her brother, and Hans Flebbe, which had been planned a long time. Frida was not going back to business that afternoon; she had succeeded in getting away as an exception, and because she pleaded an extremely urgent reason for her absence. And now she was almost beside herself with glee: oh, how splendid it was, oh, what a fine time they would have. Wolfgang had gone to the expense of taking a cab; he and Frida sat on the front seat, the two others opposite them on the back seat, and they had driven round the green, green wood, had paid a visit to this and that place of amusement, had gone on a roundabout and in a boat and into the booth where they were playing with dice. Wolfgang was very polite, Frida always got leave to throw them again and again; a butter dish of blue glass, a glazed paper-bag full of gingerbread nuts, but above all a little dicky-bird in a tiny wooden cage made her extremely happy. Hans was allowed to carry it all, whilst she

and Wolfgang rushed along on the walk home from Schildhorn, chaffing each other. Her sweetheart did not disturb them. Hans had foregone the pleasure of having his Frida on his arm from the commencement; everybody might easily have thought the well-dressed young gentleman was her lover. But when she lost her breath entirely and was red and dishevelled, and the dusk, which came on somewhat earlier in the wood among the trees that stood so close together, made her shudder a little and filled her with a delicious fear, she hung on her Hans's arm as a matter of course. They remained a little behind the others.

Then Wolfgang was alone, for he did not count Artur, although he walked beside him stumbling over the roots and whistling shrilly. And Wolfgang envied fat Hans at whom they had all laughed so much, the girl he was engaged to more than anyone else. He also wanted to have a girl hanging on his arm. It need not even be such a nice-looking girl as Frida--as long as it was a girl. The dusk of the wood, which was so nice and quiet, seemed positively to hold out inviting arms to him. And a smell of satiation, an abundant fulfilment, rose out of the earth that evening, although it was so poor--nothing but sand. Wolfgang felt a wish to live and love, an eager desire for pleasure and enjoyment. If he had had Frida near him now, he would have seized hold of her, have clasped her in his arms, have quickly closed her mouth with kisses and not let her go again.

[Pg 287] He could not contain himself any longer, he had to seize hold of Artur, at any rate, and waltz with him along the sandy path through the wood, so that the lanky youth, who had already run to so many customers to shave them that day, could neither see nor hear. All the other people stopped; such sights were nothing new to them on excursions, not to speak of worse. It amused them, and, when Wolfgang lifted his partner high up into the air with a loud shout of triumph and swung him several times round his head, they clapped their hands.

Wolfgang was very much out of breath by this time. When they got out of the wood they had to proceed more slowly; they might have trodden some of the people to death in the more inhabited parts, for the fine villas were already commencing. What a crowd! People were pushing and squeezing each other at the place where the electric cars started. Wolfgang and Artur posted themselves there too: what a joke it was to see how the people who wanted to go by them elbowed each other. It was still pretty light and as warm as summer, but it would soon be quite dark, and the later it was the larger the crowd would be. The two stood there laughing, looking quietly on at the throng. What did it matter to them if they did not get a seat? They could run that short bit to their homes.

Wolfgang felt how his heart thumped against his side--it had been great fun to dance with Frida. He had swung her round several times in the booth adjoining a restaurant, in which a man sat strumming on a piano, and had done the same to a couple of other girls, who had looked longingly at the boisterous dancer. What a pleasure it had been. He still felt the effects of it, his chest rose and fell tumultuously--oh, what a pleasure it was to swing a girl round in his arm like that. Wonderful! Everything was wonderful.

[Pg 288] Wolfgang trembled inwardly with untamed animal spirits, and clenched his teeth so as not to draw people's attention to him by means of a loud, triumphant shout. Oh, how splendid it would be, oh, how he would love to do something foolish now. He thought it over: what on earth could he do?

At that moment a cough disturbed him. How hollow it sounded--as if everything inside were loose. The young fellow who was standing behind his broad back might have been coughing like that for some time--only he had not noticed it; now he felt disgusted at his spitting. He stepped aside involuntarily: fagh, how the man coughed!

"Oh, how wretched it is that there isn't a cab to be had!" Wolfgang now heard the older man say, on whose arm the young fellow who was coughing was leaning. "Are you quite knocked up? Can you still stand it?" There was such an anxiety expressed in that: "Can you still stand it?"

"Oh, pretty well," the young fellow answered in a hoarse voice. Wolfgang pricked up his ears: he surely knew that voice? And now he also recognised the face. Wasn't that Kullrich? Good gracious, how he had changed. He raised his hat involuntarily: "Good evening, Kullrich."

And now the latter also recognised him. "Schlieben!" Kullrich smiled, so that all his teeth, which were long and white, could be seen behind his bloodless lips. And then he held out his hand to his former schoolfellow: "You aren't at school either? I've left as well. It's a long time since we've seen each other."

[Pg 289] The hand Wolfgang held had a disagreeable, moist, cold feeling, and a shudder passed through him. He had forgotten long ago that he had once heard that Kullrich had consumption; all at once he remembered it again. But that was quite impossible, surely you could not die so young? Everything in him strove against the conviction.

"Have you been ill?" he asked quickly. "But now you're all right again, aren't you?" It was quite difficult for him to remember that he was speaking to his old schoolfellow; this Kullrich was quite a stranger to him.

"Oh yes, pretty fair," said Kullrich, smiling once more. Quite a peculiar smile, which even struck the careless youth. Kullrich had never been nice-looking, he had a lump at the end of his

nose; but now Wolfgang could not take his eyes off him. How much more refined his face had grown and so--he could not contain himself any longer, all at once he blurted it out: "How different you look now. I hardly recognised you."

"My son is soon going away," his father said quickly, drawing his son's arm more closely through his own as he spoke. "Then I hope he will come back quite well. But he has tried to do too much to-day. The weather was so fine--plenty of fresh air and the smell of the pines, the doctor said--but we have remained out too long. It won't do you any harm, I trust?" There was again such a terrible anxiety expressed in his voice. "Are you cold? Would you not like to sit down until we can start?" The father put a camp-stool, which he had carried under his arm, on the ground, and opened it: "Sit down a little, Fritz."

Poor fellow! The father's voice, which trembled with such loving anxiety, touched Wolfgang strangely. Poor fellow, he really must be very ill. How terrible! He was overcome with dread, and stepped back involuntarily for fear the sick boy's breath should reach him. He was full of the egotism of youth and health; how unfortunate he should meet him there to-day, just to-day.

[Pg 290] "May I get you a carriage?" he inquired hastily-- only let Kullrich get away, it was too awful to have to listen to that cough--"I'm acquainted with this neighbourhood; I shall be able to get one."

"Oh yes, oh yes, a cab, a closed one if possible," said Kullrich's father, drawing a deep breath as though relieved of a great anxiety. "We shall not possibly be able to go by train. And it's getting so late. Are you really not cold, Fritz?" A cool wind had suddenly risen, and the old man took off his overcoat and hung it round his son's shoulders.

How awful it must be for him to see his son like that, thought Wolfgang. To die, to die at all, how terrible. And how the man loved his son. You could hear that in his voice, see it in his looks.

Wolfgang was pleased to be able to run about for a cab. It was difficult to get one now, and he ran about until he was quite out of breath. At last he got one. When he reached the place where the electric cars started, Herr Kullrich was in great despair. He had given up all hope and his son had coughed a good deal.

He did not know what to say, he was so grateful. The unpretentious man--he was a subordinate official in one of the government offices and probably could not afford it--promised the driver a good tip if he would only drive them quickly to their home in Berlin. He enveloped his son in the rug that lay on the back seat; the driver also gave them a horse-cloth, and Wolfgang wrapped it round his schoolfellow's legs.

"Thanks, thanks," said Fritz Kullrich faintly; he was quite knocked up now.

"Come and see us some time, Herr Schlieben," said the father, pressing his hand. "Fritz would be pleased. And I am so grateful to you for helping us."

"But come soon," said the son, smiling again in that peculiar manner. "Good-bye."

[Pg 291] "Good-bye." Wolfgang stood staring after the carriage as it disappeared quickly; there drove Kullrich--after his mother.

Wolfgang's good spirits had flown. When his companions with whom he had spent the afternoon sought him with loud hallos--Hans must have given his Frida many hearty kisses, her hat was awry, her eyes gleamed amorously--he got rid of them without delay. He said good-bye to them quickly and went on alone. Death had touched his elbow. And one of the old songs he had sung with Cilia, the girl from his childhood, suddenly darted through his mind. Now he understood its deeper meaning for the first time:

Art thou now with fair cheeks prancing,
Cheeks milk-white, through rose-light glancing?
Roses wither soon, alas!

He went home at once, he had no wish to loaf about out of doors any longer. And as he sauntered along with unsteady gait down out-of-the-way roads, something rose up before him in the dusk of the autumn evening and placed itself in his path--it was a question:

"And you? Where are you going?"

He entered his parents' house in a mood that was strangely soft and conciliatory. But when he stepped into the room, his parents were sitting there as though to pass sentence on him.

Käte had not been able to keep it to herself after all, it had weighed on her mind, she had to tell somebody what she had seen. And it had irritated her husband more than his wife had expected. So the boy had got into such company!

"Where have you been wandering about?" he said to his son angrily.

[Pg 292] The boy stopped short: why that voice? It was not so late. He raised his head with the feeling that they were treating him unjustly.

"Don't look at me so impudently." His father lost control of himself. "Where is that woman you were wandering about with?"

Wandering about--woman? The hot blood surged to the boy's head. Frida Lämke a woman--how mad. "She isn't a woman," he flared up. And then: "I haven't been wandering about."

"Come, come, I've----" the man broke off quickly; he could not say: "I've seen you"--so he said: "We've seen you."

Wolfgang got very red. Oh!--they had spied on him--no doubt to-day--had crept after him? He was not even safe from their prying looks so far away. He was furious. "How can you say 'that woman.' She isn't a woman."

"Well--what is she then, may I ask?"

"My friend."

"Your friend?" His father gave a short angry laugh. "Friend--very well, but it's rather early for you to have such a friend. I forbid you to have friends of such doubtful, such more than doubtful character."

"She isn't doubtful." Wolfgang's eyes sparkled. How right Frau Lämke was when she said the other day to him when he went to see them again: "Although I'm very pleased to see you, don't come too often, Wolfgang. Frida is only a poor girl, and such a one gets talked about at once."

No, there was nothing doubtful about her. The son looked his father full in the face, pale with fury. "She's as respectable a girl as any. How can you speak of her like that? How d----" He faltered, he was in such a fury that his voice failed.

[Pg 293] "Dare--only say it straight out, dare." The man had more control over himself now, he had become quieter, for what he saw in his boy's face seemed to him to be honest indignation. No, he was not quite ruined yet, he had only been led astray, such women prefer to hang on to quite young people. And he said persuasively, meaning well: "Get away from the whole thing as quickly as possible. You'll save yourself much unpleasantness. I'll help you with it."

"Thanks." The young fellow stuck his hands into his trouser pockets and stood there with an arrogant expression on his face.

His soft mood had disappeared long ago, it had flown as soon as he took the first step into the room; now he was in the mood not to stand anything whatever. They had insulted Frida.

"Where does she live?" his father asked.

"You would like to know that, I daresay." His son laughed scornfully; it gave him a certain satisfaction to withhold her address, they were so curious. They should never find it out. It was not at all necessary to tell them. He threw his head back insolently, and did not answer.

O God, what had happened to the boy! Käte stared at him quite terrified. He had changed completely, had become quite a different being. But then came the memory--she had loved him so much once--and the pain of knowing that she had lost him entirely and for ever. "Wolfgang, don't be like that, I beseech you. You know we have your welfare at heart, Wolfgang."

He measured her with an inexplicable look. And then he looked past her into space.

"It would be better if I were out of it all!" he jerked out suddenly, spontaneously. It was meant to sound defiant, but the defiance was swallowed up in the sudden recognition of a painful truth.

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CHAPTER XVI

They had agreed that Wolfgang should not live at the villa with them any longer. True, he was still very young, but the time for independence had come, his parents realised. Two prettily furnished rooms were taken in the neighbourhood of the office--Wolfgang was to take a much more active part in the business now--otherwise he would be left to himself. This coming home so late at night, this responsible control--no, it would not do for Käte to worry herself to death. Paul Schlieben had taken this step resignedly.

And it seemed as though the days at the Schliebens' villa were really to be quieter, more peaceful. It was winter, and the snow was such a soft protecting cover for many a buried hope.

Wolfgang used to come and visit them, but not too often; besides, he saw his father every day at the office. It never seemed to enter his head that his mother would have liked to see him more frequently. She did not let him perceive it. Was she perhaps to beg him to come more frequently? No, she had already begged much too much--for many years, almost eighteen years--and she told herself bitterly that it had been lost labour.

[Pg 295] When he came to them, they were on quite friendly terms with each other; his mother still continued to see that his clothes were the best that could be bought, his shirts as well got up as they could be, and that he had fine cambric night shirts and high collars. That he frequently did not look as he ought to have done was not her fault; nor was it perhaps the fault of his clothes, but rather on account of his tired expression, his weary eyes and the indifferent way in which he carried himself. He let himself go, he looked dissipated.

But the husband and wife did not speak about it to each other. If he could only serve his time as a soldier, thought Paul Schlieben to himself. He hoped the restraint and the severe regulations in force in the army would regulate his whole life; what they, his parents, had not been able to effect with all their care, the drill would be able to do. Wolfgang was to appear before the commissioners in April. At present, during the winter, he certainly kept to the office hours more regularly and more conscientiously, but oh, how wretched he often looked in the morning. Terribly pale, positively ashen. "Dissipation." The father settled that with a shake of his head, but he said nothing to his son about it; why should he? An unpleasant scene would be the only result, which would not lead to anything, and would probably do more harm. For they no longer met on common ground.

And thus things went on without any special disturbance, but all three suffered nevertheless; the son too.

Frida thought she noticed that Wolfgang was often depressed. Sometimes he went to the theatre with her, she was so fond of "something to laugh at." But he did not join in her laughter, did not even laugh when the tears rolled down her cheeks with laughing. She could really get very vexed that he had so little sense of what was amusing.

"Aren't you enjoying yourself?"

"Hm, moderately."

[Pg 296] "Are you ill?" she asked, quite frightened.

"No."

"Well, what's the matter with you then?"

Then he shrugged his shoulders and looked so forbidding that she did not question him any more, but only pressed his hand and assured him she was amusing herself splendidly.

Gradually these invitations to the theatre, which had mostly ended so pleasantly in a little intimate talk in some café or other, ceased. Frida saw her friend very rarely at all now; he no longer fetched her from business, and did not turn up at her home.

"Who knows?" said Frau Lämke, "perhaps he'll soon get engaged. He has probably somebody in his mind's eye."

Frida pouted. She was put out that Wolfgang never came. What could be the matter with him? She commenced to spy on him; but not only out of curiosity.

And somebody else made inquiries about his doings too--that was his mother. At least, she tried to find out what he was doing. But she only discovered that he had once been seen in a small theatre with a pretty person, a blonde, whose hair was done in a very conspicuous manner. Oh, that was the one at Schildhorn. She still saw that fair hair gleam in the dusk--that was the one who was doing all the mischief.

[Pg 297] The mother made inquiries about her son's doings with a sagacity that would have done credit to a policeman. Had her husband had any idea of how often--at any time of the day or evening--his wife wandered round the house where Wolfgang had his rooms, he would have opposed it most strenuously. Her burning desire to hear from Wolfgang, to know something about him, made Käte forget her own dignity. When she knew he was absent she had gone up to his rooms more than once, nominally to bring him this or that; but when she found herself alone there--she knew how to get rid of his garrulous landlady--she would rush about in both his rooms inspecting everything, would examine the things on his writing-table, even turn over every bit of paper. She was never conscious of what she was doing as long as she was there, but on going down the stairs again she felt how she had humiliated herself; she turned scarlet and felt demeaned in her own eyes, and promised herself faithfully never, never to do it again. And still she did it again. It was torture to her, and yet she could not leave it off.

It was a cold day in winter--already evening, not late according to Berlin notions, but still time for closing the shops, and the theatres and concerts had commenced long ago--and Käte was still sitting in her son's rooms. He had not been to the villa to see her for a week--why not? A great anxiety had suddenly taken possession of her that day, she had felt obliged to go to him. Her husband imagined she had gone to see one of Hauptmann's pieces played for the first time--and she could also go there later on, for surely Wolfgang must soon come home now. In answer to her letter of inquiry he had written that he had a cold, and stopped at home in the evenings. Well, she certainly did not want him to come out to her and catch fresh cold, but it was surely natural that she should go to see him. She made excuses to herself.

[Pg 298] And so she waited and waited. The time passed very slowly. She had come towards seven o'clock, now it was already nine. She had carefully inspected both rooms a good many times, had stood at the window looking down absently at the throng in the streets, had sat down, got up and sat down again. Now she walked up and down restlessly, anxiously. The landlady had already come in several times and found something to do; her inquisitive scrutinising glances would have annoyed Käte at any other time, but now she took no notice of them. She could not make up her mind to go yet--if he were ill why did he not come home? Her anxiety increased. Something weighed on her mind like a premonition of coming evil. She would really have to ask the landlady now--it was already ten o'clock--if he always came home so late in spite of his cold. She rang for the woman.

She came, inwardly much annoyed. Why had Frau Schlieben not confided in her long ago? Hm, she would have to wait now, the stuck-up person.

"I suppose my son always comes home late?" Käte inquired. Her voice sounded quite calm, she must not let such a woman notice how anxious she really was.

"Hm," said the landlady, "sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn't."

"I'm only surprised that he comes so late as he has a cold."

"Oh, has the young gentleman a cold?"

What, the woman with whom Wolfgang had lived almost three months knew so little about him? And she had promised to take such exceedingly good care of him. "You must give him a hot bottle at night. This room is cold." Käte shivered and rubbed her hands. "And bring him a glass of hot milk with some Ems salts in it before he gets up."

The landlady heard the reproach in her voice at once, although nothing further was said, and became still more annoyed. "Hm, if he doesn't come home at all, I can't give him a hot bottle at night or hot milk in the morning."

[Pg 299] "What--does not come home at all?" Käte thought she could not have understood aright. She stared at the woman. "Does not come home at all?"

The woman nodded: "I can tell you, ma'am, it's no joke letting furnished rooms, you have to put up with a good deal. Such a young gentleman--oh my!" She laughed half-angrily, half-amused. "I once had one who remained away eight days--it was about the first of the month. I was terrified about my rent--I had to go to the police."

"Where was he then? Where was he then?" Käte's voice quivered.

The woman laughed. "Well, then he turned up again." She saw the mother's terror, and her good-nature gained the victory over her malice. "He'll be sure to come again, ma'am," she said consolingly. "They all come again. Don't fear. And Herr Schlieben has only been two days away as yet."

Two days away--two days? It was two days since he had written, in reply to her letter, that he had a cold and must remain at home. Käte gazed around her as though she had lost her senses, her eyes looked quite dazed. Where had he been the whole of those two days? Not there and not at home--oh, he had not been to see her for a whole week. But he must have been at the office or Paul would have mentioned it. But where was he all the rest of the time? That was only a couple of hours. And a day is long. And the nights, the nights! Good God, the nights, where was he during the nights?

Käte would have liked to have screamed aloud, but the landlady was watching her with such inquisitive eyes, that she pressed the nails of one hand into the palm of the other and controlled herself. But her voice was nothing but a whisper now: "Hasn't he been here at all for the last two days?"

[Pg 300] "No, not at all. But wait a moment." Her love of a gossip was stronger than the reserve she had meant to show. Drawing near to the lady who had sunk down in a chair, and dragging a chair forward for herself, she began to chatter to her, giving her all the details: "It was Sunday--no, Saturday that I began to notice there was something the matter with him. Ay, he's one of the dashing sort. He was quite mad."

"What do you mean? 'Mad' do you say?"

The landlady laughed. "Oh, I don't mean in that way at all, you mustn't take it so literally, ma'am. Well, he was--well, what am I to call it?--well, as they all are. Well, and in the evening he went away as usual--well, and then he did not come back again."

"And how--how was he?" The mother could only get the words out in jerks, she could no longer speak connectedly, a sudden terror had overwhelmed her, almost paralysing her tongue. "Did he--seem strange?" As in a vision his livid face and the place in the sand near Schildhorn, where the wind was always blowing, appeared before her many a mother's son, many a mother's son--O God, O God, if he had made away with himself! She trembled as the leaves do in a storm, and broke down altogether.

The landlady guessed the mother's thoughts instinctively, and she assured her in a calm good-natured voice: "No, don't imagine that for a moment. He wasn't sad--and not exactly happy either--well, like--like--well, just in the right mood."

"And--oh, could you not give me a--a hint of--where--where he might be?"

[Pg 301] The woman shook her head doubtfully. "Who could know that? You see, ma'am, there are so many temptations. But wait a moment." She shut her eyes tightly and pondered. "Some time ago such a pretty girl used to come here, she used to fetch him to go to the theatre, she said--well, it may have been true. She often came, very often--once a week at least. She was fair, really a pretty girl."

"Fair--quite light-coloured hair--a good deal of it and waved over the ears?"

"Yes, yes, it was done like that, combed over the ears, a large knot behind you could not help noticing it, it was so fair. And they were on very friendly terms with each other."

Fair hair--extremely fair. Ah, she had known it at once when she saw him at Schildhorn with that fair-haired girl. Everything seemed to be clear to her now. "You--do not know, I suppose--oh, do you happen to know her name?"

"He called her Frida."

"Frida?"

"Yes, Frida. I know that for certain. But she does not come here any more now. But perhaps he's got a letter from her. I'll look, just you wait." And the woman bent down, drew out the paper-basket from under the writing-table and began to rummage in it.

"He throws everything into the paper-basket, you see," she said in an explanatory tone of voice.

She had certainly never sought there. Käte looked on with staring eyes, whilst the woman turned over every scrap of paper with practised fingers. All at once she cried out: "There, we've got it." And she placed some bits of paper triumphantly on the table. "Here's a letter from her. Do you see? I know the writing. Now we'll see."

Laying their heads together the two women tried to piece together the separate bits of the letter that had been torn up. But they were not successful, too much was wanting, they could only put a very few sentences together:

[Pg 302] "not come any more--
"angry with me--
"soon come to you some evening--
"always your"

But wait, here was the signature. That had not been torn, here it stood large and connected at the bottom of the sheet of paper:

"always your"

"FRIDA LÄMKE."

"Frida Lämke?" Käte gave a loud cry of surprise. Frida Lämke--no, she had never thought that--or were there perhaps two of the same name? That fair-haired child that used to play in the garden in former years? Why yes, yes, she had always had bold eyes.

"You know her, I suppose?" asked the landlady, her eyes gleaming with curiosity.

Käte did not answer. She stared at the carpet in deep thought. Was this worse--or was it not so bad? Could it not still be hindered now that she was on the track, or was everything lost? She did not know; her head was no longer clear enough for her to consider the matter from a sensible point of view, she could not even think any more. She only had the feeling that she must go to the Lämkes. Only go there, go there as quickly as possible. Jumping up she said hastily: "That's all right, quite all right--thanks. Oh, it's all right." And hastening past the disconcerted woman she hurried to the door and down the stairs. Somebody happened to unlock the door from outside at that moment; thus she got out.

[Pg 303] Now she was in the street. She had never stood in Friedrichstrasse so quite alone at that time of night before; her husband had always accompanied her, and if she happened to go to the theatre or a concert alone for once in a way, he had always fetched her himself or made Friedrich fetch her, at any rate. All at once she was seized with something that resembled fear, although the beautiful street was as light as day.

Such a quantity of men, such a quantity of women. They flowed past her like a stream, and she was carried with them. Figures surged round her like waves--rustling dresses that smelt strongly of scent, and gentlemen, men, young and old, old men and youths, some of whom were hardly more than boys. It was like a corso there--what were they all seeking? So this was Berlin's much-talked-of and amusing life at night? It was awful, oh, unspeakably horrible.

Suddenly Käte saw everything from one point of view only. Hitherto she had been blind, as unsuspecting as a child. A policeman's helmet came into sight. She flew away as though somebody were in pursuit of her: the man could not see that she had grey hairs and that she was a lady. Perhaps he, too, looked upon her as one of those. Let her only get away, away.

She threw herself into a cab, she fell rather than got into it. She gave the driver her address in a trembling voice. A burning longing came over her all at once: home, only home. Home to her clean, well-regulated house, to those walls that surrounded her like a shelter. No, he must not come into her clean house any more, not carry his filth into those rooms.

She drove the whole way huddled up in a corner, her trembling eyelids closed convulsively; the road seemed endless to her to-day. How slowly the cab drove. Oh, what would Paul say? He would be getting anxious, she was so late.

[Pg 304] All at once Käte longed to fly to her husband's arms and find shelter on his breast. She had quite forgotten she had wanted to go to the Lämkes straight away. Besides, how could she? It was almost midnight, and who knows, perhaps she would only find a mother there, who was just as unhappy as she? Lost children--alas, one does not know which is more terrible, a lost son or a lost daughter!

Käte cried bitterly. But when the tears stole from under her closed lids and ran down her cheeks, she became calmer. Now that she no longer saw the long procession in the street, did not see what went on there every night, her fear disappeared. Her courage rose again; and as it rose the knowledge came to her, that she was only a weak and timid woman, but he a robust youth, who was to be a man, a strong swimmer. There was no need to lose all hope yet.

By the time the first pines in the quiet colony glided past to the right and left of her and the moonshine showed pure white on their branches, Käte had made up her mind. She would go to the Lämkes next day and speak to the mother, and she would not say anything to her husband about it beforehand. The same fear that now so often made her mute in his presence took possession of her once more: he would never feel as she felt. He would perhaps seize the boy with a rough hand, and that must not be. She was still there, and it was her duty to help the stumbling lad with gentle hand.

[Pg 305] Käte went up to her husband quite quietly, so calmly that he did not notice anything. But when she took the road to the Lämkes next day, her heart trembled and beat as spasmodically as it had done before. She had fought against her fear and faint-heartedness the whole morning; now it was almost noon on that account, Paul had told her at breakfast that Wolfgang had not been to the office the day before and only for quite a short time the preceding day. "I don't know what's the matter with the boy," he had said. "I'm really too angry with him. But I suppose we ought to find out what's happened to him." "I'll do so," she had answered.

Her feet hardly carried her as she slowly crept along, but at last she almost ran: he had been her child for many, many years, and she shared the responsibility. She no longer asked herself how she was to begin the conversation with Frau Lämke, she hoped the right word would be given her when the time came.

So she groped her way down the dark steps to the cellar where the Lämkes lived, knocked at the door and walked in without waiting for an answer.

Frau Lämke was just washing the floor, the brush fell from her hand and she quickly let down the dress that she had turned up: Frau Schlieben? What did she want at her house? The pale woman with the innocent-looking face that had grown so thin gazed at the lady with the utmost astonishment.

"How do you do, Frau Lämke," said Käte, in quite a friendly voice. "Is your daughter Frida at home? I want to speak to her."

"No, Frida isn't at home." The woman looked still more perturbed: what did the lady want with Frida? She had never troubled about her before. "Frida is at business."

"Is she? Do you know that for certain?"

There was something offensive in her way of questioning, but Frau Lämke did not notice anything in her innocence. "Frida is never back from business at this time of day, but she is due

in less than half an hour. She has two hours off at dinner-time; in the evening she does not come in until about ten, as they only close at nine. But if you would like her to come to you after her dinner"--Frau Lämke was very curious, what could she want with Frida?--"she'll be pleased to do so."

[Pg 306] "She'll be here in half an hour, you say?"

"Yes, certainly. She's always in a hurry to come home to her mother--and she's always hungry too."

"I will wait for her if I may," said Käte.

"Please sit down." Frau Lämke hastily wiped a chair with her apron: after all, it was an honour that Wolfgang's mother came to see Frida in the cellar. And in a voice full of cordial sympathy she said: "How is the young gentleman? if I may ask. Is he quite well?"

Käte did not answer her: that was really too great an impertinence, quite an unheard-of impertinence. How could she ask so boldly? But all at once she was filled with doubt: did she know anything about it? She looked into her innocent eyes. This woman had probably been deceived as she had been. She had not the heart to explain matters--poor mother! So she only nodded and said evasively: "Quite well, thanks."

They were silent, both feeling a certain embarrassment. Frau Lämke peeled the potatoes for dinner and put them on, now and then casting a furtive look at the lady who sat waiting. Käte was pale and tried to hide her yawns; her agitation had been followed by a feeling of great exhaustion. For was she not waiting in vain? And this mother would also wait in vain to-day. The girl, that hypocrite, was not coming. Käte was seized with something akin to fury when she thought of the girl's fair hair. That was what had led her boy astray, that had bewitched him--perhaps he could not throw her off now. "Always your--your Frida Lämke"--she had sulked in that letter, he had probably wanted to draw back but--"if you don't come I shall come to you,"--oh, she would no doubt take care not to let him go, she held him fast.

[Pg 307] Käte did not believe that Frida Lämke would come home. It was getting on for two o'clock. Her mother had lied, perhaps she was acting in concert with the girl all the time.

But now Käte gave a start, a step was heard on the cellar steps, and on hearing it her mother said, delighted: "That's Frida."

Someone hummed a tune outside--then the door opened.

Frida Lämke was wearing a dark fur toque on her fair hair now, instead of the little sailor hat; it was imitation fur, but two pigeon wings were stuck in on one side, and the hat suited her pert little face well.

Käte was standing in the greatest agitation; she had jumped up and was looking at the girl with burning eyes. So she had really come. She was there but Wolfgang, where was he? She quite shouted at the girl as she said: "Do you know where my son is--Wolfgang--Wolfgang Schlieben?"

Frida's rosy face turned white in her surprise. She wanted to say something, stammered, hesitated, bit her lips and got scarlet. "How should I know? I don't know."

"You know very well. Don't tell a lie." Käte seized hold of Frida violently by both her slender arms. She would have liked to catch hold of her fair hair and scream aloud whilst tearing it out: "My boy! Give me back my boy!" But she had not the strength to go on shaking her until she had forced her to confess.

Frida's blue eyes looked at her quite openly, quite frankly, even if there seemed to be a slight anxiety in her glance. "I've not seen him for a long time, ma'am," she said honestly. And then her voice grew softer and there was a certain anxiety in it: "He used to come here formerly, but he never does now--does he, mother?"

[Pg 308] Frau Lämke shook her head: "No, never." She did not feel at all at her ease, everything seemed so strange to her: Frau Schlieben in their cellar, and what did she want with Frida? Something had happened, there was something wrong. But whatever it was her Frida was innocent, Frau Schlieben must know that. And so she took courage: "If you think that my Frida has anything to do with it, ma'am, you're very much mistaken. My Frida has walked out a long time with Flebbe--Hans Flebbe, the coachman's son, he's a grocer--and besides, Frida is a respectable girl. What are you thinking about my daughter? But it's always like that, a girl of our class cannot be respectable, oh no!" The insulted mother got quite aggressive now. "My Frida was a very good friend of your Wolfgang, and I am also quite fond of him when I felt so wretched last summer he sent me fifty marks that I might go to Fangschleuse for three weeks and get better--but let him try to come here again now, I'll turn him out, the rascal!" Her pale face grew hot and red in her vague fear that something might be said against her Frida.

Frida rushed up to her and threw her arm round her shoulders: "Oh, don't get angry, mother. You're not to excite yourself, or you'll get that pain in your stomach again."

Frida became quite energetic now. With her arm still round her mother's shoulders she turned her fair head to Käte: "You'll have to go somewhere else, ma'am, I can't tell you anything about your son. Mother and I were speaking quite lately about his never coming here now. And I wrote him a note the other day, telling him to come and see us--because I had not seen him for ever so long, and--and--well, because he always liked to be with me. But he hasn't answered it. I've certainly not done anything to him. But he has changed greatly." She put on a knowing look: "I think it would be better if he still lived at home, ma'am."

Käte stared at her. What did she suspect? What did she know? Did she really know anything? Doubts rose in her mind, and then came the certainty: this girl was innocent, otherwise she would not have been able to speak like that. Even the most artful person could not look so ingenuous. And she had also confessed quite of her own accord that she had lately written to Wolfgang--no, this girl was not so bad, it must be another one with fair hair. But where was she to look for her?--where find Wolfgang?

And holding out both her hands to the girl as though she were begging her pardon, she said in a voice full of misery: "But don't you know anything? Have you no idea whatever where he might be? It was two days yesterday since he went away--since he disappeared--disappeared entirely, his landlady does not know where."

"Disappeared entirely--two days ago?" Frida opened her eyes wide.

"Yes, I've just told you so. That's why I am asking you. He has disappeared, quite disappeared."

A furious impatience took possession of his mother and at the same time the full understanding of her painful position. She put her hands before her face and groaned aloud.

Frau Lämke and her daughter exchanged glances full of compassion. Frida turned pale, then red, it seemed as if she were about to say something, but she kept silent nevertheless.

"But he's not bad, no, he's not bad," whispered Frau Lämke.

[Pg 310] "Who says that he's bad?" Käte started up, letting her hands fall from before her face. All the misery she had endured during those long years and the hopelessness of it all lay in her voice as she added: "He's been led astray, he has gone astray--he's lost, lost!"

Frida wept aloud. "Oh, don't say that," she cried. "He'll come back again, he's sure to come back. If only I--" she hesitated and frowned as she pondered--"knew for certain."

"Help me! Oh, can't you help me?"

Frau Lämke clasped her hands when she heard the poor woman's cry of "Help me!" and trembled with excitement: how terrible if a mother has to live to see her child do such things, the child she has brought into the world with such pain. Forgetting the respect with which she always regarded Käte she tottered up to her and grasped her cold hand as it hung at her side: "Oh dear, oh dear, I am so grieved, so terribly grieved. But calm yourself. You know a mother has still such power, quite special power, her child never forgets her quite." And she smiled with a certain security.

"But he isn't my son--not my own son--I'm not his real mother." Käte confessed now what she had never confessed before. Her fear dragged it out of her and the hope that the woman would say: "He won't forget such a mother either, certainly not."

But Frau Lämke did not say it. There was doubt written on her face and she shook her head. She had not thought of her not being Wolfgang's real mother at that moment.

[Pg 311] There was a troubled silence in the room. All that could be heard was a sound of heavy breathing, until at last Frida broke the paralysing stillness in her clear voice. "Have you been to see the landlady to-day?" she asked. Käte shook her head in silence. "Well then, ma'am, you say it was two days ago yesterday, then he may have come back to-day. We shall have to make inquiries. Shall I run there quickly?"

And she was already at the door, and did not hear her mother call after her: "Frida, Frida, you must eat a mouthful first, you haven't eaten any dinner yet," but ran up the cellar steps in her good-natured haste and compassionate sympathy.

Käte ran after her.

But they got no further news in Friedrichstrasse. There were fires in the rooms, they had been dusted, the breakfast table had even been laid as if the young gentleman was expected to come any moment--the landlady hoped to receive special praise for her thoughtfulness--but the young gentleman had not returned.

* * * * *

Käte Schlieben was ill in bed. The doctor shrugged his shoulders: there was not much to be done, it was a question of complete apathy. If only something would happen that would rouse

her, something for which it would repay her to make an effort, she would be all right again. At present he prescribed strengthening food--her pulse was so bad--every hour a spoonful of puro, essence of beef, eggs, milk, oysters and such like.

Paul Schlieben was sitting near his wife's bed; he had just come home from town. He was sitting there with bent head and knit brows.

"Still nothing about him? What did the woman say--nothing at all about him?" Käte had just whispered in a feeble voice.

His only answer was: "We shall have to communicate with the police after all now."

[Pg 312] "No, no, not with the police. Should we have him sought as though he were a criminal? You're terrible, Paul. Be quiet, Paul." Her voice that had been so feeble at first had almost become a scream.

He shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing left for us to do but that," and he looked at her anxiously and then lowered his head.

It seemed to him as though he could not realise the calamity that had overtaken him, as though it were too great. It was now a week since Wolfgang had gone away--the misery that fellow had brought on them was terrible, terrible. But his wife's condition made him still more uneasy. How would it end? Her increased nervousness was dangerous; and then there was her complete loss of strength. Käte had never been a robust woman, but now she was getting so thin, so very thin; the hand that lay so languidly on the coverlet had become quite transparent during the last week. Oh, and her hair so grey.

The man sought for the traces of former beauty in his wife's face with sad eyes: too many wrinkles, too many lines graven on it, furrows that the plough of grief had made there. He had to weep; it seemed too hard to see her like that. Turning his head aside he shaded his eyes with his hand.

He sat thus in silence without moving, and she did not move either, but lay as though asleep.

Then somebody knocked. The man glanced at his wife in dismay: had it disturbed her? But she did not raise her eyelids.

[Pg 313] He went to the door on tip-toe and opened it. Friedrich brought the post, all sorts of letters and papers. Paul only held out his hand to take them from habit, he took so little interest in anything now. During the first days after Wolfgang's disappearance Käte had always trembled for fear there should be something about him in the newspaper, she had been tortured by the most terrible fears; now she no longer asked. But it was the man's turn to tremble, although he tried to harden himself: what would they still have to bear? He never took up a paper without a certain dread.

"Don't rustle the paper so horribly, I can't bear it," said the feeble woman irritably. Then he got up to creep out of the room--it was better he went, she did not like him near her. But his glance fell on one of the letters. Whose unformed, copy-book handwriting was that? Probably a begging letter. It was addressed to his wife, but she did not open any letters at present; and he positively longed to open just that letter. It was not curiosity, he felt as if he must do it.

He opened the letter more quickly than he was in the habit of doing. A woman had written it, no doubt a girl the letters were carefully formed, with no character in them. And the person had evidently endeavoured to disguise her writing.

"If you wish to find out anything about your son, you must go to 140, Puttkammerstrasse, and watch the third storey in the back building, left side wing, where 'Knappe' is written above the bell. There she lives."

No name had been signed underneath it; "A Good Friend" was all that was written below.

Paul Schlieben had a feeling as if the paper were burning his fingers--common paper, but pink and smelling of cheap perfumed soap--an anonymous letter, faugh! What had this trash to do with them? He was about to crumple it up when Käte's voice called to him from the bed: "What have you got there, Paul? A letter? Show me it."

[Pg 314] And as he approached her, but only slowly, hesitatingly, she raised herself up and tore the letter out of his hand. She read it and cried out in a loud voice: "Frida Lämke has written that. I'm sure it's from her. She was going to look for him--and her brother and the man she's engaged to--they will have found him. Puttkammerstrasse--where is that? 140, we shall have to go there. Immediately, without delay. Ring for the maid. My shoes, my things--oh, I can't find anything. For goodness' sake do ring. She must do my hair--oh, never mind, I can do it all myself."

She had jumped out of bed in trembling haste; she was sitting in front of her dressing-table now, combing her long hair herself. It was tangled from lying in bed, but she combed it through with merciless haste.

"If only we don't arrive too late. We shall have to make haste. He's sure to be there, quite sure to be there. Why do you stand there looking at me like that? Do get ready. I shall be ready directly, we shall be able to go directly. Paul, dear Paul, we are sure to find him there--oh God!" She threw out her arms, her weakness made her dizzy, but her will conquered the weakness. Now she stood quite firmly on her feet.

Nobody would have believed that she had just been lying in her bed perfectly helpless. Her husband had not the courage to oppose her wishes, besides, how could things be worse than they were? They could never be worse than they were, and at all events she would never be able to reproach him any more that he had not loved the boy.

When, barely half an hour later, they got into the carriage Friedrich had telephoned for, she was less pale than, and did not look so old as, he.

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CHAPTER XVII

Whenever Frida Lämke met Wolfgang Schlieben now, she cast down her eyes and he pretended not to see her. He was angry with her: the confounded little minx to betray him. She was the only one who could have put his parents on his track. How should they otherwise have ever guessed it? He could have kicked himself for having once given that viper hints about his acquaintance in Puttkammerstrasse. Frida and her friendship, just let her try to talk to him again about friendship. Pooh, women on the whole were not worth anything.

A fierce contempt for women had taken possession of the young fellow. He would have liked to spit in their faces--all venal creatures--he knew quite enough about them now, ay, and loathed them.

The boy, who was not yet nineteen, felt tired and old; strangely tired. When Wolfgang thought of the time that had just passed, it seemed to him like a dream; now that the rooms in Friedrichstrasse had been given up and he was living with his parents again, even like a bad dream. And when he met Frida Lämke--that could not be avoided as he drove to and fro regularly in office hours now--he felt a bitter pang every time. He did not even say how do you do to her, he could not bring himself to say even that.

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If only he could throw off! the oppression that weighed him down. They were not unkind to him--no, they were even very good--but still he had always the feeling that they only tolerated him. That irritated him and made him sad at the same time. They had not reproached him, would probably not do so either, but his father was always grave, reserved, and his mother's glance had something that simply tortured him. He was filled with a morbid distrust: why did they not tell him straight out they despised him?

Something that was almost remorse troubled him during the nights when he could not sleep. At such times his heart would throb, positively flutter, he had to sit up in bed--he could not bear to lie down--and fight for breath. Then he stared into the dark, his eyes distended with terror. Oh, what a horrible condition that was. In the morning when the attack was over--this "moral sickness"--as he used to call it scornfully--he was vexed at his sentimentality. What wrong had he done? Nothing different from what hundreds of other young fellows do, only they were not so idiotic as he. That Frida, that confounded gossip. He would have liked to wring her neck.

After those bad nights Wolfgang was still more unamiable, more taciturn, more sulky, more reserved than ever. And he looked more wretched.

"He's run down," said Paul Schlieben to himself. He did not say so to his wife--why agitate her still more?--for he could see that she was uneasy from the way she took care of him. She did not make use of words or of caresses--those days were over--but she paid special attention to his food; he was positively pampered. A man of his age ought to be much stronger. His back no longer seemed to be so broad, his chest was less arched, his black eyes lay deep in their sockets and had dark lines under them. He held himself badly and he was always in very bad spirits. His spirits, yes, his spirits, those were at the root of all the evil, but no care could alter them and no medicine. The young fellow was dissatisfied with himself, that was it, and was it any wonder? He felt ashamed of himself.

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And the situation in which he had found him rose up before his father's mental vision with terrible distinctness.

He had let his wife wait downstairs for him--true, she had made a point of going up with him, but he had insisted on her staying down in the court-yard, that narrow, dark yard which smelt of fustiness and dust--he had gone up alone. Three flights of stairs. They had seemed terribly steep to him, his knees had never felt so tired before when mounting any stairs. There was the name "Knappe." He had touched the bell--ugh, what a start he had given when he heard the shrill peal. What did he really want there? As the result of an anonymous letter he, Paul Schlieben, was forcing his way in on strange people, into a strange house? The blood surged to his head--and at that moment the person opened the door in a light blue dressing-gown, no longer young, but buxom, and with good-natured eyes. And by the gleam of a miserable kitchen lamp, which lighted up the pitch-dark passage even at noon, he had seen a smart top-coat and a fine felt hat hanging in the entrance, and had recognised Wolfgang's things. So he was really there? There? So the anonymous letter had not lied after all.

[Pg 318] He did not know exactly what he had done after that; he only knew he had got rid of some money. And then he had led the young man down the stairs by the arm--that is to say, dragged him more than led him. Käte had met them halfway. She had found the time too long downstairs, open-mouthed children had gathered round her, and women had watched her from the windows. She was almost in despair: why did Paul remain upstairs such a terribly long time? She had had no idea, of course, that he had first to wake his son out of a leaden sleep in an untidy bed. And she must never, never know.

Now they had got him home again, but was it a pleasure? To that Paul Schlieben had to give a curt "no" as answer, even if he had felt ever so disposed to forgive, ever so placable. No joy came to them from that quarter now. Perhaps they might have some later, much later. For the time being it would be best for the young man to serve his time as a soldier.

Wolfgang was to present himself on the first of April. Schlieben pinned his last hope to that.

Wolfgang had always wished to serve with the Rathenow Hussars, but after their last experiences his father deemed it more advisable to let him join the more sedate infantry.

Formerly Wolfgang would have opposed this plan very strenuously--in any case it must be cavalry--now it did not enter his head to do so. If he had to serve as a soldier, it was quite immaterial to him where; he was dead tired. His only wish was to sleep his fill for once. Kullrich was dead--his sorrowing father had sent him the announcement from Görbersdorf towards Christmas--and he? He had wasted too many nights in dissipation.

It was a blow to Paul Schlieben that Wolfgang was not accepted as a soldier. "Disqualified"--a hard word--and why disqualified?

"Serious organic defect of the heart"--his parents read it with eyes that thought they had made a mistake and that still read correctly.

[Pg 319] Wolfgang was very exhausted when he came home after the examination, but he did not seem to mind much that he was disqualified. He did not show it--but was he not, all the same?

The doctor tried to put everything in as favourable a light as he could after he, too, had examined him. "Defect of the heart, good gracious, defect of the heart, there isn't a single person who has a perfectly normal heart. If you take a little care of yourself, Wolfgang, and live a regular life, you can grow to be a very old man with it."

The young fellow did not say a word.

The Schliebens overwhelmed their doctor with reproaches. Why had he not told them it long ago? He must surely have known. Why had he left them in such ignorance?

Dr. Hofmann defended himself: had he not again and again exhorted them to be careful? He had been anxious about the boy's heart ever since he had had scarlet fever, and had not concealed his fears. All the same, he had not thought matters would get worse so quickly. The boy had lived too gay a life.

"Serious organic defect of the heart"--that was like a sentence of death. Wolfgang laid down his arms. All at once he felt he had no longer the strength to fight against those attacks in the night. What he had fought out all alone in his bed, even without lighting his candle, before he knew that, now drove him to his feet. It drove him to the window--he tore it open--drove him round the room, until he at last, completely exhausted, found rest in the arm-chair. It drove him even to knock at his parents' door: "Are you asleep? I am so frightened. Sit up with me."

* * * * *

[Pg 320] They had had bad nights for weeks. Wolfgang had suffered and his mother with him. How could she sleep when she knew that somebody in the next room was in torture?

Now he was better again. Their old friend's medicines had had a good effect, and Wolfgang had gone through a regular cure: baths, friction, massage, special diet. Now they could be quite satisfied with the result. It was especially the strictly regular life that had done him good; his weight had increased, his eyes were brighter, his complexion fresher. They were all full of hope--

all except one. That one had no wish to live any longer.

The month of April was raw and stormy, quite exceptionally cold. It was impossible for the convalescent to be as much in the open air as was desirable, especially as any exercise that would warm him, such as tennis, cycling, riding, was still too tiring for him. The doctor proposed to send him to the Riviera. Even if there were only a few weeks left before it would be too hot there, that would suffice.

His father was at once willing for the young fellow to go. If it would do him good of course he must go. Käte offered to accompany him.

"But why, my dear lady? The youngster can quite well go alone," the doctor assured her.

[Pg 321] However, she insisted on it, she would go with him. It was not because she still feared she might lose him; it was her duty to do so, she must accompany him even if she had not wished to. And at the same time a faint desire began to stir in her, too, unknown to herself. She was so well acquainted with the south--should they go to Sestri, for example? She looked inquiringly at her husband. Had they not once spent some perfectly delightful days on the coast near Spezia? There, near the blue sea, where the large stone pines are greener and give more shade than the palms further south, where there is something crisp and refreshing in the air in spite of its mildness, where there is nothing relaxing in the climate but everything is vivifying.

He smiled; of course they could go there. He was so pleased that his wife's enthusiasm was not quite a thing of the past.

Wolfgang rummaged about in his room for a long time on the afternoon before their departure. Käte, who feared he might exert himself too much whilst packing, had sent Friedrich to assist him. But the latter soon came downstairs again: "The young gentleman wishes to do it alone."

When Wolfgang had put the last things into his trunk he looked round his room thoughtfully. He had grown up there, he had so often looked upon the room as a cage, would he ever return to it?

Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

The text he had received at his confirmation hung on the wall opposite him in a beautiful frame. He had not read it for a long time. Now he read it again, smiling slightly, a little scornfully and a little sadly. Yes, he would flutter back into it. He had got used to the cage.

And now he resolved to do something more as the very last thing--to go to Frida.

Frau Lämke was speechless with astonishment, almost frightened, when she saw young Heir Schlieben step into her room about the time her Frida generally came home. She stammered with embarrassment: "No, Frida isn't at home yet--and Artur isn't either--and father is up in the lodge--but if you will put up with my company until--until--they come"--she pushed him a chair with a good deal of noise.

[Pg 322] He drew his chair close to the table at which she had been sewing. Now he was sitting where he used to sit. And he remembered his first invitation to the Lämkes' quite distinctly--it had been Frida's tenth birthday--he had sat there with the children, and the coffee and the cakes had tasted so excellent.

And a host of other memories came back to him--nothing but pleasant memories--but still he and Frau Lämke did not seem able to start a proper conversation. Did he feel oppressed at the thought of meeting Frida again? Or what made him so restless there? Yes, that was it, he did not feel at home there now.

There was something sad in his voice when he said to Frau Lämke as he held out his hand to her on leaving: "Well--good-bye."

"Well, I hope you'll have a real good time--good bye for the present."

He nodded in reply and shook her hand once more, and then he went. He preferred to go and meet Frida, that was better than sitting in that room. His heart was throbbing. Then he saw her coming towards him.

Although it was dark and the street lamps not so good as in the town, he recognised her already far off. She was wearing the same sailor hat with the blue band she had had the summer before; it was certainly rather early in the year, but it suited her--so fresh and springlike.

A feeling surged up in Wolfgang, as she stood before him, that he had never known in the presence of any woman: a brotherly feeling of great tenderness.

He greeted her in silence, but she said in a glad voice: "Oh, is it you, Wolfgang?" and held out her hand to him.

He strolled along beside her as he had done before; she had slackened her pace involuntarily.

She did not know exactly on what footing they were with each other, but still she thought she could feel that he was no longer angry.

[Pg 323] "We are going away to-morrow," he said.

"Well, I never! Where?"

And he told her.

She interrupted him in the middle. "Are you angry with me?" she asked in a low voice.

He shook his head in the negative, but he did not say anything further about it.

All she had intended saying to him, that she had not been able to do anything else, that Hans had found him out, that she had promised his mother and that she herself had been so extremely anxious about him, remained unsaid. It was not necessary. It was as if the past were dead and buried now, as if he had entirely forgotten it.

When he told the girl, who was listening with much interest, about the Riviera where he was going, something like a new pleasure in life seemed to creep into his heart again. Oh, all he wanted was to get away from his present surroundings. When he got to the Riviera everything would be better. He had not got an exact impression of what it would be like there; he had only half listened, no, he had not listened at all when his mother told him about the south, it had all been so immaterial to him. Now he felt himself that it was a good thing to take an interest in things again. He drew a deep breath.

"Are you going to send me a pretty picture post-card from there, too?" she asked.

"Of course, many." And then he laid his arm round her narrow shoulders and drew her towards him. And she let him draw her.

They stood in the public street, where the bushes that grew on both sides of it were already in bud and the elder was swelling with the first sap, and clung to each other.

[Pg 324] "Come back quite well," she sobbed.

And he kissed her tenderly on her cheek: "Frida, I really have to thank you."

When Frida went to business next morning--it was half past seven--she said to her mother: "Now he's gone," and she remained thoughtful the whole day. She had not spoken to Wolfgang for many weeks and she had not minded it at all during the time but since the evening before she had felt sad. She had thought much of him, she could not forget him at all.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Käte was alone with her son. Now she had him all to herself. What she had striven for jealously before had now been given to her. Not even nature that looked in at the windows with such alluring eyes could attract him. It surprised her--nay, it almost saddened her now--that he did not show more interest. They travelled through Switzerland--he saw it for the first time--but those high mountains, whose summits were lost in the snow and the clouds and that moved her to tears of adoring admiration the first time she saw them, hardly wrung a glance from him. Now and then he looked out of the carriage window, but he mostly leant back in his corner reading, or dreaming with open eyes.

"Are you tired?"

"No," he said; nothing but "no," but without the surly abruptness which had been peculiar to him. His tone was no longer unpleasant and repellent.

Käte looked at her son with anxious eyes: was the journey tiring him? It was fortunate that she was with him. It seemed to her that she was indispensable, and a feeling of heartfelt satisfaction made her insensible to the fatigue of the long journey.

[Pg 326] Wolfgang was not much interested in the cathedral at Milan. "Yes, grand," he said when she grew enthusiastic about the marvellous structure. But he would not go up to the platform with her, from which they would have a magnificent view all round as far as the distant Alps, as the

weather was so clear. "You go alone, leave me here."

At first it seemed ridiculous to her that she, the old woman, should go up whilst he, the young man, remained below. But at last she could not resist the desire to see all those marvellous things again that she had already once enjoyed. She took a ticket for the platform, and he opened one of the camp stools that stand about in the enormous empty cathedral and sat down, his back against a marble pillar.

Oh, it was nice to rest here. After the market outside, with its noise and the buzzing of voices and all the gaudy colours, he found a twilight here filled with the perfume of incense. It did not disturb him that doors opened and closed, that people came in and out in crowds. That here a guide gave the visitors the information he had learnt by heart, drawling it quite loudly in a cracked voice without heeding that he meanwhile almost stumbled over the feet of those who were kneeling on low benches, confessing their sins in a whisper to a priest seated there. That there someone was celebrating mass--the priests were curtsying and ringing their bells--whilst here a cook chattered to a friend of hers, the fowls that were tied together by their legs lying beside her.

[Pg 327] All that did not disturb him, he did not notice it even. The delicious twilight filled his senses, he was so sleepy, felt such a blessed fatigue. All the saints smiled before his closing eyes, sweet Marys and chubby little angels resembling cupids. He felt at his ease there. Milan Cathedral, that wonder of the world, lost its embarrassing grandeur; the wide walls moved together, became narrow and home-like, and still they enfolded the world a peaceful world in which sinners kneel down and rise again pure. Wolfgang was seized with a great longing to kneel down there also. Oh, there it was again, the longing he had had in his boyhood. How he had loved the church their maid Cilia had taken him to. He still loved it, he loved it anew, he loved it now with a more ardent love than in those days. He felt at home in this church, he had the warm feeling of belonging to it. *Qui vivis et regnas in sæcula sæculorum.* The golden monstrance gleamed as it was raised on high, those who were praying bowed low, blissful harmonies floated under the high arched dome, ever more and more beautiful--more and more softly. His eyelids closed.

And he saw Cilia--as fresh, as beautiful as life itself. Oh, how very beautiful. Surely she had not looked like that before? He knew that he was dreaming, but he was not able to shake off the dream. And she came quite close to him--oh, so close. And she made the sign of the cross--over him the organ played softly--hark, what was she saying, what was she whispering above him? He wanted to seize hold of her hand, question her, then he heard another voice:

"Wolfgang, are you asleep?"

Käte had laid her hand lightly on his hands, which were folded on his knees. "I suppose I was a long time up there? You have felt bored?"

"Oh no, no." He said it enthusiastically.

They went out of the cathedral together, whilst the organ sounded behind them until they reached the market-place. Käte was in ecstasies about the view she had had, so did not notice the mysterious radiance in Wolfgang's eyes. He was quiet, and seemed to agree to everything.

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[Pg 328] His manner began to cause his mother some uneasiness. What would have made her happy before--oh, how she had longed for a more docile child in bygone days!--saddened her now. Was he, after all, worse than they had any idea of?

They had now reached the coast, had got to Sestri. Those were the same stone pines under which she had sat and painted as a younger woman eighteen years ago. But another hotel had come into existence since then, quite a German hotel, German landlord, German waiters, German food, German society, all the comfort the Germans like. Käte had wanted to live a retired life, to devote herself to Wolfgang; but now she felt she needed a chat with this one or that one at times, for even if she and Wolfgang were together, she felt alone all the same. What was he thinking of? His brow and his eyes showed that he was thinking of something, but he did not express his thoughts. Was he low-spirited--bright? Happy--sad? Were there many things he repented of and did he ponder over them, or did he feel bored here? She did not know.

He kept away from everybody else with a certain obstinacy. It was in vain that Käte encouraged him to play tennis with young girls who were on the look-out for a partner; if he did not overdo it he might certainly try to play. He was also invited to go out sailing, but he did not seem to care for that sport any longer.

Wolfgang lay right out on the mole for the most part, against the rocky point of which the blue sea flings itself restlessly until it is a mass of white foam, and looked across at the coast near San Remo swimming in a ruddy violet vapour or back at the naked heights of the Apennines, in whose semi-circle the white and red houses of Sestri nestle.

[Pg 329] When the fishing boats glided into the harbour with slack sails like weary birds, he got up and sauntered along to meet them at the landing-place. Then he would stand there with his hands in his trouser pockets, to see what fish they brought ashore. The catches were not large. Then he

took his hands out of his pockets and gave the fishermen what money he had with him.

If his mother had known what her son was thinking of! If she had guessed that his soul flew away with weary wings like a gull drifting over a boundless sea!

Wolfgang was suffering from home-sickness. He did not like being there. Everything was much too soft, much too beautiful there; he felt bored. The stone pines with their pungent smell were the only things he liked; they were even better than the pines in the Grunewald. But he was not really longing for the Grunewald either. It was always the same, whether he was here or there he was always racked with longing. For what? For what place? That was what he pondered over. But he would not have liked to say it to his mother, for he saw now that she did all she could for him. And he found an affectionate word to say to her more frequently than he had ever done before in his life.

So at last, at last I Käte often gave him a covert side-glance: was this the same boy who had resisted her so defiantly as a child, had refused her love, all her great love? This boy whose face had moved her so strangely in Milan Cathedral, was he the same who had lain on the doorstep drunk?--ugh, so drunk! The same who had sunk, sunk so low, that he--oh, she would not think of it any more.

[Pg 330] Käte wanted to forget; she honestly tried to do so. When she found him in the cathedral sitting near the pillar, his hands folded, his eyelids closed dreamily, he had seemed to her so young, still touchingly young; his forehead had been smooth, as though all the lines on it had been wiped away. And she had to think: had they not expected too much of him? Had they always been just to him? Had they understood him as they ought to have understood him? Doubts arose in her mind. She had always deemed herself a good mother; since that day in the cathedral she felt as though she had failed in something. She herself could not say in what. But sadness and a large amount of self-torturing pain were mingled with the satisfaction that her son had now come to her. Ah, now he was good, now he was at least something like what she had wished him to be--softer, more tractable--but now--what pleasure had she from it now?

"Wolfgang still causes me uneasiness," she wrote to her husband. "It's beautiful here, but he does not see it. I am often frightened."

[Pg 331] When her husband had offered to go with them he had done so because he wished to save her in many ways--Käte had opposed it almost anxiously: no, no, it was not at all necessary. She would much prefer to be alone with Wolfgang, she considered it so much more beneficial both for him and for herself. But now she often thought of her husband, and wrote to him almost every day. And even if it were only a few lines on a postcard, she felt the need of sending him a word. He, yes he would find it just as beautiful there as she found it. As they had both found it in the old days. They had once climbed that path over the rocks together, he had given her his hand, had led her so that she should not feel dizzy, and she had eyed the blue glassy sea far below her and far above her the grey rocky promontory with the deep green stone pines that kissed the blue of the sky with a blissful shudder. Had she grown so old in those eighteen years that she dared not go along that path any more? She had tried but it was of no use, she had been seized with a sudden dizziness. That was because the hand was not there that had supported her so firmly, so securely. Oh yes, those had been better days, happier.

Käte entirely forgot that she had coveted something so ardently in those days, that she had saddened many an hour for herself and him, embittered every enjoyment. Now she looked past the son who was strolling along by her side, looked into the distance with tender eyes in which a gleam of her lost youth still shone--her good husband, he was so alone. Did he think of her as she of him?

That evening when Wolfgang had retired to his room--what he did there, whether he still sat up reading or writing or had already gone to bed she did not know--she wrote to her husband.

It was not the length and the full particulars she gave in the letter that pleased Paul Schlieben so much--she had also written long detailed letters to him from Franzensbad at the time--but he read something between the lines. It was an unexpressed wish, a longing, a craving for him. And he resolved to go to the south. After all, they had lived so many years together, that it was quite comprehensible that the one felt lonely without the other.

He settled the business he had in hand with energetic eagerness. He hoped to be ready to start in a week at the latest. But he would not write to her beforehand, would not write anything whatever about it, it was to be a surprise for once in a way.

* * * * *

[Pg 332] The midday sun at Sestri was hot, but in spite of its gleaming power the air became agreeable and refreshing just a little before sunset. A sweet odour poured forth from every plant then, and this streaming wealth of perfume was so soothing, so delicious. Käte felt her heart overflow. Thank God, she was still not quite exhausted, not quite worn-out yet, she still possessed the faculty of enjoying what was beautiful. If Paul had only been there.

High up, quite at the edge of the outermost promontory on that coast and surrounded by the white foam of the ardent sea that longs to climb up to the cypresses and pines, the holm-oaks and

the strawberry-trees, the many sweet-smelling roses, lies the garden of a rich marchese. The mother and her son were sitting there. They were looking in silence at the gigantic sun, which hung red, deep purple just above the sea that, quiet and devout, solemn and expectant in the holy conception of the light, shone with the splendid reflection of it. It was one of those hours, those marvellous rare hours in which even mute things become eloquent, when the hidden becomes revealed, the stones cry aloud.

The woman felt quite startled as she gazed and gazed: oh, there it was, the same gigantic red sun that she had once seen disappear into the waves of the wild Venn.

Alas, that that thought should come even now and torture her. She turned quickly and looked at Wolfgang with timid apprehension--if he should guess it. But he was sitting on a stone, taking no interest in his surroundings; he had crossed his legs and his eyes were half closed. Of what was he dreaming? She had to rouse him.

"Isn't that splendid, grand, sublime?"

"Oh yes."

[Pg 333] "It's setting--look how it's setting." Käte had jumped up from the ivy-clad pine-stump and was pointing at it. Her cheeks were flushed and she was full of enthusiasm at the sight of the purple sea, the radiant light that was disappearing in such splendour. The tears came to her eyes; they were dazzled. When she looked again it struck her that Wolfgang was very pale.

"Are you cold?" A sudden coolness blew from the sea.

"No. But I"--suddenly he opened his dark eyes wide and looked at her firmly--"I should like to know something about my mother. Now you can speak--I'm listening."

"Of your--your"--she stammered, it came so unexpectedly. Alas, the sun, the Venn sun. She would have preferred to have been silent now; now she had not the courage she had had before.

But he urged her. "Tell me." There was something imperious in his voice. "What is her name?--Where does she live?--Is she still alive?"

Käte looked around with terrified eyes. "Is she still alive?"--she could not even answer that. Oh yes, yes, surely--of course--she was still alive.

And she told him all. Told him how they had got him away from the Venn, had fled with him as though he had been stolen.

As she told him it she turned pale and then red and then pale again--oh, what a passion he would fly into. How he would excite himself. And how angry he would be with her. For they had never troubled about his mother since they left the Venn, never again. She could not tell him any more.

He did not ask any other questions. But he did not fly into a passion as she had feared; she need not have defended her action when he remained silent for some time, positively make excuses for it. He gave her a friendly glance and only said: "You meant well, I feel sure of that."

[Pg 334] As they went down the steps leading from the park to the town he offered her his arm. He led her, to all appearances, but still she had the feeling as if he were the one who needed a support--he tottered.

The cemetery at Sestri lies behind the marchese's garden. The white marble monuments gleamed through the grey of evening; the white wings of an enormous angel rose just above the wall that encircles the park. Käte looked back: did not something like a presentiment seem to be wafted to them from there--or was it a hope? She did not know whether Wolfgang felt as she did or whether he felt anything, but she pressed his arm more closely and he pressed hers slightly in return.

She heard him walking restlessly up and down his room during the night that followed the evening they had spent in the garden of Villa Piuma. She had really made up her mind to leave him alone--she had looked after him much too much formerly--but then she thought he was still a patient, and that the agitation he must have felt on hearing her story might be injurious to him. She wanted to go to him, but found his door locked. He only opened it after she had repeatedly knocked and implored him to let her come in.

"What do you want?" There was again something of the old repellent sound in his voice.

But she would not allow herself to be deterred. "I thought you might perhaps like to--well, talk a little more about it," she said tenderly.

"What am I to do?" he cried, and he wrung his hands and started to stride restlessly up and down the room again. "If only somebody would tell me what I'm to do now. But nobody knows. Nobody can know. What am I to do--what am I to do?"

Käte stood there dismayed: oh, now he had such thoughts. She saw it, he had wept. She clung

[Pg 335] to him full of grieved sympathy. She did what she had not done for a long time, for an exceedingly long time, she kissed him. And shaken in the depths of her being by his "What am I to do?" as by a just reproach, she said contritely: "Don't torture yourself. Don't fret. If you like we'll go there--we'll look for her--we shall no doubt find her."

But he shook his head vehemently and groaned. "That's too late now--much too late. What am I to do there now? I am no use for that or for this"--he threw out his hands--"no use for anything. Mother, mother!" Throwing both his arms round the woman he fell down heavily in front of her and pressed his face against her dress.

She felt he was sobbing by the convulsive movement of his body, by the tight grasp of his hot hands round her waist.

"If only I knew--my mother--mother--oh, mother, what am I to do?"

He wept aloud, and she wept with him in compassionate sympathy. If only Paul had been there. She could not find any comforting words to say to him, she felt so deserving of blame herself, she believed there was no longer any comfort to be found. Before her eyes stood the *one* agonising, torturing question: "How is it to end?" engraved in large letters, like the inscriptions over cemetery gates.

* * * * *

[Pg 336] Käte took counsel with herself: should she write to her husband "Come"? Wolfgang was certainly not well again. He did not complain, he only said he could not sleep at night and that made him so tired. She did not know whether it was moral suffering that deprived him of his sleep or physical. She was in great trouble, but she still put off the letter to her husband. Why should she make him hasten to them, take that long journey? It would not be of any use. It was still not clear to her that she wanted him for herself, for her own sake. She even omitted writing to him for a few days.

Wolfgang lay a great deal on the couch in his room with the shutters closed; he did not even read. She often went in to keep him company--he must not feel lonely--but it seemed almost as though he were just as pleased to be alone.

When she looked at him furtively over the top of her book in the semi-obscurity of the room, she could not think he was so ill. It was probably a disinclination to do anything more than anything else--a slackness of will-power that made him so apathetic also physically. If only she could rouse him. She proposed all manner of things, drives along the coast to all the beautifully situated places in the neighbourhood, excursions into the mountains--they were so near the highest summits in the Alps, and it was indescribably beautiful to look down into the fruitful valleys of the *cinque terre* that were full of vineyards--sails in the gulf, during which the boat carries you so smoothly under the regular strokes of practised boatmen, that you hardly notice the distance from the shore and still are very soon swimming far out on the open sea, on that heavenly clear, blue sea, whose breath liberates the soul. Did he want to fish--there were such exquisite little gaily-coloured fish there, that are so stupid and greedy they grab at every bait--would he not shoot ospreys as well? She positively worried him.

But he always gave her an evasive reply; he did not want to. "I'm really too tired to-day."

[Pg 337] Then she sent for the Italian doctor. But Wolfgang was angry: what did he want with that quack? He was so disagreeable to the old man that Käte felt quite ashamed of him. Then she left him alone. Why should she try to show him kindness if he would not be shown kindness? She despaired about him. It made her very depressed to think that their journey also seemed a failure--yes, it was, she saw that more every day. The charm of novelty that had stirred him up during the first days had disappeared; now it was as it had been before--worse.

For now the air no longer seemed to agree with him. When they walked together he frequently stood still and panted, like one who has difficulty in breathing. She often felt quite terrified when that happened. "Let us turn round, I know you don't feel well." But this difficulty in breathing passed away so quickly that she scolded herself for the excessive anxiety she always felt on his account, an anxiety that had embittered so many years of her life.

But one night he had another attack, worse than the others he had already had at home.

It might have been about midnight when Käte, who was sleeping softly, rocked to sleep by the constant roar of the sea, was startled by a knocking at the door between their two rooms, and by a cry of "Mother, oh mother!" Was not that a child moaning? She sat up drowsily--then she recognised his voice.

"Wolfgang, yes, what's the matter?" She threw on her morning-gown in a fright, pushed her feet into her velvet shoes, opened the door--there he stood outside in his shirt and with bare feet, trembling and stammering: "I feel--so bad." He looked at her imploringly with eyes full of terror, and fell down before she had time to catch hold of him.

Käte almost pulled the bell down in her terror. The porter and chambermaid came running. "Telegraph 'Come' to my husband--to my husband. Quickly, at once."

[Pg 338] When the scared proprietor of the hotel also appeared, they laid the sick lad on his untidy bed again; the porter rushed to the telegraph station and for the doctor, the chambermaid sobbed. The landlord himself hurried down into his cellar to fetch some of the oldest brandy and the best champagne. They were all so extremely sorry for the young gentleman; he seemed to be lying in a deep swoon.

Käte did not weep like the good-natured person the chambermaid, whose tears ran down her cheeks the whole time. She had too much to think of, she had to do her duty until the last. Until the last--now she knew it. It was not necessary for the doctor to shake his head nor to whisper mysteriously to the proprietor of the hotel--she knew it. Restoratives were brought from the chemist's; the sick lad's head was lowered, his feet raised, they gave him camphor injections--the heart would not be whipped on any more.

Käte did not leave him; she stood close to his bed. The golden, invincible, eternal light was just rising gloriously out of the waves when he stammered something once more. She bent over him as closely as she had once done over the sleeping boy, when she had longed to give him breath of her breath, to mould him anew for herself, to give him life of her life. She had not that wish any longer. She let him go now. And if she bent over him so closely now, hung on his lips so affectionately, it was only to hear his last wish.

"Mo-ther?" There was such a question in his voice. He said nothing further. He only opened his eyes once more, looked round searchingly, sighed and then expired.

* * * * *

[Pg 339] The sun laughed in at the windows. And the woman, who, with dry eyes, was now standing at one of them looking out at the splendour, at the refreshing, glorious morning that was more sparkling than ever before, felt vanquished by the power of nature. It was too great, too sublime, too irresistible--she must bend the knee admiringly before nature, however veiled her eyes were. Käte stood a long time in deep thought. Outside was life, here in the room was death. But death is not the greatest evil. She turned round with a trembling sigh and stepped back to the bed: "Thank God!"

Then she sank on her knees before the dead boy, folded his cold hands and kissed him.

She did not hear that someone tapped softly at the door.

"Madame." The chambermaid stuck her head in. And a man's head was visible above the chambermaid's.

"Madame."

Käte did not hear.

"Here is somebody--the gentleman--the gentleman has arrived."

"My husband?"

Paul Schlieben had pushed the girl aside and had entered, pale, hurriedly, in great agitation. His wife, his poor wife. What a lot she had had to go through alone. The lad dead! They had met him with the news as he arrived unsuspectingly to surprise them at their breakfast.

"Paul!" It was a cry of the most joyful surprise, the utmost relief. She fled from the cold dead into his warm arms. "Paul, Paul--Wolfgang is dead!" Now she found tears. Streaming tears that would not cease and that were still so beneficial.

[Pg 340] All the bitterness she had felt whilst her son was still alive disappeared with them. "Poor boy--our poor dear boy." These tears washed him clean, so clean that he again became the little innocent boy that had lain in the blooming heather and laughed at the bright sun with transparent eyes. Oh, if she had only left him there. She would always reproach herself for not having done so.

"Paul, Paul," she sobbed aloud. "Thank God, you are here. Had you any idea of it? Yes, you had. You know how miserable, how unhappy I feel." The elderly woman clasped her arms round the elderly man with almost youthful fervour: "If I had not you--oh, the child, the poor child."

"Don't cry so much." He wanted to console her, but the tears rolled down his lined face too. He had travelled there as quickly as he could, urged on by a sudden anxiety--he had had no letters from her--he had come full of joy to surprise them, and now he found things like this. He strove for composure.

"If only I had left him there--oh, if only I had left him there!"

The man entered into his wife's feelings of torture and self-reproach, but he pointed to the dead boy, whose face above the white shirt looked peculiarly refined, almost perfect, young and smooth and quite peaceful, and then drew her more closely towards him with the other hand. "Don't cry. You were the one to make a man of him--don't forget that."

"Do you think so?--Oh Paul!"--she bowed the face that was covered with tears in deep pain--"I did not make him any happier by it."

She had to weep, weep unceasingly in deep acknowledgment of worldly error. She grasped her husband's hands tremulously and drew him down with her at the side of the bed.

The hands of husband and wife were clasped together over the son they had lost. They whispered, deeply repentant and as though it came from one mouth:

"Forgive us our trespasses."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SON OF HIS MOTHER ***

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