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Elderflowers

A story by Wilhelm Raabe (1831-1910)

A Recollection of the 'House of Life'

I am a doctor, a general practitioner of long standing and a medical officer of health. Four years ago I was decorated with the Order of the Red Eagle (Third Class) and, having been born some years prior to the turn of the century, am therefore quite near to the end of my biblical lifespan. I used to be married. My children have done well for themselves. My sons are all standing on their own two feet and my daughter has found herself a good husband. I cannot complain of my heart and my nerves as they are robust and have often held out when other people's, not without good reason, would have failed. We doctors become, as it were, both inwardly and outwardly thick-skinned, and, as we become immune to epidemic viruses, so nothing can prevent us from assuming roles as loyal and imperturbable counsellors to unadulterated grief and inarticulate despair. Every man should do his duty and I hope that I always do mine to the best of my ability. Doctors who think that their task is over once they have marked with a cross or some other symbol the name of a dead patient on their list are bad doctors. Very often our hardest task is only just beginning then. We, whose skill and knowledge have been shown to be so powerless, who are so often not seen by the friends and relatives of our patients in the most favourable and equitable of lights, should still do our best to find words of consolation for those relatives and friends. The hours we must spend with and visits we must pay to those left behind after the coffin has been taken out of the house are much more painful than those we passed at the bedside of the hopeless case.

All this has nothing to do, of course, with the observations that follow. I merely want to show, by means of an example, what a wonderful thing the human soul is. Not without good reasons have I entitled these personal memoirs "Elderflowers". The reader will presently appreciate just what an influence *Syringa vulgaris* has had on me.

It was a clear, cold day in January. The sun was shining and packed snow crackled underfoot as people went past while the wheels of carts made a shrill, squealing sound as they turned. The weather was healthy and invigorating and I filled my lungs once more with a deep breath before ringing, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the doorbell of one of the stateliest mansions in one of the stateliest streets in the town.

I knew what I was doing when I strove to take with me as much human warmth as I possibly could into that elegant home. And yet nobody was lying inside critically ill and there was no corpse there. My

scalpel would be superfluous and I would not even need to make out a prescription.

I did not have long to wait at the door. An old servant with a careworn face opened up to me and bowed his head in silent greeting. I walked through the long and cold entrance hall and slowly ascended the wide staircase one step at a time.

I had of late climbed these stairs on numerous occasions, at all hours of the day and night. Upstairs, near a bend in the banister, stood a fine plaster cast of a pensive muse who, gracefully enshrouded by her veils, had been given the attitude of leaning her chin on her hand. When the great city slept, when the light of the lamp, which the old servant carried in front of me, deep into the night, came to rest on that pure, white shape, I gazed upon it steadily in passing and tried to take with me something of the bust's lovely and eternal tranquillity behind that fateful door where... but that was all over with now, the fever had won and the coffin with the young virgin's head cradled on a white satin headrest, had been taken downstairs past this selfsame statue. The coffin had then been taken through the hallway and outside through the streets of the town. Three weeks had gone by—time enough for the grave to be covered with snow and for the cold winter sun to now be shining on it.

I walked on through well-ordered rooms where beautiful pictures were hanging on the walls and flowers were arranged in window-boxes and the floor was overlaid by soft carpets. But every room I entered I found cold and uninhabitable.

Door after door I opened and closed gently till I found myself standing in front of the last one leading to the last remaining room in that part of the house, a corner bedroom already well-known to me. I stood outside the door to listen for a moment as somebody inside the bedroom moved about.

I knew what I was going to find in that bedroom, but I felt, nevertheless, a cold, clammy sweat breaking out on my forehead and all the nerve-endings on my skin ever so slightly beginning to tingle. Even the most case-hardened doctor is never quite hardened enough and today I was to learn the truth of that all over again.

It was a warm and cheerful, comfortable room into which I now entered. Here too sunlight inundated everything, reflected by the room's big mirrors. And here too, on the window-sill, pretty flowers were in evidence, and somewhere, in amongst them, a finely wrought birdcage with two songbirds in it. Over here was a piano with the lid up and, in front of it, a piano-stool the seat of which had been embroidered. A songbook lay open on the music holder. Everything in that room pointed to the fact that a woman and, moreover, a young woman, lived there or rather had lived there. Everything bore the hallmark of a single young lady's delicacy; a married woman or an old maid would not have had the same taste in interior design. The pale-looking woman, dressed in black, whom I greeted wordlessly and who, kneeling on the carpet in front of an open drawer, looked up at me with eyes terribly sad, drained absolutely dry of tears, came here every day to drink in every minute of this fading brilliance and fragrance: the fragrance and the brilliance, alas, of what had been and never would be more.

After exchanging greetings, we spoke but little. The bereaved mother addressed me as usual with the words: "Thank you for coming, dear friend!" and then I sat down on the embroidered stool in front of the piano, resting my head in my hand, watching this woman as she stooped to do things.

She was busy ordering the little treasures that her daughter had left behind her after her brief stay on earth. Each day she would imbibe another bitter draught from that chalice of memory which all those who have lost a loved one clutch at so tightly.

Now it was up to her to sort out letters from school friends, old birthday presents, items of personal jewellery and a hundred and one other curiosities of a manifold and colourful multiplicity which art and craft, full of hidden meanings, bestow on their favourites in this world. Everything that came to hand was treated by this poor woman as a sentient, living thing. She lingered over it, talked to it and called it to mind, remembering just when it had first come into the house to give pleasure to or perhaps, in some cases, to slightly unsettle the woman's now dead daughter. Here, for instance, was a smashed shepherdess in porcelain and thereby hung a tale and this proud mother told it to herself, to me and to the multi-coloured gilded ornament with all its twists and turns, exactly as it had happened. Then, as my hands wandered absent-mindedly over the piano keys behind me, a look of jealousy flashed across the face of that much-to-be-pitied narrator: would the hand of a stranger dare to play again those notes that had once belonged to the deceased?

As the woman once more cast her livid face downwards, my glance chanced to fall on the songbook lying open on the music-holder. The song contained therein was a sad one. Was it just a coincidence that the songbook lay open at that particular place or had the dead girl, somewhat ominously, turned to it herself? It read as follows:

Should fate bestow on you a precious gift,
Needs must you lose some other dear advantage;
Pain, like success, is gathered bit by bit,
And what you long for most will do most damage.

A human hand is like a childish hand
That grabs at life, then wantonly destroys it.
It ruins what it cannot understand
And clings to something though it ne'er enjoys it.

A human hand is like a childish hand,
Man's heart a childish heart, full of childish fears.
Never lose your grip! ... Life's a burning brand
And laughter, soon or late, for aye changed to tears.

Should fate bestow on you a garland wreath,
You needs must pluck away its finest flower;
You to yourself destruction will bequeath
And over scattered petals cry and cower.

With this song came the first reminder of a bygone age to which, however, a further reminder would need to be added before the series of thoughts and impressions recorded in these pages finally developed.

The sky outside was cold and blue over the roofs opposite. The sun was still shining through the high casement windows, but the ice crystal patterns thereon, which had melted slightly in the heat of the noonday sun, were already re-forming. I had picked up from a sewing table an ornamental ballroom spray of artificial flowers and the sun also shone on this bouquet.

It was an artful and delicate concoction of white and blue elderflowers and leaves and a single strand of long blonde hair had got mixed up in it when the girl who was now dead had taken it out of her hair after the ball held the night before her fatal fever started.

There are many kinds of laurel wreaths in the world and just as many ways of running after them to win them or to lose them. Is not every life an attempt to weave a garland by and for oneself? We all set about the work to the best of our strength and ability and are all more or less successful in completing it. Often very fine work is produced, but then again hopelessly botched jobs as well come to light. Many a wreath is destroyed before completion and many a proud garland, having adorned the head of some elevated personage, eventually falls into the hands of a total stranger who, while holding it, examines it and tears it apart leaf by leaf as an austere winter sun, ill-disposed to all borrowed plumes and tinsel, looks on impassively.

The decorative spray I was holding in my hand just then was not, of course, destined to suffer that fate. It consisted for the most part of elder blossoms and, though it was only an artificial, trumped-up thing, its heart-warming vivacity was such that, old as I was, with white hairs on my head that had not sprung up there overnight, I was plunged into the contemplation of increasingly remote and wild blue yonders. Memories awoke in me which had, at bottom, little to do with the deceased youngster's ballroom favour.

Blame those elder blossoms for the deep and bitter seriousness with which I now thought of the wreath that had twisted itself around my own life, in part due to the efforts of my own hands, and the two ends of which would soon now make contact with each other.

The song lying open on top of the piano had been written more for me than for the young dead girl who had now, after a short and happy sojourn on earth, fallen softly, painlessly and quietly asleep, having worn this little wreath of fair spring flowers on an even fairer head as a lovely symbol of her life and her success in plaiting garlands.

I had been flung out into the world to fend for myself quite early on in life and had lived as an orphan, heir to a not inconsiderable fortune, in the house of a relative who was also a bilious hypochondriac carrying morbid thoughts of death even into the most cheerful of days and binding me with iron fetters to my daily chores and then to unremitting study. Discontented and recalcitrant, I would sit in a darkened room and my childhood, which contains the happiest days of your life under normal circumstances, passed by wretchedly and inauspiciously enough under the watchful gaze of those surly eyes. The unbridled pleasure and the heady exaltation to be found in a circle of carefree companions were unknown to me then. I never once got a thrashing for a silly puerile prank, and that an incalculable blessing was denied me in this way, which no grammatical treat could ever take the place

of, is something that more than one well-educated gentleman can testify to.

There was much that was fascinating and exotic in many of the books over which I had to pore all day long, but even the most splendid and dazzling of gods and goddesses came over to me as no better than grisly torturers, and ancient heroes and philosophers appeared to me to fight their battles and impart their wisdom only as a way for them to vent on me their arbitrary spleen, poor prisoner that I was. They had lived their lives and carried out their exploits only to drag me, thousands of years later, through terrifying labyrinths full of monstrous vocabulary and to push me over gloomy precipices bristling with the brambles of complex grammatical constructions.

When this seven-year apprenticeship to misery had finally finished, I naturally broke loose like a wild animal from its chain and the first and hitherto imponderable consequences of such an upbringing came to the fore. I belonged at university to the wildest and the most anarchic of its confraternities and my standing in the eyes of my dignified tutors was appreciably less than it was in the eyes of my distinctly undignified cronies.

I naturally got as far away as possible from the area in which my guardian and relative lived and embarked on my academic career in Vienna, which was still, in those days, Mozart's Vienna of 'wine, women and song'. And when the ground beneath my feet had grown too hot for me there, and too many eyes were taking too much notice of what I was doing, I went to Prague, a city world-famous for its Schools of Medicine.

The sun was dancing still over the ballroom favour in my hand and the solitary hair, which its beautiful wearer had left behind between the white and now reddish blossoms, glowed like a thread of spun gold. I remembered the old city of Prague with its one hundred towers and another fair maiden whose hair though had been black and I remembered other elderflowers. Prague! A town of lunacy and gaiety! A town of martyrs and musicians and beautiful women! Prague! How much of my freedom-loving soul you have taken away from me!

They say that when a Czech mother has given birth to a child, she lays it on the roof: if it stays there it is destined to become a thief, if it rolls off it is destined to be a musician. If the foregoing aphorism had come out of a German head, Bohemians would probably have had a lot to say about it, but, as it is a pan-Slavic dictum, we must take it as it is, at face value. In the old and fabulous city of Prague, when I was studying medicine there, such a child existed, the offspring of a Bohemian mother who was also Jewish. It had failed to fall off the roof, having indeed anchored itself thereto, and was therefore fated to become a thief. It stole my heart and yet I did not love it and the story that grew out of all this was a sad one.

Then it was, if anything, even more difficult than today to find Prague's famous Jewish cemetery if you were a stranger in the town. One simply did, and still does, the best one can to find the place, and so I too, the day after my first arrival in Prague, asked the way there, having just, coming from the Grosser Ring, gone down Ghost Lane, at which point I had got lost in the nameless confusion of little streets and alleyways that together surround 'the good place'.

As it is a matter of principle with me to turn to the most pleasant face I can find in any quandary caused by unfamiliar surroundings to help me, this was what I did now, but I fell from one difficulty straight into another: the people I met were all, without exception, as ugly as sin. Had I been willing to turn to the most repulsive face among them, I might have succeeded in arriving at my destination sooner. Eventually, however, I saw what I was looking for.

On a washing line strung up in front of a shadowy doorway hung an old frock and a not-ungracious fifteen-year-old girl was nonchalantly leaning against the door-jamb. She kept her hands and her arms hidden behind her back and looked at me. I looked back at her and decided to put my question. Hers was not the kind of face well-to-do people have and, before I received a response, a small brown hand came out from behind the child's back and was thrust towards me with unmistakable intent and there was nothing left for me to do but to deposit there a six-kreuzer piece.

"Our old graveyard, you say. Why, I'll take you there myself, sir."

Her wiry form sprang forthwith down three dirty steps, sailed past me without even turning round and started to lead me in a veritable zigzag through the most abominable nooks and crannies, back streets and alleyways in which offers came from all directions with a view to purchasing my old black German velvet frock-coat. I did not even stop to turn these offers down but concentrated all my attention on the dainty jack o'lantern who was acting as my guide in these uncanny regions and who, playfully enjoying my discomfiture as she did so, was leading me astray.

We came at last into a narrow dead-end and turned off to the right between two high stone walls at

the end of which a curious round arched door led to an equally curious dark passageway. My light footed guide came to a halt outside this entrance, pointed to the darkness that prevailed there and said with an apparent candour that really took the biscuit: "Just knock on that door down there."

Although I did not have the slightest inkling of where it was I ought to knock, I groped my way along the passage more by good luck than good management, till I finally stumbled on a darkened door. I knocked on it, hearing moans and groans and then a shuffling sound coming from inside. Then the door opened and I stood there rooted to the spot in terror by an unsavoury old witch screeching at me in Czech. Three more of these sorceresses were creeping up on me on crutches and they too were snarling something unintelligible at me. Totally taken aback I gazed about me in the semi-darkness of the long low room. There were six beds there and, in two of them, two terrible spectres were sitting up and staring at me like the unfortunate creatures that Gulliver encountered on his travels, those beings who were born with a black spot on their forehead and who were incapable of dying. I had the temerity to repeat my question about the Jewish cemetery even though my own misgivings warned me I had let myself be led here by the nose and that the question itself was quite inadmissible under the circumstances. I found myself, a moment later, back again in the sinister dark passage already depicted, happy to have gained my freedom without having had my eyes scratched out. Inside the room there was pandemonium. The urchin, my will-of-the-wisp, my precious Jewish sweetheart, had led me for my half-a-dozen kreuzers to a charitable hospice for six old Christian ladies instead of to the venerable Israelite to whom the key to Beth Chaim had been entrusted.

A sound of high-pitched laughter roused me from my vexed and disconcerted state. Outside in the alleyway the sun was shining and, in the sunshine at the end of the dark passage, another witch was dancing and "dere iss no creadure vairer dan a vitch van she is younk beink."

She danced in the sunshine and pulled a long face at me and I shook my fist at her threateningly: "Just you wait, you witch, you temptress, you little female devil from Prague, you!"

She, however, pointed with her finger at her mouth and called out mockingly: "Strc prst skrz krk!" These lilting syllables, noticeable for the richness of their consonant clusters, roughly translated mean something like: "Go and stick your finger down your throat!" Then the goblin disappeared and I was free to reflect on the underlying meaning of her words to my heart's content, but I chose not to and, after such an untoward experience, I decided not to ask anyone else the way to the old Jewish cemetery, but began, with Germanic thoroughness, to look for it myself. I trusted to my own lights and they did not leave me in the lurch, but brought me, in the end, by way of the dirtiest labyrinth of buildings that the human mind can imagine, to the gate that led to that awesome, oft-described domain of a thousand years of dust.

I saw there the countless tombstones piled up on top of one another and the ancient elder trees that twist and spread their gnarled old branches round and over them. I wandered down the narrow graveyard paths and saw the jugs of Levi and the hands of Cohen and the grapes of Canaan. As a mark of respect I laid, like everyone else, a small stone on the grave of the Chief Rabbi, Judah Loew ben Bezalel. Then I sat down on a grimy gravestone dating from the fourteenth century and the uncanny nature of the place impressed itself upon me with considerable force.

For a thousand years the dead of God's chosen people had been gathered here together, hemmed in in the same way that the living had been by the narrow walls of the ghetto. The sun shone brightly and it was spring and, from time to time, a cool gust of wind stirred the branches and the blossoms of the elder trees so that they brushed against the graves and filled the air with a sweet fragrance. I, on the other hand, was finding it more and more difficult to breathe. Was this really the place they called Beth Chaim, the House of Life?

From that black, damp, mouldy earth which had swallowed whole so many sorely-tried, ill-treated, put-upon and harassed generations of living beings and into which life after life had sunk as into a bottomless, all-consuming swamp—from that mildewed ground, I say, rose a pungent aroma of decomposition more suffocating than the stench that emanates from the unburied carcass of a beached whale, sufficiently funereal as an odour to cancel out completely all the sunlight and the pleasant scents exuded by both flowers and spring breezes.

I have already mentioned that I was, at that time in my life, something of a hell-raiser. The feeling, however, I was gripped by at that moment was adequate proof, even to me, of a latent, as yet underlying seriousness in my character.

My head was lolling further and further down on my chest when, suddenly, right next to me, on top of me, I heard the sound of childish, high-pitched laughter already familiar to me from my having heard it once before. This time I was startled and, looking up quickly, caught a fleeting glimpse of a delightful female form.

In the foliage of one of the low elder-bushes which, as has already been pointed out, covered the whole of the graveyard, in amongst the flowers themselves, on one of those fantastically gnarled branches which the spring, in its splendour and its glory, had crowned so abundantly with greenery and blossoms, sat the practical joker who had made such a bad job of showing me the way here, smiling roguishly down at her adopted German student.

No sooner had I stretched out my hand to catch this spook than, quick as a flash, it disappeared and I saw the next instant a laughing nut-brown face, framed by jet-black locks, near the grave of the Chief Rabbi as if she wanted to entice me after her again, tempting me this time to chase her over the old burial ground. But this time I did not permit myself to be led astray for I already knew full well that it would do me no good to run after her. She would only have vanished into the ground, down into that black earth, or, what was perhaps even more likely, have disappeared into the elder trees sheltering the graves. I continued to stand there stock-still and took not the least bit of comfort from the fact that it was broad daylight and high noon, for who could say but that this haunted place might be subject to supernatural laws quite different from the natural laws that operated elsewhere.

I stood there and was very careful not to move and when the imp saw that her laughter and come-hither gestures were no longer helping her, this little enchantress of mine changed her tack. Her young face grew serious, and, jumping down gracefully from her branch, she bowed politely to me and then, planting herself squarely in front of me, bowed again, saying: "Forgive me, handsome sir. I shan't do you any more mischief now."

She tolerated my taking her by the hand and did not try to prevent me from pulling her nearer so that I could look her straight in the eye. She even, to my amazement, gave a clear and sensible account of herself when I asked her where she came from and what she was called. Unless she was lying like a leprechaun this neglected and yet utterly charming being did not entirely inhabit the ethereal realm of Make-Believe and was not a daughter of Oberon and Titania but the progeny instead of very down-to-earth parents who were dealers in old clothes and general household requisites in the Josephstown area of Prague. I also learned the number of the house where she lived and her name, Jemimah, like the daughter of Job, that splendid fellow who hailed from the land of Uz, and Jemimah means 'day'.

Even though her father's name was not Job but Baruch Loew, the latter was a passable counterpart to that paragon of patience in his time of trouble. On the subject of Jemimah's mother I would rather not say anything.

Nor will I enlarge upon the squalor I saw in house number 533 in the Jewish quarter when I went there for the first time after making the acquaintance of the daughter of the house. I craftily pawned my watch there even though I had a new, not inconsiderable personal allowance in my pocket. And what I smelt in that house was almost worse than what I saw.

But a spell had been put on me and it was a powerful spell and was destined to become a dark spell. How could it be otherwise when, forty years later, in that elegant, peaceful and spotlessly clean Berlin home all it took was a garland of elderflowers, worn by a young girl at a dance, to bring it all back to me again?

I had come to Prague from the fleshpots of Vienna with the firm intention of gracing the College of Doctors there, to work extremely conscientiously and to make up for lost time with renewed zeal. Nothing came of it. It was not that I reverted to my former wild behaviour, to that life-style which has brought many a young medical student to the point of having to apply the noble art of healing to his own body. On the contrary, neither midnight revelry accompanied by crazy bouts of drinking, neither Melniker wine, Pilsner beer, nor slivovice had retained the attraction they had had for me formerly and yet I was no less intoxicated for all that and used up endless quantities of Hungarian tobacco to allay the confusion of my dreams. That little Jewish witch, Jemimah Loew, followed me everywhere: to my room in Nekazalka Street, to lectures, even as far as the dissecting room table. It was a forlorn hope for me now to study therapeutics and pathology and to slice up human corpses and the vital organs of dogs, cats, rabbits and frogs. And so, in Prague too, I set to one side my resolution to be diligent and put it off until another later time and another university.

In my room in Nekazalka Street I lay down on the hard settee, veiled in thick, blue, aromatic clouds of smoke and pondered the deepest and most sensible propositions ever formulated on the wonders of the human soul. I should, of course, have been quite incapable then of writing a book on how passion comes to fruition and then withers away. When I had smoked and dreamed my fill, I got up to continue my daydreaming standing, drifting away through the streets of a town which itself is like a dream.

In the Grosser Ring I could hear girls chattering away in Czech and German at the fountain and at night I would listen to the pious praying of the congregation in Tyn Church to their statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Hungarian grenadier-guards on sentry duty at the Old Town Hall were

relieved by their Italian counterparts. Life's richest tapestries shifted and changed just as in a magic lantern show. Then, once again, I strolled up and down the Vyshehrad Hill where geese cackle and goats graze over the floors of sunken royal palaces and abnormally torn and tattered washing is hung up to dry. Once more I placed myself under the protection of St John Nepomuk on his famous bridge and gazed for hours at the Moldau without any justification for doing so that my rational immortal soul could make sense of. Then I would climb through the steep streets of the Kleinseite, walk up the steps to the Hradcany Castle area and look out over the battlements to see that proud Bohemian city stretched out at my feet. Many a hot summer hour I spent in the cool and shady vestibule of St Vitus's Cathedral but Jemimah Loew followed me even under the purple canopy that overhangs St John Nepomuk's sarcophagus. Here, in the Wenceslas Chapel, is the great door ring which the holy duke and patron saint of Prague held on to in his final agony while he was being murdered by his treacherous brother. If one kisses this ring with all due solemnity it is useful and effectual against many kinds of evil, but oh, against the problems that were pressing down on me such a kiss would not have helped. Moreover a good remedy for headaches is to rub off the dust from an old wooden carving near the main door and to make three signs of the cross on one's forehead with it. I often had headaches, genuine physical ones, not just imaginary, in those strange days and was never once able to cure them by crossing myself. The pain only abated somewhat when I rushed helter-skelter down the steps from St Vitus's Cathedral and the imperial castle and crossed the Charles Bridge, passing the statue of St John Nepomuk and various other statues en route to the Josephstown Jewish quarter. Only in the shadow of the old grim walls and houses of the Jewish ghetto did my head feel better, but I went on feeling feverish for all that.

I had now been friendly with the gatekeeper of the famous graveyard for a long time and no longer paid the six kreuzers which the royal and imperial authorities had fixed as his remuneration for showing round curious foreigners whenever I wished to gain access to this kingdom of the dead.

I had won early on the affection of this greybeard inasmuch as I knew how to see eye to eye with him on the intrinsic value of the history of the Jewish people and so we wandered up and down among the graves and many a life story and many a legend I let him tell me there. In effect, one could learn a great deal from these monuments and grey stones which bear such a strong resemblance to those strewn about in the valley of Jehoshaphat.

Jemimah Loew was related to the gatekeeper, his granddaughter, great-granddaughter, great-niece or some such thing: the passage of time has erased from my mind the actual degree of kinship. She often came with us on our walks, sat next to us and made her own observations, often clever and appropriate ones, by way of contribution to our conversations.

Those were the days. What precious hours we spent together. There were moments that we shared in that old graveyard with its overhanging elder trees, the melancholy charm of which it would be impossible for me to describe in words. Now the air in this place was no longer unbreathable to me and there were no more ghosts in the sunlight that penetrated through the leaves and danced on the graves. I was now on increasingly familiar terms with those grey stones. Better even than the old man Jemimah introduced me to them and when the gatekeeper had fallen asleep in his armchair or had plunged too deeply into the unfathomable subtleties of the Talmud, we took good care not to disturb him. Hand in hand we slipped away to Beth-Chaim and were a law unto ourselves during those singular summer days which had not been so lovely for many a long year.

Yes, Beth-Chaim! This graveyard had truly become for me a "house of life". When this young girl spelt out for me the wondrous hieroglyphics on those Hebrew headstones, the life of a person of whose very existence I had hitherto had no notion was vividly conjured up for me. Wise, virtuous and pious men and women, noble perseverers of both sexes, handsome men and boys awoke from a slumber that had lasted centuries and soon their shades had taken on the most lifelike of appearances. Soon I was on intimate terms with all these people from a world previously unknown to me which, for all its differences, still had much in common with the present, and believed in them as I believed in the historical and legendary characters of my own country's history.

Usually we sat near the tomb of Rabbi Loew, from whom my little teacher thought herself to be descended and of whom she was very proud. She told me many things about this learned man: how he had had dealings with the Emperor Rudolf the Second and had called up for him the spirits of the patriarchs, how he had known everything there was to know about the Talmud and the Cabbala, how he had employed a 'golem' or servant from the spirit world, how he had courted his wife, the beautiful Pearl, daughter of Samuel, and how he had had 400 scholars studying under him and lived to be 140 years old.

I took it all in, however, hanging on my storyteller's each and every word more single-mindedly than any of the 400 scholars had hung on the erstwhile words of Chief Rabbi Loew in the yeshiva of the

three cells.

We did not speak of love for, strictly speaking, I suppose, I did not love this girl, but was, and still am, incapable of putting any other name to the tender feelings that drew me to her. These oscillated like the moods of the girl herself, like the weather on an April day, like the light summer clouds scudding over Prague and the elderflower and lilac bushes of Beth-Chaim.

There were times when I considered that Jemimah, a direct blood descendant of Hayyim, Chief Rabbi Jehuda's elder brother, was nothing more or less than a mischievous little guttersnipe with whom one could, agreeably enough perhaps, while away the odd quarter of an hour. At other times she struck me as a sprite, endowed and equipped with superior powers to torture mankind and, with the best will in the world, a predisposition to misuse those powers. Then she went back to being a poor but pretty, melancholic, albeit radiant creature, half child, half woman, for whom one might quite easily have shed one's blood, for whom one might have gladly died. I was fatally smitten at the time with a fever that was gradually getting worse, for the fluctuating shapes and sensations which assailed my soul then are only to be found in the fantasies of fever victims.

That was also a time when I read with great zeal and enjoyment tinged with sorrow the works of Shakespeare, so much so that I used to imagine that all that author's heroines had come together as one in this uneducated Jewish teenager, the quarrelsome Katharina no less than the sweet-tempered Imogen, Rosalind no less than Helena, Titania, Olivia, Sylvia, Ophelia, Jessica, Portia and all the rest of them.

Jemimah Loew had never read Shakespeare, had indeed never even heard of him, and all she was able to surmise from my rambling dissertations on this writer was that I was comparing her to various pagan and Christian women and she smiled incredulously at me and one day, round about the middle of autumn, just as the first signs of winter were in the air, as the leaves of the elder and lilac were turning to their autumn tints just like all the other leaves, one day in mid-autumn she grabbed my hand and dragged me down a gloomy graveyard path to a cemetery wall where there was a grave that we had not so far looked at.

She read me the inscription on the headstone and stated: "That'll be me!" The word MAHALATH had been chiselled thereon in Hebrew letters and underneath it the date: 1780.

Why did I feel so frightened? Was it not foolishness on my part to stare like a numbskull, as if the cat had got my tongue, at the girl now standing next to me?

And yet she was not laughing at me, nor was she pleased at the successful outcome of a jest. With melancholy gravity and folded arms she stood there, leaning against the headstone, and said, without so much as waiting to be asked: "Her name was Mahalath and that's exactly what she was: in other words, a dancer. Her heart was sick like mine and she was the last woman to be laid to rest here in this, our Beth-Chaim, the very last. After that the good emperor Joseph forbade that any more of our people should be interred in this cemetery. This woman, Mahalath, was the last of them. The good emperor Joseph also dismantled the wall of the Jewish ghetto hereabouts and gave to it his own compassionate and glorious name as a living memorial to his and to our own posterity. He it was who smashed down the walls of this prison and at long last let us breathe again in the company of other nations. May the God of Israel have mercy on his ashes."

"But who was this Mahalath? What do you have to do with Mahalath, Jemimah?" I enjoined.

"Her heart was sick and it broke."

"Don't be so silly. How can you know that about someone who was buried in the year 1780?"

"We remember our people for a long time. I know Mahalath like a sister and I also know that her fate will be my fate too."

"Now you're being ridiculous!" I shouted. But at this, Jemimah Loew suddenly put her hand over her heart and her face twitched with pain as if she were suffering some great physical discomfort.

Once more I was violently assailed by fear and when she took my hand and placed it on her bosom, my fear increased.

"Can you hear how it beats and throbs, Herman? It's my death knell ringing for my funeral. You call yourself a great doctor and you haven't even noticed it?"

She spoke these last words with such a charming smile on her face that the idea of her early demise

seemed all the more shocking to me. I seized both her hands in mine and shouted at her angrily: "To joke about such things is madness! In the ordinary way I make allowances for you, but such words go too far, even for you!"

"No joke was intended," she replied. "Do you want me to tell you Mahalath's story?"

I could only nod my head, prey to an endless malaise of gloom and foreboding.

Jemimah Loew commenced there and then to tell me the story: "She who lies buried here was called Mahalath because her limbs were slim and supple and her feet seemed to dance when she walked. She too was born in the grime of poverty and darkness like I was, and in even greater poverty and even greater darkness than me, for the Jewish quarter of Prague was a much less happy place than it is today during the reign of the great and mighty empress Maria Theresa, and not even fresh air was granted to us free of charge and every year we had to pay two hundred and eleven thousand guilders for her gracious permission to waste away here by ourselves amidst mist and darkness. But Mahalath's soul was freer than that of the proudest Christian woman in Prague. She was well-read too and played the lute with those fine hands of hers so that she came to be called a pearl of her race like Rabbi Jehuda's wife, Pearl. She was born in darkness and longed for the light. Many great men from all over the world have died for that. Why should a poor girl not lay down her life for it too? Why are you looking at me like that, Herman? Are you also of the opinion that a girl can only die for love? Don't go thinking it was love that killed our Mahalath even though her heart broke in the end. Those who are of the opinion that she died because of her affair with a young count are wrong. The young count in question tried to abduct her from her father's house by force and Her Imperial Majesty Maria Theresa later admitted that he had had to flee abroad. Mahalath laughed at this young fop who had nothing more to give her than his name, his wealth, his velvet frockcoat and his plumed hat. They called her the dancer and she died because her soul was too proud to reveal outwardly what she suffered for her people inwardly. The only place where she could see the sun was here in Beth-Chaim. She read the inscriptions on the gravestones here and learned the stories of those who lie buried under them and her soul danced over the graves until the dead pulled her down to join them down below!"

How ominously the young girl at my side uttered that brief phrase 'down below'!

"Jemimah," I cried, clasping together my hands, not knowing what I was doing: "Jemimah, I love you!"

But she stretched out her hand at me with an admonitory gesture and stamped on the ground with her tiny foot. "That's not true. The young lordling in his green and gold, the one with the white plumed hat, didn't love Mahalath either and whoever proclaims that she died for the love of him is lying. She had something wrong with her heart and our defunct forebears dragged her down to their level to join them. You say you love me, Herman, but, were I to begin right now this minute to sink into Hades, you wouldn't lift a finger to pull me back!"

How penetrating was the look she gave me! It was as though her dark eyes were drawing from my heart its deepest secrets. If I had truly loved her, I would have borne that look and answered it in kind, but she was right to say I didn't love her and, because of the high fever I was running, I averted my eyes from her and lowered them.

The last thing that I wanted was to play her false, to betray her. In befriending this poor girl no wicked thought had as yet suggested itself to me. Then why this debilitating guilt, this feeling of remorse for which my memory was unable to account? I felt the burden of a terrible responsibility nagging at me as I timidly and almost fearfully contemplated this adorable creature in her threatening posture as her eyes flashed and her hand became a fist in desperation to defend herself against her feelings of affection for me.

"Poor Jemimah! Poor Jemimah!" I cried, and now, for the first time, our eyes met. Gradually her looks grew less angry and her eyes moistened and shone. Her clenched fist fell open and was placed on my arm.

"Don't be sad, my dear. It's not your fault. You have made me very happy, dirty, ignorant, useless little thing that I am, and for that I can never thank you enough. You're not to blame if my heart is so foolish it will one day overstep the limits God has set to keep it safe inside my breast. Feel how it's beating. We have here in the ghetto a great lady doctor. I listened once behind the door when she and my mother were talking about me. It cannot be otherwise. My heart, when it gets too big, will be the death of me."

"Jemimah, Jemimah, I'll get you other, better doctors who'll listen to your chest with a stethoscope and tell you you're mistaken, that the old quack has made an error in her diagnosis!" I shouted. "You'll

live for a very long time and be a beautiful and gracious lady. You'll escape from this decadent and pestilential atmosphere, from this horrible place that you're in!"

"Where to? No, better to remain here where my ancestors have been buried since the destruction of the Temple. But you, my dear, will go back to your own country and forget me as one forgets a dream. How can you prevent a dream from coming to an end and the pale and sensible morning from waking you and telling you that it was nothing after all? Leave and leave soon. Both of us are fated to. You will be an erudite and well-respected gentleman in your own land, kind and compassionate to poor and weak alike as you were kind and compassionate to me, for I too was poor and I too was weak and you could have done me a great deal of harm had you really wanted to. Now these elder trees are bare and I am alive, but when these old trees and bushes next spring stretch out their blossoms to each other over the graves, I shall be lying as peaceful and still under my headstone as Mahalath the dancer here who died in the same year as the great and mighty empress, Maria Theresa. How long will you remember Jemimah Loew from the Josephsstadt when the lilacs bloom then in Prague?"

Once again I tried to be totally objective and reasonable about this silly speech, but could not, for the life of me, manage it and righteous indignation met with just as scant success. We both just stood there mutely, side by side, at the dancer's final resting place and, just as on that first morning, when I first came to this spot, horror gripped me with its ghostly hand in broad daylight. It was as if the earth itself were heaving like a molehill, as if ghastly and skeletal hands were everywhere at once toppling back the stones and pushing leaves and grass away from each other. I stood there as if caught between mounds of rolling skulls and all that lively putrefaction reached out to me grinning and seemed to have designs on the beautiful girl at my side.

It was a thing greatly to be wondered at that the tall thin man from Danzig and the fat man from Hamburg who were having themselves shown round Beth-Chaim at the time by Jemimah's old relative, were signally oblivious to this freak of nature. They strolled on serenely, their hands in their trouser pockets, chinking their small change in the hollow-eyed and grinning face of each putrescent century. The presence in this place of these two men in no way frightened off the Manitou as might have been expected. They only, on the contrary, served to accentuate its menace, for it was quite unnatural that two grown men should be so blithely unaware of what was going on under their very feet and all around them.

As they came towards us I could hear how the man from Hamburg was saying to the man from Danzig that he held the highly and unjustly renowned Jewish cemetery of Prague to be nothing more or less than a damnable swindle and a blasted old quarry and, once again, I pulled myself together, wiped the sweat from my brow and cried out: "No! No! This is lunacy! It's the product of a sick mind! How can anyone let a stupid thing like this put the wind up them to this extent? If there wasn't something wrong with me, I too would be walking round here every bit as calmly as those two visitors."

"Stop trying to fight it," said Jemimah, and, as the two strangers and her old relative drew nearer to us, she ran away from me, skipped lightly over Mahalath's grave, doubled over and slid off through the low branches of the elder bushes, turning back once more to look at me through their foliage and called out to me, putting her finger to her mouth as was her wont: "Remember the elderflower!"

Then she disappeared and I never saw her again. Is it not a bitter truth that every human hand is like the hand of a child that cannot hold on to anything for very long? It snatches at anything shiny or attractive or at anything expressly forbidden to it. The first it destroys out of childish curiosity while it stands before the second open-mouthed or drops it out of sheer panic.

"Just who was this Mahalath who lies here underneath this tombstone?" I asked the gatekeeper after the two Northern Germans had departed.

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"Her descendants still live in the ghetto. The family is a respected one in Jewish circles and, because of that, we are loath to talk about it. In the forty years since her death a whole host of legends have grown up about her. She had a love affair with a young man from the Kleinseite, from the Malteserplatz. For Jewish people generally the honour of their family is paramount. In matters where the honour of a family is at stake we are punctilious and can be very cruel. Suffice it to say that the poor creature ended her life unhappily and that the story is a sad one."

When the old man opened up the gate to Beth-Chaim for me, he had good reason to stare at me, shaking his head. Like a drunken man I wandered up and down that day and tried in vain to weigh my guilt and innocence against each other. In vain I did everything possible to shift the burden weighing now so heavy on my soul elsewhere or at least to make it lighter by telling myself that the words of this young girl were merely the meaningless whims and fancies of an immature mind.

Finally I staggered back to my room in Nekazalka Street, took out my medical textbooks and my slovenly and intermittent lecture notes and began, all of a tremble, with unflagging application, to con all that was written therein on the subject of the human heart, the actual physical entity itself, its functions, its well-being and its various ailments. I later wrote a book about these things which medical science has deemed most useful and which has been reprinted several times. If only medical science knew what this reputation as a leading authority on heart disease has cost me in personal terms. Not only literary works are born out of personal sorrow and grief.

It was very sultry that day. Heavy white clouds came rolling up over the rooftops and congregated there in threatening, leaden grey cloudbanks and, in spite of the fact that there was hardly a breath of air anywhere, I was driven from my room yet again, down into the hot and sticky streets. As the first clap of thunder reverberated sonorously, making windows in the town vibrate in their frames, I pulled on the rickety bell of the gatekeeper's house at the entrance to the old Jewish cemetery.

Instead of the long-bearded, venerable head of the ancient there appeared at the grille the wrinkled sallow face of the gatekeeper's old female servant.

"Where is your master? I must speak to him at once."

"God in heaven, young man. You look awful. Whatever's happened? Why have you come back again so soon? What spell is it that binds you to this place?"

Without so much as bothering to answer her questions, I pushed my way past the old chatterbox. On over the dark, now, in the thunderstorm, frightening, appallingly dark, paths of the cemetery I hurried, and, on reaching the grave of the Chief Rabbi, found there the old man, unperturbed by the ever more powerful outbreaks of the storm.

Whoever has not seen the place where I now was at a time like the one I am describing knows nothing whatsoever about it. There is no other place in the whole of the world where the advent of doomsday will be awaited with greater trepidation. The sky will then, as now, become "as black as sackcloth", the lightning flash, the thunder crack and people bow their heads in fear and trembling. How those old elder bushes writhe as they resist the storm's ravages. They shriek and groan like living beings at the end of their tether. Not like other trees and bushes do they rustle in the rain. The earth laps up the constant streams of water trickling down the topsy-turvy gravestones with a grateful and uncanny gurgle. Today is the day of the Lord; today is truly a "destruction from the Almighty".

We searched for a sheltered corner where we might, to some extent, find refuge from the fury of the storm and could only find it in the part of the cemetery where Mahalath was buried. There I spoke to the old man and told him everything without holding anything back. I told him the story of my friendship with Jemimah right from the beginning. As clearly and distinctly as I could I told him of our meetings with each other. I would have willingly accounted for each hour and every minute we had spent together.

He let me speak without once interrupting me. When I came to the end of my story, having, by then, run out of breath, he stroked my hair and forehead with his hard and bony hand.

"Your heart is a good one, my son, and I am as glad for your sake as I am for Jemimah's that you have spoken to me as you have. It is a fine thing for a conscience to be easy to arouse and for it not to need to hear, in order to be woken, the clarion calls of an avenging angel. I am grateful to you for coming here like this to pour out your heart to me. You need not fear that I will reproach you with angry words. Whoever walks among these stones, whoever breathes the air in this place, learns to look with tolerance on both the deeds and misdeeds of his fellow men. There are worse things you could have told me and I, in my turn, could have shown you graves here under which even more terrible secrets lie buried or to which rumours of such secrets have attached themselves. Thank God that you do not belong to the ranks of the wicked who, after causing irreparable harm, laugh and scoff and earn great notoriety because of it. You have only been frivolous and thoughtless. What yesterday was still a game is now in deadly earnest. A spark can grow into a flame before we realise it and then we beat it down as anxiously and urgently as we can but find ourselves unable to extinguish it. Poor wee Jemimah! She's always been a square peg in a round hole, even when she was younger. I should never have allowed her to turn this terrible garden of mine into her playground. Why did I need, old fool that I am, to keep her by my side through so many summer days just to tell her the stories of these headstones the way other children get told fairy tales about pixies and dwarves? Woe is me, for whose fault is it if it is so? But such things cannot be. Half of her hasn't grown up yet and we can still make amends for our sins of omission. What does she have to do with the dead anyway? Just because I was only able to live here, within these walls, I shut her young soul up in here with me, and, in doing so, kept her safe from all the dirt outside in the street, but it meant that only here did she see the light of day and the flowers that bloom in the spring. A sun that shines on corpses! Elder flowers growing on graves! But she'll never set

foot here again. She'll leave and see life as other children do. She won't die, will she? Because of us? Because of me?"

I could not answer him. A red flash of lightning broke over our heads and, once again, a thunderbolt came crashing in its wake.

"You too, my boy, should never set foot here again," the old man went on. "It won't do you any good either! You too are too young to breathe the air here. If you're still in Prague tomorrow, curse your luck and depart immediately. That's my advice!"

"You want to separate me from her? Now you want to separate me from her?" I shouted. "That's no good. That won't help to cure her. You too, old man, are ignorant of the ways of the living. For the love of God, do not separate me from her. What good can it do to drive me away from her now?"

"We have no choice," said the old man, now more himself again. "You are no less sick than the girl herself. Healing lies in separation for the one as for the other."

I had no weapons against that cruel old man. He threatened, he cajoled and I finally gave in to him, even though I knew that it was not a good thing to do, and so I killed my poor Jemimah from the Josephstown, and that is why the elderflower, which to everybody else gives so much pleasure, is, for me, the flower of death and judgement.

I fled but I could not flee from myself. I shut my ears in order not to hear the plaintive voice that called me back to Prague yet could not help but hear it day and night.

The following winter I studied in Berlin and, what at first sight must appear unlikely, genuinely studied. I doubt that the pursuit of any branch of learning save the study of mankind's afflictions and infirmities would have been possible for me from that moment on. Such study had, of necessity, to agree with me and with masochistic pleasure I gave myself up to it completely and managed to derive therefrom a certain peace of mind. Afterwards they told me it had been a long, hard winter; I was scarcely aware of the snow and the blizzards and the frost. Only with the renewed onset of spring did I awake from this wretched condition, but it was no healthy awakening, more of a sudden jolt forward impelled by the touch of a cold and ghostly hand.

When I finally scrambled, shocked and shaken, to my feet, I saw that there was nobody there.

It happened on the ninth day of May, 1820, a Sunday. I was sitting in a park near the Schoenhaus Gate without quite knowing how I came to be there. All around me the springtime clientele of an outdoor cafe were enjoying themselves. Children played, old people chattered, loving couples communicated in a language all their own through looks or through whispers. I sat alone at my table gazing dreamily at my glass and felt as cold as ice. How happy I had been in former times to be surrounded by such joyful goings-on and how little I cared for such things now.

Not far from the half-hidden place where I was sitting a girl began to laugh, a high-pitched, hearty, long guffaw. I was back in the old Jewish graveyard in Prague, the sun was shining through the elder trees and there, behind the tomb of Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, my lovely Jemimah was making fun of me and her pretty face and body seemed to hover in mid air over a moss-covered headstone. When I looked up, of course, the mirage had vanished. I asked the waiter to tell me what day it was and repeated the date to myself in amazement when he told me.

Now, for the first time, I stood up and looked around me. The trees were all either green or covered in blossoms. The air was warm. The sky was clear. Winter had changed into spring without my noticing. To many people such things are beautiful and many poets, for instance, have told of them with rapture. That strong feeling of consternation that takes one by surprise when one wakes up in this way is a good and profitable source of inspiration for a poem. This unperceived passing of time is, in my book, however, one of the least palatable things that one has, from time to time, to reflect on in life.

The elder trees too were in flower above me, all around me. The newly opened buds were already coming into blossom, robed in white and ruddy raiment, and the blossoms were being slightly, ever so slightly, agitated by a moving of the wind amid the bright green leaves. The following day I was on my way to Prague having fought hard but fruitlessly against the voice that was calling me back there.

I travelled night and day, but as there were no steam trains then, those trains that seem to us nowadays to creep along so slowly that their speed defies description, it was only during the afternoon of the fifteenth day of May that I finally reached the town that I was so afraid of reaching and already, in the distance, a collective chiming of festive church bells heralded the turmoil in which I was shortly to find myself. The following day was the feast day of that great patron saint of Bohemia, St John

Nepomuk, and whole villages were walking in procession with crosses, banners, censers and holy pictures, singing ancient hymns all in praise of the poor father confessor of Queen Joan, all on their way to the centre of Prague as I was. The old grey town itself was virtually unrecognizable. All the houses were adorned, including their gable ends, with greenery, floral tributes and carpets. Everywhere preparations were underway for candlelight processions. The streets and squares of the town were practically impassable and, like a swimmer caught by a strong undertow, one had to fight against the forward movement of the crowd in order not to lose one's direction.

After a great deal of effort I finally obtained accommodation at the 'Golden Goose' in the Horse Market, subsequently known as Wenceslas Square.

The room assigned to me in this hostinec was not notable for its spaciousness and even less so for its view. Its one and only window overlooked a long courtyard hemmed in on all sides by tall buildings and balconies. A terrible tangle of carts and waggons pressing in on one another had arisen despite which room was still being found for plush and fashionable carriages of the latest design, only just now rolling up, from whence issued a constant stream of late arrivals decked out in the most bizarre and colourful of costumes. Coachmen and stable boys were swearing like troopers in Czech and German. Women and children were screeching and howling in every key conceivable. Peasants, town folk and the military endeavoured to make it easier for the ladies to step out of the carriages, or, as sometimes happened in certain cases, more difficult.

Directly opposite my window a tailor had just put the finishing touches to a high-days-and-holidays pair of trousers, for which an anxious customer was no doubt waiting, and was now blowing on a hunting horn his own good-natured proclamation of seasonal merriment out of his own window. Just at that moment all the bells in Prague started once again to ring out in harmony and I leaned against the frame of my upstairs window in more of a daze than ever.

I was just about to close it so as not to succumb to the strong smell of sweat exuded by the crowd when my eye beheld a shape the sight of which brought me to my senses immediately.

In a circle of laughing Bohemians and Germans stood a Jewish pedlar with a bundle of brightly coloured kerchieves and ribbons which he was offering for sale to the women and girls alighting from the carriages. I recognized the man right away: it was Baruch Loew, Jemimah's father, and one minute later I was standing in front of him and holding his arm in a vice-like grip.

"Is it still going? Is it still going strong? It hasn't packed up yet? You haven't buried it like Mahalath's, have you?"

"What the devil!" cried the street hawker, taken aback by being accosted so crazily. "What's up?"

Then he knew me and, naturally enough, thought only of the watch I had once left in hock at his house and never been back to reclaim. He looked me in the face with an apologetic smile.

"Blow me down with a feather if it isn't that handsome clever clogs of a medical student. Well, this is a surprise and no mistake. Why shouldn't it still be going strong then? It keeps time to the minute even now, but I'm sorry to say I don't have it any more. What can I do for you apart from that?"

I pushed the man out of the courtyard of the 'Golden Goose' into the site of the old horse fair. There I repeated my question to him, mentioning his daughter by name, and now his face altered so dramatically, and he looked at me so stunned and stony-faced and crestfallen that there was no need to wait for his answer. A procession that was even then making its way over that very spot separated us from each other and I apathetically allowed myself to be shoved, dragged along and borne away by the crowd.

In the Jewish quarter it was as quiet as the grave. The silence was unnerving. Once again I rang the bell at the entrance to Beth Chaim and once again a grille was opened in the gate and the wrinkled, nearly centenarian face of the guardian of this 'house of life' appeared in the opening and, at the same time, the bolt was pulled back.

"So it's you!" said the old man. "I knew that somehow I'd see you again. Come through!"

He walked in front of me and I followed him down the shadowy graveyard paths and the festive exultations of a thousand clamouring voices in the great city of Prague were blotted out by the silence. The elder flowers in bloom made a splendid show over the graves but there were no birds to sing in them.

"Have they already told you she's passed on?" said the greybeard.

I nodded and the latter continued and spoke almost word for word like the royal psalmist of his people: "I am like one forsaken among the dead, like one whose joy has been removed from him. The loveliest flower of the field has been plucked and the voice of the cantor is no more heard among us."

He gently took hold of my hand: "Do not weep, my son. What they always say is always true: tears won't bring her back to us. Perhaps it was wrong of me to drive you away, but who could have said then what was right and what was wrong? Her funeral was only last week. The greatest of physicians were at her bedside but were powerless to help her. She was right. Her heart was too big. Do not hold yourself responsible for her death. You were just as sick as she was. All those scholarly gentlemen agreed that she couldn't have held out much longer at best. Her memories of you, my son, were joyful ones, expressed in affectionate terms of endearment. You were a ray of sunlight in her short, dark and poverty-stricken life. Through you she became conversant with the blue vault of heaven and the land of the living of which I had kept her so fearfully ignorant. You brought her much joy and a great deal of happiness and a thousand blessings intended for you were on her lips when she died. Oh, it was a great, sad and beautiful miracle how even her thoughts as well as the whole of her physical being were utterly transformed. The Lord of All knows best how to lead His children out of darkness, out from behind prison walls into light and freedom. She was beautiful when she died, truly beautiful. I could only keep her hostage here and so the God of the Living took her from me to be with Him forever in the real 'House of Life'. May His name be ever glorified!"

What answer I made to the old man's words I no longer know. "Remember the elderflower!" she had said and how I did remember it throughout my life I have just related. Her grave was not to be found in the old Jewish cemetery in Josephstown for the good emperor Joseph had forbidden any further burials to take place there. Mahalath's had been the last.

I have taken a long time to write down all the memories that went through my mind as I held that garland of elderflowers in my hand which another dead girl had worn. Now a grieving mother took it off me and put it back into the pretty box from which she had taken it in the first place.

Then she laid her hand upon my shoulder: "How grateful I am to you, doctor, for sharing my grief so closely."

I looked at her, incapable of a reply. The fire in the stove had gone out and the room had grown cold. The sun had gone down behind the skyline. The brightness of that winter day had faded. I cannot describe how heavily I felt the burden of my years weigh down on me.

Sadder, yes, but none the worse for that, I made my way downstairs again, past an ever-young and meditative muse, and left that quiet, chilly, fatal house behind me.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ELDERFLOWERS ***

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