



SHORT FICTION

HJALMAR SÖDERBERG

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translated by
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FOREWORD

This edition of Hjalmar Söderberg's *Short Fiction* was produced from various translations. "The Chimney Sweeper's Wife," "Bloom," "The Fur Coat," "The Blue Anchor," "The Kiss," "The Dream of Eternity," "The Drizzle," "The Drawing in India Ink," "The Wages of Sin," "The Communion," "The Clown," "Signy," and "A Masterless Dog" were translated by Charles Wharton Stork and originally published in 1923. "Vox Populi" was translated by Esther Rapp and originally published in 1927. "Margot," "The Burning City," and "Archimedes' Point" were translated by Charles Wharton Stork and originally published in 1928. "The Parson's Cows" was also translated by Charles Wharton Stork and originally published in 1929.

ROBIN WHITTLETON
Billeberga, Sweden, January 2025

SHORT FICTION

THE CHIMNEY-SWEEPER'S WIFE

This is a grim and sad story. I heard it told more than once in my childhood, and it made me wonder and shudder.

In a side street stands an old middle-class house with a smooth gray façade. Through a large round-arched door without any decorations—there is, to be sure, a date, and perhaps too a couple of garlands with fruit—one comes upon a narrow courtyard paved with cobblestones, and a dark, stone-paved fountain like so many of its kind, where the sun never strikes the path. An old linden with pollarded branches, blackened bark, and leafage thinned with age stands in one corner; it is as old as the house, older indeed, and is always a favorite resort for the children and cats of the courtyard.

This was of old the yard of Wetzmann, the master chimney-sweep.

Sweeper Wetzmann must have been a very good-natured old fellow. He had had success in life and had got together quite a large property. He was kind to the poor, harsh to his prentices—for such was the custom; so perhaps it needed to be, too—and drank toddy in the tavern every evening, for he had a poor life at home.

His wife was likewise harsh to the prentices, but she was not kind to the poor or to anyone else either. She had worked as maidservant in sweeper Wetzmann's house before she became his second wife. At that time Envy and Lust were the two of the seven deadly sins which were nearest her nature; now it was rather Wrath and Pride.

She was large and strongly built and in her earlier days must have been handsome.

The son Frederick was slim and pale. He was born of the first marriage, and it was said that he resembled his mother. He had a good head and a cheerful disposition, and was studying to be a minister. He had just become a student when he fell into a long and severe illness which held him to his bed a whole winter.

In a wing of the court lived a charwoman with her daughter Magda. Was her name really Magda? I do not know, but I always called her so to

myself when as a child I heard the older people tell of her on a winter evening in the twilight; and I pictured to myself a pale, shy little child's face, flooded about with an abundance of bright hair, and with a very red mouth. She was fifteen and had just been confirmed. Perhaps it was that "being confirmed" which made me represent her to myself as serious and quiet, like the young girls I used to see in church on Sunday, and which caused me to think of her as clad in a long shiny black dress.

In the spring, when the student began to convalesce, the charwoman's daughter came by his desire to sit at his bedside a while in the afternoon and read aloud.

Mrs. Wetzmann did not approve of this. She was afraid a liking might grow up between them. Her stepson, for all she cared, might fall in love with whomsoever he wished and might betroth himself, too—that did not concern her; but at least it must not be with a charwoman's daughter! She kept a mistrustful eye on Magda, but had to put up with the arrangement. An invalid should of course be diverted in some way or other; and the doctor had forbidden him to read in bed, because he had weak eyes and was not to overstrain himself.

So the girl sat by his bedside and read aloud both religious and secular books, and the student lay there pale and weak, listening to her voice and looking at her, too, in which he found pleasure.

Such a red mouth she had!

They were nearly of the same age—he was not over seventeen or eighteen—and they had often played together as children. Soon enough they grew confidential.

As often as possible Mrs. Wetzmann found some excuse to go into the sickroom to see how things were getting on there. The two young folks ought to have noticed this and been on their guard; but then one does not always do as one ought. One day, when she noiselessly and cautiously opened the door, matters were in the following state: Magda had left her chair, which had been set at some distance from the bed, and now stood leaning over the headboard with her arms around the young man's neck. He in turn had raised himself half up with his elbows propped on the pillow and was caressing her hair with a thin white hand, while they kissed each other fervently. From time to time, also, they whispered certain broken words without meaning.

The sweeper's wife grew dark red. Notwithstanding, she could not keep from smiling inwardly: hadn't everything turned out exactly as she knew it would! But now there was going to be an end to it. Wrath and Pride rose up within her, till they swelled and glowed from her cheeks

and eyes, which sent out sparks; and who knows—while she stood there silent and unseen, regarding the two young people, who had neither eyes nor ears for anything but each other—who knows if Envy and Lust, too, did not covertly slink forth from their retreat and play each on its own hidden string within her soul?

She did not reflect long, but stepped hastily forward to the bed, seized the girl's slender wrist in an iron grasp, gave her a disgraceful epithet, and flung her out of the door with a stream of the foulest abuse.

Afterwards, in the interested presence of the servants and prentices, she swore a solemn and luscious oath that if the young girl ever again dared to set foot within her threshold, she should get her skin full of so many blows that she would not be able to stir a fin for fourteen days.

There was no one who doubted that she meant to keep her word.

The invalid made no reproaches to his stepmother. Every time she went through the room he turned his face to the wall; he did not wish to see or speak to her after her performance with Magda. But one day he confided to his father in private that he could not live unless Magda might be his bride. The old chimney-sweeper was surprised and vexed, but dared not immediately set up any serious opposition: his son was the one person he cared for and who showed him any tenderness in return, and he could not endure the thought of losing him.

He put the matter aside for future action and gave his wife a share in his anxiety.

How can I describe what occurred next? It sounds like an evil dream or a story made to frighten children when they are naughty, and yet it is true.

It is supposed to have been on a Sunday evening in May that it happened.

The courtyard is still, the street is still. Maybe someone hums a song through a kitchen window, or some children play down in the alley.... The invalid is alone in his room. He is counting the quarter-hours and the minutes. It is spring outside now. Soon it will be summer. Shall he never get up from his bed, never again hear the woods murmur and rustle, never as before be able to measure the day in periods of activity and periods of rest? And Magda.... If only he did not always see before him her face with the wild alarm in her look that came there when his stepmother seized her by the wrist! She had not needed to be afraid. The

wicked woman would not have dared to do her any serious harm, for she knew that he had chosen her for his bride.

So he lies there dreaming, now awake, now half-awake, while he lets his pupils suck in the light of the sunbeam on the white door. When he shuts his eyes, there swims out an archipelago of poisonously green islands surrounded by an inky black sea. And as he dozes, the green passes over into blue, the black brightens to bluish red with ragged dark edges, and at last everything grows black together. . . .

He feels a light hand stroking his forehead, and he starts up in bed.

It is Magda. Magda stands before him, small and slender, with a smiling red mouth, and lays a bunch of spring flowers in front of him on the cover. Anemones and almond blossoms and violets.

Is it true, is it really she?

“How did you dare?” he whispers.

“Your stepmother is away,” she answers. “I saw her go just now, dressed to go out. I heard she was to go to South Stockholm, and it will surely be long before she comes home. So then I slipped up the stairs and in to you.”

She stays a long while with him, telling of the woods where she has walked alone and listened to the birds and picked spring flowers for him whom she loves. And they kiss each other as often as possible and caress like two children, and both are happy, while the hours run and the sunbeam on the floor becomes burning gold and then red, then pales and fades away.

“Perhaps you ought to go,” says Frederick. “She may soon be home. What should I do if she wanted to beat you, I who am lying here sick and weak, who grow dizzy if I get up out of bed. Perhaps you ought to go.”

“I’m not afraid,” says Magda.

For she wants to show unmistakably that she loves him and that she will gladly suffer for her love’s sake.

Only when twilight comes does she kiss him for the last time and steal out of the house. She stops a minute in the courtyard and looks up at the window of the room where he is lying with her almond blossoms and violets on the bedcover. When she turns to the little room in the wing of the court, she stands face to face with Mrs. Wetzmann, and she utters a little scream.

There is no living human being in the courtyard, none but these two. Round about stand the walls, staring at them in the darkness with empty, black windows, and the old linden trembles in its corner.

“You’ve been up there!” says the sweeper’s wife.

As a child I always believed that she smiled when she said this, and that her teeth shone as white in the darkness as those of her husband's prentices.

"Yes, I have been with him," Magda may perhaps have answered, defiant and erect even in her chalk-pale terror.

What happened then? No one really knows, but probably there was a desperate pursuit round the courtyard. At the foot of the old linden the girl tripped and fell. She dared not call for help, for fear the invalid might hear; and besides, who would have helped her? Her mother was away at work. The infuriated woman was above her—she had meanwhile got hold of a weapon, a broomstick or something of the sort—and blow followed blow. A couple of half-strangled screams from a throat constricted by the dread of death, and then nothing more.

A couple of prentices who had just come home stood down in the dark doorway and looked on; they did not move a finger to help the girl. Perhaps they did not dare; perhaps, too, they were led by a faint hope of seeing their mistress carried off in a police wagon some day.

When Mrs. Wetzmann went into the house after exercising her right of mastery—for she felt by instinct that she naturally had proprietary right to all over whom she could and would exercise it—she stumbled against something soft in the stairway. It was Frederick. He had heard the faint screams, had sprung from bed and gone out, and had fallen on the stairs.

Magda lived three days; she then died and was buried.

Sweeper Wetzmann paid a sum of money to the charwoman, her mother, and there were no legal proceedings on the matter. Nevertheless the old man took it hard. He went no more to the tavern to drink toddy, but generally sat at home in a leather-covered chair and spelled in an old Bible. He fell into a decline, grew silent and peculiar, and it was not a year before he too was dead and laid in earth.

The son Frederick grew slowly better; but he never passed his examination as minister, for both his grasp of intellect and his memory had become weakened. He was often seen going with flowers to Magda's grave; he walked leaning forward and very rapidly, indeed he almost ran, as if he had many important errands to attend to, and he mostly had a couple of books under his arm. To the end he remained wholly weak-minded.

And the sweeper's wife? She seems to have had a strong nature. There are people who are not exactly conscienceless, but who never of their own accord hit upon the idea that they have done anything wrong. It may happen that a fellow with bright buttons on his coat may clap them on

the shoulder and request them to come along with him; then their conscience awakens. But no one came to Mrs. Wetzmann. She sent her stepson to an asylum when he became too troublesome at home, she mourned her husband, as was proper and customary, and then she married again. When she drove to church on the bridal day, she wore a jacket of lilac-colored silk with gold braid and was “fixed up fit to kill”—so said my grandmother, who was sitting at her window in the house opposite and saw the whole display while she was turning a leaf in her book of sermons.

BLOOM

On a brilliant August morning at eight o'clock precisely the gates of the establishment of Långholm were opened for three boarders of the establishment, who had come there for various causes and sojourned for various periods. These periods were exactly suited to the grade and kind of their differences with the law-abiding community as proved by their conduct. They did not know each other, and having no feeling of brotherhood through their common misfortune, they said to one another neither good morning nor goodbye.

The man who came out first was a thickset fellow with a beast-like forehead and heavy wrists. One dark evening he had fallen upon an old workman whom he did not like, knocked out some of his teeth, and kicked him in the chest so that he coughed blood for several days. He had been given a month for assault and battery, which did him little harm, and he betook himself hastily to the nearest tavern.

Next came a man who had swindled an impersonal entity known as a bank of a fairly large sum of money. The three months he had spent indoors had not overly bleached his fresh brandy complexion. He had a well-fitting summer suit of dark blue with narrow white edgings; on his feet he wore new yellow shoes, and in his hand he held an elegant little satchel of the same color as the shoes, so that he most nearly resembled a traveling salesman who comes whistling softly out of a hotel. He did not, however, whistle, but mounted into a cab with a lowered hood, under which a black-clad woman with pale and anxious features awaited him. He then tossed an address to the coachman, and vanished in a cloud of dust.

Last came the former tailor's apprentice Bloom, Oscar Valdemar Napoleon. His complexion inclined more to gray, for he had had to atone with a nine months' sentence for the theft of a jacket hung out for show—this being, to be sure, his second trip to the establishment. He had in his right breast pocket, besides his birth certificate with its less flattering annotations, the sum of eighty crowns inserted in a blue

envelope, together with a certificate of good conduct at Långholm from the prison director.

That was not much to represent nine months' work, but he had also had his board and lodging meanwhile. For him it was in any case a considerable sum, and it had been besides a lever for many future plans, most of which rested on clear improbabilities, for many dreams of a new life, for happiness and prosperity and general respect. This had been especially the case during those last weeks when, in consideration of his rapidly approaching freedom, he had been spared the humiliation of being shaved, for he had felt his manly self-esteem sprout afresh and grow in rivalry with the bristles on his upper lip and chin. But now, when he was actually free, when he felt the light, cool breeze of the summer morning fan about his temples and heard it rustling in the big trees, all of these plans were pushed somewhat into the background as if of themselves, of course only until a later time, only for a few hours or perhaps a day, and a single great emotion of happiness rose up in him and swept him along as though in a vertigo. Furthermore he was very hungry, because he had hardly touched his Långholm fare on that last morning, and he thought with yearning and satisfaction of a little restaurant on Brenchurch Street which he knew from of old, and of a great beefsteak with onions and one or maybe two bottles of beer—only think of it, beer!

On the Långholm Bridge stood a guard off duty, fishing for roach with small bits of saffron bread. Bloom stood with his arms on the railing and watched: it amused him to pretend that he was not in a hurry. Down there in the deep green of the quiet water, in the shadow under the bridge, big red-eyed roach swam back and forth around the bait, pointing at it a while, turning around in hesitation and coming back again; now and then came a rudd or two with red fins and yellow back, beautiful fish, but tasting a little of clay, and once in a while came a glint from the broad silver side of a bream. On both sides of the narrow Långholm Bay large bending willows dipped their gray-green leaves into the water, and the reeds waved gently in the morning wind. In the background far away, the churches and towers of Stockholm stood in the blue sun-haze as if cut with a fine needle.

“Yes,” remarked Bloom to the guard, “now one can begin to live again.”

“Yes, good luck to you, Bloom!” answered the guard without taking his eyes from the float, which just then took a dip under the water. “That

was a bite, but the fish only took the bread and left the hook to the landlord.”

A steam sloop came sputtering up under the bridge on its way to the city and lay to at the nearest landing. For a moment Bloom was tempted to go with it, but came back directly to his first idea: the restaurant on Brenchurch Street, beefsteak, onions and beer, so he said goodbye to the guard and went ahead on the Långholm Road. He felt himself from of old most at home in the section of South Stockholm between Skinnarviksberg, Lilyholm Bridge and Långholm.

When Bloom emerged, full-fed and contented, from his restaurant, his first impulse was to buy a new black felt hat, for the old one inclined too much to yellow-brown, and he had heard sometime or other that the hat makes the gentleman. After that he went to the nearest barber shop on Horn Street and had them remove the stubble from his chin, together with part of that on his cheeks; retaining, however—besides his mustaches, of course—a couple of small mutton-chop whiskers next the ears. After that he went slantwise across the street to a general outfitter’s, whence he came out attired in a clean white collar, a blue-edged dickey, and a brilliant light-blue necktie. A few steps further up the street he stopped before a photographer’s showcase and looked at himself in the glass. He was greatly moved at the transformation he had undergone. A ribbon-like strip of paper was picturesquely wound among portraits of serving-maids, dressmakers, Salvation Army soldiers, recruits, and a parson with a parson’s collar; and when he read on this that he could have half-a-dozen card-sized pictures made for two and a half crowns, he felt an irresistible temptation to go up and be photographed. It was partly that the day was significant for him, so that the likeness he had taken now would be a memento for the rest of his life; partly, too, that he had a dark foreboding, which he tried to put by, that it might be long before he would again be in a condition equally worthy to be immortalized in a picture. Furthermore, he had had himself photographed at various times previously, and he remembered with satisfaction the agreeable feeling he had experienced in seeing his ego in an, as it were, glorified aspect, without spots on his coat or damaging inequalities in his complexion, handsomely shaved and with a dignified and engaging expression. He went up to the photographer, combed his hair solicitously before a

mirror, and sat down motionless before the camera with his hands on his knees.

“Will it be good?” he asked, when the sitting was over.

“The gentleman will look like a bank director,” answered the photographer after he had glanced at the plate.

When he stood on the street again, he became conscious of his good intentions calling more strongly and clearly than before. He ought to go down to the city, look up a couple of God-fearing and kindly people to whom the prison director and the pastor had given him directions, get work, and procure himself a cheap lodging. But it was still early in the day, the clockmaker’s timepiece over there on the corner did not yet point quite to ten, the sun shone heart-warmingly in the blue heavens, and the air was mild and still. He could give himself a little time, he could go a piece toward Lilyholm out in the woods.

Yes, the woods—he had thought of them many times while he sat caged off there behind the grating.

He had grown up in a village on a wooded slope half a mile south of Stockholm. After he had been confirmed, he had been set as prentice to a pious little tailor in South Stockholm. The tailor was a Baptist; Bloom also became a Baptist and submitted to total immersion. But when he went to another tailor, who belonged to the national church and constantly misused the name of the Devil, his new faith gradually waned. He made new acquaintances and became the betrothed of a middle-aged serving-maid who had a bankbook and gave him money. In that way he grew accustomed to amusements, not great, but nevertheless more than are good for poor folks. On fine summer evenings he often sat in Mosebacke’s café or on the river terrace drinking punch, sometimes with his intended, but sometimes with a little dark-haired dressmaker, whom he had got to know at Tekla’s one afternoon when she had given a tea in the maid’s room. She was called Edith; she had thick dark hair and very red lips. She went for long periods without work, but always knew how to provide for herself notwithstanding. Bloom often wished that Tekla’s faithful love for him, together with her bankbook, might by some magic means be transferred to Edith. But Edith’s heart was inconstant and never to be relied upon, and the bankbook still remained Tekla’s. So, as the case was, he at least got a little enjoyment from the money of the one and the red lips of the other.

But then came the end. The tailor with whom he worked went bankrupt, and he was out of work. Tekla promised to help him and took out money from the bank; he was to have the loan of thirty crowns till he

found work. On the evening when he was to get the money she forced him to stay longer than he cared to, and when at last he was to go and only waited for the money, the crash came. She was all the more angry because she had to speak low for fear of waking the family. Edith had been up in her room that afternoon, they had fallen out about something, and Edith had talked about all manner of things with Bloom to spite and annoy her. But Tekla was not the kind to let anybody make fun of her. She called him a cur and many other names, waving the three tenners under his nose and declaring that he should never again get a farthing from her. Thereupon he snatched them with a sudden grab and went off. He knew that she dared not make any disturbance at night; the family might wake.

But next day in court she accused him of theft. He first denied it, but afterwards confessed and related the circumstances. The plaintiff's version of the affair, however, was altogether different: the thirty crowns had lain on the table, he had taken them without her seeing it, and she had never promised them to him. The one thing that became wholly clear was that he had taken them.

That gave him his first trip.

Afterwards he had lived as best he could—had worked sometimes, and sometimes starved and begged, till one evening he got the idea of stealing a jacket on East Street so as to escape the poorhouse.

He had come down to Lilyholm Bridge. Milk-wagons rattled and shaggy peasant horses toiled painfully with their homemade carts up the steep abutment. From the hundred factory chimneys around the shore of Årstavik the smoke ascended quietly toward the welkin in straight columns, as from a sacrifice well-pleasing to the Lord. The Continental Express rushed southward along the railway embankment, its dining car full of breakfasting travelers with anchovies on their forks. But in the peaceful nook between the bridge and the shore a family of ducks swam to and fro; some white, some speckled with the suggestion of a wild duck's plumage, while in the middle of the flock the drake stood on a floating plank on one foot with his head under his wing, asleep.

Bloom took a roll that he had brought with him from the restaurant on Brenchurch Street, crumbled it to pieces, and threw the pieces to the ducks. The flock at once grew more lively; even the drake lifted his head and opened one eye, but shut it again. He was quite white, and his shut

eyelid was also white, so that Bloom had to think of the blank, uncanny marble eyes he had seen in the National Museum one Sunday many years ago. The others snapped among the bits of roll. One of them had got hold of a piece that was too big, so she dipped it into the water time after time in order to soften it and break it. Meanwhile another followed all her motions constantly with watchful eyes, and when at last the bit of roll slipped from the bill of the first, the other was instantly there and got it. There was no conflict; the first contented herself with following in turn and watching for a chance to recover the lost piece.

Bloom laughed aloud with delight.

Yes, that's right, he thought; he who has got something must look out for what he has, or someone else will come and take it. He felt it almost as a consolation to see the innocent white creature perform with impunity and entire naturalness an act which in the language of mankind is known as theft, and for which he had had to suffer severely.

A speckled duck, enticed by the bits of roll, came swimming out from the shore at the apex of a flock of little ones, gray-brown fellows with hairy fluff and small, black, pearly-bright eyes like rats. Several small girls on the way to school with books in their hands stopped and surveyed them with delight and astonishment. "Look there! are those rats?" "No, can't you see? They're birds." "Only think, they aren't afraid of the water!"

"Those are ducklings," explained Bloom, adding a didactic tone: "They are formed to go in the water. It's no more remarkable for them to go in the water than for fish to swim."

"Really!" said the largest girl. And they bounded off on their way with little skips.

Bloom recalled a story which he had once read in a school book about an ugly duckling that was transformed into a swan. He sought for an application of this to himself and partly found it in his recent transformation at the barber shop and the photographer's, but it did not seem to him fully satisfactory, and he muttered to himself as he passed on over the bridge: "Wait, I'll show them! Just wait."

It was very warm, and when he came to the other side of the bridge where nettles and burdocks were standing, gray with dust, by the edge of the road, he took off his jacket, stuck the crook of his stick through the loop, slung it over his shoulder, and went on out along the Lilyholm Road whistling a cheerful tune.

A little in front of him went a young woman with a bundle in her hand, and he hurried his steps so as to see how she looked from in front.

As he came nearer, all at once his heart nearly stood still in his breast, for he thought it must be Edith. At the same moment she turned.

“No, if it isn’t Valdemar!”

After the first expression of surprise had vanished from her face, she smiled affably and seemed not unpleasantly affected at seeing him. She was going to see an acquaintance who lived a little further out, and they went on together. He found her changed, fuller than before and redder in complexion, as if she had drunk a good deal of beer. She asked where he had been all the long time that they had not seen each other. He felt a certain satisfaction in her not seeming to know of his “second trip,” and he improvised something about a lengthy illness and employment for a while with a tailor in a neighboring town.

Edith chattered incessantly. She talked of common acquaintances and lamented over wrongs she had suffered. Tekla had been worst of all to her. But now she was married to a street-cleaner who had already drunk up her money and who beat her every day; and it served her right. She related besides a great deal about herself, but in a style that hardly seemed to make any pretence to veracity.

Bloom let her prattle and for his own part did not say much. He thought of the nine months he had spent in solitude.

He took her gently by the arm and guided her in on a path that led into the wood, and she grew silent in the midst of her talk and followed him without saying anything. The path led into a deep covert along a fence and hedge that enclosed a solitary orchard. From this orchard several big silver poplars spread their wide and lofty crowns. On the other side rose a fir-clad slope with mosses and ferns and dusky thickets. Over the tops of the firs a white summer cloud sailed slowly.

Bloom was awakened by a big raindrop which fell heavily on his right eyelid. He half raised himself and rubbed his eyes—had he been asleep? He was alone, and it was raining. It did not rain hard as yet; these were only the first big drops, but a black cloud was hanging directly over him.

Where was Edith?

He had thrown his jacket with the stick a little to one side; he got up and put it on. Suddenly a horrible thought came over him and he made a swift grab at the breast pocket.

It was empty. The blue envelope was gone—the envelope with the money and the prison director’s recommendations.

He felt a choking in his throat and a difficulty in breathing.

A sudden gust of wind shot through the leafage of the poplars like a lightning flash, and a raging squall of rain whipped him in the face.

THE FUR COAT

It was a cold winter that year. People shrank up in the chill and grew smaller, all except those who had furs. Judge Richardt had a big fur coat. It almost belonged, moreover, to his official position, for he was managing director of a brand-new company. His old friend Dr. Henck, on the contrary, had no fur coat: he had instead a pretty wife and three children. Dr. Henck was thin and pale. Some people grow fat with marriage, others grow thin. Dr. Henck had grown thin, and remained so on this particular Christmas Eve.

I've had a bad year this year, said Dr. Henck to himself, as he was on his way to his old friend John Richardt to borrow money. It was three o'clock of Christmas Eve, just the hour of the midday twilight.—I've had a very bad year. My health is fragile, not to say broken. My patients, on the contrary, have picked up, almost the whole lot of them, I see them so seldom nowadays. Presumably I'm going to die soon. My wife thinks so, too; I've seen it in her looks. In such a case it would be desirable that the event should happen before the end of January, when the cursed life insurance premium has to be paid.

By the time he had reached this point in the process of his thoughts he found himself on the corner of Government and Harbor Street. As he was about to pass the street-crossing in order to proceed down Government Street, he slipped on a smooth sleigh track and fell, and at the same moment a sleigh drove up at full speed. The driver swore and the horse instinctively turned aside, but Dr. Henck received a blow on the shoulder from one of the runners, and furthermore a screw or nail or some similar projection caught his overcoat and tore a big rent in it. People gathered around him. A policeman helped him to his feet, a young girl brushed the snow off him, an old woman gesticulated over his torn overcoat in a way that indicated she would have liked to sew it up on the spot if she could, and a prince of the royal house, who happened to be going by, picked up his cap and set it on his head. So everything was all right again except the coat.

“Lord! what a sight you are, Gustav,” said Judge Richardt, when Henck came up to his office.

“Yes, I’ve been run over,” answered Henck.

“That’s just like you,” said Richardt, laughing good-humoredly. “But you can’t go home like that. You may gladly have the loan of my fur coat, and I’ll send a boy home after my ulster.”

“Thanks,” said Dr. Henck. And after he had borrowed the hundred krona he needed, he added, “We shall be glad to have you for dinner.”

Richardt was a bachelor and was accustomed to spend Christmas Eve with Henck.

On the way home Henck was in a better humor than he had been for a long time.

That’s on account of the fur coat, he said to himself. If I had been smart, I should have got myself a fur coat on credit long ago. It would have strengthened my self-esteem and raised me in the popular opinion. One can’t pay such a small fee to a doctor in a fur coat as to a doctor in an ordinary overcoat with worn buttonholes. It’s a bother that I didn’t happen to think of that before. Now it’s too late.

He walked a stretch through King’s Garden. It was dark already, it had begun to snow again, and the acquaintances he met did not recognize him.

Who knows, though, whether it’s too late, Henck went on to himself. I’m not old yet, and I may have been mistaken about the question of my health. I’m poor as a little fox in the woods; but so was John Richardt not so long since. My wife has grown cold and unfriendly toward me in these latter times. She would surely begin to love me afresh, if I could earn more money and if I were dressed in furs. It has seemed to me that she cared more for John since he got himself a fur coat than she did before. She was certainly a bit sweet on him when she was a young girl, too; but he never courted her. On the contrary he said to her and to everybody that he wouldn’t dare to marry on less than ten thousand a year. But I dared, and Ellen was a poor girl who wanted to marry. I don’t believe she was so much in love with me that I should have been able to seduce her if I had wished to. But I didn’t want to, either; how could I have dreamed of that sort of love? I haven’t thought of that since I was sixteen and saw *Faust* the first time at the opera with Arnoldson. I’m sure, though, she was fond of me when we were first married; one can’t

be mistaken about such a thing as that. Why couldn't she be again? In the first days after our marriage she always said spiteful things to John whenever they met. But then he built up a company, invited us often to the theatre, and got himself a fur coat. And so naturally in time my wife grew tired of saying spiteful things to him.

Henck had still several errands to do before dinner. It was already half past five when he came home laden with parcels. He felt very tender in his left shoulder, otherwise there was nothing that reminded him of his mishap in the afternoon except the fur coat.

It'll be fun to see what my wife will do when she sees me in a fur coat, said Dr. Henck to himself.

The hall was quite dark; the lamp was never lighted unless visitors were expected.

I hear her in the parlor now, thought Dr. Henck. She walks as lightly as a little bird. It's remarkable that I still get warm around the heart every time I hear her step in the next room.

Dr. Henck was right in his supposition that his wife would give him a more loving reception when he had on a fur coat than she was otherwise wont to do. She stole up close to him in the darkest corner of the hall, twined her arms about his neck, and kissed him warmly and intensively. Then she burrowed her head into the collar of his fur coat and whispered: "Gustav isn't home yet."

"Yes," answered Dr. Henck in a voice that trembled slightly, while he caressed her hair with both hands, "yes, he's home."

A big fire flamed in Dr. Henck's workroom. Whisky and water stood on the table.

Judge Richardt lay stretched out in a large leather easy-chair and smoked a cigar. Dr. Henck sat huddled in a corner of the sofa. The door was open on the hall, where Mrs. Henck and the children were busy lighting the Christmas tree.

Dinner had been very quiet. Only the children had twittered and prattled to one another and been happy.

"You're not saying anything, old fellow," said Richardt. "Is it that you're sitting worrying over your torn overcoat?"

"No," answered Henck, "it's rather over the fur coat."

There was a few minutes' silence before he continued:

"I'm thinking of something else, too. I'm sitting thinking that this is the last Christmas we shall celebrate together. I'm a doctor and I know I've not many days left. I know it now with full certainty. I want, therefore, to thank you for all the kindness you've shown me and my wife in these last times."

"Oh, you're mistaken," muttered Richardt, looking away.

"No," replied Henck, "I'm not mistaken. And I want also to thank you for lending me your fur coat. It has given me the last seconds of happiness I have known in my life."

THE BLUE ANCHOR

I

There was dancing in the salon, but in the darkened smoking-room sat several men who did not dance. The younger ones had white flowers in their buttonholes, the older ones had decorations. In the corner of a sofa sat a man a little apart from the others; he sat very silent and smiled as at a happy dream. His face was brown, but his forehead was white. His frock coat was as correct as anyone else's, and he had also a white flower in his buttonhole; but his left hand, which hung over the arm of the sofa, was tattooed with a blue anchor.

As a matter of fact it was not a ball; there had merely been a dinner, and afterwards there was dancing.

A man with a decoration was standing in front of him.

"You don't dance, Mr. Fant?" he inquired.

Fant replied, "I've just been dancing with Miss Gabel."

But as he said this, he felt that he blushed. Why should he have added "with Miss Gabel." It was surely a matter of indifference with whom he had danced. Because he believed he had said something stupid, he was annoyed with the man to whom he had said it, and set to staring at his decoration without saying anything. Since this was a bogus foreign decoration of the worst sort, the man grew embarrassed, coughed drily, and passed on.

Fant remained seated and stared into a mirror which faced him on an oblique wall. But it was not himself that he saw in the mirror, it was the flooding light of the dancing hall and the sinuous lines of the women. They seemed to move silently in time with the music. Look at their red lips, look at the white curves of their arms!—

There she was again! For the third time she glided past across the mirror. It was her cousin she was dancing with, a boy, lately a student—

ah, well!

No, he could not sit still, he could not look on any more. It surely signified nothing that the boy danced with his own cousin, but he could not look on. He rose and went out of the room.

Someone asked, "Who is this Mr. Fant?"

"He has invented something—a gas-burner, I believe. He is already on the way to make a fortune."

"But did you see," said the man with the foreign order, "did you see that he has a blue anchor tattooed on one hand?"

They suddenly burst into guffaws.

II

He sauntered back and forth through the rooms. He went out into the corridor. A couple of Knights of Vasa were sitting on the wood-box talking about business while they gesticulated with two big cigars, on which they had left the labels. They grew silent as he passed.

He came into a greenish room that was half dark. From the roof on a narrow cord hung a single electric light, its glow shaded by blue and green fringes. On a dressing-table with a marble top an old Chinese mandarin of porcelain sat sleeping on his crossed legs.

How strangely far off the music sounded, as if from underneath!

He set the mandarin's head in motion with a little punch of his little finger. Two mirrors repeated in unending succession the pale and lethargic nods of the yellow head.

Now it was quiet, the music.

All at once she stood there, in the middle of the room. He had not heard her enter. She held out both hands to him. He took them and drew her to him for a kiss, but she freed herself almost immediately.

"Somebody's coming," she said.

They listened. Voices approached and moved away again.

When all was quiet around them, he pressed her to him in a long kiss. And he thought while she kissed him: This is life! This is eternity!

Far away in the green darkness nodded the pale head of the mandarin.

"No one kisses like you," he muttered.

"Many kiss like you," she responded, smiling.

He thought to himself: she's smiling so that I shall know she's jesting and that she has never kissed anyone else.

While he caressed her two small hands between his, he noticed that she was looking at his left hand.

"You are looking at the anchor," he said. "It's true that it is not handsome. And it won't come off."

She took his hand and surveyed inquisitively the blue dots that formed an anchor. But she said nothing.

"It was in Hamburg that was done," he said. "I was a ship's boy on a vessel. We had come ashore and gone into a tavern by the harbor. I remember it all so well: the fog, the many masts in the harbor, and the smell of the grease. My comrades were tattooed, on the hands, arms and body, and they thought I ought to have myself tattooed also. I couldn't refuse, or they would have thought I was afraid of the pain, for it hurt a great deal. But I thought, too, it was stylish; I was hardly fourteen, you know."

"Are you tattooed on the body as well?" she asked.

Smilingly and somewhat unwillingly he answered, "Yes, I have on the breast a ship and a bird, which is supposed to be an eagle, though it's more like a rooster."

She looked long into his eyes, then slowly raised his hand to her lips and kissed the blue anchor.

III

Years passed, and one day Richard Fant said to his wife as they were dressing to go out to dinner, "Do you know, I think the blue anchor is beginning to fade. Perhaps it's on the way to vanish entirely."

"Oh, it's not as bad as that," she answered.

In reality her thoughts were in another direction. She was thinking of her cousin, Tom Gabel, who was an attaché at the embassy in Madrid. He had now been home for two months on a visit and had promised to come and fetch them so as to go together to the dinner.

"Hurry up," she said, "so that Tom won't have to wait for you."

"I'm all ready," he replied.

He had sat down in a corner in the shadow, fully dressed. She turned and scanned his attire.

“You’ve forgotten your decoration,” she remarked.

“I don’t want my decoration,” he responded.

“But Richard! could you be so discourteous to Tom, who got it for you?”

He went after his decoration. It was not one of the very worst, not an order of Christus or a Nichan Iftikar; it was a medium good decoration, a quite nice decoration. He fastened it on the lapel of his coat with the feeling that perhaps he really needed it, seeing that he had a blue anchor on his left hand.

IV

There was a dance after the dinner, but Fant remained sitting in a sofa corner of the smoking-room. By his side sat the man whom he had formerly annoyed by staring at his foreign decoration, but he was now a Knight Commander. They had become good friends and called each other by their first names when they said anything to each other, but they said nothing. They merely sat each in his corner of the sofa and smoked big cigars with labels and understood each other perfectly.

The doctors had forbidden Fant to smoke strong cigars, because he had a bad heart. But he had just lighted the third since dinner.

In the mirror on the middle of the opposite wall he saw the revolving of the dancers and the flood of light from the hall. He had often wondered how it was that they seemed to dance as though on felt or soft greensward, soundlessly. He understood now that it came from his seeing them in the mirror. Because the picture struck him from another quarter than the clatter and the music, he did not connect them, and over the flooring reflected in the mirror the dance appeared to go without noise. Look at the girls’ white dresses! behold their panting bosoms!—

He recollected that he had once seen her who was now his wife float past, as they did, in a girl’s plain white ball-dress. She was differently clad now.

See! there she was, sure enough, with him, her cousin. She remained standing a moment in the doorway, erect, slender, and delicate as always.

She seemed as if quite naked under the stiff, variegated silk in which she had wrapped her body, and which was only held together by clasps at the shoulders and waist. They bent their heads together and whispered.

No, he must move about a bit, stretch his legs a little.—It is not good to sit still too long after a big dinner and smoke three black cigars.

He lighted the fourth and began to saunter back and forward through the room.

He went out into the corridor. Three young men with white flowers in their buttonholes sat on the wood-box with cigarettes in holders and talked about women, but they became silent as he went past. He opened the door to the little green cabinet and went in. It was empty. He set the mandarin's yellow head in motion with a push of his knuckle and passed on to the window.

The windowpane breathed frost and wintry chill. He blew on it till there was a peephole between the ice-flowers, put his eye to the glass, and looked out. The sky was dark and glittering with stars. Highest up stood the Dipper with its handle aloft.

It was late, then.

He could not force himself to leave the room, because he felt a bitter and devouring desire for his wife and the kiss of old times, the kiss under the blue-green light from pearl fringe of the single electric light, the kiss which the mandarin had beheld in his nodding half-slumber. If she would only come now, precisely now! No one could kiss as she did, no one. He had kissed other women since she no longer loved him; but he had forgotten them all, he would not recognize them if he met them on the street. If she would only come! Yes, even if she but came to meet the other, even then he would take her forced and treacherous kiss as a boon, even then—

He listened. Whispering voices were audible outside the door, but they grew silent all at once and remained so.

He had a strange sensation at his heart, he felt that in a couple of seconds he would lie stretched on the carpet, unconscious, but he held himself upright, and suddenly he heard from the entry where the young men were smoking their cigarettes a very clear voice which said: "Well, after all it's only natural. One can't expect her to be in love with someone who has a blue anchor tattooed on his hand."

The coffin stood in the middle of the room. The black-clad woman walked back and forth, back and forth.

“No, he’s not coming—”

When he finally did come, he said, “Pardon me, beloved. I was delayed by someone who came to call—”

She nodded stiffly. She did not believe him, because he had not kissed her.

When he felt that they had stood too long silent, he said, “I must be off tomorrow. I’ve had a telegram from the minister.—But I swear to you that I’ll come back,” he added in a somewhat lowered voice as if he did not wish that the dead man should hear.

She comprehended that he was lying and that he never meant to see her again. And she nodded.

“Goodbye,” she said.

When he had gone, she went forward to the head of the coffin and looked at the dead man without thinking any further, for she was too weary. But as she stood there she remembered suddenly that she had loved him. She had loved other men too, but it came to her now that she had loved this one most. At that thought she felt the tears rise from deep down in her heart; she took his left hand, the one with the blue anchor, and wetted it with her kisses and her tears.

THE KISS

There was once a young girl and a very young man. They sat on a stone on a promontory that ran out into the lake, and the waves splashed at their feet. They sat silent, each wrapped in thought, and watched the sun go down.

He thought that he should very much like to kiss her. When he looked at her mouth, it occurred to him that this was just what it was meant for. He had, to be sure, seen girls prettier than she was, and he was really in love with someone else; but this other he could surely never kiss, because she was an ideal, a star, and what availed “the desire of the moth for the star”?

She thought that she should very much like to have him kiss her, so that she might have occasion to be downright angry with him and show how deeply she despised him. She would get up, pull her skirts tightly round her, give him a glance brimmed with icy contempt, and go off, erect and calm, without any unnecessary haste. But in order that he might not divine what she thought, she asked in a low, soft voice, “Do you think there is another life after this?”

He thought it would be easier to kiss her if he said yes. But he could not remember for certain what he might have said on other occasions about the same subject, and he was afraid of contradicting himself. He therefore looked her deep in the eyes and answered, “There are times when I think so.”

This answer pleased her extraordinarily, and she thought: At least I like his hair—and his forehead, too. It’s only a pity his nose is so ugly, and then of course he has no standing—he’s just a student who is reading for his examinations. That was not the sort of beau to vex her friends with.

He thought: Now I can certainly kiss her. He was, nevertheless, terribly afraid; he had never before kissed a girl of good family, and he wondered if it might not be dangerous. Her father was lying asleep in a hammock a little way off, and he was the mayor of the town.

She thought: Perhaps it will be still better if I give him a box on the ear when he kisses me.

And she thought again: Why doesn't he kiss me? Am I so ugly and disagreeable?

She leaned forward over the water to see her reflection, but her image was broken by the splashing of the water.

She thought again: I wonder how it will feel when he kisses me. As a matter of fact she had only been kissed once, by a lieutenant after a ball at the town hotel. He had smelt so abominably of punch and cigars that she had felt but little flattered, although to be sure he was a lieutenant, but otherwise she had not much cared for the kiss. Furthermore she hated him because he had not been attentive to her afterwards or indeed shown any interest in her at all.

While they sat so, each engrossed in private thoughts, the sun went down and it grew dark.

And he thought: Seeing that she is still sitting with me, though the sun is gone and it has become dark, it may be that she wouldn't so much object to my kissing her.

Then he laid his arm softly around her neck.

She had not expected this at all. She had imagined he would merely kiss her and nothing more, and with that she would give him a box on the ear and go off like a princess. Now she didn't know what she should do; she wanted of course to be angry with him, but at the same time she didn't want to lose the kiss. She therefore sat quite still.

Thereupon he kissed her.

It felt much more strange than she had supposed. She felt that she was growing pale and faint, she entirely forgot that she was to give him a box on the ear and that he was only a student reading for his examination.

But he thought of a passage in a book by a religious physician on *The Sex Life of Woman*, which read: "One must guard against letting the marital embrace come under the dominion of sensuality." And he thought that this must be very difficult to guard against, if even a kiss could do so much.

When the moon came up, they were still sitting there and kissing.

She whispered into his ear: "I loved you from the first hour I saw you."

And he replied: “There has never been anyone in the world for me but you.”

THE DREAM OF ETERNITY

While I was still very young I believed with entire certainty that I had an immortal soul. I regarded this as a holy and precious gift and was both happy and proud over it.

I often said to myself: "The life I am living is a dark and troubled dream. Some time I shall awaken to another dream which stands closer to reality and has a deeper meaning than this. Out of that dream I shall awaken to a third and afterwards to a fourth, and every new dream will stand nearer the truth than the one before. This approaching toward truth constitutes the meaning of life, which is subtle and profound."

With the joy of knowing that in my immortal soul I possessed a capital which could not be lost in play or distrained upon for debt, I carried on a dissipated life and squandered like a prince both what was mine and what was not mine.

But one evening I found myself with some of my cronies in a large hall, which glittered with gilt and electric light, while from its flooring rose a smell of decay. Two young girls with painted faces and an old woman whose wrinkles were filled with plaster were dancing there on a platform, accompanied by the wail of the orchestra, cries of applause, and the clink of broken glass. We watched the women, drank a great deal, and conversed on the immortality of the soul.

"It's foolish," said one of my comrades who was older than I, "it's foolish to believe that it would be a blessing to have an immortal soul. Look at that old harridan dancing there, whose head and hands tremble if she stays still a moment. One sees directly that she is wicked and ugly and entirely worthless, and that she's getting more and more so every day. How ridiculous it would be to imagine that she had an immortal soul! But the case is just the same with you and me and all of us. What a mean joke it would be to give us immortality!"

"The thing that I dislike most in what you say," I answered, "isn't that you deny the immortality of the soul, but the fact that you find a pleasure in denying it. Human beings are like children that play in a garden

surrounded by a high wall. Time and again a door is opened in the wall, and one of the children disappears through the door. People then tell them that it is taken to another garden bigger and more beautiful than this, whereupon they listen a moment in silence and afterwards continue to play among the flowers. Assume now that one of the boys is more inquisitive than the others and climbs up on the wall so as to see where his comrades go, and when he comes down again tells the rest what he has seen; namely, that outside the gate sits a giant who devours the children when they are taken out. And they all have to be taken out through the gate in due turn! You are that boy, Martin, and I find it unspeakably ridiculous that you tell what you think you've seen, not in a spirit of despair, but as if you were proud and glad of knowing more than the rest."

"The younger of those girls is very pretty," replied Martin.

"It's dreadful to be annihilated, and it's also dreadful not to be able to be annihilated," remarked another of my friends.

Martin continued this line of argument.

"Yes," he said, "one should be able to find a middle course. Gird up your loins and go out to look for a midway degree between time and eternity. He who finds it may found a new religion, for he'll then have the most enticing bait that a fisher of men ever possessed."

The orchestra stopped with a clash. The gold of the hall glittered more faintly through the tobacco smoke and through the floor boards pressed continuously a smell of decay.

The party broke up and we separated, each in his own direction. I wandered a long while back and forth on the streets; I came upon streets which I did not recognize and which I have never seen since, remarkably desolate and empty streets, where the houses seemed to open their lines to give me space whithersoever I turned my steps, and then to close up again behind my back. I did not know where I had got to, before all of a sudden I stood in front of my own door. It stood wide open. I went in through the door and up the stairs. At one of the stair windows I stopped and looked at the moon: I had not previously noticed that there was moonlight that evening.

But I have never either before or after seen the moon look so. One could not say that it shone. It was ashen-gray and pallid and unnaturally big. I stood a long while and stared at yonder moon, despite the fact that I was dreadfully tired and longed to get to sleep.

I lived in the third story. When I had gone up two flights I thanked God there was only one left. But as I came up this flight, it struck me that

the corridor was not dark, as it had always used to be, but faintly lighted like the other corridors where the moon glimmered in through the stair windows. But there were only three flights of stairs in the house besides the attic stairs; for that reason the uppermost corridor was always dark.

“The door of the attic is open,” I said to myself. “The light is coming from the attic stairway. It’s unexcusable of the servants to leave the door of the attic open, for thieves might get up into the attic.”

But there was no attic door. There was only an ordinary stairway like the others.

I had counted wrong, then; I had still a flight to go up.

But when I had mounted this flight and stood in the corridor, I had to control myself so as not to shriek aloud. For this corridor, too, was light, neither was there any attic door open, but a new stairway led up just as before. Through the stair window the moon glimmered in, and it was ashen-gray and lustreless and unnaturally big.

I rushed up the stairway. I could no longer think. I tottered up another, and yet another; I did not count them any longer.

I wanted to cry out, I wanted to wake that accursed house and see human beings around me; but my throat was constricted.

Suddenly it occurred to me to try if I could read the names on the doorplates. What kind of people could it be that lived in this tower of Babel? The moonlight was too faint; I struck a match and held it close to a brass plate.

I read there the name of one of my friends who was dead.

Then the bonds of my tongue were loosed and I shrieked: “Help! help! help!”

That cry was my salvation, for it waked me up out of the terrible dream of eternity.

THE DRIZZLE

Autumn is here again with its dismal days, and the sun is hiding himself in the darkest corner of the heavens so that no one shall see how pale and aged and worn he has grown in this latter time. But while the wind whistles in the window-chinks and the rain purls in the rain-spouts and a wet dog howls in front of a closed gate down below on the street and before the fire has burned down in our tile stove, I will tell you a story about the drizzle.

Listen now!

For some time back the good God had become so angered over the wickedness of men that he resolved to punish them by making them still wickeder. He should, in his great goodness, have liked above all things to have drowned them all together in a new Deluge: he had not forgotten how agreeable was the sight when all living creatures perished in the flood. But unfortunately in a sentimental moment he had promised Noah never to do so again.

“Harken, my friend!” he therefore said to the Devil one day. “You are assuredly no saint, but occasionally you have good ideas, and one can talk things over with you. The children of men are wicked and do not want to improve. My patience, which is infinite, has now come to an end, and I have resolved to punish them by making them wickeder still. The fact is I hope they will then collectively destroy each other and themselves. It occurs to me that our interests—otherwise so far apart—should here for once find a point of contact. What advice can you give me?”

The Devil bit the end of his tail reflectively.

“Lord,” he answered finally, “Thy wisdom is as great as Thy goodness. Statistics show that the greatest number of crimes are committed in the autumn, when the days are dismal, the sky is gray, and the earth is enveloped in rain and mist.”

The good God pondered these words a long while.

“I understand,” he said finally. “Your advice is good, and I will follow it. You have good gifts, my friend, but you should make better use of them.”

The Devil smiled and wagged his tail, for he was flattered and touched. He then limped home.

But the good God said to himself: “Hereafter it shall always drizzle. The clouds shall never clear; the mist never lift, the sun never shine more. It shall be dark and gray to the end of time.”

The umbrella makers and the overshoes manufacturers were happy at the start, but it was not long before the smile froze upon even their lips. People do not know what importance fair weather has for them until they are for once compelled to do without it. The gay became melancholy. The melancholy became mad and hanged themselves in long rows or assembled to hold prayer-meetings. Soon no one worked any more, and the need became great. Crime increased in a dizzying scale; the prisons were overcrowded, the madhouses afforded room for only the clever. The number of the living decreased, and their dwellings stood deserted. They instituted capital punishment for suicide; nothing did any good.

Mankind, who for so many generations had dreamed and poetized about an eternal spring, now went to meet their last days through an eternal autumn.

Day by day the destruction went on. Countrysides were laid waste, cities fell in ruins. Dogs gathered in the squares and howled; but in the alleys an old lame man went about from house to house with a sack on his back and collected souls. And every evening he limped home with his sack full.

But one evening he did not limp home. He went instead to the gate of heaven and straight on to the good God’s throne. There he stood still, bowed, and said:

“Lord, Thou hast aged in these latter days. We have both of us aged, and it is for that reason we are so dull. Ah! Lord, that was bad advice I gave Thee. The sins that interest me need a bit of sunlight once in a while in order to flourish. Look here! you’ve made me into a miserable rubbish-gatherer.”

With these words he flung his dirty sack so violently against the steps of the throne that the cord broke and the souls fluttered out. They were not black, but gray.

“That’s the last of the human souls,” said the Devil. “I give them to Thee, Lord. But beware of using them, if Thou intendest to create a new world!”

The wind whistles in the window chinks, the rain purls in the rain-spouts,
and the story is done. He who has not understood it may console himself
with the thought that it will be fair weather tomorrow.

THE DRAWING IN INDIA INK

One day in April many years ago, in the time when I still wondered about the meaning of life, I went into a little cigar booth on a back street to buy a cigar. I selected a dark and angular El Zelo, stuffed it into my case, paid for it, and made ready to go. But at that moment it occurred to me to show the young girl who stood in the booth, and of whom I used often to buy my cigars, a little sketch in India ink, which I happened to have lying in a portfolio. I had got it from a young artist, and to my thinking it was very fine.

“Look here,” said I, handing it to her. “What do you think of that?”

She took it in her hand with interested curiosity and looked at it very long and closely. She turned it in various directions, and her face took on an expression of strained mental activity.

“Well, what does it mean?” she asked finally with an inquisitive glance.

I was a little surprised.

“It doesn’t mean anything in particular,” I answered. “It’s just a landscape. That’s the ground and that’s the sky and that there is a road—an ordinary road—”

“Yes, I can see that,” she interrupted in a somewhat unfriendly tone; “but I want to know what it *means*.”

I stood there embarrassed and irresolute; I had never happened to think that it ought to mean anything. But her idea was not to be removed; she had now got it into her head that the picture must be some sort of “Where is the cat?” affair. Why otherwise should I have shown it to her? At last she set it up against the windowpane so as to make it transparent. Presumably someone had once shown her a peculiar kind of playing card, which in an ordinary light represents a nine of diamonds or a knave of spades, but which, when one holds it up against the light, displays something indecent.

But her investigation brought no result. She gave back the sketch, and I prepared to leave. Then all at once the poor girl grew very red in the

face and burst out, with a sob in her throat:

“Shame on you! it’s real mean of you to make a fool of me like that. I know very well I’m a poor girl, and haven’t been able to get myself a better education, but still you don’t need to make a fool of me. Can’t you tell me what your picture means?”

What was I to answer? I should have given much to be able to tell her what it meant; but I could not, for it meant precisely nothing.

Ah, well, that was many years ago. I now smoke other cigars, which I buy in another shop, and I no longer wonder about the meaning of life—but that is not because I think I have found it.

THE WAGES OF SIN

This is the story of a young girl and an apothecary with a white vest.

She was young and slim, she smelled of pine woods and heather, and her complexion was sunburned and a trifle freckled. So she was when I knew her. But the apothecary was a quite ordinary apothecary; he wore a white vest on Sundays, and on a Sunday this attracted attention. It attracted attention in a place in the country so far away from the world that no one in that region was so sophisticated as to wear a white vest on Sundays except the apothecary.

This, you see, was how it happened that one Sunday morning there was a knock at my door, and when I opened it, the apothecary stood outside in his white vest and bowed several times. He was very polite and very much embarrassed.

“I beg your most humble pardon,” he said, “but Miss Erika was here yesterday with her sisters while you were away, and when she went, she left her poetry book for you and me to write something in it. Here it is. But I don’t know at all what to write. Could you perhaps kindly—?” And he bowed again several times.

“We will think the matter over,” I answered in a friendly tone.

I took the book therefore and for my own share inscribed a translation of “Du bist wie eine Blume,” which I had made myself and which I always use for that purpose. I then began to search among my papers to see if by any chance I had some old verses from my school days which would suit for the apothecary. Finally I came upon the following bad poem:

You set my thoughts in turmoil,
I wither in longing’s blight.
In solitude you haunt me,
I dreamed of you in the night.

I dreamed that we walked together

Side by side in the twilight dim,
And through your lowered lashes
I saw the bright tear swim.

I kissed your cheek and your eyelids,
I saw the teardrop fall,
But oh, your red, red lips, love—
I kissed them most of all.

One cannot always dream sweetly.
Small rest since then have I known,
For, sorrowful oft and weary,
I watch through the night-hours alone.

Alas! your cheeks so soft, love,
I touch but with glances trist,
And those red lips, my darling,
I never, never have kissed.

I showed the apothecary this poem and offered to let him use it. He read it through attentively twice and blushed all over with delight.

“Did you really write that yourself?” he inquired in his simplicity of heart.

“Yes, I’m sorry to admit.”

He thanked me very warmly for the permission to use the poem, and when he went out of the room I imagine we both had the feeling that we must drop the formality of “mister” at the first opportunity.

That evening there was a little party at the girl’s house. Young folks were there. We drank cherry syrup on a veranda festooned with hop-vines.

I sat and looked at the young girl.

No, she was not like herself. Her eyes were bigger and more restless than usual and her mouth was redder. And she could not sit still on her chair.

From time to time she cast a furtive glance at me, but more often she looked at the apothecary. And the apothecary looked that evening like a turkey-cock.

When the punch was passed around, we dropped the “mister.”

We young people went down on the meadow to play games. We tossed rings and played other games, and meanwhile the sun went down behind the hills and it grew dark.

We had laid the rings and the sword in a heap on the ground and were now standing in groups, whispering and smiling, while the dusk came on. But the young girl came up to me through the dusk and took me aside behind a shed.

“You must answer me a question,” said she. “Did the druggist really write his verses himself?” Her voice trembled, and she tried to look away as she spoke.

“Yes,” I said. “He wrote them last night. I heard him going back and forth in his room all night.”

But when I had said that, I felt a sting in my conscience, for I saw that she was a pretty and lovable child and that it was a great sin to deceive her so.

Who knows, I said to myself, who knows? Perhaps this is the sin of which the Scripture says that it cannot be forgiven.

The twilight deepened, it became night, and a star burned between the trees in the wood, where we were walking in pairs.

But I was alone.

I do not remember any more where I went that evening. I separated from the others and went deeper into the wood.

But deep within the wood among the firs I saw a birch with a shining white stem. By the stem stood two young people kissing, and I saw that one of them was the young girl who smelled of pine woods and heather. But the other was the apothecary, and he was a quite ordinary apothecary with a white vest. He held her pressed against the white stem of the birch and kissed her.

But when he had kissed her three times, I went away and wept bitterly.

COMMUNION

It happened when I was hardly more than a boy.

It was on a blustering autumn evening on board a coast steamer. We had not yet come in from the country, and I had to go in and out of town to school. I had been lazy as usual and was to be examined in several subjects in order to be promoted into a higher class.

I went back and forward on the deck in the darkness, with collar turned up and hands in my coat pockets, thinking of my reverses at school. I was almost sure to flunk. As I leaned forward over the railing and saw how the foam hissed whitely and the starboard lantern threw sparkling green reflections on the black water, I felt tempted to jump overboard. Then at least the mathematics teacher would be sorry for the way he had tormented me—then, when it was too late—

But in the end it grew cold outside, and when I thought I had been freezing long enough, I went into the smoking cabin.

In my imagination I can still see the warm, comfortable interior which met my view when I opened the door. The lighted ceiling-lamp swung slowly back and forth like a pendulum. On the table steamed four whiskey toddies, four cigars puffed, and four gentlemen were telling smutty stories. I recognized them all as neighbors of our summer sojourn: a company director, an old clergyman, a leading actor, and a button dealer. I bowed politely and threw myself down in a corner. I had, to be sure, a slight feeling that my presence might perhaps be superfluous; but on the other hand it would have been asking too much of me to go out into the wind and freeze when there was so much room in the cabin. Furthermore I knew within myself that I might very well contribute to the entertainment if necessary.

The four men looked askance at me with a certain coolness, and there was a pause.

I was sixteen and had recently been confirmed. People have told me that at that time I had a guileless and innocent appearance.

The pause, however, was not long. A few swallows from the glasses, a few puffs at the cigars, and the exchange of opinions was once more in full swing. A peculiar circumstance struck me, though: all the stories that were told I had already heard innumerable times, and for my part I found them comparatively flat. Smutty stories may, as is well known, be divided into two chief groups, one of which concentrates itself mostly about digestive processes and circumstances related to them, whereas, on the contrary, the other, which stands incomparably higher in degree, has preferably to do with woman. I and my schoolmates had long since left the former group behind us; I was therefore the more surprised to hear these mature gentlemen give it their liveliest interest, while the other, much more appealing group was passed over in silence. I did not understand it. Could this possibly be out of any undue consideration for me? I need not say to what extent the suspicion of such a thing provoked me. The lively tone of the cabin had affected me and made me venturesome, so that I resolved to put an end to this childishness.

“Look here, uncle,” I burst out quite impulsively during a silence after a story which was so harmless that even the clergyman guffawed at it, “don’t you remember the story the captain told day before yesterday?”

“Uncle” was the company director, who was a friend of my father.

I continued undismayed: “That was the choicest I’ve heard in all my days. Couldn’t you please tell it?”

Four pairs of astonished eyes were directed upon me, and a painful silence set in. I already regretted my rash courage.

The company director broke the ice with a skittish little chuckle, which was but a faint echo of the thunder he had allowed to roll out a couple of days before when the captain had told the story.

“Tee-hee!—yes, that wasn’t so bad—”

He then began to tell it. It was very highly seasoned and had to do with woman.

The leading actor at first hid his feelings behind his customary mask of dignified seriousness, whereas on the other hand the button dealer, an old buck who had grown gray in sin, regarded me with a sort of furtive interest, in which was an element of increased respect for my personality.

But when the anecdote began to take a somewhat precarious turn, it was suddenly interrupted by the clergyman, a kindly old man with a pious and childlike expression on his elderly smooth-shaven countenance.

“Pardon the interruption, my good brother, but”—and he turned a little in his chair so that he could direct his words at me—“how old, may I

ask, is this young man? Has he been to Our Lord's—to Communion?"

I felt that I flushed bloodred. I had forgotten that there was a clergyman in the company.

"Y-yes," I stammered almost inaudibly. "I was confirmed last winter."

"Indeed!" returned the old clergyman, while he slowly stirred his glass of toddy.

Then without looking up, in a voice which forty years of mediation between God and the world had impressed with the mild tone of tolerance and indulgence, he continued:

"Go on, my dear brother! Excuse the interruption!"

THE CLOWN

Yesterday a familiar face flitted by me on the street. It was pale and had a tired expression, but the features were sharp and strongly marked.

I did not recall his name. I was sure I had seen him sometime, perhaps a long while ago, but I could not remember when or under what circumstances. His face had aroused my interest without my being able to explain why, and I dug all sorts of old recollections out of the junk-room of my memory in order to identify him, but in vain.

In the evening I was at the theatre. There to my surprise I found him again on the stage in a minor role. He was but little disguised; I recognized him at once and looked for his name on the program. I found it, but it was unknown to me. I followed his acting with tense interest. He took the part of a miserably stupid and ridiculous servant, whom everybody made fun of. The role was as wretched as the piece, and he played it mechanically and conventionally; but in certain intonations his voice assumed a sharp and bitter character which did not belong to the part.

They reechoed in my ear, those tones, till late into the night, as I went back and forth in my room. And with their help I at last succeeded in digging up the recollection with which they belonged. I discovered that we had been schoolmates, but he was many years younger than I; when I was in the highest class, he was in one of the lowest.

When I was in the top class of the school, I was one day standing at the window toward the end of a lunch recess. Recesses at the school were an especial abomination of mine; I could never find anything to do. I knew that I did not know my lesson, and I could not set myself to going over it. The slight vexation I felt about the coming lesson always faded before a greater: a vexation about life, a gnawing premonition that the days to follow would be as empty and meaningless as those which had passed.

So I was walking back and forth with my hands in my jacket pockets, now and then stopping at the window, which was open. As I stood there, my attention was caught by a peculiar occurrence which was taking place down in the yard just below the window. A little boy in one of the lowest classes, a lad of ten or eleven, lay stretched on his back, surrounded by a crowd of other boys in a ring. Their faces, most of them at any rate, had the expression of evil curiosity which children and uncultured people do not know how to conceal. A little broad-shouldered fellow with high cheekbones, who gave the impression of being very strong for his age, stood in the ring with a whip in his hand.

“You are my slave,” he said to the boy on the ground, “aren’t you? Say: ‘I am your slave!’”

“I am your slave,” answered the child without hesitating; which indicated that this was not the first time he had said it.

“Get up,” ordered the other.

The boy got up.

“Imitate B., the way he looks when he comes into class!”

B. was a teacher who went on crutches. The boy went a couple of steps outside the ring, which opened to give him space; then he came back on the improvised stage and executed as he did so the movements of a man walking on crutches. He did his part very well; the illusion was complete, and the onlookers applauded, but the little actor stood there with a serious expression. He had a pallid little face and black clothes; perhaps he had just lost his father or mother.

“Laugh!” ordered the other with a light flick of the whip which he had in his hand.

The boy tried to obey, but it did not come easily. The laugh sounded forced at the start, but it was not long before he succeeded in laughing himself into a genuine, quite natural guffaw, and with that he turned toward his “master,” as if it was at him that he laughed. But the latter already desired to have his slave show off new accomplishments.

“Say: ‘My farsher is a damned scoundrel!’”

The boy looked around the circle with a helpless glance. When he saw that no one gave a semblance of wanting to help him, and that, on the contrary, all stood in eager expectation of something really amusing, he said as low as he dared:

“My farsher is a damned scoundrel.”

That drew unbounded applause.

“Laugh—Cry!”

The child began to simulate weeping, but with that he now came into the mood he was ordered to imagine. The weeping stuck in his throat, and he shed actual tears.

“Let him be!” said an older boy in the circle, “he’s crying in earnest.” And with that the school bell rang.

Some days afterwards he ran past me on the way from school. I noticed that his jacket was ripped open in the back.

“Wait a bit!” I said to him, “your jacket has split open in the back.”

“No,” he said, “it hasn’t split open, they have cut it open with a penknife.”

“Have they dirtied your book for you, too?” I asked.

“Yes, they’ve laid it in the gutter.”

“Why are they so mean to you?”

“I don’t know. They are stronger than I am.”

He knew of no other reason. But of course that was not the only one; they must have found something in him that irritated them. I saw it in him that he was not like the others. The exceptional, the divergent always irritates children and mobs. A schoolboy’s eccentricities are punished by the teacher with a well-intended monition or a dry satiric smile; but by his comrades they are punished with kicks and cuffs and a bloody nose, with a torn jacket, a cap carefully laid under a rain-spout, and his best book thrown into the gutter.

Well, he is an actor now; that was surely his natural predestination. He now talks from the stage to a large public. It would be strange if sometime he did not make his way; I believe he has talent. Perhaps he will gradually transform his peculiarity to a pattern, according to which others try to conform as to an inoffensive regular verb.

SIGNY

Signy was a little girl about as old as I, with a pink dress and a pink ribbon in her hair. Her hair was dark, with curly locks, and she had dark blue starry eyes with long lashes. She was not at all angelic. I didn't care a great deal for angels, perhaps in especial because they always had fair hair. I had fair hair myself at that time, like most children, and light hair wasn't much, I thought.

But I thought an awful lot of Signy. I could go about thinking of her for whole days. It was not seldom that she did something naughty, which I was blamed for, and sometimes I myself took the blame voluntarily. I cared no less for her on that account, but only wished that she would do more naughty things and I get the blame for them. But what was that bit of deviltry she hit upon? Let me think.—She ran off and hid somewhere where we were forbidden to go, in some dangerous place where there might be trolls and spooks. One time I remember clearly that she wheedled me into playing with matches—playing with fire, the most dangerous and most strictly forbidden thing there was. Didn't she set fire to an old dry bush in the garden? Why, to be sure she did; and I got the switch from mother. Oh, how I cared for Signy. And sometimes she said words that shouldn't be said. The shivers went up and down my back, but I only wanted her to say them again.

I don't know just where she lived. It wasn't in the same house as we did; the other children whom I played with didn't know her. But she must have lived in the same street—I suppose—in a little home with a garden surrounded by a fence. Or did she live in a garret cupola obliquely across the street, with flowers on the windowsill?—I may just as well say right out that she didn't live anywhere. She existed only in my imagination.

Signy was the first creation of my fancy, at least the first I can recall. I was a good six or seven years old, and at the age (just as, besides, at sixty, seventy or more) one often thinks aloud. To be brief, I went about

prattling to myself as I imagined things about Signy, and one fine day it happened, of course, that my mother heard me.

“Listen to the boy,” she said to my father. “Listen how he goes around talking to himself!”

And to me she said, “What is it you go around talking about? What are you thinking about?”

Grownups have a terrible passion for asking children the most inconsiderate questions. I ran off and hid.

Another day it was the same story, and still another day. Pain and embarrassment, questions that couldn’t be answered.

My father said to me, “Other children talk to themselves up to four and five years old; you are too big for that.”

I perceived that things couldn’t go on any longer so; something must be done. It occurred to me that it was the sibilant sound that betrayed me: Signy, Signy; that wouldn’t do. So I changed Signy’s name to Ida. In that way I succeeded in having her sometimes in peace, but Ida never really got the same power of enchantment over me as Signy. One fine day we became enemies, I quarreled with her and called her a silly girl, and perhaps I even went so far as to scratch her. I regretted it to be sure but wouldn’t ask her pardon, and soon after I let her go to the deuce. At the same time I learned to think in silence—and with a few exceptions have continued to do so.

But whence had I got Signy? In the same house with us lived a little girl, with whom I sometimes played. Her mother was in the ballet, and once she dressed herself in one of her mother’s ballet skirts. But she was neither Signy nor Ida, she performed no deviltries and had none of Signy’s magic power over my heart. I must, then, at the age of seven have created Signy as the German creates a camel: out of the depths of my consciousness.

Then, too, I was predestined.

After that the years rolled on, and my genuinely literary impulses arrived, only quite late. The first strong urge came when one of my schoolmates—it was the present Professor Almquist at the Caroline Institute—during a lesson in Mother Tongue declaimed with powerful effect Viktor Rydberg’s “Flying Dutchman.” I became wild with enthusiasm and for months afterwards dreamed of nothing else than being able at some period in the remote future to write something equally fine.

So far I haven’t succeeded, but why should one give up hope?

A MASTERLESS DOG

A man died, and after he was dead no one looked after his black dog. The dog mourned him long and bitterly. He did not, however, lie down to die on his master's grave; possibly because he did not know where it was; possibly, too, because he was at bottom a young and happy dog, who considered that there was still something left for him in life.

There are two kinds of dogs: dogs that have a master, and dogs that have none. Outwardly the difference is not material; a masterless dog may be as fat as others, often fatter. No, the difference lies in another direction. Mankind is for dogs the infinite, providence. To obey a master, to follow him, rely upon him—that is, so to speak, the meaning of a dog's existence. To be sure, he has not his master in his thoughts every minute of the day, nor does he always follow close at his heels. No, he often runs about of his own accord with businesslike intent, sniffs around the corners of houses, makes alliance with his kind, snatches a bone, if it comes in his way, and concerns himself about much. Yet on the instant that his master whistles, all this is out of his canine head more quickly than the scourge drove the hucksters out of the temple, for he knows that there is but one thing he must attend to. So forgetting his house-corner and his bone and his companions, he hurries to his master.

The dog whose master died without the dog's knowing how, and who was buried without the dog's knowing where, mourned him long; but as the days passed and nothing occurred to remind him of his master, he forgot him. He no longer perceived the scent of his master's footsteps on the street where he lived. As he rolled about on a grass plot with a comrade, it often happened that a whistle pierced the air, and in that instant his comrade had vanished like the wind. Then he pricked up his ears, but no whistle resembled his master's. So he forgot him, and he forgot still more: he forgot that he had ever had a master. He forgot that there had ever been a time when he would not have regarded it as possible for a dog to live without a master. He became what one would call a dog that had seen better days, though it was in the inner meaning

of the expression, for outwardly he got along fairly well. He lived as a dog does live: he now and then stole a good meal in the square, and got beaten, and had love affairs, and lay down to sleep when he was tired. He made friends and enemies. One day he thoroughly thrashed a dog that was weaker than he, and another day he was badly handled by one that was stronger. Early in the morning one might see him run out along his master's street, where out of habit he mostly continued to resort. He ran straight forward with an air of having something important to attend to; smelt in passing a dog that he met, but was not eager to follow up the acquaintance; then continued his journey; but all at once sat down and scratched himself behind the ear with intense energy. The next moment he started up and flew right across the street to chase a red cat down into a cellar window; whereupon, re-assuming his business manner, he proceeded on his way and vanished around the corner.

So his day was spent. One year followed close in the track of another, and he grew old without noticing it.

Then there came at last a gloomy evening. It was wet and cold, and now and then there came a shower. The old dog had been all day on an expedition down in the city. He walked slowly along the street, limping a little; a couple of times he stood still and shook his black hide, which with the years had become sprinkled with gray about the head and neck. According to his wont he walked and sniffed, now to right, now to left. He took an excursion in at a gateway, and when he came out had another dog in his company. Next moment came a third. They were young and sportive dogs that wanted to entice him to play, but he was in a bad humor, and furthermore it began to sleet. Then a whistle pierced the air, a long and sharp whistle. The old dog looked at both the young ones, but they paid no attention; it was not one of their masters that whistled. Then the old masterless dog pricked up his ears; he felt all at once so strange. There was a fresh whistle, and the old dog sprang irresolutely first to one side, then to the other. It was his master that whistled, and he surely had to follow! For the third time someone whistled, sharply and persistently as before. Where is he then, in what direction? How could I have been separated from my master? And when did it happen, yesterday or day before yesterday, or perhaps only a little while ago? And what did my master look like, and what sort of smell had he, and where is he, where is he? He sprang about and sniffed at all the passersby, but none of them was his master, and none wanted to be. Then he turned and bounded along the street; at the corner he stood still and looked around in all directions. His master was not there. Then he went back down the street

at a gallop; the mud splattered about him and the rain dripped from his fur. He stood at all the corners, but nowhere was his master. Then he sat down on his haunches at a street crossing, stretched his shaggy head toward heaven, and howled.

Have you ever seen, have you ever heard such a forgotten, masterless dog, when he stretches his neck toward heaven and howls, howls? The other dogs slink softly away with their tails between their legs; for they cannot comfort him and they cannot help him.

VOX POPULI

This little village is the most conventional in the world. When, as it sometimes happens, an artist in presenting to the world the product of his imagination ventures to overstep the prescribed bounds of convention, thereby desecrating the gifts a kind Providence has bestowed upon him, not only are the people filled with a spirit of righteous indignation, but the little dogs become indignant as well.

This I observed but yesterday.

The clock struck three as, wearied by hours of labored research within its cool walls, I stepped out of the library, laden with ponderous tomes so learned that none would be able to recognize even the titles, though I should name them.

Without was the blessed warmth of a summer's day. At once I turned aside into the lane under the great green trees; whence chance led me at length to the summit of that eminence where the *Father of the Ages*, silent and immovable, sits dreaming, the man-child asleep on his knee.

On the bench before this little group in bronze, I sank exhausted. Throwing my books to the left and to the right, I lighted a cigarette, and halfway closed my eyes. I have observed that one is able to view the world more synthetically when one looks upon it with half closed eyes; all lines become more simple and cleancut, all confusing gradations of shade are eliminated, while figures glide back and forth over the scene as silhouettes in separate planes. Doubly fortunate it was that at that moment I was sitting thus with half closed eyes, when two frightfully hideous old women came past, leading a little black dog by a string.

Now the situation is this: there in the background the *Father of the Ages* sits dreaming his age old dream of generations to come, dreaming of them—he is certainly mistaken—everything that is beautiful and good: here, in the seat of the observer, I wait, while in procession between us pass two frightfully hideous old women, forward from left to right, leading between them a little black dog by a string. The *Father of the Ages*, as everyone knows, is a highly unconventional creation of the

sculptor's art. I remind you of this, lest you have forgotten: it is a part of the story.

It is before this great bronze statue that these two frightfully hideous old women now stop, giving vent to their opinions about art. I cannot hear their words, but the vehement nodding of their heads and the excitable movements of their greenish black parasols, aloft in the air, give evidence that they regard the matter rather from a moral than an esthetic point of view; and their judgement of this subject becomes one of positive disapproval.

In the meantime the little dog runs here and there, as far as his string will allow. Finally he becomes aware that a matter of great importance claims the attention of his mistresses, a matter which consequently becomes of great interest to him as well. It proves to be nothing less than the very bronze statue which rises there before us on the grassy carpet. He, then, sits primly upright on his haunches, his ears pricked and his nose upturned, attentively listening to the two frightfully ugly old women; and soon he, no less than I, apprehends by the aid of the nodding heads and frenzied gesticulations of greenish black parasols that the group in bronze is the object of their spirited disapproval. It follows, then, in the natural order of things, that he is immediately possessed by an unquenchable hatred toward this group: otherwise he would be, indeed, a very inferior dog.

"Er-ror," he growls, and rushes at the group in bronze with such unmistakable fury that the old women become frightened and are silenced at once. "Er-ror—Er-ror—Er-ror—"

The scene becomes suddenly animated: on one side the little dog with frothing mouth and eyes shining wide with mingled loyalty and hatred makes spring upon spring against his new and deadly enemy. "Er-ror—Er-ror—Er-ror—," he snarls; on the other side there are two pale, lean, black-clothed, frightfully hideous old women who pull and tug at his string, and slowly, inch by inch, succeed in moving themselves and the little dog, until finally they pass to the left, disappearing out of the line of vision.

"Error!" yelps the little dog once more, and disappears. Therewith he is out of the story—but the story is not ended.

Everybody knows that when one little dog begins to bark it is an invitation for all the little dogs in the neighborhood immediately to join in. Now, Humlegården is full of young and playful little dogs that roll about on the grassy carpet and spend their days in innocent diversion,

prepared at any time when occasion demands to rush up at once, crying, “Error—Er-ror Er-ror—!”

“Hear that barking,” say these little dogs, one to another, “now we too must take a part.” And here they come, rushing from every direction: from the Library Fount, from Linné’s Statue, and all the way from Scheele’s Knoll, until finally they reach the statue, *The Father of the Ages*, where they bark in chorus, “Er-ror—Er-ror—Er-ror—!”

I hear them barking still.

MARGOT

To Oscar Levertin

I had known Paul Herbst over a year before I learned accidentally that he had been married and that his wife had been dead long since.

We used to meet at one place or another with common friends, and it sometimes happened, too, that we looked each other up to talk away an hour over a game of chess and a glass of wine, especially if it was getting on to the twilight of a long and gloomy day, when solitude began to feel oppressive. I was twenty or thereabouts, and he was a good bit over thirty; which is probably why he so seldom spoke to me of himself and his life.

One evening my glance fell on a woman's portrait in the recess with the porcelain stove, a faded portrait behind a glass. I had presumably seen it many times before without its having tempted my curiosity or my even noticing it at all. This time it occurred to me to ask who it was.

Herbst looked up, a bit surprised.

"That is my wife," he answered.

My astonishment made me embarrassed. There was a moment's silence.

"I never knew you were married... Or that you..."

Herbst smiled meditatively in his sofa corner, while he gathered together the chessmen and laid them in a drawer, each in its place according to a regular scheme.

"Yes, I believe I was married."

"You believe!"

"It's so long ago. I've almost forgotten."

His eyes stared into the dusk with a blind and empty look.

"If I didn't know that I have a worn ring with her initials in a drawer somewhere, and a church certificate and some other trifles, I might

sometimes believe the whole thing was a dream—a bright and happy dream, whose contours break up and fade in my memory inch by inch, a shade more with every passing year.”

“A good many have passed since then,” he continued. “I was twenty, and she was eighteen. After two years she died.”

And he added, while he slowly stirred the fire, “Her name was Margot.”

I could not take my eyes from the portrait, which surveyed me with a faded and stiffened smile. But behind the smile I caught a glimpse in the half light of a sad and winsome girl’s face, almost a child’s, framed in long curls after the style of the time, with a wonderfully blue and bright glance.

Some days later I was in company with Herbst on the way home from a party.

He lived on the outskirts of Östermalm, and we went out there along Strandvägen. That was in the days when new and old flourished together on the street, two or three modern houses in the midst of gray dilapidation, outhouses and old wharf sheds.

It was a cool night in the early part of October. The moon was up; a cold, moist wind was blowing. The big buildings on Blasieholm formed a dark mass, whose broken and irregular edge seemed to be catching at the wisps of cloud that drove forward against a deep blue background. The still, heavy water of Nybro Inlet mirrored a broad glittering moon-path in oily rings, and along the wharves the lumber sloops raised a thin and motionless forest of masts and tackle. In the upper air was haste and tumult; the clouds hunted each other from west to east, till over the woods of Djurgården they congested into a low black wall. It was as if heaven were breaking camp for a journey, for a flight.

It was late, and Herbst seemed weary.

“Let’s hurry up a bit,” he said. “Moonlight isn’t healthy. One doesn’t sleep well after it.”

“Perhaps... But it’s beautiful just the same.”

“I suppose so. Sunlight’s more beautiful.”

We went on a stretch in silence. The city slept around us. A policeman’s rapid step rang on the pavement, iron heels against the stone; a shrill laugh came from an alley, a heavy carriage rumbled past somewhere in the distance.

Herbst picked up his thread of thought anew:

“The sun, you see, is healthier and above all more up-to-date. It celebrates the new, the fresh, the present, what we must admire so as not

to be out of things—even if it seems tiresome sometimes. Toward the old, the past, it is pitiless; it calls an old ruin straight out an old ruin.—The moon, on the other hand, the moon is a reactionary. It reveres the dynasties of banished beauty. It makes us think of the beauty that enchanted us in our first youth, which we laugh at now or have forgotten; of voices that are silenced; of caresses under which we trembled long ago.”

His voice shook a little.

“—And of the dead whom we loved.”

He was very pale, and his look had a sickly gleam. I had never seen him like that. I felt that I was walking beside a strange man whom I had never known and never seen by daylight. Was he drunk? His features had new lines, and his voice sounded with a new tone. I don’t know why, but at that moment it occurred to me that he was a passionate worshipper of music. I recalled that I had heard him play the violin one evening when I stood outside his closed door, and when I had rung, the violin ceased, but no one opened. Perhaps music was to him like a fair but depraved mistress, for whom he fevered in darkness and solitude, but for whom he blushed in daytime, in the sunlight.

We had come into the newly-planted avenues. All was silent and bare; not a human being was visible. The sparse, thin skeletons of the trees threw long shadows in the moonlight.

Neither of us spoke for a long while.

Finally Herbst took my arm: “Let us turn off! I have something to show you over there. It’s nothing remarkable, only an old house.”

We turned to the left into a dark side street. The houses stood sleeping in low irregular lines, and far away a lamp flared in the wind with a reddish light.

The street ascended sharply. Herbst stood still before a high-paled fence.

“Here is where we used to live,” he said.

It was an old dilapidated two-story house with a pointed gable and a high, steeply-inclined tile roof—probably an old citizen’s residence of the last century—shaded by five or six tall lindens and a gigantic chestnut. The moonlight burned white on the wavy glass of the gable windows. On the gray masonry the net of linden branches was outlined like the broken web of a monster spider, and from the round attic window with broken glass in its ragged frame stared the darkness.

The gate stood open, hanging on one hinge. We went into the yard.

The house appeared desolate, abandoned, dead.

“Yes,” repeated Herbst, “it was here; here we used to live. Through that door there she entered in her bridal dress one evening, when the stars were burning in the treetops. And through the same door they carried her out one winter day. They carried her out in a black chest and drove off with her in a grotesque wagon ridiculously gotten up, carried her off somewhere, God knows where. I doubt if I know where the grave is. I have never been there since.”

We sat down on a green bench which ran around one of the old tree trunks. We sat there a long while in silence. Paul Herbst was tracing flourishes in the sand and now and then spearing a withered leaf with his stick.

“You see that left gable window up there,” he went on. “There she sat when I came home and when I went away. There we both sat together as evening drew on. When the sunlight fell in aslant, it painted the shadow pattern of the chestnut’s leaves on the bright wallpaper and brought out a warm glow from her red mahogany sewing board. There we would sit in the bright May evenings with the window open. And in the dusk of December afternoons I used to unfasten her hair and let it run between my fingers... while the city down below there was sunk in wintry darkness... in silence and dream.

“She was a good child, Margot. I remember a New Year’s Eve, our last. We had gone to church together, she had wanted to. It was packed and fearfully warm. Margot went to sleep with her head on my shoulder. Suddenly the preacher broke out with a thunder; she awoke and was frightened at having been asleep. He was her spiritual adviser, and we had our pew right under the pulpit; she was positive that he had seen her. She thought he looked at her so sternly and coldly. She was depressed all the evening afterwards. She was afraid she had been too happy, she whispered to me; what if God had grown angry and would do her some harm?

“She was a guileless, conscientious little being. She knew little of the world’s evil, and my own knowledge was much the same—at that time.... Toward spring she got brain fever and died. In three days it was over.”

There was a rustling in the trees. Herbst sat in silence and traced in the sand.

I sat and stared at the moon’s reflection in the left gable window. There one might have had some notion of happiness once. A peaceful nook, protected, remote.

“Who lives here now?” I asked so as to say something.

“Some artisans’ families, I believe. The house has run down.”

And he continued with a smile, “That must be their wash hanging out there. It reminds me of a story from the time when we lived here. Before us the house had belonged to an apothecary who had come to grief, I don’t know how, and gone bankrupt. More than once I saw him out on the street looking in through the palings. One night—it was bright moonlight as now, and I was standing at the window with Margot—one night I saw him steal into the yard. The tears came into Margot’s eyes when she recognized him. Our laundry was hanging out. He looked cautiously round; it was dark in our window, and he didn’t see us. When he thought he was unobserved, he hurriedly tore down all the clothes from the line and threw them higgledy piggledy on the ground. He acted as if he was on the rampage. The man obviously had a screw loose; he couldn’t stand seeing strangers’ clothes hanging to dry in the same yard where in the old days his own shirts and drawers had dangled in the moonlight.”

A cloud slipped over the moon. Herbst rose. “Well, let’s go! I’m freezing.”

He had won back his calm. When he was out on the street he lighted a cigarette and after a while resumed:

“So happiness passes from one to another. It’s no good shutting your hands on it with a convulsive grip; no matter what you do, some day you’ll be standing with your hands full of empty air. The only thing to do is to take everything with the same imperturbable equanimity as a well-conducted gambler when he loses the last thing he owns.... What if existence afterwards should be like a worn and faded coat which one would gladly give away to a beggar; it’s all one has anyhow. So one can only refrain from exposing his poverty too openly, one must keep close to the houses on the shady side of the street; and when one sees the stream of humanity billow forward on the opposite sidewalk, one may console himself with the knowledge that in time they will all come over to the shadow side—one by one, sooner or later.”

“That’s a fine consolation, ‘A solace for a tiger heart.’”

“Yes, it leaves much to be desired, I grant... but there is no other. Furthermore there is a certain interest in seeing one after another of one’s friends and acquaintances slip into the freemasonry of the shadow side. One sees it on them when they have passed the line—in their walk, their carriage, the lines around the mouth, and the corners of the eyes. After that nothing matters. The end will be the same, whatever happens: one will be carried out of his house by six fellows dressed in black, who

smell of brandy and have white cotton gloves, and one will be buried in the ground amid reading and mumbling of incantations.”

We went along the street in silence; only our steps echoed between the rows of houses. A company of night revellers took a clamorous farewell at a street corner. A door with a rattling chain was pushed open and shut with a bang. Herbst turned up his coat collar and bade me a hurried good night.

“I shall wake up with a headache tomorrow,” he said. “I can’t stand moonlight.”

THE BURNING CITY

Through the two windows with their bright lattice-figured curtains the level sunlight of the winter morning falls in two slanting oblong quadrilaterals on the soft green carpet, and in the warm sunny spaces a little boy skips and dances. He knows but little of the world as yet. He knows he is little and is going to be big, but he does not know either that he has been born or that he will die. He knows he is four and will soon be five, but he does not know what is meant by “a year”; he still measures time only into yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

“Papa,” he suddenly exclaims to his father, who has just finished breakfast and lighted his first cigar of the day—he being a person to measure time with cigars—“papa, I dreamed so many things last night! I dreamed about the whole room! I dreamed about the chairs and the green carpet and the mirror and the clock and the stove and the shutters and the cupboards.”

With that he skips forward to the stove, where the fire flames and crackles, and turns a somersault. He considers the stove and the place in front of it as the most important and dignified things in the room.

His father nods and laughs at him over the corner of his paper, and the boy laughs back, laughs away uncontrollably. He is at the age when laughter is still only an utterance of joy, not of appreciation for the ridiculous. When he stood at the window some days ago and laughed at the moon, it was not because he found the moon funny, but because it gave him joy with its round bright face.

When he has had his laugh out, he clambers up on a chair and points to one of the pictures on the wall.

“—And I dreamed most of all about that picture,” he says.

The picture is a photograph of an old Dutch painting, *A Burning City*.

“Well, and what was it you dreamed?” his father asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Come, think!”

“Oh yes, I dreamed it was burning and that I patted a doggie.”

“But generally you are afraid of doggies.”

“Yes, but on pictures I can pat them nicely.”

Then he laughs and skips and dances.

At last he comes up to his father and says, “Papa dear, take down the picture. I want papa to show me the picture again the way he did yesterday.”

The picture is a new arrival in the room; it came the day before. With the other pictures around the walls the little boy has acquainted himself long ago: Uncle Strindberg and Uncle Schopaur (i.e. Schopenhauer) and Uncle Napoleon and ugly old Goethe and grandmother when she was young. But the Burning City is new, and is furthermore in itself a much more amusing picture than the others. The father humors the little boy, takes the picture down from the wall, and they enjoy it together. Over a broad estuary that winds toward the sea and is filled with sloops and rowboats runs an arched bridge with a fortified tower. On the left shore lies the burning city: rows of narrow houses with pointed gables, high roofs, churches, and towers; a throng of people running hither and thither, a sea of fire and flames, clouds of smoke, ladders raised against walls, horses running away with shaking loads, docks crowded with barrels and sacks and all manner of rubbish; on the river a mass of people in a rowboat that is almost ready to capsize, while across the bridge people are running for dear life, and away off in the foreground stand two dogs sniffing at each other. But far in the background, where the estuary widens toward the sea, a much-too-small moon sits on the horizon in a mist of pale clouds, peeping wanly and sadly at all this misery.

“Papa,” inquires the little boy, “why is the city burning?”

“Somebody was careless with fire,” says the father.

“*Who* was it that was careless?”

“Ah, one can’t be sure of that so long afterwards.”

“How long afterwards?”

“It is many hundred years since that city was burned,” says the father.

This is a bit puzzling to the little boy, as the father clearly realizes, but he had to answer something. The boy sits quiet a moment and ponders. New thoughts and impressions about things stir in his brain and mingle with the old. He points with his little finger on the glass over the burning city and says:

“Yes, but it was burning yesterday, and now today it’s burning too.”

The father ventures on an explanation of the difference between pictures and reality. “That is not a real city,” he says, “that is only a

picture. The real city was burned up long, long ago. It is gone. The people that run about there waving their arms are dead and don't exist any more. The houses have been burned up, the towers have fallen. The bridge is gone too."

"Have the towers burned down or tumbled down?" asks the boy.

"They have both burned and tumbled down."

"Are the steamboats dead too?"

"The boats too have been gone long ago," replied the father. "But those are not steamboats, they are sailing vessels. There were no steamboats in those days."

The little boy sticks out his lower lip with a dissatisfied expression.

"But I see that they're steamboats," he says. "Papa, what's that steamboat's name?"

He has a mind of his own, has the boy. The father is tired of the labor of instruction and holds his peace. The boy points with his finger to the old Dutch merchantmen and prattles to himself: "That steamer's name is *Bragë*, and that one's is *Hillersea*, and that is the *Princess Ingeborg*."

"Papa," he cries all of a sudden, "is the moon gone too?"

"No, the moon still exists. It is the one thing of all there that still exists. It is the same moon you laughed at the other day in the nursery window."

Again the little boy sits still and ponders. Then comes yet another question:

"Papa, is it very long ago this city was burned? Is it as long ago as when we went away on the *Princess Ingeborg*?"

"It is much, much longer ago," answers the father. "When that city burned, neither you nor I nor mamma nor grandma was here."

The boy's face becomes very serious all at once. He looks positively troubled. He sits quiet a long while pondering. But it seems as if things would not work out for him.

"Tell me, papa," he finally asks, "where was I when that city was burned? Was it when I was at Grenna with mamma?"

"No, old fellow," replies the father, "when that city burned you didn't yet exist."

The boy sticks out his under lip again with an attitude as much as to say: no, I can't agree to such a thing as that. He then repeats with emphasis:

"Yes, but where was I then?"

His father answers, "You didn't exist at all."

The boy looks at his father with round eyes. Suddenly all the little face brightens, the boy tears himself away from his father, and begins to skip and dance again in the sunny spots on the green carpet, crying at the top of his lungs:

“Oho yes, I did just the same. I was somewhere, I was somewhere!”

He thought his father was only joking with him. Such an idea was clearly too ridiculous! The maids used sometimes to talk nonsense to him in jest, and he thought his father had done the same.

So he skips and dances in the sunlight.

ARCHIMEDES' POINT

I once knew a little street arab.

He was the same age as I and lived in the same square. But he was superior to me in everything, not only in experience and courage but also in accomplishments; for with the aid of a piece of red chalk or charcoal he could fill the walls of the street with words and symbols whose meaning I did not understand. When I was going out and was alone and unprotected, I used first to stick my nose out of the gate and glance down the street to assure myself that the little rowdy was not in the neighborhood. For he was stronger than I and could never endure with equanimity the appearance of my clothes, which were cleaner and in better condition than his.

But one day it happened that I was given a sled by my father. It was covered with a piece of red-flowered felt, the runners were of sharp steel, which shone in the sun, and it had also a little bell in front. When I first came down into the gateway with this sled, and the scent of new-fallen snow pricked my nose so that I sneezed, I was suddenly possessed by such a mad delight that I completely forgot my usual caution and rushed out of the gate without looking to left or to right, skipping and dancing like a jumping-jack, while I gave vent to wild war-cries.

Just beyond our gate the street began to slope. I at once sat myself astride the sled and let it slide down the incline, but the slope was not steep, and it went but slowly, so that now and then I had to help with my feet. An icy wind swept through the street, my ears began to freeze, and my joy had already begun to chill, great as it had been but a moment before. As the cold wind crept in under my clothes, such reflections as these began to steal into my soul: I'm not having nearly such a good time as I had just now when I came down through the gateway with my sled.

While I was thinking this within myself, I suddenly caught sight of the little rowdy as he stood at his gate with hands in his trousers' pockets. He was dirty, scrofulous, and hideous to look at, and his appearance

filled my heart with fear and trembling, for he really was a dreadful little mucker.

I saw no chance of getting away. I sat still on my sled without stirring a limb, like a rabbit before a boa-constrictor, waiting till the little rowdy should come out of his gate and thrash me.

But, lo and behold! my guardian angel was watching over me. The little rowdy did not come out of his gate; he stood where he was with his hands in his pockets and, looking at me with indifference rather than hate, spoke only the following words:

“Give yourself a shove from behind, kid, and you’ll go faster!”

Thereupon he took a piece of charcoal from his pocket, scratched a monosyllabic word on the wall, and vanished in at the gate.

But I continued down the slope, scrambling with my feet to keep going, for the track was not very steep. Suddenly, however, it struck me that there might be some truth in the little rowdy’s words. If I sit on my sled, thought I, and someone comes behind and gives me a push on the back, I shall slide on a bit. So if I push myself on the back now, it will naturally have the same effect as if someone else did it. It was so simple: how stupid I was not to have thought of that before! I looked around cautiously to assure myself that the rowdy was not near, for I did not want him to see that I was following his advice. After that I began to thump myself on the back as hard as I could.

But as the sled did not stir from its place, I thumped my back till I was red and hot, and two serving-maids stood still and laughed at me; but the sled never moved.

Then I grew vexed and cross, took my sled by the rope and ran home with it, wishing I had an elder brother who could thrash the little rowdy for me.

At the dinner table I related my adventure to my father and asked him to explain how it was that one could not go forward on a sled by thumping oneself on the back. My father neither laughed at me nor said I was stupid, as most fathers would have done, but tried to give me a logical explanation of the phenomenon. He tangled himself up so badly in contradictions, however, that in the end I got the impression that he did not understand much more of the matter than I did. I then doubted whether I should ever find the explanation to this riddle and asked my worthy father if at least he would not thrash the little rowdy. But he answered that he had not time.

Hours fly, and years pass.

The little rowdy grew up to be a big rough. I myself went to school and came to learn a great deal; but I never got any satisfactory explanation of how it is that one can not push himself forward on a sled by hitting himself on the back. It sometimes happens still that I lie awake at night puzzling over the question. And if some day I have a son and he asks me about it, I am fully resolved to laugh at him and tell him he is stupid.

THE PARSON'S COWS

I

I had not seen my old student comrade, Pastor Torelius of Lerkila, for ten years when, on a fine warm summer evening just a little while ago, we ran into each other on the corner of the sidewalk in front of the Grand Hotel. We had been at the same mess table at Uppsala, where I was studying something, I don't remember what—probably the piano—but he was studying “divvers” and was a very serious young man, except on Saturday nights. For he had regular habits and was exact in everything, even in the matter of youthful indulgence. He had an excellent head, and as he was also of a good old clerical family and had more than one bishop, if not for blood uncle at least for uncle by courtesy, he had made his way quickly, so that while he was still quite young he had been assigned to a fairly good parish. All this has given him a predominantly bright and harmonious conception of Christianity, and when I saw him coming toward me on the sidewalk with arms outspread, as if it had been only a week ago we had parted at Taddi's café, I should have believed from his expression that it was Saturday night, if I hadn't known it was only Friday.

We sat us down at a table under the awning of the restaurant and were served with various refreshments. It so happened that we came to the end of our student memories more quickly than we expected, and our conversation dealt mostly with the present. I was informed that he had already been married for the second time and that his second venture promised to be as happy as his first would have been, had the Lord so ordained. He talked about his charming life out in the country, which he wouldn't change for anything else in the world. He was fond of his congregation and believed that they in turn respected him. We also touched on the subject of present religious tendencies, and I asked,

among other things, if he was much bothered by revivalists in his community.

“You mean the Independents?” he said. “No, I can’t say that I am. It was vexatious when the Archbishop came on his visitation and saw that more people streamed into the meetinghouse than into church. But I was new in the district, my predecessor was made the scapegoat, and since then conditions have changed for the better. There is a more conciliatory spirit, and though I can’t exactly say I have more people in church than before, at least—God be thanked!—there are fewer in the meetinghouse. Ah well, and there’s a special reason for that....”

He broke off and looked very mysterious, but I asked no further questions, and we sat silent for a minute. On the sidewalk in front of us an occasional lean Yankee was parading amid the fat Stockholmers; from the river terrace came the last bars of a Viennese waltz, which left behind a strange stillness; and through the midst of this stillness burst the lowing of a cow. It proceeded from one of the coast boats which had just come in at the dock; a moment later we could hear the cow trampling on the gangway, another followed, and we saw a little old peasant leading both the cows after him on one rope.

“They are beautiful cows,” said the clergyman, “though not so beautiful as mine. I have the fattest and handsomest in the whole parish. But one must see cows in a green landscape to appreciate them. There is nothing I’m fonder of than my cows—among the things of this world, I mean, of course. But for that too there’s—”

“A special reason?”

“Precisely. Let me tell you the whole story, about the cows, the Independents, and my marriage. It all belongs together.

II

“You may, perhaps, remember that it was very warm last summer, especially just before midsummer. One day I was going the rounds of my place as usual. I went out along the ditches in the full sunlight, crossed a meadow where my people were cutting hay, and came to the pasture where my cows were grazing. You can’t imagine how handsome they looked between the birch trunks. I scratched them behind the horns and

talked to them the way I do, to Primrose and Buttercup and White Girl—she is my bell-cow; she has no horns and is as white as milk—and to Hercules, my bull, who is a combination of strength and mildness. No animal is better tempered than a bull if only one doesn't irritate him at the start.

“I talked to them all, and they answered me as well as they could, lowing after me when I left. I also talked with an ‘enlightened’ tailor whom I met on the slope, a man who was a pillar of strength among the ‘awakened’ in the parish. I’ve even heard tell that he used to drive out devils. He responded a bit wryly, of course—and then I came down to the lake. There it lay still and shining. It’s a principle with me never to go in swimming before midsummer; but it was only a couple of days till then, and I was perspiring with the heat. I couldn’t resist. In a twinkling my clothes were off, I jumped into the water, and swam out. However, it was colder than I had thought, and I didn’t stay in long.

“But when I came out, what did I see but all the cows coming toward me? I called to them, and they came nearer, but slowly and cautiously. White Girl came first, with Hercules close beside her. When they were ten or fifteen paces away, I suddenly saw by their expression that they didn’t recognize me, that they didn’t even take me for a human being! And in Hercules’ look I thought I saw something I had never seen there before. I confess that all at once I got frightfully scared. If you want to know what panic terror means, picture yourself stark naked in front of a dozen large beasts with sharp horns—I have eleven cows and a bull—with a lake behind you!

“I for my part went half crazy with fear and began to run along the shore. Then some life came into the cows. I heard them behind me at a sharp trot. What was I to do? I caught hold of a bough that was fairly low and swung myself up into a tree. It was high time; the whole herd was upon me, and Hercules snorted at me and butted the tree with his horns. Well, he couldn’t reach me, and luckily it was so warm that I didn’t catch a chill, though ordinarily my stomach is very sensitive. I tried to talk sense to them, but there was no possibility of such a thing. White Girl responded only with contempt, Primrose lowered her head and gave me an ugly look, and Hercules lost his composure for the first time.

“And in their way they were right. How could they conceive that this strange white thing, which took flight at their coming and climbed into a tree, this animal which had neither black clothes, nor spectacles, nor a straw hat with a wide brim, was identical with their master and good friend? This creature must then inevitably be their enemy, or at least a

strange, ridiculous, and indecent phenomenon which ought to be combated.

III

“It is, however, luckily a fact that a violent emotion is seldom long-lived, at least not with animals. After a while the luscious grass began to distract their attention, and I hid myself in the leaves as much as I could, in the hope of being forgotten. The beasts had already begun to spread out and I began to hope for liberation—the rough bark was most uncomfortable to my skin—when I heard the prattle and laughter of girls’ voices. It was the schoolmistress and the enlightened tailor’s two daughters—all of them enlightened, of course—who were coming with towels in their hands to bathe!

“I can’t deny that I whispered to myself, ‘This is the very devil!’ I only hoped that they wouldn’t see me and I vowed in turn to look the other way. As far as that goes, there wasn’t much to look at, if I except the youngest. They were, I must say, so quick in their motions that I had hardly time to think what I should do before the younger girl was standing with one foot in the water and all her clothes neatly laid on a stone. To be frank, I didn’t dare to turn my head away for fear of making a rustle in the leaves. Well, soon all three of the girls were splashing in the water, while I was sitting in my tree as silent as a little rat. There’s nothing like getting used to things: the bark no longer hurt my poor skin as much as before, and I began to submit to my fate and hope for a happy end to the story. So there was, too, in the end, though not in the way I imagined.

“The girls came out of the lake again, but the schoolmistress happened to come ashore a bit farther away, of course just where my clothes were. She came running to tell of her discovery: ‘A man’s clothes are over there; there’s a man bathing right by us!’

“‘But where has he gone?’

“‘He must have swum far out.’

“They dressed in a great hurry, then stood and listened. They could hear nothing, could see nothing out in the lake. Had he been drowned? And who could it be? They would have to look more carefully at the

clothes. The youngest was the boldest; she stole off and came back with the news: 'It's the parson. Only think—if he's been drowned!'

"'What will become of his poor soul?' the schoolmistress wondered.

"'His soul, nothing!' responded the youngest girl, angry and at the same time with a sob in her throat; 'He confirmed me three years ago and I was very fond of him, even if he didn't have the true revelation. But God isn't as spiteful as you are.'

"Suddenly they all grew silent and began to stare up into the tree as if they were bewitched. Then they let out a triple shriek and the next instant they were off like the wind.

"Finally I got down out of the tree and dressed. I was comparatively calm. You must admit I hadn't much more to lose. Never, surely, was a poor servant of the Lord so innocently placed in such a damning situation. It wasn't long before the tailor came to the spot with two more of the faithful. They looked a bit grim, all three of them, but in the tailor's eyes was a gleam of secret fire. You can imagine the rascal's delight at the thought of driving out the devil from no less a person than the lawful guardian of his soul, the parish minister. However, by the greatest luck I had already managed to get my clothes on; and with them the dignity of which I was now in so much need. Before the tailor could open his mouth, I told him I should call on him in the afternoon and explain everything; whereupon I dismissed them with a wave and went off with firm composure.

IV

"That afternoon I fortunately met the girl first. She was standing by a bush in the orchard eating gooseberries. Her father, I should mention, had a fine place with an excellent orchard; he had been blessed outwardly as well as inwardly, had saved his money and bought this house. I explained everything to her, and the dear child believed me at once. She was the only sensible one of the lot. First she had thought I was crazy to have climbed up naked into a tree, but when she heard me talk and saw that I had my wits in control, she believed me right away. She was a simple-hearted, unsophisticated girl, and what had happened did not seem to her nearly so dreadful as I had thought. It is assuredly

true, as someone has said, that woman is closer to nature than man, and that she feels much less shame about natural things than do we, although we always think the opposite when we are young and do not know her.”

“But what about the tailor?”

“He never would believe me. But that didn’t, of course, prevent him from feeling flattered when a couple of months later I came to ask for the hand of his daughter. You will have gathered by this time that it is she who is now my wife. But my father-in-law still believes I climbed up into a tree naked to see the girls bathe. For his family’s sake, however, he regards this as a very natural and pardonable fault, which I have completely atoned for since. But among his fellow believers his indulgence toward me has awakened surprise and displeasure, and that is why the services at the meetinghouse which he and his family conduct are no longer so well attended as formerly.”

As it was getting late, we rose to depart. When we separated, we shook hands heartily and I wished him all success, both for the victory of the true church and for the good turn which the affair had taken in respect to him personally.

“Thanks,” said he, “I am happy already. It is, to be sure, a fact that my wife has not had the same intellectual advantages as I; but she has the culture of the heart. And it made an impression on me, too, that she laid down her clothes so neatly; whereas the others threw them all higgledy-piggledy.”



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