

The Jews' Beech
Die Judenbuche

A portrait of morals in hilly Westphalia

Where is the hand so gentle, that, unerring,
but of a dull brain's confusion
so steady, that without trembling, it can
hurl the stone at some poor stunted being?
Who dares to measure vain blood's urge,
to weigh each word that, unforgotten,
into a young breast the tough roots did send
of prejudice's secret thief of souls?
Thou happy one, born and bred
in bright space, cared for by a pious hand:
Put down the scales, to thee never allowed!
Let lie the stone – it strikes thine own head!

Friedrich Mergel, born 1738, was the only son of a tenant farmer or lower-class landowner in the village of "B" which, badly built and smoky though it may be, yet seizes the attention of every traveller by reason of the thoroughly picturesque beauty of its position in the green-forested valley of an important and historically remarkable mountain range. The little province to which it belonged was in those days one of those hidden away corners of the earth without factories and commerce, without military roads, where a strange face still caused a sensation and a journey of thirty leagues¹ gave even the more prominent person in his district an aura of an intrepid explorer – in short, a spot like which there were so many others in Germany, with all the faults and virtues, all the originality and narrow-mindedness that thrive only under such circumstances. Under highly simple and often inadequate laws, the inhabitants' notions of justice and injustice had become somewhat confused, or rather, a second justice had formed alongside the legal one, a justice of public opinion, of habit and of negative prescription arising from neglect. Landowners, who had the right of jurisdiction at the lower levels, punished and rewarded according to their own, in most cases sincere, judgement. Inferiors did what seemed achievable and compatible with a somewhat broad conscience and only to the loser did it occur, every once in a while, to search through old dusty documents. It is difficult to view that period impartially. Since its disappearance, it has been either arrogantly criticised or absurdly praised, because those who experienced it are blinded by too many dear memories and those born later do not understand it. This much one may, however, claim: that the mould was weaker, the core firmer, offences more frequent, unscrupulousness more seldom. For, whoever acts according to his convictions, be they ever so imperfect, can never quite go to ruin, whereas nothing has a more soul-destroying effect than laying claim to an outwardly visible justice rather than following inner feelings of justice.

A race of people, more restless and enterprising than all its neighbours, let some things come to the fore much more glaringly in that little province about which we are speaking than anywhere else under the same circumstances. Offences of timber theft and game poaching were daily occurrences and every man had to console himself with his broken head from the brawls that often happened.

However, as large and productive woodlands made up most of the main wealth of the province, a strict watch on the forest was kept, to be sure, but less through legal means than in ever renewed attempts to outdo violence and trickery with the same weapons.

The village that we shall call B, counted as the most arrogant, cunning and daring community in the whole principality. Its position in the midst of deep and proud forest isolation would quite early on nourish the inborn obstinacy of the minds. The proximity of a river which flowed into a lake and was navigable for

covered vessels large enough to move shipbuilding timber comfortably and safely out of the country, contributed very much towards encouraging the natural daring of the timber transgressors. Also the circumstance, that everywhere was alive with foresters, could only make for excitement, since, in the course of the skirmishes that often happened, the advantage lay mostly with the peasants. Thirty or forty carts set off together on fine moonlit nights, with about double the number of crews of all ages, from mere lads to a seventy year old local magistrate who, as experienced lead-ram, commanded the gang with the same proud sense of responsibility as when taking his seat in the courtroom. Inhabitants left behind listened unconcerned to the gradual dying away of the creaking and bumping of wheels over sunken roadways and gently went back to sleep. An occasional shot, a faint cry would startle a young wife or fiancée; others would pay no attention to it. As dawn began to break, the gang would return silently home, faces glowing like ore in the furnace, here and there one with a bandaged head, a matter of little concern and a couple of hours later the district was full of the misfortune of one or more foresters who were carried out of the forest, beaten, blinded by snuff and incapable for a time of carrying on their occupation.

It was into these conditions that Friedrich Mergel was born; in a house which, by reason of the proud addition of a chimney and a few panes of glass, betokened the ambitions of its builder and by reason of its present dereliction also the mean circumstances of the present owner.

The previous railings around farmyard and garden had given way to a neglected fence, the roof was dilapidated, stray cattle grazed on the pasturage, wild corn grew right up to the house and the garden held, apart from a few rose bushes from better times, more weeds than vegetables. Though misadventures had brought about some of this, much disorder and bad management played a part, too. Friedrich's father, old Hermann Mergel, was, in his bachelorhood, known as a proper toss-pot, that is to say, one who lay in the gutter only on Sundays and holidays and was, throughout the week, as well behaved as the next man. Thus his wooing of a right pretty and well-to-do girl was not made difficult. All was merry at the wedding. Mergel was not too badly drunk and the parents of the bride went home in the evening delighted.

But on the following Sunday the young woman was seen running, screaming and bloody, through the village to her family, abandoning all her fine clothes and chattels. To be sure, it was a great scandal and vexation for Mergel who, of course, needed consolation. So it was then, that, in the afternoon, no pane of glass remained whole at his house and he was seen until late at night, lying in front of the doorstep, time and again putting the broken neck of a bottle to his mouth, cutting his face and hands deplorably. The young woman remained at her parents' home where she soon wasted away and died. Enough of whether regret or shame now tormented Mergel; he seemed ever more in need of a means of consolation and soon started to count among those gone completely to the dogs.

The farm decayed; strange girls brought disgrace and infamy. So passed year after year. Mergel was and remained an embarrassed and finally rather wretched widower, until he suddenly came forward as a bridegroom again. If the matter was, properly speaking, unexpected, then the personality of the bride contributed to raising the astonishment. Margrethe Semmler was an upright, decent person in her forties, a village beauty in her youth and now still respected as very sensible and hospitable, also not without means. So it had to be inconceivable to everyone what drove her to this step. We believe that the reason is to be found in just this, her confident perfection. On the eve of the wedding she is supposed to have said, "A woman who is badly treated by her husband is foolish or is not up to much. If I do badly, then say it is my own fault." The result showed that she had over estimated her strengths. At the start, she impressed her husband. When he had taken too much drink, he did not come home, or he crept into the barn. But the yoke was too oppressive to be carried for long, and soon one saw him often enough staggering straight across the alley into the house, heard his

coarse shouting within and saw Margrethe hurriedly closing door and windows. On one such day – no longer a Sunday – she was seen rushing out of the house, without bonnet and scarf, her hair dishevelled, throwing herself to the ground alongside a vegetable patch and scrabbling in the soil with her hands; then, looking fearfully about her, hurriedly picking a bundle of vegetables and slowly walking towards the house again, but not into it – instead, into the barn. It was said that Mergel first laid hand on her that day, although the confession never passed her lips.

The second year of this unhappy marriage was, one cannot say, blessed, with a son, for Margrethe is said to have wept a lot when they handed the child to her. Although carried beneath a heart filled with grief, Friedrich was yet a healthy, pretty child who thrived greatly in the fresh air. The father loved him very much; never came home without bringing him a piece of currant bun or the like, and it was even said that he had become steadier since the birth of the lad. At least, the shouting indoors ceased.

Friedrich was in his ninth year. It was some time during Epiphany, a hard, stormy winter's night. Hermann had gone to a wedding and had set off in good time, as the bridal home lay some three miles distant. Although he had promised to return in the evening, Frau Mergel reckoned all the less on this, as dense snow flurries had set in after sundown. Near ten o'clock, she raked the ashes together in the stove and made ready to go to bed. Friedrich stood next to her, already half undressed and listened to the howling of the wind and the rattling of the loft windows. "Mother, is father not coming tonight?" he asked. "No, child, tomorrow." "But why not, Mother? He promised." "Oh God, if he kept to everything that he promises! See to it that you get along and make ready for bed."

They had scarcely laid themselves down when a whirlwind arose, as if it would take the house with it. The bedstead shook and there was a rattling in the chimney like a hobgoblin. "Mother, there's knocking outside!" "Quiet, Freddie. That is the loose board in the gable that the wind is chasing." "No, Mother, at the door!" "It does not close properly; the latch is broken. Goodness, go to sleep! Don't deny me the little bit of nighttimes rest." "But when father comes?" The mother turned over irascibly in bed. "The devil is holding him firmly enough!" "Where is the devil, Mother?" "Just you wait, you fidget! He is standing outside the door and will fetch you away if you are not still!"

Friedrich fell silent. He listened for a little while and then fell asleep. After a few hours he awoke. The wind had swung round and was hissing through the gaps in the window at his ear. His shoulder was frozen stiff. He crept deep below the bedclothes and lay quite still out of fear. After a while he noticed that his mother was also not asleep. He heard her weeping and now and then: "Hail Mary!" and "Pray for us poor sinners!" The beads of the rosary slid down his face. An involuntary sigh escaped him. "Friedrich, are you awake?" "Yes, Mother." "Child, pray a little – you already know half the Paternoster – that God protect us from fire and water."

Friedrich thought about the devil, how he might look. The cacophony of noise and howling in the house seemed strange to him; there must be something alive inside and outside, too. "Listen, Mother, that is surely people knocking." "Oh, no, child; but there is not one old board in the house, that does not rattle." "Listen! Don't you hear it? There is indeed calling out! Do listen!" The mother raised herself. The storm's raging abated for an instant. Knocking on the window shutters and several voices could be heard clearly. "Margreth! Frau Margreth, hoi there, open up!" Margreth let out a loud cry: "Oh, they're bringing me back that pig again!" The rosary flew rattling on to the bench, clothes were snatched together. She raced to the stove and soon Friedrich heard her going, with defiant steps, across the threshing floor. Margrethe did not come back again, but there was much murmuring and strange voices to be heard in the kitchen. Twice a strange man came into the bedroom and seemed to be anxiously seeking something. Suddenly a lamp was brought in. Two men were carrying the mother. She was as white as chalk and had her eyes closed. Friedrich imagined that she was dead. He started yelling dreadfully, whereupon someone boxed his ears, which quietened him and now he understood, bit by bit from the talk about the

situation, that his father had been found dead in the woods by Uncle Franz Semmler and Herr Huelsmeyer and was now lying in the kitchen.

As soon as Margrethe came to her senses again, she tried to get rid of the verderers. Her brother remained with her and Friedrich, who was told, on pain of severe punishment, to stay in bed, heard the fire crackling in the kitchen all night through and a sound like sliding to and fro and brushing. Little was spoken and that only quietly, but from time to time sighs were audible from there, which young though he was, set the boy's teeth on edge. Once, he understood the uncle to say, "Margrethe, do not take it so hard. Let us each have three masses said and near Eastertide make a pilgrimage of intercession to Our Lady of Werl". As the corpse was being taken away after two days, Margrethe sat at the stove, her face buried in her apron. After a few minutes, when all was quiet, she said to herself, "Ten years, ten crosses. We bore them, though, together and now I am alone"! Then, louder, "Freddie, come here"! Friedrich approached shyly; his mother seemed to him to have become quite uncanny with her black-banded headdress and her disturbed features. "Freddie", she said, "do you now also want be well-behaved, so that I take pleasure in you, or do you want to be naughty and lie, or tittle and steal? "Mother, Huelsmeyer steals". "Huelsmeyer? God forbid! Shall I give you what-for? Who tells you such bad rubbish?" "He beat Aaron recently and took six groats from him." "If he took money from Aaron, then the cursed Jew had cheated him previously, for sure. Huelsmeyer is a decent, reasonable man and Jews are all rogues." "But, Mother, Brandis also says that he steals wood and deer!" "Child, Brandis is a verderer." "Mother, do foresters lie?" Margrethe was silent for a while, and then she said, "Listen, Freddie, our Lord God lets the timber grow freely and the game passes from one lord's land into the other. Deer may belong to no one. Indeed, you do not understand that yet. Now go into the shed and fetch me kindling".

Friedrich had seen his father on the straw when he is supposed to have looked blue and dreadful, as they say. But he never spoke about it and appeared reluctant to think about it. Altogether the memory of his father had left him with a fondness mixed with horror, since nothing fascinates as much as the love and solicitude of a personality which seems hardened against everything else and this feeling grew in Friedrich with the years, through the hurt of many a slight on the part of others. It was extremely hurtful to him as long as he was a child, if someone mentioned the deceased none too laudably, an affliction from which neighbours' tactfulness did not save him. It is usual in those regions to deny to the unfortunate his peace in the grave. Old Mergel had become the ghost of Brede Wood. In the guise of a will o' the wisp, he led one drunkard to within a hair's breadth of the Zellerkolk – a pond. Shepherd boys, crouching over their fires at night, the owls hooting in the hollows, now and then quite clearly heard, in disjointed notes, "Listen to me, sweet little goose," and one unprivileged woodcutter who had fallen asleep beneath the broad oak and awoke to darkness, saw his swollen blue face peering through the branches. Friedrich had to hear much about this from other boys; then he would howl, lash out all round, stabbed once with his little knife and was pitifully beaten on this occasion. Since then he drove his mother's cows on his own to the other end of the valley where he was often seen lying for hours in the same position in the grass and plucking the wild thyme from the ground.

He was twelve years old when his mother had a visit from her younger brother who dwelled in Brede and since his sister's unwise marriage, had not crossed her threshold. Simon Semmler was small, restless, lean man with protuberant fishy eyes and a face on the whole like a pike – a weird fellow in whom boastful taciturnity often alternated with affected guillessness, who would gladly have presented himself as an enlightened thinker, instead of which he was regarded as an awkward, quarrel-seeking fellow, out of whose way everyone went the more he entered the age where people, already narrow-minded, easily gain in pretensions what they lose in usefulness. Nevertheless, poor Margreth was pleased, who otherwise no longer had any of her relatives alive. "Simon, is it you?" she said and shivered such that she had to hold on to the chair. "Do you want to see how I and my dirty boy are getting on?" – Simon looked at her with a

serious expression and shook her hand. "You have grown old, Margreth!" – Margreth sighed, "It has meanwhile often been a bitter time for me, with all kinds of disasters." "Yes, girl; who courts too late always regrets it! You are now old and the child is small. Everything has its time and place. But when an old house is burning, extinguishing does not help." A flush as red as blood flew across Margreth's woe-begone face. "But, listen. Your boy is astute and sharp," Simon continued. "Ay, well, fairly so and steady with it." "Hm. A fellow who once stole a cow was also named Steady. But he is quiet and pensive, is he not? He does not run with the other boys?" "He is a strange child," said Margreth, as if to herself, "it is not a good thing." Simon laughed out loud. "Your boy is shy because the others have given him a good hiding a couple of times. The boy will pay them back alright. Huelsmeyer was at my place recently. He said the boy is like a deer." What mother's heart does not swell with pleasure when she hears her child being praised? Everybody called her boy spiteful and taciturn. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "Well, praise God, he is straight of limb." "What does he look like?" Simon went on. "He has much about him like you, Simon; much." Simon laughed. "Oh, that must be a rare one – I am becoming more handsome by the day. He should not waste his energy on schooling. You let him mind the cows? Just as well. It is only half true, what the schoolmaster says. But where does he mind them? In the Telge Vale, in Rode Wood, in the Teutoburg Forest? At night, too, and early?" "The whole night through. But what do you mean?" Simon appeared not to hear this last. He inclined his head toward the door. "Ah, there comes the fellow! Son of the father! He swings his arms just the same as your departed husband. And, look at him! In truth, the boy has my blond hair!" A secret, proud smile spread over the mother's features. Her Friedrich's blond curls and Simon's reddish bristles! Without answering, she broke a switch off the nearest hedge and walked to meet her son, ostensibly, to make a lethargic cow move on, but in reality to mutter a few quick, half-threatening words to him, for she knew his refractory nature and Simon's manner had seemed more intimidating today than ever. However, all went well, beyond expectations, indeed. Friedrich showed himself to be neither obdurate nor impudent, rather bashful and much at pains to please the uncle. Thus it came to a stage where, after half an hour's discussion, Simon proposed a form of adoption for the boy, on the strength of which he would not take him entirely away from his mother, but dispose over the greatest part of his time, the old bachelor's inheritance falling to him in the end, which he surely could not fail to notice. Margreth patiently allowed this to be explained to her – how great the advantage, how minimal the deprivation on her part would be in the transaction. She well knew what an infirm widow missed when deprived of the help of a twelve-year-old boy who had already become accustomed to filling the place of a daughter. Yet she remained silent and resigned herself to everything. She merely bade her brother to be strict, but not harsh toward the boy. "He is good," said she, "but I am a solitary woman. My child is not as one who had been ruled by a father's hand". Simon nodded knowingly. "Just let me have my way. We shall agree alright, but do you know what? – let the boy come with me right now. I have to fetch two sacks from the mill; the smallest is just right for him and that way he will learn to give me a hand. Come, Freddy, put on your clogs!" Soon Margreth watched the pair stepping away, Simon out ahead, his face cutting through the air, while the tails of the red coat followed him like flames of fire. Thus he had much the appearance of a fiery man doing penance under the stolen sack, Friedrich following him, slight and slim for his age, with delicate, almost noble features and long blond locks which, better groomed than the rest of his outward appearance, led one to expect. He was generally ragged, sunburned and with an air of neglect and a certain rough melancholy in his features. Yet a great family likeness between both was unmistakable and as Friedrich trod so slowly after his leader, his sight firmly on the same who attracted him exactly by reason of the strangeness of his appearance, he reminded one of someone regarding, with distracted watchfulness, the image of his future in a magic mirror. Now the pair was approaching the place in the Teutoburg Forest, where Brede Wood climbed down the range's escarpment and occupied a very dark hollow. Little had been

spoken until now. Simon seemed to be musing, the boy distracted and both were gasping under their sacks. Suddenly Simon asked, "Do you like drinking brandy?" The boy did not answer. "I'm asking, do you like drinking brandy? Does your mother give you some occasionally?" "Mother has none herself," said Friedrich. "Ah, ha. So much the better! Do you know that wood there in front of us?" "That is Brede Wood." "Do you also know what happened in there?" Friedrich stayed silent. Meanwhile they came ever nearer to the gloomy ravine. "Does your mother still pray a lot?" Simon started again. "Yes, every evening two rosaries." "So? And you pray with her?" The boy laughed, somewhat ill at ease, with an artful sideways glance. "Mother prays one rosary in the twilight before supper, then I am mostly not back with the cows, and then the other rosaries in bed; then I am usually going to sleep." "Ah, ha, young fellow!" These last words were spoken beneath the shelter of a broad beech which arched over the way into the ravine. It was now quite gloomy, the moon's first quarter hung in the sky but its weak beams served only to lend an odd appearance to objects that they touched from time to time through gaps in the branches. Friedrich kept close behind his uncle; his breath came rapidly and if one could have made out his features, one would have gained the impression of immense, but more fanciful than fearful, tension.

And so both stepped out robustly, Simon with the firm tread of the hardened traveller, Friedrich faltering and as if in a dream. It seemed to him as though everything was moving and the trees were swaying, now together, now apart, in individual moonbeams. Tree roots and slippery places where water running down the paths had collected, made his steps unsure. A few times he was near to falling. Now the darkness seemed to break at a distance and soon both stepped into a fairly large clearing. The moon shone clearly into it and revealed that the axe had shortly before raged unmercifully. Tree stumps stuck out everywhere, some several feet above the earth, cut through in haste where it had been easiest. The despicable work must have been unexpectedly interrupted, for one beech lay athwart the path, in full leaf, its branches stretching high above itself and the fresh leaves shivering in the night wind. Simon stood for a moment and viewed the felled trunk with interest. In the middle of the clearing stood an old oak, more broad than tall. A faint beam shining through the branches, which fell on its trunk, showed that it was hollow, which had probably saved it from the general destruction. At this point Simon suddenly grasped the boy's arm. "Friedrich, do you know that tree? That is the broad oak." Friedrich quailed and clung with cold hands to his uncle. "Look, " Simon went on, "Uncle Franz and Herr Huelsmeyer found your father here when he went to the devil without confession and extreme unction." "Uncle, uncle!" whimpered Friedrich. "What are you thinking of? You are not going to be frightened? Oh, you Satan of a boy, you are pinching my arm! Let go, let go!" He sought to shake off the boy. "Your father was, incidentally, a good soul. God will not be too hard on him. I loved him as much as my own brother." Friedrich let go his uncle's arm. They continued in silence through the rest of the woods and the village of Brede lay before them, with its wattle and daub hovels and individual dwellings of brick. Simon's house was one of the latter.

The next evening Margreth had already been sitting before the door for an hour with her distaff and was waiting for her boy. It was the first night that she had spent without hearing her child's breathing next to her and Friedrich had still not come home. She was troubled and afraid and knew that both were groundless. The clock in the tower struck seven, the cattle returned home. He was still not there and she had to get up to attend to the cows. When she went into the dark kitchen again, Friedrich was standing at the stove. He was leaning forward and warming his hands against the coals. The glow played across his features and gave them a repulsive look of thinness and frightened twitching. Margreth stood in the doorway of the threshing floor, so strangely changed did her child seem to her. "Friedrich, how is your uncle?" The lad mumbled a few unintelligible words and huddled closer to the chimney breast. "Friedrich, have you forgotten how to speak? Boy, open your snout! You know very well that I don't hear well with my right ear." The child raised his voice, falling so much to stammering that Margreth

scarce understood any of it. "What are you saying? Greetings from Herr Semmler? Going away again? Where to? The cows are already home. Cursed boy, I cannot understand you. Just you wait, I must see whether you no longer have a tongue in your head!" Angrily, she took a few steps forward. The child looked up at her, with the expression of misery of a half-grown dog learning to stand guard and began, in his fear, to stamp and to rub his back against the chimney breast. Margreth stood still, her expression became frightened. The boy seemed to her as though shrunken, also his clothes were not the same; no, that was not her child, or was it? "Friedrich, Friedrich!" she cried.

In the bedroom a cupboard door banged and, thus summoned, he stepped forward, in one hand a so-called *Holzschenvioline*, that is to say, an old wooden clog with three or four worn strings stretched across it, in the other a bow, quite in keeping with the instrument. Thus he went straight towards his forlorn mirror image, for his part with an attitude of conscious dignity and independence, which at this moment strongly emphasised the difference between the two otherwise remarkably similar boys.

"There, Johannes!" he said and with a patronising air, handed him the work of art. "There is the violin that I promised you. My playing days are over, I have to earn money now." Johannes again shot a shy glance at Margreth, then slowly stretched forth his hand until he had a firm grasp of the offered item and put it, as if surreptitiously, under the folds of his shabby jacket. Margreth stood quite still and let the children alone. Her thoughts had taken another, very serious direction and she looked with an uneasy eye from one to the other. The strange boy was once again bent over the coals with an expression of momentary comfort bordering on silliness, while sympathy, obviously more selfish than good humoured, played in succession across Friedrich's features and his eyes certainly showed, for the first time, with almost crystal clarity, an expression of that unbridled ambition and disposition to swagger, which later emerged as such a strong motive for most of his actions. His mother's call shook him out of his thoughts which were just as new as they were pleasant. She was once more sitting at her spinning wheel. "Friedrich," she said, hesitantly, "tell me...", and fell silent again. Friedrich looked up and, as he heard no more, turned back to his protégé. "No, listen", and then more softly, "what sort of boy is that – what is his name?" Friedrich answered just as softly, "That is Uncle Simon's swineherd who has a message for Herr Huelsmeyer. Uncle gave me a pair of shoes and a waistcoat made of drill. The boy carried them for me on the way. For that I promised him my violin. He is after all a poor child. He is called Johannes." "Well?" said Margreth. "What do you mean, Mother?" "What is his other name?" "Yes – well nothing more, or, no, wait – Niemand, Johannes Niemand he is called. He has no father", he added. Margreth stood up and went into the bedroom. After a while she came out, with a hard, stern expression in her countenance. "Well, Friedrich," she said, "let the boy go, so that he can run his errand. Boy, what are you doing, almost lying on top the ashes? Have you nothing to do at home?" The boy struggled to his feet with the air of one persecuted, such that he was all hands and feet and the violin was a hair's breadth from dropping into the fire. "Wait, Johannes," said Friedrich, "I will give you half of my slice of buttered bread, it is too big for me. Mother always cuts right across the loaf." "Leave it," said Margreth, "he is going home". "Yes, but he gets nothing more. Uncle Simon eats at seven o'clock."

Margreth turned to the boy. "Do they not keep something for you? Speak up. Who takes care of you?" "Nobody," the boy stammered. "Nobody?" she repeated, "here, take it, take it!" she added sharply. "You are called Nobody and Nobody takes care of you! Heaven forbid! And now be off with you! Friedrich, do not go with him, do you hear. Do not go through the village together". "I am only going to get wood from the shed," Friedrich answered. When both boys were gone, Margreth dropped on to a chair and clapped her hands together with the expression of utmost misery. Her face was as white as a sheet. "Perjury, perjury!" she groaned, "Simon, Simon, how will you stand the test before God!" She sat like that for a while, rigid, tight-lipped, as if in complete absent-mindedness. Friedrich stood before her and had already

spoken twice to her. "What is it? What do you want?" she cried out, startled. "I am bringing you money," he said, more astounded than shocked. "Money? Where?" She bestirred herself and the little coin fell tinkling to the floor. Friedrich picked it up. "Money from Uncle Simon because I helped him to work. I can earn money myself now." "Money from Simon? Throw it away – away with it! No, give it to the poor. All the same, no; keep it," she whispered, scarcely making herself heard, "we are poor ourselves. Who knows, whether we shall get by without begging!" "I am supposed to go to Uncle Simon again and to help him with the sowing". "You, to him again? No, no, nevermore!" She embraced her child vehemently. "After all," she added, a flood of tears suddenly bursting out across her hollow cheeks, "go. He is my only brother and the slander is great! But keep God in mind and do not forget daily prayer!" Margreth laid her face against the wall and wept aloud. She had borne many a heavy burden – her husband's bad treatment of her, worse still his death and it was a bitter blow when the widow had to let a creditor have the last piece of arable land in usufruct, the plough standing idle before her house. Never had she felt like this. Nevertheless, after an evening spent weeping and a night lying awake, she had come round to thinking that her brother Simon could not be that godless – the boy assuredly did not belong to him; similarities do not prove anything. Had she not herself lost a little sister forty years ago, who looked exactly like that travelling seller of gee-gaws. What does one not believe, when one has so little and has to lose that little through disbelief! From then on, Friedrich was seldom any longer at home. Simon appeared to have turned all the warmer feelings of which he was capable to his sister's son. At least, he much missed him when he was not with him and he did not let up with errands when some domestic business or other kept him at his mother's for a time. The youth was as though transformed since then, the dreamy personality entirely gone from him. He seemed self-confident, started taking care of his appearance and soon gained the reputation of an attractive, efficient lad. His uncle who could well not live without projects, now and then undertook fairly important public works, such as road mending, Friedrich being looked upon as one of his best workmen and everywhere as his right hand man, for, although his physical strengths had not reached their full measure, nobody matched him in stamina. Margreth had until then just loved her son, now she began to be proud of him and even to feel a kind of respect toward him, as she saw the young person developing quite without her doing, and what is more, without her counsel that she, like most people, held to be inestimable and thus did not value high enough those capabilities which could dispense with such a precious means of support. In his eighteenth year, Friedrich had already secured a reputation for himself within the little world of the village youth, by the upshot of a bet, wherein he carried a bagged wild boar on his back over some nine miles without setting it down. For all that, enjoyment of the fame was about the only advantage that Margreth gained from these favourable circumstances, as Friedrich spent more and more on his outward appearance and gradually began finding it hard to accept when lack of money forced him to fall behind anyone in the village. Added to that, all his efforts were directed toward casual earnings. Every continual occupation at home seemed to him, contrary to his other repute, to be burdensome and he submitted himself rather to a hard but brief exertion which soon allowed him to follow his former calling as a herdsman, which already began to become unsuitable for his age and occasionally called forth derision from which he obtained respite by means of a couple of rebukes with his fists. Thus one became accustomed to seeing him, now in his finery and cheerful at the head of the young folk as the recognised village dandy, now creeping alone and dreamy as a ragged herd boy again, or lying in a forest clearing seemingly unthinking and plucking moss from the trees. About this time the slumbering laws were somewhat shaken up by a gang of timber thieves, which under the name of the *Blue Smocks*, so surpassed all their predecessors in cunning and audacity that it had to be too much for even the most forbearing. Quite contrary to the usual state of affairs, where one could point the finger at the strongest bucks in the herd, it had not been possible to name but one individual, despite great watchfulness. They got their name from the very uniform costume by means of

which they made recognition difficult when, for instance, a verderer still saw a single straggler disappearing into the thicket. They devastated everything as does the oak processionary moth², whole stretches of woods were felled in one night and taken away there and then, so that nothing was found the next morning other than chippings and tangled heaps of toppings and the situation, that cart tracks never led to a village, but always from the river and back again, proved that they were acting under the protection and perhaps with the support of ship owners. There had to be very clever lookouts in the gang, for the foresters could watch for weeks to no good end. Then the first night, regardless of whether stormy or moonlit, when they slackened, destruction broke out. It was strange that the country folk in the area appeared just as unknowing and anxious as the foresters themselves. It was said with certainty of a few villages that they did not belong to the *Blue Smocks*, but none could be designated as strongly suspected since the most suspected of all, the village of B, had to be acquitted. Chance had brought this about. A wedding at which almost all inhabitants of this village notoriously claimed to have spent the night while the Blue Smocks were carrying out one of their most extensive expeditions at just that time. The damage in the forests was by now far too great, wherefore measures to counter it were heightened in a previously unheard of manner. Patrolling went on day and night, farm labourers, male domestic servants and others were provided with muskets and attached to the forest officials. Nevertheless, success was only minimal and the guards often had scarcely left one end of the forest when the Blue Smocks were already entering at the other. That lasted longer than a full year – guards and Blue Smocks, Blue Smocks and guards, like sun and moon, always alternately in possession of the terrain and never meeting up.

It was July 1756, at three in the morning. The moon hung bright in the sky, but its glow was beginning to fade and in the east a thin yellow strip was already showing up, hemming the horizon and closing the opening to a narrow glen as with a golden ribbon. Friedrich lay in the grass in his usual manner and whittled at a willow staff the knotty end of which he was trying to shape into the crude figure of an animal. He looked tired out, yawned, at the same time letting his head rest against the weathered gnarled base of a tree trunk and casting glances – more sleepy than the horizon – over the way into the glen, which was almost closed by scrub and young growth. Once or twice his eyes lit up and took on their peculiar glassy sparkle, but he closed them again soon after, yawned and turned over, as only lazy herdsmen are allowed to do. His dog lay at some distance close to the cows who, unheeding of the forest laws, partook as freely of young tree shoots as of grass and snorted in the fresh morning air. From time to time a hollow, crashing sound broke forth from the woods. The note lasted only a few seconds, accompanied by a long echo from the hillsides and was repeated about every five to eight minutes. Friedrich took no notice of it, except that, occasionally, when the noise was unusually loud or continuous, he raised his head and glanced slowly at the various paths that led into the valley floor. Day was already beginning to break swiftly, the birds beginning to twitter softly and the mist rising perceptibly from the valley floor. Friedrich had slid down the trunk and was staring into the stealthily creeping rosy dawn, his arms clasped across his head. Suddenly he started. A flash crossed his face, he listened a few seconds, his upper body leaning forward like a hound catching a scent wafted on the air. Then he quickly put two fingers to his mouth and whistled shrilly and long. “Fido, you accursed animal!” A thrown stone struck the unworried dog’s flank, who, startled out its slumbers, first snapped all around itself and then, howling on three legs, sought consolation whence the evil had emanated. At the same moment, the branches of a nearby bush were pushed aside without a sound and a man stepped out, wearing the green jacket of a verderer, silver badge on sleeve, loaded gun in hand. He let his eyes rove quickly over the ravine and then come to rest on the boy, with particular sharpness, stepped forward, waved toward the bush and seven or eight men gradually came into sight, all in similar clothing, hunting knives at their belts and loaded muskets in their hands.

“Friedrich, what was that?” asked the man who appeared first. “I wish the rascal would perish on the spot. As far as he is concerned, the cows can eat the ears

off my head." "The mob has seen us," said another man." "Tomorrow you are going on a journey with a stone tied to your neck," Friedrich went on and kicked out at the dog.

"Friedrich, do not behave like an idiot! You know me and you understand me too!" A look accompanied these words, which had an immediate effect. "Herr Brandis, think of my mother!" "That I do, indeed. Did you not hear anything in the woods?" "In the woods?" the boy threw a quick glance at the forester's face. "Your woodmen, otherwise nothing." "My woodmen!" The forester's already dark facial colour turned more ruddy. "How many of them are there and where are they active?" "Wherever you sent them. I do not know." Brandis turned to his associates: "Go ahead, I shall follow on."

As one after the other disappeared in the thicket, Brandis stepped close up to the boy. "Friedrich," he said, in a tone of suppressed anger, "My patience is at an end. I would like to beat you like a dog and you are not worth more. You riff-raff who own not one tile on the roof! You will soon have reached the stage of begging, please God, and your mother, the old witch, will not get one mouldy crust of bread at my door. Both of you shall sooner go into the pincfold!"

Friedrich gasped desperately at a branch. He was deathly pale and his eyes seemed to want to shoot out of his head like glass balls. But only for a moment. Then that great calm, bordering on enervation, returned. "Sir," he said firmly, in an almost gentle voice, "you said things that you cannot justify and I perhaps, too. Let us be reconciled and I will tell you what you are demanding to know. If you did not order the woodmen, then they must be the Blue Smocks, for no cart has come out of the village. I have the path before me and there were four carts. I did not see them but heard them driving up the ravine." He faltered for a moment. "Can you say that I have ever felled one tree in your precinct? Or even that I have hewn timber anywhere else other than to order? Think it over, whether you can say that?" A self-conscious mumbling was the forester's only answer, who, in the manner of most coarse people, easily regretted. He turned crossly and strode towards the bushes. "No, sir," Friedrich called, "if you want to get to the other foresters, they went up there by the beech." "By the beech?" said Brandis, disbelievingly, "no, over there, to the oakwood for masts" "I tell you, by the beech. Tall Heinrich's musket strap even caught on the crooked branch there. I saw it!" The forester took the direction thus described. Friedrich did not leave his position the whole time. Half lying, holding on to the dead branch by his arm, he steadily watched the departing man as he glided through the half overgrown path with the careful paces of a man of his calling, as soundlessly as a fox climbing up a henhouse. Here a branch sank back after him, there another. The outlines of his figure faded steadily away. Once more there was a glint through the foliage. It was a steel button on his hunting jacket. Now he was gone. Friedrich's face had lost the expression of its coldness during this gradual disappearance and his features eventually seemed troubled. Was he perhaps rueing not having begged the forester to conceal his statements? He took a few paces forward, then stood still. "It is too late," he said to himself and reached for his hat. A faint chipping sound in the bushes, not twenty paces from him. It was the forester who was sharpening his flint stone. Friedrich listened. "No!" he said then determinedly, grabbed his belongings together and drove the cattle hurriedly along the ravine.

At midday Margreth was sitting at the stove brewing tea. Friedrich had come home sick, he complained of severe headaches and had, at her worried enquiry, told how he had been much vexed by the forester; in short, the whole event just described, with the exception of a few details that he found better kept to himself. Margreth looked silently and dismally into the boiling water. She was well used to hearing her son complain from time to time, but today he seemed to her to be more poorly than otherwise. Was a sickness imminent? She sighed and let fall a log that she had just grasped. "Mother!" Friedrich called from the bedroom. "What do you want? Was that a shot?" "Oh, no, I do not know what you mean." "My head is pounding," he replied. The neighbour walked in and told, in a quiet whisper, some unimportant gossip that Margreth listened to without interest. Then she went. "Mother!" Friedrich called. Margreth went in to him. "What was

Frau Huelsmeyer telling you?" "Oh nothing at all, lies, wind!" Friedrich sat up. "About Gretchen Siemers. You know the old tale well enough and there is no truth in it." Friedrich lay back again. "I want to see whether I can sleep," he said. Margreth sat at the stove. She spun and thought of little that was agreeable. Half past eleven struck in the village. The door was unlatched and the court clerk stepped inside. "Good day, Frau Mergel!" he said, "Can you give me a drink of milk? I have come from M." As Frau Mergel brought what was demanded, he asked, "Where is Friedrich?" She was busy reaching for a plate just at that moment and missed hearing the question. He drank hesitantly and in short sips. "Do you know," he said then, "that the Blue Smocks again swept a whole stretch in the mast oaks plantation bald as my hands last night?" "Oh, dear God!" she replied indifferently. "The scoundrels," the clerk continued, "ruin everything. If they only had a care for the new growth, but oaken saplings no thicker than my arm, where there is not enough wood for an oar! It is as though other people's loss were just as dear to them as their profit!" "It is a shame!" said Margreth. The court clerk had finished drinking and still did not leave. He seemed to have something on his mind. "Have you heard nothing about Brandis?" he asked suddenly.

"Nothing. He never comes into this house." "Then you do not know what happened to him?" "What, then?" Margreth asked tensely. "He is dead!" "Dead!" she cried, "what, dead? For God's sake, he went past here this morning quite healthy, with his musket on his back" "He is dead," the clerk repeated, looking steadily at her, "slain by the Blue Smocks. The corpse was brought into the village a quarter of an hour ago." Margreth clasped her hands together. "God in Heaven, do not bring him to judgement! He knew not what he did!" "Him!" the bailiff's clerk shouted, "The accursed murderer, do you mean?" Heavy groaning broke forth from the bedroom. Margreth hurried there and the clerk followed her. Friedrich was sitting upright in the bed, his face pressed into his hands and moaning like a dying man. "Friedrich, how are you?" the mother asked. "How are you?" the bailiff repeated. "O my belly, my head!" he wailed. "What ails him?" "Oh, God knows," she replied, "It was only four o'clock when he came home with the cows, because he felt so ill. Friedrich, Friedrich, answer do. Shall I go for the doctor?" "No, no," he wailed, "it is only colic. It will soon be better." He lay back, his face twitching spasmodically with pain. Then his colour returned. "Go," he said limply, "I must sleep, then it will pass." "Frau Mergel," said the bailiff sternly, "is it certain that Friedrich came home at four o'clock and did not go away again?" She looked at him woodenly, "Ask any child in the street. And going away again? Would to God that he could!" "Did he not tell you anything about Brandis?" "In the name of God, yes, that he scolded him in the woods and reproached him with our poverty, the blackguard! But God forgive me, he is dead! Go!" she went on, vehemently, "have you come to reproach honest folk? Go!" She turned again to her son. The clerk went away. "Friedrich, what is the matter with you?" the mother said, "did you hear? Terrible, terrible! Without confession and absolution!" "Mother, Mother, for God's sake let me sleep. I can stand no more!"

At that moment, Johannes Niemand stepped into the room, thin and gangly like a hop pole, but ragged and shy as we saw him five years ago. His face was yet paler than usual. "Friedrich," he stuttered, "you shall come to Uncle straight away. He has work for you, but straight away." Friedrich turned toward the wall. "I am not coming," he said gruffly, "I am sick". "But you must come," gasped Johannes, "he said I had to bring you with me." Friedrich laughed disdainfully. "That I want to see!" "Leave him in peace, he cannot," sighed Margreth. "You see how it is." She went out for a few minutes. When she came back, Friedrich was already dressed. "What has got into you?" she cried. "You cannot and shall not go!" "What must be, must be," he replied and was already out through the door with Johannes. "Oh, God," his mother sighed. "When children are small they kick us in the womb, when they are big, in the heart."

The court investigation had made a start. The deed was as clear as daylight, but evidence about the perpetrator was so weak that, although all the circumstances brought suspicion upon the Blue Smocks, one could venture no more than

conjecture. *One* clue did seem to shed light, but little was expected from it for various reasons. The absence of the lord of the manor obliged the court clerk to introduce the affair of his own accord. He sat at the table. The courtroom was crammed full with farmers, partly the curious, partly those from whom some explanation could be hoped, in the absence of actual witnesses. Herdsmen who were tending animals that night, labourers who were sowing the field nearby – all stood erect and firm, hands in pockets, as though making a tacit declaration that they were not disposed to interfere. Eight foresters were interrogated. Their statements were completely of the same tenor. Brandis had ordered them to the patrol in the evening of the tenth, as information about one of the Blue Smocks' undertakings must have reached him. He had, nevertheless, spoken only uncertainly of it. They had started out at two o'clock in the night and had come across many a trace of the destruction, which put the head forester in a bad mood. Everything was otherwise quiet. Toward four o'clock Brandis had said, "We have been misled. Let us go home." As they then turned around the Bremerberg and the wind had swung round, one had clearly heard felling in the Master Woods and concluded from the rapid sequence of the axe blows that the Blue Smocks were at work. They had then conferred for a while, on whether, with such minimal force, it was expedient to attack the audacious gang and then, without any definite decision, moved closer to the sound. Now followed the scene with Friedrich. Furthermore, after Brandis sent them on without orders, they had carried on for a while and then, as they noticed that the din had stopped completely in the still fairly distant woods, stood still in order to await the head forester. The delay had vexed them and after about ten minutes they went further and thus up to the site of devastation. Everything was done with; no further sound in the forest – of twenty felled trunks, eight still present, the rest whisked away. It was incomprehensible to them, how this had been accomplished, since no cart tracks were to be found. Also the season's drought and the ground, strewn with pine needles, allowed of no distinguishing of footprints, although the soil all around was trodden hard. As they now considered that it could be of no use to await the head forester, they walked quickly to the other side of the woods, in the hope of catching perhaps a glimpse of the transgressors. On leaving the woods, the powder-bottle lanyard of one of their number had become entangled in the brambles and, as he had looked round, he had seen something glinting in the scrub. It was the head forester's belt-buckle, who was now found lying behind the runners, outstretched, his right hand clamped around the gun barrel, the other clenched as a fist and his forehead split open by an axe. Thus, the statements of the foresters. Now came the turn of the farmers from whom, however, nothing was to be gained. Some claimed to have been at home or busy elsewhere at four o'clock and none to have noticed anything. What to do now? They were, to a man, settled local people, suspected of nothing. One had to be satisfied with their negative evidence.

Friedrich was called in. He walked in with a bearing that in no way differed from his usual manner; neither tense, nor brazen. The interrogation lasted a fairly long time and the questions were cunningly posed. He answered them all openly and with certainty and told what happened between him and the head forester generally in accordance with the truth, except for the ending that he regarded as more advisable to keep to himself. His alibi at the time of the murder was easily proven. The forester lay at the path out of the Master Woods, over three-quarters of an hour away from the ravine in which he had spoken to Friedrich and out of which the latter had, ten minutes later, driven his herd into the village. Everybody had seen this. All the farmers present were eager to bear witness to this. He had spoken to this one, nodded to that one.

The court clerk sat there, annoyed and embarrassed. Suddenly he reached behind him with his hand and brought out something glinting in front of Friedrich's eye. "To whom does this belong?" Friedrich jumped back three paces. "Lord Jesus! I thought that you wanted to crack my skull." His eyes looked rapidly over the deadly tool and momentarily appeared to fix on a place on the handle where a splinter had broken off. "I do not know," he said firmly. It was the axe that had been found embedded in the head forester's skull. "Look at it closely," the court

clerk continued. Friedrich grasped it with his hand, peered at it from above, below, turned it round. "It is an axe like any other," he then said and laid it nonchalantly on the table. A bloodstain was clearly visible. He seemed to shudder, but repeated very definitely again, "I do not recognise it." The court clerk sighed in annoyance. He was at the end of his tether and had only wanted to make an attempt at possible discovery through surprise. There remained nothing for it, but to close the interrogation. I must say to those who are, perhaps, eagerly awaiting the result of this affair, that this story has never been solved, although much still happened in connection with it and other interrogations followed this one. The Blue Smocks seemed to have lost their courage as a consequence of the sensation stirred up by the event and the intensified punishments following upon it. From now on they were as though disappeared and, although many a timber thief was caught later on, cause was never found to ascribe him to the notorious gang. The axe lay twenty years afterwards as a useless *corpus delecti* in the court archive where it may well still be resting, with its rust spots. It would be out of place in a fictional story, so to disappoint the curiosity of the reader. Yet all this really did happen – I cannot take anything away from it, or add to it.

The next Sunday, Friedrich arose very early in order to go to Confession. It was the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the parish clergy were already in the confession boxes before daybreak. After he had dressed himself in the semi darkness, he left the narrow box room that was allotted to him in Simon's house, as noiselessly as possible. His prayer book ought to be lying on the sill in the kitchen and he hoped to find it by the weak moonlight. It was not there. He cast his eyes searchingly around and was startled – in the doorway stood Simon, almost undressed, his gaunt figure, his unkempt hair and the pallor of his face, caused by the moonshine, gave him a horribly altered appearance. "Can he be sleepwalking?" thought Friedrich und kept quite still. "Friedrich, where to?" whispered the old man. "Uncle, is it you? I want to go to confession." "I thought so. Go in the name of God, but confess like a good Christian." "That I will," said Friedrich. "Think of the Ten Commandments: thou shalt not bear witness against thy neighbour." "No false witness!" "No, none at all. You are badly informed. Whoever accuses another in confession, receives the sacrament unworthily." Both fell silent. "Uncle, what makes you say that?" Friedrich then said. "Your conscience is not clear. You lied to me." "I? Well?" "Where is your axe?" "My axe? On the barn floor." "Did you put in a new handle? Where is the old one?" "You can find it today by daylight in the wood shed. Be off", he continued, scornfully, "I thought you were a man, but you are an old woman who thinks the house is burning when her chimney smokes. Look," he went on, "if I know more about the story than the doorpost there, then may I never go to heaven. I was long home", he added. Friedrich stood ill at ease and doubting. He would have given much to be able to see his Uncle's face. But while they were whispering, the sky had clouded over.

"I am greatly at fault," sighed Friedrich, "in sending him the wrong way – although – still, I did not think this, no, certainly not. Uncle, I have you to thank for a guilty conscience." "Well go, confess!" whispered Simon in a quivering voice, "dishonour the Sacrament through boasting and set a spy on to poor people, who will soon find ways of snatching the last crust of bread from their mouths, if he may not speak straight away. Go!" Friedrich stood undecided. He heard a slight noise. The clouds parted; moonlight again shone on the door of the room. It was closed. Friedrich did not go to Confession that morning.

Unfortunately, the impression that this incident made upon Friedrich faded all too soon. Who doubts that Simon did everything to guide his adoptive son in the ways that he himself trod? And within Friedrich dwelt characteristics which made this only too easy: imprudence, excitability and, above all, unbridled arrogance which did not always disdain appearances and then put everything into evading possible injury by going ahead with what was pretended. He was not of an ignoble nature, but he became accustomed to preferring the inner to the outward and visible shame. One can only say, he became used to flaunting himself while his mother suffered want. This unhappy change of character was for all that, the

work of many years, in which one noticed that Margreth became ever more silent about her son and gradually sank into a condition of depravity that one would earlier have regarded as impossible in her. She became shy, negligent even untidy and some thought her head had suffered. Friedrich became so much the louder. He missed not a consecration, not a wedding and since a very delicate sense of honour did not let him overlook the secret disapproval of some, he was, so to speak, always forearmed, not so much to offer defiance to public opinion as to lead it along the way that suited him.

He was outwardly tidy, sober, apparently guileless, but artful, boastful and often coarse, a human being in whom no-one could take pleasure, least of all his mother, and yet who had achieved a certain superiority in the village through his feared boldness and even more feared maliciousness, which was recognised all the more, the more one was aware of not knowing him and of not being able to calculate that of which, in the end, he was capable. Only one fellow in the village, Wilm Huelsmeyer, in the knowledge of his own strength and good relationships, dared to defy him, and since he was more adroit with words than Friedrich and always knew how to make a joke of it if the barb struck its target – this, then was the only person whom Friedrich encountered unwillingly.

Four years had passed. It was October. That mild autumn of 1760, which filled every barn with grain and every cellar with wine, had also spread its riches over this corner of the Earth and one saw more drunkards, heard of more brawls and foolish tricks than ever. Everywhere there were festivities. "Saint Monday" became the custom and whoever had put by a couple of silver dollars wanted a wife as well, who could help him to eat well today and starve tomorrow. Then there was an excellent, respectable wedding in the village and guests could expect more than one glass of brandy and whatever good mood they brought with them. From early on, everybody was up and about. Clothes were aired in front of every door and the village of B looked like a junk shop. As many outsiders were expected, everyone wanted to keep up the honour of the village.

It was seven o'clock in the evening and everything in full swing. Merry-making and laughter from all quarters, the low-beamed rooms filled to suffocation with blue, red and yellow figures – like market stalls in which too large a herd is penned in. There was dancing on the barn floor, that is to say, those who had conquered two foot of space, turned round and round on it and sought to substitute cheering for the lack of movement. The orchestra was brilliant, the first violin, a recognised lady artiste, predominant, the second and a large contrabass with three strings scraped *ad lib* by dilettantes. Brandy and coffee in abundance, all the guests dripping with perspiration. Briefly, it was a wonderful party. Friedrich strutted around and about like a fighting cock, in a new sky-blue coat and asserted his right as prime dandy. When the lord and lady of the manor arrived, he was sitting behind the double fiddle and bowing the single string with great force and much decorum.

"Johannes!" he called, peremptorily and his protégé came from the dance floor where he had been trying to shamble with his awkward legs and to give a shout, too. Friedrich handed him the bow, made known his orders with a proud jerk of his head and stepped to the dancers. "Lively, now, musicians – the *Papen von Istrup!*" The favourite dance was then played and Friedrich did leaps and bounds before his masters' eyes, such that the cows at the barn drew back their horns and the rattling of chains and mooing ran along their stalls. His blond head bobbed up and down, feet above the others, like a pike romping in the water. All around the girls shrieked, into whose faces he flipped his long flaxen hair as a sign of homage. "Now that is enough!" he said and stepped, dripping with perspiration, to the sideboard. "Long live the gracious lord and lady and all the princes and princesses and he who does not drink to this, I will box his ears so that he hears the angels singing!" A loud *Hurrah!* answered this gallant toast. Friedrich made his bow. "No offence meant, gracious sir and madam, we are only untaught farming folk!" At that moment, turmoil broke loose at the end of the barn; yelling, scolding, laughter – all mixed up. A few children were calling out,

"Butter thief, butter thief!" and Johannes Niemand, his head ducked between his shoulders, came into view, or rather, was being pushed, striving with all his might towards the exit. "What's going on? What do you want with our Johannes?" Friedrich shouted commandingly.

"That you will find out soon enough," panted an old woman in her kitchen apron, dwile in hand. Scandal! Johannes, the poor devil for whom the worst had to be good enough, had tried to secure a mean half-pound of butter for the coming lean times and, without remembering that he had wrapped it nicely in his handkerchief and hidden it in his pocket, had gone close the kitchen fire and now the fat was running outrageously down the tails of his coat. General uproar; the girls jumped back for fear of becoming soiled, or shoved the delinquent forward. Others gave way, both out of sympathy and caution. But Friedrich stepped forward: "Scoundrel!" he shouted. A couple of hefty slaps to the face caught the long-suffering protégé. Then he pushed him to the door and gave him a hard kick on the way.

He returned, crestfallen, his standing had been injured, the general laughter cut him to the quick, although he sought to get himself going again with a brave shout of hurrah. It no longer worked properly. He was about to flee behind the bass viol, but then there was a sensation: he drew out his silver pocket watch, at that time an exceptional and valuable piece of jewellery. "It will soon be ten," he said, "Now the Bridal Minuet! I want to make music."

"A magnificent watch!" said the swineherd and thrust his face forward in respectful curiosity. "What did it cost?" called Wilm Huelsmeyer, Friedrich's rival. "Do you want to pay for it?" asked Friedrich. "Have *you* paid for it?" answered Wilm. Friedrich threw him an arrogant glance and reached in silent majesty for the fiddle bow. "Now, now," said Huelsmeyer, "that sort of thing has happened before. You know well enough, Franz Ebel also had a fine watch until Jew Aaron took it off him again." Friedrich did not answer, but waved haughtily to the first violin and she began to play with all her might.

Meanwhile, the gentry from the manor had entered the room where the women of the neighbourhood were placing the symbol of her new status, the white headband, around the bride's head. The young person was weeping a great deal, partly because custom required it, partly out of true anxiety. She was to be in charge of a muddled household, under the eye of a morose old man whom she was also supposed to love into the bargain. He stood next to her, by no means the bridegroom in the Song of Songs, who "steps into the chamber as does the morning sun"³.

"You have wept enough now," he said grumpily. "Remember, it is not you who is making me happy, I am making you happy!" She looked up at him meekly and appeared to feel that he was right. The transaction was at an end; the young woman had raised a glass to her husband, young wags had looked through the trivet to see whether the headband fitted properly and all were pushing towards the barn whence inextinguishable laughter and noise sounded. Friedrich was no longer there. Great unbearable shame had struck him, because Jew Aaron, butcher and occasional second-hand dealer from the neighbouring town, had suddenly appeared and had, after a brief, unsatisfactory dialogue, loudly in front of all the people, reminded him of the amount of ten silver dollars for a fine watch supplied as far back as Easter. Friedrich had gone away as though destroyed, the Jew following him, constantly shouting, "Oy vay! Why did I not listen to reasonable people! Did they not tell me a hundred times, you had all your wealth about your body and no bread in the cupboard!" The whole barn shook with laughter; several people had pushed after them into the yard. "Grab the Jew! Weigh him against a pig", a few called out. Others had turned serious. "That Friedrich looked as pale as a sheet," said one old woman and the crowd parted as the carriage with the lord of the manor steered into the yard.

Herr von S. was out of humour on the way home, as was always the case when the desire to maintain his popularity moved him to attend such celebrations. He looked out of the carriage in silence. "What are those two creatures, then?" He pointed to two dark figures that were running ahead of the carriage like ostriches. Now they slipped into the chateau. "A couple of fuddled pigs from our own sty!"

Herr von S. sighed. Arriving at home, he found the entrance door blocked by all the servants who were surrounding two pageboys who had sat down on the stairway, pale and breathless. They were claiming to have been chased by old Mergel's ghost as they returned home through the Brede Wood. At first there had been rustling and crackling high overhead. Then, up in the air, a clattering like sticks being knocked one against the other. Suddenly, a shrill scream and quite clearly the words, "O vay, my poor soul!" rang down from high above

One of them claimed to have seen glowing eyes twinkling through the branches while both had run as fast as their legs could carry them.

"Foolish nonsense!" said the lord of the manor grumpily and went into the bedchamber to change his clothes. The next morning the fountain in the garden would not run and it was found that someone had displaced a pipe, apparently to search for the head of a horse skeleton buried here many years earlier, which is regarded as a tried and tested remedy against all haunting by witches and ghosts. "Hum," said the lord of the manor, "what rogues do not take, is spoiled by fools."

Three days later a dreadful storm raged. It was midnight, but everybody in the chateau was out of bed. The lord of the manor was standing at the window and looking concernedly into the darkness, across to his fields. Leaves and twigs were flying at the windowpanes; now and then a tile fell down and shattered on the courtyard paving. "Dreadful weather!" said Herr von S. His wife looked anxious. "Are we sure that the fire is well kept?" she said. "Gretchen, see to it once more. Better put it right out; douse it! Come, everyone. Let us recite the St. John Gospel." They all knelt down and the lady of the house began, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and God was the Word."

A fearful clap of thunder. They all started. Then awful shouting and tumult up the stairway. "For God's sake! Is there a fire?" Frau Von S. called out and sank face down on the chair. The door was flung open and the wife of Jew Aaron burst in, as pale as death, her hair dishevelled, dripping wet from the rain. She fell on her knees before the lord of the manor. "Justice!" she cried, "Justice! My husband has been slain!" and sank unconscious to the floor. It was only too true and subsequent investigation proved that Jew Aaron had lost his life through a blow to the temple with a blunt instrument, probably a stick – one single blow. On the left temple was the blue mark, otherwise no injury to be found. The Jewess's statements and those of her servant ran thus: Aaron had gone out in the afternoon three days ago in order to buy cattle, saying that he would remain away overnight for sure, because a few bad debtors in B. still had to be reminded. In which case he would stay overnight in B. with the butcher Solomon. When he did not return home on the following day, his wife had become very worried and had eventually set off today at three in the afternoon in the company of her servant and the butcher's big dog. At Jew Solomon's place nobody knew anything of Aaron. He had not been there. Now they had gone to all the farmers with whom they knew Aaron had in mind to do business. Only two had seen him and that was on the same day on which he had gone out. It had by then become very late. Great fear drove the woman home where she was nourishing a faint hope of finding her husband again. Thus they had been caught by a thunderstorm in the Brede Wood and had sought shelter beneath a large beech growing on the hill slope. The dog had meanwhile hunted around and about in a conspicuous manner and at last, despite every enticement, lost itself in the woods. Suddenly, as lightning flashed, the woman sees something white next to her, in the moss. It is her husband's stick and almost at the same moment the dog breaks out of the bushes and carries something in its mouth – it is her husband's shoe. Shortly after that, the corpse of the Jew is found in a ditch filled with dried leaves. This was the servant's statement, supported only generally by the woman. Her excessive tension had diminished and she now seemed to be half confused, or rather, apathetic. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!" these were the only words that she occasionally blurted out. That very night the verderers were called out to arrest Friedrich. There was no need for a charge since Herr von S. had himself been a witness to an incident which was bound to cast a strong suspicion on him. Added to that were the ghost story of that

evening, the beating together of sticks in the Brede Wood the scream from above. As the court clerk happened to be absent, Herr von S. conducted everything more rapidly than would otherwise have happened. Nevertheless, dusk had already begun to fall before the verderers had surrounded poor Margreth's house as soundlessly as possible. The lord of the manor himself knocked. It took scarcely a minute before the door opened and Margreth appeared in the doorway, fully dressed. Herr von S. drew back – he almost did not recognise her, looking so pale and stony-faced. "Where is Friedrich?" he asked in an unsure voice. "Seek him," she replied and sat down on a chair. The lord of the manor hesitated for another moment. "Come in, come in!" he then said brusquely. "What are we waiting for?" They went into Friedrich's room. He was not there but the bed was still warm. They climbed up into the loft, into the basement, poked into the straw, looked behind every barrel, even into the bake oven. He was not there. A few went into the garden, looked behind the fence and up in the apple trees – he was not to be found. "Escaped!" said the lord of the manor with very mixed feelings. The sight of the old woman affected him powerfully. "Give me the key to that chest." Margreth did not answer. "Give me the key!" the lord of the manor repeated and only now noticed that the key was in the lock. The contents of the chest came to light. The escapee's Sunday best clothes and his mother's paltry finery. Also two shrouds with black ribbons – one made for a man, the other for a woman. Herr von S. was deeply moved. Right down at the bottom of the chest lay the silver watch and some papers in a very legible hand, one of which was signed by a man whom they held to be under strong suspicion of being connected with the timber thieves. Herr von S. took them away for examination and they all left the house, without Margreth's having given any sign of life, other than that she continuously gnawed at her lips and blinked her eyes. Arriving back at the chateau, he found the court clerk who had already come home the previous evening and claimed to have overslept the whole affair because the 'noble gentleman' had not sent for him. "You always come too late," said Herr von S. gruffly. "Was there, then, no old gossip in the village, who told your maid about the affair? And why did they not wake you then?" "Noble Sir," countered Kapp, "my Anne Marie had indeed heard about the business an hour earlier than I, but she knew that your Grace was himself conducting the matter and then," he added with a plaintive manner, "that I was so dead tired." "A fine body of police!" the lord of the manor murmured. "Every old biddy in the village is fully informed when something is supposed to be really secret." Then he went on, vehemently, "It must be a veritable idiot of a delinquent who would let himself get caught!" Both were silent for a while. "My waggoner lost his way in the night," the court clerk started to say. "We stopped in the woods for over an hour. It was murderous weather. I thought the wind would blow the coach over. Finally, when the rain let up, we drove on, for heaven's sake, always into the Zellerfeld, without being able to see a hand before our eyes. Then the coachman said, "Let us pray that we do not come too close to the quarries!" I was afraid, myself. I ordered him to halt and lit up, in order to take at least a little comfort from my pipe. Suddenly we heard, quite nearby, perpendicularly below us, the clock striking. Your Grace may believe that I felt despairing. I jumped out of the coach, for one can trust one's own legs, but not those of the horses. Thus stood I, in mud and rain, without moving, until, praise God, it very soon started to dawn. And where had we stopped? Hard by the Heerse gorge and the Heerse tower immediately below us. Had we driven twenty paces further, we would all have been dead men." "That was, indeed, no joke." The lord of the manor replied, half placated. He had, meanwhile, read through the papers that he had taken away. They were dunning letters for monies lent, most of them from moneylenders. "I had not thought", he murmured, "that Mergels were so deep in debt." "Yes, and that it had to come to light like this," Kapp replied. "That will be no small vexation for Frau Margreth." "Oh, Lord, she is not thinking about that now!" With these words the lord of the manor stood up and left the room, in order to undertake the post mortem examination required by the court. The examination was brief, violent death proven, the presumable culprit flown, denunciations against him admittedly aggravating, his flight was, to be sure, very

suspicious. Thus the court proceedings had to be concluded without a satisfactory result.

Jews in the district demonstrated great sympathy. The widow's house was never empty of people wailing and advising. There had never been so many Jews seen gathered in the village of L. in living memory. Embittered in the extreme by the murder of their fellow believer, they spared neither effort nor money to track down the perpetrator. It was even known that one of the same, commonly called Usurer Joel, had offered one of his clients who owed him several hundred and whom he perceived to be a particularly cunning fellow, remission of the whole amount, if he would help him to secure the arrest of Mergel. Among the Jews it was generally believed that the culprit had escaped only with good aiding and abetting and that he was still in the district. When, nevertheless, nothing came of it and the court process had been declared at an end, several of the most respected Israelites appeared next morning at the chateau, in order to propose a transaction to the 'noble master'. The object was the beech under which Aaron's stick had been found and where the murder had probably been committed. "Do you want to fell it? Still in full leaf?" the lord of the manor asked. "No, your Grace, it has to remain standing winter and summer, as long as there is a chip of wood left on it." "But when I have the wood cut down, it will be bad for the young growth." "We do not want it at the ordinary price." They offered 200 silver dollars. The transaction was concluded and all the verderers strictly admonished not to damage the Jews' Beech in any way. Subsequently, one evening, there were seen some sixty Jews, their Rabbi at the head, moving into Brede Wood, all silent and with downcast eyes. They stayed in the woods for over an hour and then returned just as solemnly and ceremoniously, through the village of B. right into the Zellerfeld where they dispersed and each went his way. Next morning, cut into the beech with an axe was:

אם תעמר במקום הזה יפגע בך באסר אמה עושה לי.

And where was Friedrich? Gone away, without doubt, far enough no longer to have to fear the short arm of such a weak police force. He was soon missing altogether, forgotten. Uncle Simon seldom spoke of him and then badly. Only poor Margreth remained inconsolable.

About six months later the lord of the manor was reading a few letters just received, in the presence of the court clerk. "Strange, strange!" he said. "Just think, Kapp, Mergel is perhaps not guilty of the murder. The president of court at the town of P. is just writing to me:

le vrai n'est toujours vraisemblable. I often encounter that in my profession and now recently. Do you know, that your dear faithful follower, Friedrich Mergel, is no more likely to have struck down the Jew than you or I? Unfortunately, there is a lack of evidence, but the probability is great. A member of the Schlemming gang whom we, incidentally, have for the greater part under lock and key, going by the name of Ragman Moses, gave a statement at the last interrogation, saying that he rued nothing so much as the murder of a fellow believer, Aaron, whom he had struck down in the woods and had found only six groats on him. Unfortunately the interrogation was interrupted by the lunch hour and while we were at table, the dog of a Jew had hanged himself with a garter.

"What do you say to that? Aaron is, of course, a common name, etc. What do you say to that?" the lord of the manor repeated. "And why did the ass of a fellow run away?" The court clerk pondered this. "Well, perhaps on account of the timber theft that we had under investigation just then. Do they not say that the evil man is afraid of his own shadow? Mergel's conscience was dirty enough even without this blot."

At that point they calmed down. Friedrich was gone, disappeared and Johannes Niemand, poor, disregarded Johannes, with him on the same day.

A good, long period had passed; twenty-eight years, almost half a lifetime. The lord of the manor had grown very old and grey, his good-natured assistant, Kapp, long since buried. Humans, animals and vegetation had sprung up, ripened and

faded away, only Chateau B. still looked down, grey and dignified as ever, upon the lowly dwellings which, like consumptive people, seemed always about to fall down yet were still standing. It was Christmas Eve, the 24th December 1788. Deep snow lay in the sunken roads, easily twelve feet high, and a penetrating frost made the window panes in the heated room freeze over.

Midnight was near, but little subdued lights flickered all around from the hummocks of snow and in every house the occupants were on their knees to welcome the entry of the holy feast of Christ with prayer, as is the custom in catholic countries, or at least, was general at that time.

Then, from the Brede Heights, a figure moved slowly down towards the village. The traveller seemed very feeble or sick. He was groaning awfully and dragging himself laboriously through the snow. At the middle of the slope he stood still, leaned on his crutch and stared fixedly at the points of light. It was so quiet everywhere, so dead and cold; it made one think of will-o'-the-wisps in churchyards. Now it struck twelve from the church tower. The last stroke died away slowly and in the nearest house strains of a hymn⁴ arose softly, which, swelling, spread throughout the whole village:

A little child so lovely
is born to us today,
Of a virgin immaculate,
Of that all people are glad;
And were that little child not born,
Then were we altogether forlorn:
Salvation is for us all.
O thou my dearest Jesus Christ,
Thou who art born as man,
Deliver us from hell!

The man on the slope had sunk to his knees and was trying, in a quivering voice, to join in. Only loud sobbing came of it and heavy, hot teardrops fell into the snow. The second verse began – he was praying quietly the while – then the third and fourth. The hymn was at an end and the lights in the houses began to move. Then the man raised himself laboriously and stole slowly down into the village. He panted past several houses, then stood before one of them and gently knocked at the door.

“What ever is that?” a woman’s voice exclaimed within. “The door is rattling and the wind is not up.” He knocked more loudly. “For God’s sake, let in a half-frozen human being who is come out of Turkish slavery!” Whispering in the kitchen. “Go to the inn,” a voice answered. “The fifth house from here!” “For the sake of God’s mercy, let me in! I have no money.” After some hesitation, the door was opened and a man held out a lighted lantern. “Just come in!” he said then. “You will likely not cut our throats.” In the kitchen were, apart from the man, a woman in her middle years, an old granny and five children. All pushed forward around the entrant and mustered him with shy curiosity. A sad figure, with a crooked neck, bent back, the whole figure broken and without strength. Long, snow-white hair hung around his face which bore the drawn expression of lengthy suffering. The woman went silently to the stove and fed in fresh brushwood. “We cannot give you a bed,” she said, “but I shall make a good bed of straw here. You will have to make the best of it.” “God’s reward!” replied the entrant. “I am used to much worse.” The home-comer was recognised as Johannes Niemand and he himself confirmed that he was the very person who had once fled with Friedrich Mergel. Next day the village was full of the adventures of the man so long missing. Everybody wanted to see the man from Turkey and they were surprised that he still looked like other people. Young villagers, of course, had no memory of him, but the older people easily made out his features, wretchedly disfigured though he was. “Johannes, Johannes, how grey you have become!” said one old woman. “And where did you get that wry neck?” “From carrying wood and water in slavery,” he rejoined “And what became of Mergel. You both ran away

together?" "That is true, but I do not know where he is. We became parted from one another. If you think about him, pray for him," he added, "he will be in need of it."

They asked him why Friedrich had made off, since he had not struck down the Jew. "Did he not?" said Johannes and listened intently as they told him what the lord of the manor had deliberately noised abroad, in order to remove the spot from Mergel's name. "All for nothing, then," he said, thoughtfully. "So much endured wholly for nothing!" He sighed a deep sigh and now his turn came to ask about many things. Simon was long dead, but had first become completely poverty stricken through lawsuits and bad debtors whom he dared not take to court because, as word had it, his affairs were shady. In the end he had taken to begging and had died among the straw in a stranger's shed. Margreth had lived longer, but in complete mental apathy. People in the village soon grew tired of supporting her, because she let everything go to waste that anyone gave her, in the way that people desert the most helpless those for whom support does not work lastingly and need help just as much as ever. She had, nevertheless, not suffered actual need. The gentry took care of her, sending food daily and also let her have treatment by a doctor when her pitiful condition turned into complete emaciation.

In her house there now dwelt the son of the former swineherd who, on that unhappy evening, had so much admired Friedrich's watch. "Everything ruined, everybody dead!" Johannes sighed.

At evening, when it had become dark and the moon was shining, he was seen limping about in the snow in the churchyard. He prayed at no grave, did not go close to one, but seemed to fix a rigid gaze on a few from a distance. Forester Brandis, son of the murdered forester, whom the gentry had sent to fetch him to the chateau, found him thus.

On entering the living room he looked shyly around, as if dazzled by the light, and then at the baron who sat, very withered, in his armchair, but still bright-eyed and with the red cap on his head as twenty-eight years ago. Next to him the lady of the house, also become old, very old.

"Now, Johannes, said the lord of the manor, "tell me about your adventures in a right orderly manner. But," mustering him through his spectacles, "you were terribly harshly treated in Turkey!" Johannes began: how Mergel had called him away from the herd at night and said that he had to depart with him. "But why did the silly boy run, then? You know that he was not guilty." Johannes looked down, ahead. "I do not know really. Methinks it was because of goings-on with timber. Simon had all sorts of business, nobody told me about it, but I do not believe that everything was as it ought to be." "What did Friedrich say to you then?" "Nothing, except that we had to run, they were after us. Thus we ran as far as Heerse. It was still dark there and we hid ourselves behind the big cross in the churchyard until it became lighter, because we were afraid of the quarries at the Zellerfeld. And when we had sat for a while, we suddenly heard snorting and stamping above us and saw long streaks of fire in the air just above the Heerse church tower. We jumped up and ran straight ahead as fast as we could, for God's sake, and when it dawned we were really on the right road to the town of P." Johannes seemed to shudder at the memory and the lord of the manor thought of his late Kapp and his adventure on the Heerse slope. "Strange!" he laughed, "You were so close to one another! But go on." Johannes told how they passed luckily through P. and over the border. From there on they had begged their way as journeymen to Freiburg im Breisgau. "I had my haversack with me" he said, "and Friedrich had a little bundle, so they believed us." In Freiburg they were recruited by the Austrians. Him they had not wanted to take, but Friedrich insisted. So it was that he enlisted in the baggage train. "Over the winter we stayed in Freiburg," he went on, "and we did fairly well, as well because Friedrich often reminded me and helped me when I did something wrong. In the spring we had to march off to Hungary and in the autumn the war with the Turks started. I cannot say much about it, for I was taken prisoner in the first battle and spent twenty-six years since then in Turkish slavery!" "Heavens above! That is indeed shocking!" said Frau Von S. "Bad enough. The Turks think no better of us

Christians than dogs. The worst was that my strength fell away under the hard work. I became older and was still supposed to do as in previous years.”

He fell silent for a while. “Yes,” he then said, “it went beyond human powers and human patience. Also, I could not stand it. From there I got aboard a Dutch ship.”

“How did you manage that, then?” the lord of the manor asked. “They fished me out of the sea, out of the Bosphorus,” Johannes replied. The baron looked at him astonished and raised a finger in warning, but Johannes went on unfolding his story. On the ship he was treated very little better. “Scurvy broke out. Whoever was not seriously ill had to work beyond his powers and the rope’s end ruled just as strictly as the Turkish whip. Finally,” he concluded, “when we got to Holland, to Amsterdam, they set me free because I was no use to them and the merchant who owned the ship took pity upon me and wanted to make me his gate keeper. But,” he shook his head, “I rather begged my way through to here.” “That was stupid enough,” said the lord of the manor. Johannes let out a deep sigh. “Oh, sir, I have had to spend my life among Turks and heretics, shall I not at least lie in a Catholic churchyard?” The lord of the manor had taken out his purse. “Here, Johannes, go now, and come again soon. You must tell me everything in much more detail. Today it was somewhat muddled. You must still be very tired?”

“Very tired,” replied Johannes, “and,” here he pointed to his forehead, “my thoughts are so strange from time to time – I cannot rightly say what it is like.”

“Yes, I know,” said the baron, “from long ago. Now go. Huelsmeyers will keep you for the night; come again tomorrow.”

Herr von S. had heartfelt pity for the poor wretch. By next day, it had been decided where he could be lodged. He should eat in the chateau every day and means would also be found to clothe him. “Sir,” said Johannes, “I can also do something. I can make wooden spoons and you could send me as a messenger.”

Herr von S. shook his head pityingly. “That would not work out especially well.”

“Oh yes, sir, when I first get going. I do not move quickly, but I get there and it will not trouble me, as one might think.” “Well,” said the baron, dubiously, “do you want to try it? Here is a letter which has to go to P. There is no special hurry.”

The next day, Johannes took up occupation of a tiny room in a widow’s house in the village. He whittled spoons, ate at the chateau and ran errands for the noble gentleman. Life was, in general, pleasant. The gentry were very kind and Herr von S. often conversed at length with him about Turkey, Austrian service and the sea. “Johannes could recount much,” he said to his wife, “if he were not so thoroughly simple minded.” “More meditative than simple,” she replied. “I always fear that he is going mad.” “Oh, far from it!” the baron answered. “He has been a simpleton all his life. Simple people never go mad.”

Some time later, Johannes was unusually late returning from an errand. The good lady was very concerned about him and was about to send out people, when they heard him stumping up the steps. “You were away a long time, Johannes,” she said. “I thought that you had lost your way in Brede Wood.” “I went through the pinewood bottom.” “That is a wide detour. Why did you not go through Brede Wood?” He looked up at her, dully. “The people said to me that the woods had been felled and there were now so many criss-cross paths, I was afraid that I would not come out again. I am becoming old and dozy”, he added slowly. “Did you see,” said Frau von S. to her husband afterwards, “How strange and queer was the look in his eyes? I tell you, Ernst, this will yet come to a bad end.”

Meanwhile, it was approaching September. The fields were empty, the leaves began to fall and many a fevered person felt the scissors at life’s thread. Johannes, too, seemed to suffer under the influence of the equinox. Those who saw him these days say that he looked noticeably disturbed and continuously spoke quietly to himself, which he had also otherwise done, but seldom. Finally, he did not come home at all one evening. They thought that the gentry had sent him away. Also not on the second. On the third day his landlady became frightened. She went to the chateau and enquired. “Goodness – not at all. I know nothing about him. But quick! Call the gamekeeper and the forester’s Wilhelm! When the poor cripple,” he added, touched, “has fallen into even a dry ditch, he cannot get out again. Who knows whether he has, perhaps, even broken one of

his crooked legs. Take the dogs with you," he shouted after the verderers as they moved off. "And above all, search in the ditches, look in the quarries!" he shouted louder. The verderers returned home after some hours. They had found no trace. Herr von S. was greatly disquieted. "When I think that someone has to lie like a log and cannot help himself! But he can still be alive. A human being can last three days without nourishment." He himself set off. They asked in all the houses, sounded the horns everywhere, called, set the dogs to seek – to no end. A child had seen him as he sat at the edge of Brede Wood and carved on a wooden spoon. "But he cut it quite in two," said the little girl. That was two days ago. Another trace came one afternoon, yet another child who had noticed him at the other side of the woods where he was sitting in the brush, his face on his knees as though he were asleep. That was still on the previous day. It seemed that he had been wandering about round Brede Wood. "If only the damned undergrowth were not so dense! Not a soul can get through," said the lord of the manor. They drove the dogs into the new growth. They sounded horns and halloed and finally returned home ill humoured when they had convinced themselves that the animals had searched through the whole wood. "Do not let up, do not let up!" begged Frau von S. "Better a couple of steps for nothing than that something be missed. The baron was almost as fearful as she. His disquiet drove him even to Johannes' dwelling, although he was sure of not finding him there. He had the missing man's room unlocked. There stood his bed, still unmade as he had left it. There hung his good coat that the gracious lady had had made up for him from the master's old hunting coat. On the table, a bowl, six new wooden spoons and a small box. The lord of the manor opened it. Five groats lay therein, neatly wrapped in paper, and four silver waistcoat-buttons. The lord of the manor considered them attentively. "A souvenir from Mergel," he murmured and walked outside, for he had felt quite constricted in the stuffy, narrow little room. They continued the searches until they had convinced themselves that Johannes was no longer in the district – at least, not alive. Thus he had disappeared for the second time. Would he be found again – perhaps, years later, his bones in some ditch? There was little hope of seeing him alive, and anyway, certainly not after twenty-eight years.

Fourteen days later young Brandis was returning home from an inspection of his precinct, through Brede Wood. It was an unusually hot day for time of year. The air shimmered, no bird sang – only the rooks cawed boredly from the boughs and held open their beaks to catch some air. Brandis was very tired. Now he doffed his cap heated by the sun, now he set it on his head again. It was all equally unbearable, working through the knee-high cuttings very fatiguing. All around not a tree, other than the Jews beech. He was making in that direction with all the strength he could muster and lowered himself, dead tired, on to the moss in the shadow beneath it. The coolness flowed so pleasantly through his limbs that he closed his eyes. "Disgusting mushrooms!" he murmured, half asleep. There is, by the way, a type of very juicy mushroom, which stands only for a couple days and then decays and emits an unbearable smell. Brandis believed that he could smell such an unpleasant neighbour; he turned over a couple of times, but did not want to get up. His dog, meanwhile, was jumping about, scratching at the beech's trunk and barking up it. "What have you got there, Bello – a cat?" murmured Brandis. He half opened his eyelashes and the Jewish inscription came into view, very overgrown, but still quite recognisable. He closed his eyes again. The dog continued to bark and finally laid its cold muzzle on its master's face. "Leave me in peace. What is wrong with you, then?" With this, Brandis looked upwards, as he lay on his back, then in one bound, was up and off into the scrub as if possessed. Deathly pale, he arrived at the chateau. A person was hanging in the Jews beech; he had seen the legs hanging just above his face. "And you did not cut him down, ass!" the baron cried. "Sir," panted Brandis. "If your grace had been there you would have surely known that the person was no longer alive. I thought at first that it was the mushrooms." Nevertheless, the lord of the manor demanded great urgency and himself marched out with them.

They arrived beneath the beech. "I see nothing," said Herr von S. "You have to come here, here on this spot." Truly, it was so. The lord of the manor recognised

his own worn-down shoes. "My God, it is Johannes. Put up the ladder, like that, yes. Now down, gently, gently. Do not let him fall. Dear heavens, the worms have already started. Anyway, undo the noose and the necktie." A broad scar became visible. The lord of the manor started back. "My God!" he said. He bent down again over the corpse, studied the scar with great attention and stayed silent for a while, deeply shocked. Then he turned to the foresters. "It is not just, that the innocent should suffer for the guilty. Tell everybody, that one there," he pointed to the dead man," was Friedrich Mergel. The corpse was hurriedly buried in the knacker's yard.

According to all the circumstances, this really took place as described in September of the year 1788. The Hebrew inscription on the tree reads:

If you approach this spot, what you did to me will happen to you

Notes:

¹ The league (*Meile*) was equal to 4000 fathoms (*Klafter*) or 24 000 feet (*Fuss*). In northern Germany it was 4.6805 miles or 7532.5 metres. A version of the *Meile* called the *geographische Meile* was defined to equal exactly 4 nautical miles (24 320 feet, 4.6061 miles, or 7412.7 metres).

² Oak procession moth (migratory caterpillar). *Thaumetopoea processionea* (notontidae thaumetopoeinea). Its common name is *oak processionary*.

³ the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, "*who steps into the chamber as does the morning sun*"

It may be imagined that the authoress is quoting from the *Song of Solomon* (OT) but there is no reference there. It is more likely that she means Psalm 19, verse 4: *In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun*, and then verse 5 *which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber*.

⁴ The first verse of that hymn is given here as a mere translation. It was composed in the late 14th century, but seems not to have an equivalent in English hymnals.