

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Adolf Schmitthenner (1854-1907)

Peace on Earth
A Christmas Tale. [1892]

There is a small village which lies so far away from all the world that good and bad tidings reach there two months later than any other spot in German lands. Thus did it happen that at Christmastide in the year 1648, the people in the village still did not know that peace had come to the Fatherland after the misery of the Thirty Years' War, even though the ambassadors had put down the final, large full-stop, with elaborate ceremony, at Münster and Osnabrück as early as 25th October.¹ Shortly after Martinmas, a travelling journeyman had come and reported in the inn that there was peace in the Empire, and he had seen, with his own eyes, peasants down by the river driving their pigs to market along the military road; but nobody believed him. One of them fetched the old schoolmaster. He gave the stranger a grilling, asking him all kinds of questions. When the journeyman said that he had been at the university in Padua, where men now carried their rapier under their coat-flap, the schoolmaster whispered to the others: "Don't trust him, he's a Romanist," and the wanderer came within a hair's breadth of taking blows for his news of peace.

Thus did the people erroneously believe themselves to be in the midst of war. Whoever had something to do in field or forest took a good

¹ These two treaties constituted the Peace of Westphalia.

companion along with him. They took turns to carry the firearm, and before they went to work, they combed the countryside around; and while one chopped wood or ploughed, the other kept guard. Several times, armed men had appeared; they were driven away by gunshots. Whether they were scattered soldiers or robbers was not known. Every Sunday the pastor added a plea for noble peace to the Common Prayer, and almost every other week he had his favourite hymn sung, 'O Lord, from Heaven look on us, and let Thy pity waken!'² He had been well-nigh voiceless ever since the Croats had given him the Swedish Drink³ with hot water, and he had known no happy day since that time. But he still performed his service, and the people understood their shepherd; moreover, they could all sit close to him. War, pestilence and hunger had thinned their number.

The day before Christmas had now come. Nobody thought about the Romanist's news of peace any longer. Only one person had not forgotten them. It was the nightwatchman's old mother. Five years before, she had made a wicked vow. It tormented her now, for she lay on her deathbed. It had been on a winter's day when they carried her husband into the house dead. Horsemen dashing by had shot him out of sheer malice while he was sitting on a felled tree-trunk eating his bread. At that time she cursed the Lord for allowing such atrocities, which cried out to Heaven, to take place, and she vowed not to go to Holy Communion anymore as long as the war lasted. Now she lay sick in bed and knew she

² 'Ach Gott vom Himmel sieh darein' – a 1524 hymn by Martin Luther, paraphrasing Psalm 12.

³ Liquid, ranging from water to liquid manure, forced down the throat.

was going to die, and she yearned for the sacred fare. But when the pastor exhorted her to satisfy her longing, for her vow had been ungodly, she turned herself to the wall and gave no reply.

Now today she restlessly tossed and turned on her bed. Her cough tormented her, and there was something else. "My late father died on Christmas Day," she said in the early morning. After a while she gave a loud groan.

"What's wrong, mother?" asked her son, hurrying to her bed.

"One is still a Christian, after all!" she whispered.

"Tomorrow there's Communion for the congregation," her son began again, "don't you want it too, mother?"

Then she asked in a rushed voice, "Is there peace in the land?"

The nightwatchman sadly shook his head. "We'll never live to see it, mother, you won't and I won't." And he went out the door.

Then her grandson, a beanpole, came to the bed. He had been sitting behind the stove carving kindling. "I'll go to town, grandmother, and ask if it's war or peace. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

"Yes, go," the sick woman whispered in tremendous haste, "Go, before your father comes, or he won't allow it."

"Whom shall I ask, grandmother?"

"The bailiff lives in the Gate Tower. His wife is my godchild. Ask her, she'll know. She has a silver salt-cellar I gave her for her dowry. She'll give you that as a token of the truth, if there's peace in the land. Go, take your father's spear with you, the wolf—"

But the boy was no longer listening. He was already hurrying down

the mountain towards the dingle.

It was six leagues to the town. The way there led through lonely heaths and wild woods, past burnt-out mills and abandoned villages. Then he climbed down into the wide, open valley by the large river, where the military road ran and the towns lay. Through wood and heath trotted the wolf, and through the valley passed murderous vermin year in, year out, those with the red feather and those with a burgonet,⁴ highwaymen and soldiers.

All day the old woman lay still. When her son made the midday meal – there were no other females in the house – he asked, “Wherever is the boy?” But he was asking himself more than his mother, and she kept silent. Dusk fell. Then the man anxiously checked the stable and barn, looked up the village street and returned to the parlour in silence. He sat down on the bench by the stove. It grew dark. His mother groaned. “Do you want anything?” her son asked from the bench.

“He’ll be in town,” the sick woman moaned.

“The boy?” cried the man in horror.

“He’ll ask if there’s peace in the land.”

“Mother,” her son cried, “if I lose him, I’ll lay it at your door!”

The sick woman murmured something incomprehensible. Her teeth chattered. Both were silent. It became dead of night in the parlour. Only the eyes of the house-cat shone up from under the stove.

When Orion was shining over the barn-roof, the man stood up, took

⁴ Dragoons, who wore a red feather in a white slouch hat, and pikemen respectively.

his horn from the wall, and left the parlour without saying a word. The cat padded after him to the door, then she leapt up onto the window-ledge. But a cold draught blew in. With a few springs she was back by the stove, and lying down in her old place. Her eyes shone over to the bed of the dying woman.

In the meantime, Orion rose higher and higher, and now its stars shone into the dingle right at the bottom of the village. It was called Wolf's Cave, and the people knew why. The starlight penetrated down to the narrow, dark ground. There lay a dark mass, almost motionless, man and beast grappling for life or death. Up at the entrance to the dingle, the nightwatchman stood and peered down. But his look passed over the tangle, and the fight was soundless; the whistling breath of the grapplers dissipated before the slight stirring of air down below could rise up. At the moment when the father turned towards the little village, wild eyes emerged from the depths of the dingle into the flashing starlight, and with superhuman power a soul's scream struck into infinity like a victorious thunderbolt: "Lord, I must help grandmother to take Communion." The nightwatchman had slowly climbed up onto the churchyard hill. From there one could see furthest around. He peered out into the snowless landscape, his eyes tarrying a while on the dark firs which covered the Wolf's Cave. Then the man walked slowly over the bright graveyard. He stood still at a large grave-mound. Here lay seventeen, who had died of the plague in two days. Among them his wife and two little girls. A third one, the eldest, had been dragged away by the soldiers. She had never come home.

Never come home! It made his heart bleed. He thought of his boy.

But as he now lifted his countenance, to scout and to listen anew, the stars shone at him, so gently and consolingly that his eyes became moist. And all of a sudden it occurred to him: Today the Saviour was born. He had a look at the position of the stars. It was around halfway through the night. He took his horn and blew the twelfth hour. Then he strode down the hill. When he had entered the dark village street from the starlit height, he stood still and began to sing in a loud voice:

“From Heaven High I come to you,
I bring you tidings, good and new;
So much good news I have to bring,
Whereof I now shall speak and sing.”⁵

He was just about to continue: A child was born to you this day – when he saw a tall figure coming up the village street. Only one person is so tall, his heart rejoiced, my boy! With swift steps he went to meet him. The boy came slowly; he was bareheaded, his arms folded over his breast. In the shadow of a barn he stood still. Half delighted, half astonished, his father approached him. But before he could ask anything, the son cried to him in a quiet, strange voice, “Father, fetch the pastor, grandmother can take Holy Communion.” And he added in a whisper, “It’s peace.”

“Peace!” cried the man, staggering back. “Peace,” he repeated, and tears streamed from his eyes, and he shivered as in a feverish fit. For a while he stood lost in thought and kept murmuring to himself only the one word, “Peace.” Then he roused himself and headed for the parsonage with

⁵ “Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her” – another hymn by Martin Luther, dating from 1534.

long strides. He had forgotten his son. The latter walked slowly back. Often he stopped and pressed his hands to his breast. But a short while later he kept on walking, past the last house, where his dying grandmother lay. He dragged himself out of the village towards the Wolf's Cave. What drove him to that terrible place? Did he wish to look into his throttled enemy's glazed, bloody eyes once again? Meanwhile, the nightwatchman had forced the parsonage door open with the blade of his halberd. Nobody had opened to his knocking. People knew what this knocking at night-time usually meant. Inside, in the parlour, the pastor was on his knees, imploring God for the coup de grâce. Then the nightwatchman's familiar voice called into the parlour: "Peace!" The pastor looked with staring eyes, as if he understood nothing. "My mother is going to die. Give her the sacrament. There is peace in the land!" Then the old man's heart was overwhelmed. He burst out sobbing in his unvoiced whisper. It sounded pitiful.

The nightwatchman walked over to the schoolmaster's house. He beat against the shutter with the head of his halberd: "It's me, open up!"

"Where's the fire?" cried the schoolmaster, opening the shutter.

Then the nightwatchman put his arms round the man's head, bent his countenance to his cheek, and whispered a word in his ear. The schoolmaster gave a start, and the two men wept chest to chest.

"I must ring the bells, let me go," the schoolmaster said at last. But his companion was no longer master of himself. The old man forcibly freed himself, woke his sons, and hurried up to the church, while the nightwatchman turned towards the parsonage again.

For fourteen years, the bells had been silent. The last time they had rung was for the Festival of Christ after the Battle of Nördlingen. After that, they fell silent so as not to attract the cutthroats.

And now, and now they were pealing again!

“What’s doing that?” the children asked.

“The bells are ringing,” said the old ones. “Get up, children, Peace has come to the land!”

“Who’s Peace?” asked the children. “Will Peace take our goat from us, and will he beat our father all bloody?”

“Be silent, children, and get dressed and pray!”

“Does Peace howl like that?” the children asked timorously. But their mother gave them no answer thereafter. So they began to cry, and then they crept away, each one into his own hidey-hole, and fearfully listened to the strange sounds.

The bells sounded discordant. The large one was cracked. Right at the beginning of the war, the men of Mansfeld had thrown it and the middle one, which was no longer there, down from the tower and dragged them away. The large one was later found in the forest. But even so, their ringing was like sounds from Heaven to the old people. And yet there was no real joy. The memory of the misery they had suffered rose up horribly. Everyone thought of their loss, and the many wounds of the soul all bled together. People stared at one another; they stood around in the street bewildered. But nobody doubted the truth of the news.

Supported by two men, the old pastor came down the street. Lore will take Communion now, the people said to each other. Many of them

joined. The procession went to the last house.

The pastor, with the nightwatchman and the schoolmaster's oldest son, entered the parlour where the dying woman lay. A chip of wood was lit and fixed to the wall. The sexton prepared the Communion table at the sick woman's bed. The pastor bent down, and the toneless words wheezed like a strong rush of air: "It is peace; will you now take Communion?"

Then the old woman anxiously looked around, seeking something, and felt around on her blanket. "Will you?" the pastor repeated. "You see, you're going to die. Make peace with your God and go hence in peace!" The old woman opened her eyes wide and stared at the pastor. "Where is the salt-cellar?" she whispered. The nightwatchman said, "She's crazy." Then a steely, closed expression appeared on the dying woman's countenance. "I want –" she groaned. "What do you want, mother?" her son asked, and he took her in his arms. "I want to die like that," she breathed, pointing her hand at the wall. "She wants to die facing the wall," said her son.

At this moment the door opened. A group of men stood outside. "Softly, slowly," they called to each other, and they half led, half carried the dying woman's grandson in. His clothes hung in bloody tatters from his body, his breast was a pool from which a thick, black stream poured out. The men wanted to take him into the bedroom, but the mortally wounded boy looked fixedly at his grandmother's bed, and his tottering legs strove thither. So the men took him where he wanted to go. He sank down on the bed, besmearing every inch of it with blood. He felt for her hand, and when he had found it, he pressed into it an object which his hand had been

holding desperately clenched. “Here, grandmother, here,” he murmured, “your godchild sends you her best wishes and would have you know there is peace in the land. Here is the salt-cellar as proof of the truth.”

The token had fallen from him during his fight with the monster. That was why he went back again. And that had caused his wounds, which he had stopped up with moss, to break open.

The dying woman felt the salt-cellar. Then her countenance lit up beatifically. “God be thanked,” she whispered, “peace, peace!”

“She has died without Communion!” cried the sexton.

“She will celebrate it up there,” breathed the pastor. “Kiss your mother one more time,” he whispered to the nightwatchman, “and then make yourself ready to say farewell to your son. You are making a heavy sacrifice to peace.” They gently laid the boy down on the floor. Women washed his wounds. His father lay down beside him and looked into his dying eyes.

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that publisheth peace,”⁶ the pastor whispered. Then his voice failed him. He had been fond of the boy with the defiant blue eyes. The throes of death began. The father held his son fast in his arms. Meanwhile the room filled with men and women. The fight was not hard. Now it was over. The women began to weep. The pastor kneeled down. Then everyone was silent and kneeled likewise. Except for the nightwatchman, who remained lying by the side of his son.

⁶ Isaiah 52:7.

The pastor began: “Glory to God in the highest —”

A shudder ran through the assembly. He had spoken in a *loud* voice. The pastor himself stopped in horror. Perhaps he was afraid to begin again. At last, he resumed. Shattering, like the pealing of bells, but pure and sonorous, the words rang out through the room: “and on earth peace, and good will towards men.”⁷

⁷ Luke 2:14.