

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

**'Willi' by Carmen Sylva (1843-1916)**

**(Elisabeth of Wied: Queen of Romania 1881-1914)**

From *Leidens Erdengang* (Sorrow's Earthly Progress), 1882.



Mother Patience was sitting by her window and writing. She had been called upon many times during the day and had a great deal to confide to her mighty tome, including much that was good and pleasant; a serene calm therefore lay on her features. The whole room was fragrant with marvellous flowers, and on the hearth a mighty fire was burning and throwing magical lights and shadows over the industrious scribe. Outside a cold wind was blowing, and the frozen snow flew needle-sharp against the window. A thin sheet of ice, on which ravens could stand, had stretched over the lake by this time; the distant roads vibrated hard and dry under

the rapid steps of freezing wayfarers; and the wind sang around the lonely cottage with such dreary mournfulness, as if it would recount to Mother Patience all the misery on Earth. It shook and swayed the ivy which tenderly twined round the little house. All of a sudden, she pricked up her ears – a light, well-known footstep glided past her window, and the next moment, Sorrow was kneeling at her feet, breathless, trembling, like a hunted deer.

“Mother!” she said, “Oh Mother, how dreadful! Why were you not there? Then the terrible woman would not have walked with me, and none of it would have happened!” While she spoke, Sorrow looked anxiously around her, as though that which had frightened her so severely must be pursuing her. Patience gently stroked her hair. “Calm yourself, child, no terrible people enter here. But tell me, what has happened?” “It is my fault!” wailed Sorrow, “I did it; oh, why am I in the world, why am I not down at the bottom of the lake, where the frozen water would bury me twice over!”

“Quiet, quiet, child, do not lament, do not grumble! For you bend the necks of the proud and soften the hardhearted!” “No, Mother, that’s precisely it: I harden hearts and those who loved each other know one another no longer. You must hear my story:

“Two years ago, I made a stop at a sumptuous farmstead; they called it Grove Farm; wherever you looked, abundant and vigorous life met you with a smile. The cattle were as sleek and smoothly combed as the horses, the barns were full, and farmhands and maids were busily and noisily at work. A splendid boy with blue eyes and curly brown hair was cracking a whip in the yard, his mind set on chasing around the calves that

were going to the drinking-trough. Then a lovely, slender girl with a coronet of blonde plaits and laughing brown eyes stepped onto the threshold: "Oh Hans, Hans!" she cried out, "You rogue! You scamp! *Will* you leave the calves alone!" The boy laughed and began to crack the whip all the more loudly; but the girl flew out and, with a curiously stern and firm expression about her mouth and brow, she wrested the whip from his grasp before he realised what was happening and held it high in the air so he could not reach it, jump as hard as he might. It was a charming picture: the boy impetuously defiant, the girl so agile and so firm; I observed both of them with pleasure. But there was another who observed her, a strapping young man; he seemed to be the chief hand. When the girl looked round, she turned crimson at the gaze that rested on her and cried, "What are you standing there like that for? Couldn't you have stopped him?"

"Oh yes, but then Willi wouldn't have come flying out like a guardian devilkin; I was just waiting for her to come out with that severe look on her face!" "Get away with you!" she said, and she threatened him with the whip.

"The bell rang for supper. I was called in and allowed to take a seat among the maids. There was Farmer Grove, so sturdy and stately; he had just such light brown eyes as the daughter, as well as the defiant trait, but it was significantly more pronounced. The farmer's wife had blue eyes, like the boy, but there was also an air of dejection, as if she could not stand up to the strong wills around her. "Hans, the Evening Blessing!" cried the farmer. Hans was still very cross, and he stammered out, "Come, Lord Jesus, sit down and give me my whip back."

“But Hans!” roared the farmer, intending thus to quell the general laughter. However, the atmosphere was very cheerful, Hans was much teased, and he swallowed his embarrassment with his hot soup. The chief hand sat opposite Willi and they often exchanged furtive glances. “Hans is my Crown Prince,” said the farmer. “One day he’ll rule over everything here, and Willi will get a tidy sum and marry Farmer Raven!” “I won’t do that, father!” said the girl, without looking up from her plate, and the defiant expression crinkled her brow once again, “I don’t like Farmer Raven.” “She doesn’t want to be a raven-mother,”<sup>1</sup> the first maid whispered to the chief hand, and everyone began to laugh.

“What did she whisper there?” the farmer asked in a stern, grim voice. Nobody wanted to reply, until little Hans cried out: “Willi will be a raven-mother!” Then the laughter knew no bounds. Willi threw a reproachful look at her brother, and Farmer Grove said dryly: “I don’t like stupid jokes, and when I say something, that’s the final word.” Willi kept silent, but under her blonde plaits the same thought remained, immutable.

“But now hear the terrible part: In the very night that I slept there, little Hans caught a fever; the doctor was hurriedly sent for, all of the house was in turmoil, and before I had even left the village, which I was slowly walking through, little Hans was pale and still, the whole farmstead like a grave, and only the sobbing of the women was heard, sounding through the open window from where they had laid the boy in his coffin. The farmer’s wife was utterly devastated and wept and wailed without cease; the farmer bit his teeth together in furious grief; Willi went about her work

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<sup>1</sup> “Rabenmutter” – a term for a cruel, unnatural mother.

and sometimes passed her hand over her eyes. But when the chief hand tried to come near her to console her, she turned her back on him and walked away. –

“I did not travel that road again for a long time, so I saw no more of the poor girl. I have only just passed that way, I was so eager to know what the people were doing and if Willi had become Farmer Raven’s wife after all, to comfort her father, now that his pride, his darling, his Crown Prince, lay in the earth. Oh Mother! Mother! Had I not brought them misfortune enough? All three of them were standing there on the threshold of the house, and the north wind howled around them. The old woman was holding her apron up before her eyes, the father was as furious as a goaded bull and he shook Willi and pushed her out with the words, “Away, out my house, you trollop! I don’t know you anymore!”

“Willi’s face was deathly pale but immovable; no sound passed her lips, no plea, no complaint. The door of the family home slammed shut and locked, and Willi, wrapped in a shawl, stood outside in the gale from the north. – But under the shawl something stirred which she carefully protected, and which soon began to cry for its mother’s breast. Her face softened somewhat at this, and she looked anxiously at the little creature with whom she stood alone in the winter’s night, she, the daughter of rich Farmer Grove. She seemed not to be very strong on her feet and often had to sit down by the wayside, now to take a rest, and now to nurse the baby, which was very restless. In this way she walked along the high road all through the night until she came to an unknown village. Seeking some protection from the wind in a porch, she sat down on the stone steps and

fell asleep. But no sooner had day dawned than she was turned away with hard words by the maid who had come to sweep. The wind had abated somewhat; but she was so benumbed that she swayed on her feet.

“After a while, she was able to walk again, and so she trudged onwards, through the large village, over the hard-frozen ground and under the lead-grey sky that grew ever gloomier as the day advanced. The baby would not be quietened now, and its screams were more frequent and longer. So poor Willi went from house to house and begged for work. “We want no maid with a baby!” was the hard answer everywhere, or: “What good is the bawling brat to us?” Then she began to beg for a little milk for her baby, for her own milk was diminishing hour by hour. But nobody would give her any, and she wandered on. I followed, for I could part from her no longer. Suddenly, I saw somebody following after me, a hideous woman with a stony face and wild hair; she came ever nearer and nearer, and when she was close by me, she laughed hoarsely: “You’ve done your job well, now it’s my turn, I am Despair!” Then the wind roared anew and a snowstorm began that took even my breath away. Willi thought she had left the village far behind, but in the middle of the night she found herself before its entrance once more, and she sat down in a hedge, half-senseless from hunger and cold. The poor infant in her arms whimpered unceasingly; every now and then, it screamed out. In the morning, she roused herself and begged at several doors for a drop of milk once again. She was reviled once again. One time, a boy gave her a piece of bread, but she could not eat it. Twice, thrice she tried to choke down the cold, hard pieces; then the baby wailed again; shaking her head, she threw the

bread into the snow. So she crept onwards until she came near the river, which already had a thin crust of ice on which lay freshly fallen snow. The gale had ceased; but the sky was still lead-grey and a new snowstorm was in the air. The hideous woman walked past me, towards Willi, who now stood on the bridge staring down below, and suddenly laid her hand on her shoulder. Willi slowly turned her head, and when she saw the stony eyes, she screamed – the baby fell from her arms; I heard the ice crackle and crack, and then nothing more. Willi lay unconscious on the ground, and people who were crossing the bridge just then looked down, shook their heads, and lifted her up. I do not know whither they have taken her, beautiful Willi with the splendid, blonde defiant head and the light-brown eyes. Oh Mother! What have I done? Can you not help?” –

“Not now,” said Patience, looking dreamily into space, “but I shall help when it is time.”

Winter was over and the world began to stir, titmice and blackbirds were twittering, the fields were teeming with life; and Willi stood before the judges accused of infanticide. She was white as a sheet; her eyes glittered uncannily in their dark sockets, and to every question she only shook her head. On her brow and around her lips was a sinister expression: was it the reflection of that hideous face which had stared at her on the bridge, or was it the thoughts which she had wrestled with in prison?

Utter silence and the greatest tension reigned in the whole assembly. The judge’s voice became sharper and more cutting every moment: “Don’t you know that your life is in danger if you give no answer?” had just sounded from his lips when there arose a commotion in the

courtroom. Everyone looked eagerly towards the door; for Farmer Grove himself walked in, stooped, with white hair and deep furrows in his face. Willi saw him, clenched her fist, and raised it menacingly at her father; yet all of a sudden she let it fall again. She did not know what had happened to her, but something so soft had settled on her heart as to make the ice in her melt. Invisible to all, someone else had walked into the courtroom behind Farmer Grove: it was Mother Patience. She saw at a glance that the outlook for Willi was bleak. Like a soft, warm spring zephyr she passed by everyone; she touched Willi's hard brow, whispered some words to her counsel, began to dictate the judge's questions to him, stretched out her hand to Farmer Grove to support him – and all of a sudden the aspect of the entire courtroom was transformed. Even the pale youth, Death, who stood behind Will, waiting for her, withdrew from her; it seemed she would be snatched from his grasp this time. "Tell me, dear child!" the judge asked very gently, "were you on the high road for long?" "Willi grimly uttered, "I no longer know." "Were you outdoors at night?" "Yes, I was outdoors at night, two nights, I think, in a snowstorm." "Did you not ask anyone for alms?" Willi gnashed her teeth. "I went from house to house and begged for milk for my – for my – starving baby, but nobody, nobody gave me any. They berated me and gave me nasty names, but not a drop of milk!"

A murmur ran through the assembly; people from the village were called in, who stated that the person had begged from them for two days and then disappeared.

"She was walking in a snowstorm with a newborn baby," the judge said sternly, "and you gave her nothing?" "We thought she was a bad



person!” the people replied. The judge shrugged his shoulders.

“And then you came to a bridge and stayed there, leaning against it to look into the water. What happened next?” Willi shuddered.

“I looked down and wanted to jump in, but I was so numb that I could not lift my feet, and then – then somebody touched me and when I turned round, a hideous woman was looking at me, with a face of stone, with wild hair, and – and I heard the ice crack down below and then I knew nothing more!”

Farmer Grove gave a loud groan; the people looked at one another; the counsel for the defence took the floor and spoke with great eloquence of ‘Hallucinations.’

Willi listened in amazement. “Is that what the terrible woman is called?” she thought to herself. Once, she glanced at her father; he looked so broken that her eyes grew hot and moist; indeed, a tear even rolled slowly down her emaciated face and dropped on her hand. She felt the slow withdrawal of pale, silent Death just as little as she had felt his proximity. She only looked over, with tired eyes, towards the door which had closed behind the jurors. What were life and death to her? However, another tear welled up when she saw her father looking towards the closed door as if the thunderbolt that could kill him must strike from there. Finally, finally, the men walked out and gravely and solemnly pronounced: “Not guilty!” It would be impossible to describe the commotion in the courtroom; nobody was calm except Willi, who leaned against the wall like a dead woman, only opening her eyes when she felt her head resting against a violently beating heart and two arms enfolded her, as they had done when

she was but a small, weak child. Farmer Grove whispered soft, soft words into the ear of his saved child which sank into her heart, as though there were no curious crowd around them. When she could at last find her tongue, she stammered with dry lips, "Mother! Where is mother?" A flash as of sheet lightning passed over the old man's face. "Mother is very, very ill, we may not find her alive!" "Oh come, father, come quickly, quickly!" cried Willi, and she dragged him away, so swiftly that the once so strong man struggled to follow his weak child. On the threshold of the house, they stood still a moment; Willi placed her hand on her heart, but it would not be calmed.

"Father!" she breathed, "Father, I'm afraid!" "So am I," he said softly, from the depths of his heart. Willi stepped trembling into her paternal home, and trembling into the dear old parlour. There lay her mother, so deathly still, as pale as marble, but Mother Patience had kissed her at the last and so the pale mouth smiled. Willi knelt by the bed and her whole body shook with suppressed sobs.

Farmer Grove stayed standing in the doorway leaning on a stick, and tears ran down his face. He had known fine well; he himself had closed those eyes which had now finally ceased to weep. Then he went out; he could look on no longer. Sorrow was in the room; she laid her arm around Willi and breathed, "Sister!" But Mother Patience was there also, stroking Willi's head and pouring peace into her weary soul, until at last she could bear to look upon her dead mother, and even to touch the cold hand with her lips. Then Patience showed her the way out to her father, to whom she remained as his comfort, as his support. Yes, Willi was a strong

soul. She began a hard, laborious life with a broken heart and a weak body. She often had need to call upon Mother Patience when her strength was at an end, and her father, old and whimsical, demanded too much of her; when the servants obeyed her only reluctantly and with a bad grace, and people timidly avoided her on the way to church.

However, she became a mother to the poor and quietly did more good than the rest of the village. Yet people were always a little afraid of the serious, stern countrywoman who was never harsh nor hard, but also never happy. She will not marry, the man least of all who had plunged her into misery and forsaken her in her need; her property shall go to orphans one day. Yes, Mother Patience, you can work miracles!