

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Emil Ertl (1860-1935) – From *Liebesmärchen* (1886)

1. Keys to Heaven
2. The Greatest Sorrow
3. Rübezahl
4. Dizzy-Dim and Eyes'-Delight
5. The Switch-Father

Keys to Heaven



One day, Saint Peter had things to do away from Heaven, so he placed the Cherubim with the big, flaming sword by the Pearly Gates and said, "Let nobody in but those who bring a key with them and open by themselves; for I shall send a Key to Heaven to all those people who are to die today and who belong in Heaven. And whoever does not have a key does not belong in Heaven." And having said this, he departed.

Now there lived on Earth an old ship's-pilot by the name of Jürgen

and his wife. They dwelt in a shining little cottage where they could look out onto the dunes and hear the surging of the sea. They had retired there, and they looked back at a long life that had been very happy, for they loved one another dearly, always sharing joy and sorrow, and neither had ever spoken an angry word to the other. And the older they became, the more dearly they loved each other and the more tightly they clung to life.

On that very day when Saint Peter was not in Heaven, old Jürgen felt that he must die, and it fell very hard on him, for all the times he had looked Death in the eyes when in among the waves. "Farewell, dear wife," he said sadly, "Farewell, until we meet again!" Then he lost consciousness. After a while, he opened his eyes and spoke in a weak voice: "Listen! ... bring me the big net, I'll take it with me, for they don't need a pilot in Heaven; but when the dear Lord hears I'm a dab hand at fishing, he might use me as a Heavenly Fisherman, for there's no idleness in Heaven." Then he sighed one last time and died.

When he had died and was just about to start on the road to Heaven, an angel came flying up bringing a golden key, and it said, "Saint Peter sends his regards, and he happens to have things to do away from home today; so you may open Heaven's Gate by yourself and enter without ceremony."

Old Jürgen thanked him and put the Key to Heaven in his jacket, then he loaded the heavy net on his shoulders and began to climb up the broad road of clouds. On the way he kept looking round, and he said to himself, "My old woman is sure to follow on soon, for she won't long survive my death." But he reached the great Gate of Heaven without anyone having

come after him, and as there was a wooden bench in front of it, he threw the net to the ground and sat down to wait. For he did not want to enter Heaven without his wife, and he thought, “When she comes up and sees the magnificent gate, she mightn’t dare to open it.”

And it was not long before he saw someone laboriously dragging their feet up the road. However, it was not his wife, but rather a soldier, a still very young spark, but shot through the middle of his breast. He leaned upon his sabre and groaned with every step, for his wound burned like fire. When he arrived at the Pearly Gates, he could not go in, because he had no Key to Heaven. Then he leaned against the gate, closed his eyes, and trembled all over, for it was very cold and a fever shook him.

Old Jürgen was sore of heart when he looked at the youth, and he thought: “Saint Peter has surely forgotten that he would die so quickly, or he would have sent him a Key to Heaven. For an honest soldier who dies in open battle, *he* belongs in Heaven!” – And that was actually the case: it had completely slipped the Heavenly Gatekeeper’s mind that the brave warrior would die today; he always has so very much to think and to worry about!

“You can encroach on Saint Peter’s profession this once,” thought good-natured Jürgen, and he rose, gave his own key to the soldier and said: “Go on in, your need is greater than mine, and have the angels drip heavenly balm on your wound!”

The soldier thanked him and opened, but once over the threshold he turned round and said, “Won’t you come in now, too?”

Then the Angel with the Flaming Sword, who was standing behind the door, cried: “Only one who has a key may enter!” And he slammed the

gate shut so hard that it shook.

After old Jürgen had waited another while, he did really see a bent, little old woman climbing up the road of clouds and knew her to be his wife. Then he ran towards her, as fast as his old legs would carry him, and embraced her; and they were both overjoyed.

“Go on in!” he said, when he had helped her up to the top, “for it’s cold and dreary out here.” But when she heard that he had given his key away, she would not go in, but asked him to take hers. She was tired anyway and had to rest a little beforehand, she said. But he did not take her Key to Heaven, and so the two of them remained outside, and they sat down together on the wooden bench to wait.

Then they saw a child coming towards them with blonde curls and large blue eyes, and she walked in a shroud. With the tip of the shroud, she dried the tears that ran down over her cheeks.

“Poor child, why do you weep so?” asked the old woman.

“Because I had to leave my mummy,” the child replied.

“The dear Lord wished it to be,” said the old woman, “and He will know the reason why. So weep no more, my child! I’ll be a mother to you too, until your real mother joins you. Now just you go into Heaven, then you’ll get a pair of lovely white wings and you’ll become an angel. – You haven’t lost your Key to Heaven, have you?”

“It fell out my hand, and I couldn’t find it again,” the child said and began to cry once more.

When the old woman heard this, she took her own key, opened the door, and the child went into Heaven.

And there they were now, the two old ones, sitting beside each other on the bench with neither of them having a Key to Heaven. But night fell, and it was so dark that they grew afraid. Then the stars came rolling and crashed about in their courses. And the good old people lost all heart and began to weep softly.

But the dear Lord on His throne heard the weeping and said, "Cherubim, who weeps before the Gate of Heaven?"

And the Cherubim told Him what had happened, for he had seen everything through the keyhole. When the dear Lord heard this, He quickly descended from his throne, came to the Gate of Heaven Himself, and bid the old couple enter.

And Jürgen really did become a Heavenly Fisherman, for he had not forgotten his net but brought it with him into Heaven. He had to fish the fiery tears of Saint Lawrence, which swam around in the celestial region as shooting stars, with his big net, to stop too many of them raining down onto the Earth.

But after a time, the dear Lord noticed that this work was too hard and arduous for the old man; so He called him to His host of the Chosen Ones and allowed him to hold the double bass for one of the angels who made music at the foot of the Divine Throne. And the angel played even more beautifully than before, because it could now use the fiddle-bow with both hands like a saw. And Jürgen thought himself very important and often said to his wife, "Didn't I always tell you? There's no idleness in Heaven!"



Now as for the Key to Heaven which the poor child had lost, it had fallen through the clouds onto a green meadow. There, it changed into a little yellow flower which blooms everywhere that good people live. And whoever sees the flower forgets for one moment what is weighing on his heart and dreams of a more beautiful future.

The Greatest Sorrow

There was a mother who did not love her child. And when she had grown up, the mother summoned her and said, “I am poor and can feed you no longer. Go out into the wide world and see how you get on.”

But when the girl began to cry heartbreakingly, she felt a little pity for her and said, “The only thing I can give you to take on the way is a good precept. Fear Love and flee it, wherever you can, for Love is the greatest sorrow. I know that well because I once loved your father; he was a godforsaken man and turned me out of his house. It was a long time ago, and I’ve got over it. But the last thing which still reminds me of him – is you.”

With these words, she took the child by the hand and led her out. Then she went back into her hut and bolted the door.

The girl did not know what to do, and she walked in tears into the green forest. But because the green forest went on forever, she roamed around in it for seven days and seven nights, stilling her hunger with black and red berries and quenching her thirst with the drops of dew which hung on every leaf in the morning. With night came the howling wolves; but the

girl clapped her hands and they ran away.

On the eighth day, the wood became very dark, and the girl's heart pounded when she heard steps rustling in the dry leaves. But when the undergrowth parted, a tall man stood before her bearing a long barrel for collecting resin on his back; for he was a pitch-maker.

The girl was very glad to see a human being again, and looking up at the man with imploring eyes, she said, "Good pitch-maker, couldn't you show me the way that leads out of this dark wood? For I'm very afraid that I'll meet Love here or some other evil."

"Love?" asked the pitch-maker; "What is Love?"

"Love," replied the girl, "is the greatest sorrow."

"I've never seen Love in these woods," said the pitch-maker. "But come with me to my hut, I'll protect you there from Love and from every other evil all your life. For you are a sweet girl, and I like you."

"You kind man," said the girl, "I would like to stay with you all my life, for I have such a happy and good feeling when I'm near you, which I don't have anywhere else."

They kissed each other on the lips and went to his hut. And the girl became the pitch-maker's wife.

They were both very happy together, although they had to work hard and were so poor that they often had nothing to eat for days but the berries of the forest. "Even difficulties are easily borne together," they told each other, "and as long as God does not send us Love, then all is well."

After some time had passed by, they had a little boy, and they called him Painchild, for he was born amidst great pain. They were both

unutterably delighted with the boy, and the pitch-maker fed him with goat's milk, for the mother was sick unto death. But the pitch-maker nursed her day and night.

Now when she became very weak and her husband began to weep, because he was convinced that he was going to lose her, she opened her mouth and said, "Do not weep, my dear! My life by your side has been happy, for I have never learned what Love is. You will still have our Painchild when I am dead."

But she did not die. For he nursed her with such faithful ardour that she became healthy again.

After another while had passed by, Painchild fell very ill and died. They buried him in the forest and planted flowers on his grave. When they had wept a long time, the husband dried his tears and said, "Weep no more, my faithful wife, for even though Painchild be dead, yet you have me and I have you. Let us rather thank the dear Lord that He has protected us up to now from the greatest sorrow, from Love." Then his wife dried her tears too, and they flung their arms around each other's neck and kissed one another on the lips.

Thus did they live together for many, many more years and were very happy in their poverty. And whenever some evil befell them, they looked into each other's eyes and at once a quiet, peaceful bliss came into their hearts.

But after they had become old, they felt a great weariness. And one day they laid themselves down on their leaf-litter, pressed each other's hand one last time, and died.

When they had arrived in Heaven up the cloud-steps and they beheld the dear Lord, they kneeled down and prayed. But Saint Peter came walking along just then, and when he saw the old couple kneeling before God, he addressed them with the words: "Good people, what are you doing here? I really didn't see you coming in!"

The old pitch-maker replied, "Saint Peter, we only wish to express our thanks to the dear Lord for our life on Earth, which was far happier than the lives of many other people. For we never knew the greatest sorrow, Love."

"Hey, hey!" Saint Peter cried, shocked, "You never knew Love? Why, in that case you have no right whatsoever to be in Heaven! Just come with me right now, so I can lead you out before the dear Lord catches sight of you."

No sooner had he said this than the dear Lord turned His head and asked, "Peter, why are you so very shocked?"

"Oh Lord," said Saint Peter, "there are two children of men here who have not known Love in their earthly life; I shall turn them out, for they do not belong in Heaven."

When the dear Lord heard this, He Himself was shocked in his heart at such people having come into Heaven. But when He looked over more closely and recognised the old pitch-maker with his wife, then He gave a smile that lit the whole of Heaven.

"Dear Peter," He said, "just go to your Heaven's Gate and leave the good old people here, for I know their hearts. They shall take their place at my right side and sing the praises of my glory with the Choir of Angels."

Rübezahl



There was a boy by the name of Friedel and a girl by the name of Trudel. They were very fond of one another and wanted to become man and wife. And they were well suited, for they were both herds, he grazing the sheep and she watching the geese. But when you have no other possession in the wide world than a threadbare linen-smock and a black piece of rye-bread in your shepherd's purse, then you cannot think of marriage just like that.

Nevertheless, they were both always in good spirits and laughed more than many a King and many a Queen. Indeed, every day seemed to them to be more delightful than the one before. And it really was too funny for words when Friedel imitated the bleating of the sheep and the cackling of the geese, or when he told the comical tale of Little Hare Snippity-Snappity. Then Trudel clapped her hands and rejoiced like a true child.

It once happened that Trudel was sitting among green clover under a lime tree, just at the place where the rustling forest of the Giant Mountains comes to an end and the meadows and fields begin. Nearby, the geese grazed in harmony with the sheep, and the little bells of the flock rang clear and sweet through the morning air.

Friedel was lying down on his back, his head in Trudel's lap, and looked now into her blue eyes, now into the sky through the spring-yellowed leaves of the lime tree. Trudel was singing a pretty song, which began as follows:

A girl arose at break of day
And to the meadow made her way
And there she found her heart's true joy,
He was a simple shepherd's boy...

Now whether it be that the song awoke clever thoughts in Friedel's mind, or an inspiration came down to him from the snow-covered peak, which he had just squinted over to and which rose glittering over the hilly green: he suddenly sprang up, clapped his hands and cried, "Trudel, I've had an idea."

"What?"

"We should get married soon."

"That would be fine by me – but how?"

"Rübezahl will have to help."

"How will you call him?"

"He lives there, where the forest is thickest."

"But if he doesn't want to?"

"He's good to the poor."

"Do you dare to, Friedel?"

"He's never bitten anyone's head off yet."

"But isn't it a sin?"

"Oh nonsense, many a man has become rich through Rübezahl without taking harm to his soul."

"Brrr, Friedel, I'm afraid."

"Then stay here with the sheep and geese and wait till I come back, for I'm setting out directly."

"No, for God's sake, Friedel, I won't let you go alone; rather take me with you. I'll be real brave when he suddenly appears, glaring at us with his fiery eyes. – But must it really be right now?"

"Trudel, he who has begun, has half done."

They left the flocks to look after themselves and walked into the pathless forest. There was an old beech stand: thick, light-grey trunks with bluish shadows on them, and distended fresh foliage, golden-yellow or darker according as the sun moved behind it; black earth emitting an odour of mould, felted over with a reddish covering of tender-stalked moss; sometimes a rock, a chanterelle mushroom, then a tree-stump overgrown with large, poisonous mushrooms; a blackthorn here, blooming ground-ivy there.

Now the thicket came to an end. A meadow lay before them with tall grass and hemlock; lily-white butterflies fluttered over it and away.

The two of them walked hand in hand over the glade, their feet sinking into the moist marshy ground and the bright sunlight almost dazzling them. On the other side, they entered the dark forest again, which became ever more still and silent. No bird sang, no bee buzzed, no leaf stirred; the only sound was the beating of Trudel's heart. Soon the light became dim, almost as if it were evening. The trunks moved closer and closer together; it became well-nigh impossible to advance, and every moment one or the other of them had a cobweb hanging from their face. Blackish-green fir trees veiled the sky with their proud heads; a rustling arose and swelled in the tree-tops.

"I can smell something," said Trudel, who was happy to have found occasion to talk; "there must be a charcoal-burner nearby." All at once she took heart and lustily cut a path through the tangles, following her snuffling little nose all the time.

They came to another glade. Recently-felled fir trees lay around,

stretching their branches to the sky. At a smouldering charcoal-pile, which smoked tremendously, there stood a charcoal-burner with a ginger beard, leaning on his straight-edge.

Friedel made a leg as handsomely as he could and said, "Could you perhaps tell us, for the sake of Our Lord Jesus Christ, where in these parts Rübzahl lives?"

"Rübzahl?" asked the charcoal-burner with a grim smile; "Rübzahl?" – Then murmuring into his red beard, "Just wait, I'll Rübzahl you!" – And finally, with affable congeniality: "What do you want from Rübzahl, my good people?"

"We would like to..." said Friedel.

"Be man and wife," said Trudel.

"And request Rübzahl ..." said Friedel.

"For a small dowry," said Trudel.

"Then you're on the right path," nodded the charcoal-burner; "for the Lord of the Mountains rules over the race of gnomes, and what treasures lie in the cool ground! Gold and precious stones enough – just see how it glitters and gleams."

And he pointed to the ground, which suddenly became as transparent as glass, and they both saw broad veins of gold and silver interstratified in the dark stone. Diamonds and rubies lay around like pebbles – and everything glittered and glistened so, that Friedel and Trudel had to hold their hand before their eyes.

When they had recovered from their astonishment, they quickly fell to their knees, for they realised that the charcoal-burner was none other

than Rübezahl himself.

“Oh, help us to find happiness, Lord Rübezahl!” cried Friedel, who did not know that nothing can vex the mountain-spirit more than calling him Rübezahl; for this name reminds him of that one occasion when he was taken in good and proper.

The mountain-spirit smiled in a strange fashion and said, “Stand up, for I already knew about your request. And it shall be granted. Look at the castle over there – I shall give you that, and sufficient money and land with it, for you to live like Prince and Princess.”

He reached out his hand, and the trees of the forest moved apart, forming a wide avenue which led directly up to a proud, magnificent building. Colourful streamers fluttered from the gables, an iridescent peacock sat on a terrace surrounded by exotic plants in bloom, and a servant led two splendid mounts up and down by the high fountain in front of the castle.

Friedel and Trudel did not weary of looking and gaping.

“All of that is yours,” said Rübezahl; “come back to me at the same hour tomorrow, and the wedding-feast will be prepared in the Great Hall.”

No sooner had he said this than everything was gone – the castle, the peacock, the horses, the avenue, and the charcoal-burner with his pile.

Friedel and Trudel took each other by the hand and stumbled back through the forest as quickly as they could. But they had not advanced fifty paces when they heard the flock-bells tinkling and soon found themselves standing, to their utmost astonishment, on the meadow whence they had departed.

They sat down under the large lime-tree and Trudel said, "Oh Friedel, how cruel this Rübzahl is! Why has he put us off from moving into a life of splendour and being able to marry, until tomorrow!"

"Yes, Trudel, you're right," said Friedel, "it's a bitter pill, having to wait so terribly long."

"Friedel," Trudel began again after a while, "if only tomorrow would come! Tell me the lovely story of Little Hare Snippity-Snappity, so the time will pass more quickly."

"Okay," said Friedel, and he began: "Once upon a time there was a hare, who was called Snippity-Snappity..." But he got no further, rather interrupting himself straight away, "Those splendid horses will be ours too, Trudel." Then he leapt up to look at the sun. "It's still dreadfully high in the heavens," he said with a yawn.

Now Trudel began to count out loud. "When I reach a hundred," she cried, "another hour is up; then a hundred two more times, and the sun goes down." But she was done with the hundred far sooner than she would have thought possible, and it seemed that the sun was never going to set.

"Oh, we're truly unfortunate!" said Trudel, bursting into tears.

After she had had a good cry, she fell asleep, and Friedel slept by her side. When they both woke up, the sun had just begun to go down. They rose and drove their flocks home. All that night they could not sleep a wink.

The animals were driven to pasture earlier than usual on the next morning, and the appointed hour was awaited with ardent longing. At last it was time to start walking through the forest, and Trudel's heart beat with

joyful expectation, as it had beat with fear the day before.

They had been walking in the forest no time at all when a peasant came towards them in the costume customary to that land; but when they looked at him more closely, they recognized him to be Rübezahl from his red beard.

“Good day, Lovers!” he began, coming to a halt before them, “I suppose you’re coming to move into your castle? Now, you must forgive me – it melted away overnight, for it was a castle in the air. – But don’t be angry with me about that, and make do with a well-appointed farm – twenty head of sleek cows in the stable, and two pair farm-horses into the bargain, and the real McCoy at that. Come along with me now, and I’ll take you there.”

He turned around and strode forward. The two of them followed after, nudging each other with blissful faces; for a farm was almost as much to their liking as a castle.

Suddenly, Rübezahl stopped still, looked thoughtful and said, “Upon my soul! It’s just occurred to me that the joiner hasn’t delivered the beds for your bedroom yet. Everything else is done and dusted – but the beds, yes, the beds... And you must have beds, mustn’t you, when you want to hold your wedding. Isn’t that so?”

They both looked at each other, dumbfounded, and nodded their heads regretfully. “Perhaps we could make do with a bed of hay for the time being?” Trudel shyly suggested.

“The very idea!” Redbeard exclaimed. “And get yourselves a headache from the strong smell of hay? No, no, that won’t do, and you shan’t say the Lord of the Mountains gave you a house with no beds in it.

So the best thing is probably for you to come back a week tomorrow; the joiner will have finished making the beds by then. So until we meet again, in eight days!" And with these words, he swung off to the side and quickly disappeared in the thicket.

The eight days did drag on a little, but they did not seem as endlessly long as the single day had done. And whenever one of the two was on the verge of losing their patience, the other would comfort them, saying: "Hey, just think, a farm with twenty sleek cows in the stable; I'd say it's worth our while to wait a few days for that!"

When the eight days had passed, Friedel and Trudel set out to seek Lord Rübezahl and have him show them their farm. After they had wandered around in the forest for a long time without encountering the mountain-spirit, Friedel raised his voice and cried, "Rübezahl, Rübezahl!"

"Rübezahl!" rang out very loud and close behind them, and when they both turned round, startled, a tremendous racket suddenly broke out on the other side, and a colossal boulder, which might have broken loose from a height, rolled down the slope, barely giving Friedel time to jump to the side and pull back Trudel, who was slower to react. But in the moment that the boulder travelled past them, it changed in a marvellous manner, and Rübezahl was standing there with his long, ginger beard and dressed in green from top to toe.

"What do you want?" he snapped, surly anger creasing his brow.

Friedel was so shocked that he dropped his cap, which he had respectfully taken off his head. "The farm..." he stammered, "which you promised to give us... twenty cows in the stable..."

The angry expression on Rübzahl's face turned to astonishment. "My good people," he cried out, "I've never seen you all my born days, and you say I've promised you something?"

"Yes, indeed," Trudel answered defiantly, "you promised us twenty sleek cows in a stable, and if you don't give us that, then – I'll say it straight out – you've broken your word."

"Well, well," said Rübzahl, "I would truly be sorry if I did; but I really cannot recollect ever having seen you before, and I don't own any farms. – Whatever can I do about this? ... And something must be done for you... Wait, I have it! I'll have a cottage built by the wide road that runs through my dominion – there shall be a little cabbage-garden with it. You may live there and you can earn your livelihood by breaking stones in summer and shovelling snow in winter. The cottage will be ready by the solstice; come back then and start with the stone-breaking straight away. Are you content with that? Yes? Well then, until we meet again, at the solstice!"

But there were still two months and a bit more to go until the solstice.

Friedel and Trudel passed through this long period of time with wonderful composure and patience. Each one of them took particular care not to show the other any signs of disgruntlement; for they both needed all their strength for this new test, they clearly felt. Each one appeared cheerful, spirited, and hopeful for the other's sake.

So a peaceful content had, in the end, really entered their hearts, and while they looked ahead to the future with certainty and clarity, they knew how to satisfy themselves with a present that was ordinary, admittedly, but not by any means joyless. – They greatly looked forward to

their cottage; the hard occupation of stone-breaking, and the meagre life they had to expect to lead on their slight subsistence, appeared to them in the rosiest light, for this made a mutual self-sacrifice possible, and true love blooms all the more beautifully, the more self-denial it demands. – “What a stroke of luck,” they said to each other, “that nothing came of the splendid castle and the farm; the luxurious living would have been unbearable.”

- - - - -

On the day of the solstice, they walked hand in hand over the sunny field and resplendent meadows, and into the rustling forest. After they had wandered around for a long time in vain, Friedel clapped his hands to his mouth and cried, “Rübezahl, Rübezahl!”

But no answer came. All remained as silent as before. “Rübezahl, Rübezahl!” he cried again... All remained silent, as silent as the grave.

They both began to feel uneasy; pressing against each other for warmth, they turned around to come back out of the forest. After they had kept on walking an hour or more, they noticed that they had lost the right direction. Friedel climbed up a tall tree to look at the sun. When he looked around him, he was shocked to the core of his being; for all around, as far as his eyes could see, there was nothing but forest and forest. The sun was already setting.

They now thought to have rediscovered the right direction and followed their path as quickly as the undergrowth allowed. For several more hours they walked on, but the forest became ever thicker and more untraversable, and twilight descended. – Friedel sat down on a stone, exhausted, and Trudel sat down on his lap and wept.

It grew darker and darker. The flickering stars were in the sky, but only rarely did one shine through the leaves.

Then a light swayed through the forest as from the lantern of a solitary wanderer. A man came walking towards them, heavily laden with a dark object; in his hand he carried a dark lantern.

He cast a bright gleam of light on the two and stopped still. Then he raised the load off his shoulder and threw it crashing to the ground. To their horror, Friedel and Trudel saw it to be a black coffin.

“Dear people,” said Rübzahl – for it was none other – “I pity you very much, but I cannot give you the promised cottage. For you, Friedel, are destined to die tomorrow, and I am as powerless against Fate as you are. So I have brought you a house which is now of more use to you than a proud castle, a farm, or a cottage.”

While saying this, he gave the coffin a kick that made the lid fly open. Then he turned around and walked slowly, as he had come, away through the forest.

Friedel and Trudel stood petrified, following the light of the lantern with their eyes until it had disappeared entirely.

Then Trudel burst out into violent sobs. “Horrible, horrible,” she cried, “cruel Fate, cruel Rübzahl!”

Friedel stood there, silent and tearless. “Don’t be unjust, Trudel!” he said calmly. “How many people are taken unawares by Death before they have eased their soul, coming to a god-forsaken end? I, however, have time to go to the priest tonight and confess my sins to him – To whom else do I owe this other than the good Lord Rübzahl, who has foretold me my last

hour? Also, I'm a poor beggar and my burial would have been burdensome on the community. – Isn't it rather charity and kindness on the part of Rübezahl, to provide the coffin for it?"

"O Friedel, O Friedel," the girl sobbed, throwing her arms round his neck. "I can't live without you, I can't live! My heart will break, I know."

"This house is big enough for both of us," Friedel said happily, while he felt around the inside of the coffin.

Trudel dried her tears. She too had become, all of a sudden, so calm, light-hearted, and cheerful. She knelt down and took the size of the coffin with her hand.

"Big enough for both," she whispered to herself, as if confiding a wonderfully sweet secret to the night, "big enough for you and for me... for Friedel and for Trudel... Rest will be soft on your breast, my love... life will be snug in our narrow, black little house."

Then she bent over to him and clung to his neck. "O Friedel, my Friedel, how happy I am! At last, at last I shall be yours, yours forever... for I am a bride, Friedel... Priest Death blesses the everlasting bond... the black bridal chamber is ready..."

Friedel kissed her fervently on the lips then stood up and raised her to him. "Delightful bride, my gentle wife," he cried, warmly wrapping her in his arms, "let us be joyful, for however much life may have deceived and tantalised us – *this* house, which we now really possess, won't be stolen from us by anyone."

And they looked into each other's eyes with rapture and felt that every sorrow they had experienced in their lives was now made good.

“Now let us go home,” Friedel said at length, and heaving the heavy coffin onto his shoulder, he walked slowly forwards. Trudel followed after, calm, almost joyful.

They came to a dark ravine, where the rushing of a torrential brook thundered up from the depths. They walked along the rocky precipice until they came to a narrow footbridge which crossed the ravine. Friedel stepped out with his burden onto the shaky boards; but when he reached the middle, he turned round and admonished, “Trudel, wait till I’m on the other side, for the footbridge is weak and won’t bear both our weights!”

However, Trudel had already followed his footsteps – the footbridge collapsed and the hapless couple plunged down into the black depths.

- - - - -

When they awoke, they heard wonderful sounds in the air, the like of which they never had heard before. And it seemed to them that they were floating in white, billowing garments over an immeasurable meadow, where thousands upon thousands of sky-blue bellflowers were blooming. And all the bellflowers were ringing, sending marvellous music through the spheres...

The Switch-Father



The river was wild and foaming, but people had taken a good part of its power away some distance further up and tamed the clear water in a wide and deep wooden culvert. There it flowed in a measured manner, subject to the will of man. But wherever it found a gap or a burst board, its old spirit awakened and it shot bubbling forth to splash down on green ferns, which constantly nodded their long, wet fans under the falling drops.

The stream, diverted thus, was plunged in its full force over a large wheel and drove a clacking mill. No sooner had it emerged from that, than it went to a second, larger, deeper-lying mill, and finally even to a buzzing mill-saw. Then, having done enough, it was released again. The water foamed jubilantly back into its old bed.

Behind these mills and the mill-saw there lay, perched on the mountain-slope, the village. And it was an affluent village, as every wanderer could see at a glance, for beside the farms lay large barns and granaries as well as the mightiest heaps of fertilizer. But the stateliest things in the village were the church with its cheerfully-green roof and the clean, whitewashed inn 'At the Forest-Field.'

Immediately behind the 'Forest Field,' a sunny path went up the mountainside, and anyone who climbed up it for a while would come to a tiny chapel on the rock, with a sharp drop down to the river. The chapel had a red roof and was called 'The Switch-Father.' Why it was so called will be explained later.

Many years ago, in the times when a miracle still happened here or there, a barmaid called Lenei lived in the forest, and she was always too pretty and spruce for words. And at the same time, Fate so willed that a

millers' boy called Jockl came wandering to the upper mill, who fell for the girl at once. She also very soon became *enamoured* of him, as people learnedly said at that time, and there was no end of winking, hand-squeezing, kissing and hugging.

But they were both as poor as sparrows in winter, and a fray having just broken out in Italy, and the recruiting-drum going through the land, Jockl decided to take military service to improve his lot at a blow.

At first, Lenei could not by any means come to terms with this idea; but when Jockl painted her a picture of his being promoted to Field Captain within a year and then returning home covered in glory and laden with the spoils of war, she finally said Yes and let him go, albeit with a heavy heart and many tears and sighs.

The year at the end of which Jockl was supposed to return was soon over, and Lenei waited from day to day, with pounding heart and almost uncontrollable desire, for the valiant Field Captain distinguished with rich pay and the honours of war. – But he did not come. Day after day passed by, week after week, month after month, - but he did not come.

Lenei, however, was no faint-hearted girl. She stood behind her counter and laughed, cracked merry bar-room jokes, as a good barmaid should, and let rich Farmer Fliegenanger familiarly grasp her chin, so that nobody could perceive anything amiss with her and people said: "Look, look, the lass has quickly forgotten her sweetheart!" – But she had not forgotten him, and her hand often twitched, ready to give Farmer Fliegenanger a clout on the ears. – Now, soldiering, she thought, is no child's play, and in war everything can't fall into place exactly to the day.

When another year is over, he'll surely come, and then he'll make me his wife, and I won't be the poor barmaid who has to put up with everything any longer.

And another year did pass. But still he did not come.

Before Lenei had a clear idea of what she ought to make of this, several more months had slipped by. Then harvest-time came, during which she had to help along in the fields, and every evening after work she fell tired into bed and went to sleep at once. Then it became winter, and there was much to do in the bar until late into the night. And all of a sudden spring was there and three years had passed since Jockl had gone away.

When she realised this, her heart began to thump, and she thought: I hope nothing has happened to him!

In her secret anxiety, she did not at first know whom she should ask for words of advice and encouragement; until she thought of the Switch-Father. You've neglected him somewhat up to now, she said to herself; and early in the morning, before work began, she went up the steep path.

When she had reached the little chapel with the red roof, she stood still for a while to gather her thoughts and catch her breath. Then she pushed the heavy, creaking door open and walked inside. The air was musty and unnaturally warm. The scent of incense mixed with the smell of faded flowers. Four or five worn-out pews stood one behind the other, and old paintings hung on the walls, their colours almost obscured, depicting Christ's Path of Suffering. A light draught stole through the broken window and rustled in a wreath of withered Alpine roses which was hung up over a grey gravestone set in the wall.

Over the altar sat the Switch-Father himself: The Saviour, life-sized, carved in wood with purple robe and Crown of Thorns, humbly holding the long rod his tormentors had put in his hand. Blood had streamed all over him, and he made a face that would move a stone to pity. His hands were tied, and the rope was wrapped around and fastened to a stake of torture. This stake, the switch, gave the name Switch-Father to the statue and the little church, even though it was not God the Father but God the Son who was bound to the torture-switch. However, to suffering humanity, the Son is also a father.

Nothing could now be seen of the Crown of Thorns on the statue's head. For in the course of time, pious Christians had placed many a wreath over it, so that the Switch-Father had a crown of silver spangles and faded ribbons on his head that was almost as high as the Pope's Triple Tiara. And the power of the Switch-Father was almost as great as that of the Pope himself. For that reason, he had to be constantly kept in a good mood.

When spring came, they put the statue on a litter and carried it through fields and meadows in a ceremonial procession, singing many beautiful songs the while. The Switch-Father saw and blessed everything and sent rain and dry weather, sunshine and coolness after storms, wisely distributed so that the crops thrived splendidly. If, however, he once forgot, and did not send substantial rainfall in time, then one pilgrimage to the chapel with the red roof on the rock sufficed to recall the Switch-Father to his duty. But he did not care in a fatherly way for the meadows only. People in any kind of distress readily turned to him and were almost certain to find help. This was evinced by the gifts which had been offered to the Switch-

Father for successful healings and averted affliction, and which were displayed beside the altar, copious and resplendent. Untold silver feet and hands hung there, with silver hearts, and small, silver, and golden babes-in-arms, many with red or green sparkling eyes which were artfully made of jewels; then rich embroideries, shimmering crowns and wreaths and all sorts of gewgaws, and finally paintings depicting many kinds of events and objects. Here, a lame man who had dragged himself along only a moment before, now, cured, throws his crutches from him; there, a woman lying-in, holding her newborn babe in her arms with a blissful smile. Next, a small green tablet on which two eyes were painted, as if they were flying through the air; and underneath there was written, in a tangle of bright-red roses: Dedicated in such-and-such a year.

Lenei knelt down on the steps of the altar, clasped her hands, and looked up to the Switch-Father. It is true, she said, that I have not come to you until my need was greatest. But you are the Father of those in distress and those in fear, aren't you? So you won't hold my not thinking of you earlier against me. – It's like this. I'm mortally afraid something could have happened to Jockl and he might not come back in the end. I'll have a thick wax-candle made for you, as big as you yourself, dear Switch-Father, if you only send my Jockl part to me. You know, we'll get married then and I'll keep house frugally, and I'll buy you the wax-candle from what I scrimp and save. Will you send my Jockl to me? O say yes, say yes!"

The Switch-Father did not move, and all stayed still. – But Lenei did not desist; she begged ever more ardently, ever more fervently, and finally she cried out, through her tears, while wringing her hands up towards the

image of Christ: “You can’t – can’t refuse my plea! O say yes, dear Switch-Father, say yes and give me a sign!”

No sooner had she said this than the statue of Christ nodded its silver-crowned head – and once again it bowed its head – and slowly, a third time.

Lenei almost jumped out of her skin. Then she shouted out for joy, “Jockl’s coming back, Jockl’s coming back!” Thank you, heavenly Switch-Father, my heartfelt, heartfelt thanks!”

She stood up and staggered out of the chapel. Outside, everything – village, mountain, and valley – lay in smiling sunshine. Lenei flew down the steep path; she felt as if she had wings. Moreover, she should have been at work long before, for it was late: the monotonous buzzing of the mill-saw was already resounding through the stillness of the morning.

From this time on, she climbed up to the Switch-Father in the early morning and offered thanks for the given promise in a short prayer. Through this, she fortified her faith, so that confidence and strength moved into her heart and she could wait for the day of Jockl’s return with calm certainty.

Many years passed in this way, and Lenei had remained a respectable maiden; but she was not exactly young any more. Then it happened that Farmer Fliegenanger’s wife passed away. Once the mourning period was over, the rich farmer came to Lenei in his Sunday best and, after a lengthy and half-awkward, half-insolent introduction, he came out with a proposal to marry her.

“What are you dreaming of, Farmer?” said Lenei with a disobliging smile, for she was well aware that she was still a desirable woman, “You

see, I'm already engaged, Farmer."

"Already engaged?" Farmer Fliegenanger flared up; "So – and with whom, if one may ask?"

"With Jockl," said Lenei.

Then the Farmer burst out laughing, and he laughed until he was bright red in the face, eventually finishing in a violent cough.

"With Jockl?" he cried, after he had recovered, "don't tell me she believes that Jockl will ever come back!"

Lenei looked into Farmer Fliegenanger's face in astonishment. It did not occur to her straight away that he could not know anything about the Switch-Father's promise. "Farmer, don't sin!" she cried. – Then realising: "The Switch-Father himself gave me a sign that Jockl will come back."

"Well well," Fliegenanger said caustically, "if she has such high connections as the Switch-Father, then the likes of us must of course step back. – But remember this, maiden: As ye sow, so shall ye reap."

With those words, he put on his hat, rose to his feet, and stormed self-importantly out.

And now the years passed one after the other. Ever more and more silver-grey threads streaked Lenei's hair. Ever more and more lines and wrinkles appeared on her brow and cheeks. One tooth after another fell out of her once so lovely mouth. She had become old and ugly. But she did not notice this, for she did not possess a mirror; and she had nobody as a friend who would have told her. She was lonely and often did not speak with anybody for days on end but for the Switch-Father in the morning.

Another barmaid had come to the Forest Field a long time before, for

an old and ugly one is bad for business and no innkeeper can use her. Lenei earned her living through fine needlework, which she executed with great skill. – So she sat from early in the morning, after returning from the Switch-Father, until late dusk, sewing at her little window. This made her eyes weak, so that she had to hold the needlework right under her nose, and her back curved so much that she could no longer walk erect and without a stick.

Around this time, Sepp Gaiswinkler, a vain and light companion who had run away from his father's farm as a young man, and whom his relatives had long since ceased to number among the living, returned to the village, suddenly, as if snowed down from the sky. He visited old Lenei as well and brought – “Miracle upon miracle!” people cried – a greeting from Jockl, with whom he claimed to have been in the same squadron in Spain ten years before.

Lenei did not let him go away just like that, but treated him as well as she was able – consuming almost all her small savings thereby – and asked one question after another, while tears rolled down from her half-blind eyes over her furrowed cheeks, to good Sepp Gaiswinkler, who did ample justice to the wine placed before him.

So what did Jockl look like, and did he still wear the little ring on his finger that she had put there, and where was he staying at present, and had he not said when he was thinking of coming back, and hadn't he yet made it to Field Captain, and why had he gone as far as Spain, and had he really asked him to give her his greetings?

Sepp Gaiswinkler scratched behind his ear and said it was now just

ten years since he had seen Jockl, and he could no longer recollect every particular so exactly, but as far as he knew, Jockl had already been Colonel at that time and must have gone further since then; he wore many rings on his fingers, among which that of Lenei must without a doubt be one; he would surely come home in next to no time, for homesickness had tormented him even then; and he was generally very well, for he was a respected and feared man throughout Spain. Jockl had tasked him with greeting Lenei as certainly as he was called Sepp Gaiswinkler.

These words were heavenly music to Lenei's ears. After Sepp Gaiswinkler had gone and Lenei had dried her tears, she went into the dark corner of her chamber, knelt down on the stone floor and rummaged around in the colourfully painted chest which stood beside the green tiled stove. After long exertion, she found what she was seeking in the bottom of the chest, carefully preserved between cool canvas for which she had spun the flax herself. It was a silver necklace, which her grandmother had worn as a bride: a wide row of delicate, small silver chains, held together at the front by a high clasp which was studded with garnets and uncut emeralds.

Lenei set out and climbed the steep path up to the chapel on the rock. She hung the necklace on the altar and kneeled down on the steps, clasping her old hands. "Switch-Father, I know it was you who had the news about Jockl brought to me. I thank you with all my heart, with all my soul! And so you may see that I don't thank you only with words, I've brought the silver necklace here for you. Oh, accept it graciously – it's the only treasure I possess – and see to it that Jockl comes back soon! You know, I'll have a thick wax-candle made then, as big as you yourself, dear Switch-Father.

We'll get married then, I'll keep house frugally, and I'll buy you the wax-candle from what I scrimp and save.”

But year after year had passed by since Sepp Gaiswinkler's return to the village – and Jockl did not come.

Lenei had become quite blind in the meantime, and no longer being able to work, she asked the parish for provision for her old age. But she was turned down, and Farmer Fliegenanger, who headed the village committee, shrugged his shoulders and said, “As ye sow, so shall ye reap.” However, fortunately for her, Farmer Fliegenanger died around this time, otherwise she would certainly have starved to death. So now poor, blind Lenei was given her keep.

But even if the light of day was extinguished for her eyes, yet the light of hope shone in her heart. For she still confidently waited, day by day, for Jockl to return. The Switch-Father had said so. Would the Switch-Father have lied? –

So she felt her way up to the mountain-chapel every morning and repeated her prayer, her promise of the wax candle. She knew the way well: Here she was sure not to bump into any stone, blind though she was.

When she was praying before the altar one day, and she raised her lifeless eyes to the statue of Christ, when large tears rolled down through the deep grooves beside her cheeks – when she kneeled there, quite doubled up with her bent back and her humbly bowed head, and fervently whispered, “O Switch-Father, dear Switch-Father, bring Jockl back into my arms!” - - then a hand was laid on her shoulder, and a voice said: “Lenei!”

“All-merciful God,” cried Lenei, “Jockl, my Jockl, it's you!” And she felt

her way up his body and threw her arms around his neck. – All the sorrow, the worry and longing, the fear and disappointed hope – all the sighs, the fervent prayers, the tears and restless nights – all the heartache of long, long, long years – Everything – Everything found release in this *one* embrace...

The two of them stood, overwhelmed by the impact of such a meeting. Old Lenei recovered first.

“So the Switch-Father kept his word after all,” she cried, “well, what good luck, what a pleasure – but now we must get married right away -” she broke off... “Old, blind Lenei,” the thought passed through her mind, “and a bride?” Then it suddenly became clear to her – No, nothing became clear to her. She felt only a short, piercing grief in her heart... Her poor, shrivelled little face blushed all over: What will Jockl think of the bent, blind little old woman who talks to him about getting married?

“You’ll have to speak a bit louder, Lenei,” Jockl said, “for I’m hard of hearing.” And he held his ear out towards her.

Lenei breathed a sigh of relief. He had not heard anything about getting married.

She gently pressed him into one of the pews, and sitting down beside him, she stroked his coat-tail and quietly sobbed to herself. “I can’t see you any more, dear Jockl, never look at your face again in this life... for I’m blind, you should know, as blind as a bat... If you’d come some thirty, forty years earlier... we’d have got married... I’d have kept house frugally, and the Switch-Father would have received his wax candle... But now it’s over... over.”

“Yes,” said Jockl, shouting too loudly, “I should have come thirty, forty years ago. And I wanted to be back then. But to come home without a farthing in my pocket – a soldier’s blood can’t bear the shame. And what I saved up in Italy – the Spanish scoundrels took it off me. Then I went over to America – there was a big fray. I earned a pretty sum there – but lost everything again; for the ship was wrecked on the return journey – I just managed to save my skin. Finally, in Holland they shot my right leg off – completely off – here, feel it, my wooden leg. – Yes, twenty years have passed now since I was disabled. – Then I went to Spain again, thought I’d find my lucky star there. – But there was nothing to be got. I came within a whisker of starving to death. Now I’m too old, I can’t find any more service out there. – That’s why I’ve come home; I want to see the old village one more time and find a patch in the graveyard for me – don’t need a big one...” He thundered this out hard and jerkily in his soldierly way. Then, somewhat gentler and softer: “And you, old Lenei, how has your life been?”

The two old ones sat silently together. Lenei did not answer his question. She only stroked his wooden leg affectionately and smiled with rapture. Her tears had dried up. “How long I’ve waited for you, Jockl, how long, how long! And now you’ve come at last.”

“But too late,” said Jockl. “That’s the way of it: wait a long time – then it’s too late – then the wish is fulfilled, when no-one can get any benefit from it.”

He stroked his white hair over his ear and was very proud of his worldly wisdom.

Lenei continued to caress his wooden leg, and it seemed to her that

the old organ in the choir had softly, softly begun to sound and ring out quite marvellously.

“It seemed to be too late to me too, at first,” she said, “but it isn’t too late. For Love, as I understand it, it’s never too late.”