

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries  
**Friedrich Gerstäcker (1816-1872)**

**Germelshausen (1860)**

In the autumn of the year 184-, a vigorous young man, a knapsack on his back and a stick in his hand, walked slowly and leisurely along the broad carriage-way which leads from Marisfeld up to Wichtelhausen.

He was no journeyman going from place to place in search of work; one could tell this at the first glance, even had the small, neatly made leather portfolio he carried strapped to his knapsack not given him away. All in all, there was no belying the artist. The black, broad-brimmed hat which perched jauntily on one side, the long, curly blond hair, the soft beard, full though recently grown – everything proclaimed it, even the somewhat threadbare velvet coat. This might have become a little too hot for him on this warm morning; he had unbuttoned it, and the white shirt beneath – for he wore no waistcoat – was held together but loosely at the throat by a black silk handkerchief.

When he was about a quarter of an hour from Marisfeld, the village's bells were ringing to church; and he stood still, leaning on his stick, and listened attentively to the rich chimes of the bells, which reached his ears with a quite wonderful clarity.

The peals had ceased long since, yet still he stood there, dreamily gazing at the hillsides. His thoughts were at home, with his family in the pleasant little village in the Taunus Mountains, with his mother, with his sisters, and it almost seemed that a tear were about to rise to his eyes.

However, his light and joyful heart did not let these sad and melancholy thoughts take root. He simply took his hat off and saluted, with a warm smile, the direction in which he knew his home to be; and then grasping his stout stick more firmly, he cheerfully strode down the road, following the course he had begun.

Meanwhile, the sun was shining down rather warmly on the broad, monotonous carriage-way, on which the dust lay in a thick coating, and our traveller had been looking about to the right and to the left for some time, to see if he could not discover a more comfortable footpath anywhere. There was a path that branched off to the right in one place, but it did not promise any improvement, and would also have led him too far out of his way; he therefore kept to the old road for some time longer until he came at last to a clear mountain stream, by which he perceived the ruins of an old stone bridge. On the other side, a grassy path led away into a valley; however, with no definite aim in mind, since, as a matter of fact, he was only going to the beautiful Werra Valley to enrich his portfolio, he leapt dry-shod over the stream on large, detached stones, to the closely mown meadow beyond. And here, on the springy turf and in the shade of thick alder-bushes, he strode quickly forwards, highly satisfied with his exchange.

“Now, I have the advantage,” he said to himself with a laugh as he walked along, “of not having the least idea whither I am going. There is no tiresome signpost here to tell me a few miles in advance what the next village is called, and then be invariably wrong about the distance. How *do* the people in these parts measure their miles, I should like to know! But it

is uncommonly quiet here in the hollow – of course, the countrypeople have nothing to do out of doors on Sundays, and if they have to run along behind the plough or beside the cart all week long, they don't care much for going walking on a Sunday. First, they get a good, sound sleep in church in the morning, and then, after the midday meal, they can stretch their legs under the inn table. Inn table – hmm – a glass of beer would really not be so amiss now in this heat – but until I can get that, the clear stream here will quench my thirst.” And so saying, he threw off his knapsack and hat, bent down to the water, and drank to his heart's content.

Somewhat cooled down by this draught, he caught sight of an old, queerly crooked willow tree, which he sketched quickly and with a skilled hand; and completely refreshed and rested by this time, he picked his light knapsack up again and continued on his way, not caring whither it led him.

He might have been wandering thus for an hour, taking down a piece of rock here, a peculiar alder bush there, a knotty oak-bough there again, in his portfolio. During this time, the sun had risen ever higher, and he was just making up his mind to stride out with vigour so as not, at least, to miss dinner in the next village, when he saw a peasant girl sitting before him in the hollow, close by the stream, on an old stone on which an image of a saint may have stood in former days, looking down the path which he was travelling.

Hidden by the alders, he had been able to see her before she could see him; but following the bank of the stream, he had scarcely emerged from the bushes which had concealed him from her sight when she leapt to

her feet and rushed towards him with a cry of joy.

Arnold, as the young painter was called, stopped in surprise, and soon saw that it was a girl of barely seventeen years of age, as pretty as a picture, who had rushed towards him with outstretched arms, clothed in a quite peculiar, but extremely pretty, peasant costume. Arnold knew of course that she had, at all events, taken him for another, and this joyful reception was not meant for him – the girl no sooner noticed who he was than she stopped, dismayed, turned first pale and then scarlet all over, and at last said, shyly and sheepishly:

“Don’t take it in bad part, good Sir – I – I – thought –”

“That I was your sweetheart, my dear child, isn’t that so?” the young man said with a laugh, “and are you now vexed that another human being, a stranger, one to whom you are indifferent, has run across your path? Do not be angry that I am not he.”

“Oh, how can you say those things,” the girl timidly whispered. “How could I be angry – but if you knew how eagerly I had looked forward to his coming.”

“Then he does not deserve that you wait for him any longer,” said Arnold, who was not, for the first time, struck by the truly wonderful charm of the simple peasant-child. “If I were he, you should not have had to wait for me in vain a single minute.”

“How strangely you do talk,” the girl said bashfully. “If he had been able to come, he would certainly have been here by now. Perhaps he is indeed sick or – or even – dead,” she added slowly, heaving a sigh from the very depths of her heart.

“And has he sent no word of himself for so long a time?”

“Not for a very, very long time indeed.”

“Then his home, I presume, is far from here?”

“Far? Certainly – really a very long distance from here,” said the girl, “in Bischofsroda.”

“Bischofsroda?” cried Arnold. “I’ve just stayed there for four weeks and know every child in the entire village. What is his name?”

“Heinrich – Heinrich Vollgut,” the girl said bashfully, “the son of the mayor in Bischofsroda.”

“Hmm,” said Arnold, “I visited the mayor frequently, but he is called Bäuerling as far as I know, and I didn’t hear the name Vollgut anywhere in the village.”

“I suppose you don’t know all the people there,” said the girl, and through the sad expression which lay on her sweet countenance there stole a soft, arch smile which became her quite as well, indeed much better than, her previous melancholy.

“But from Bischofsroda,” said the young artist, “one can come here over the mountains in two hours very easily, in three at the most.”

“And yet he is not here,” said the girl, with another sorrowful sigh, “although he promised me so adamantly.”

“Then he will certainly come,” Arnold ingenuously assured her, “for if a man had promised you anything, he would really need to have a heart of stone not to keep his word – and I’m sure that you Heinrich does not have that.”

“No,” the girl said candidly, “but all the same, I’m not going to wait

for him any longer, for I must be home for dinner, else father will scold me.”

“And where is your home?”

“Just there, in the valley – do you hear the bell? – it is ringing out the divine service right now.”

Arnold listened, and he could hear the slow strokes of a bell from no very great distance at all. However, the sound that reached his ears was not full and deep, but sharp and discordant, and when he looked towards that region, it was almost as if a thick haze<sup>1</sup> hung over that part of the valley.

“Your bell has a crack in it,” he said with a laugh, “it sounds harsh.”

“Yes, I know that,” the girl serenely replied, “it does not ring sweetly, and we should have had it recast before now, but we never have the money and time for that, for there are no bell-founders hereabouts. But what does it matter? We’re used to it, that’s all, and we know what it means when it rings – hence even a cracked bell answers its purpose.”

“And what is the name of your village?”

“Germelshausen.”

“And can I get to Wichtelhausen from there?”

“Very easily – if you take the footpath, it’s hardly half an hour – perhaps not even as long as that if you stride out.”

“Then I’ll go through your village with you, my dear, and if you have a good inn in the place, I’ll have dinner there.”

“The inn is *too* good,” the girl said with a sigh, while glancing back to

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<sup>1</sup> Höhenrauch – smoke from the burning of peat.

see if the one she expected was not coming yet.

“And can an inn ever be too good?”

“For the peasant, yes,” the girl said earnestly, now walking slowly through the valley at his side, “in the evenings after work, he has many things still to do in the house, and he neglects them if he sits in the inn until late in the night.”

“But I won’t neglect anything more today.”

“Yes, it’s quite a different matter with gentlemen of the town – they don’t do any work at all, and so don’t neglect much either; the peasant, you know, has to earn their daily bread for them.”

“Well, not exactly,” Arnold said, laughing, “he cultivates it, that is true, but we have to earn it ourselves, and sometimes that is hard enough, for the peasant sees to it that he is well paid for what he does.”

“But you don’t do any work, do you?”

“And why not?”

“Your hands don’t look as if you did.”

“Then I shall show you right now what I can do and how I do it,” Arnold said with a laugh. “Sit down on the flat stone there, under the old elder-bush.”

“But what am I to do there?”

“Just sit down,” exclaimed the young artist, rapidly throwing off his knapsack and taking out his portfolio and lead-pencil.

“But I must go home!”

“I’ll have done in five minutes – I would also like to take a remembrance of you into the world with me, which even your Heinrich will

have no objections to.”

“A remembrance of me? – how droll you are!”

“I wish to take your portrait with me.”

“You’re an artist?”

“Yes.”

“That would be just ideal – then you could restore the paintings in the church at Germelshausen while you’re there, they look so badly ravaged by time.”

“What is your name?” Arnold now asked, having opened his portfolio in the meantime and rapidly sketched the girl’s lovely features.

“Gertrud.”

“And what does your father do?”

“He is the village mayor. If you are an artist, it wouldn’t be right for you to go to the inn, I’ll take you right home with me, and after dinner you can talk everything over with father.”

“The church paintings?” Arnold said, laughing.

“Why, certainly,” the girl said earnestly, “and then you must stay with us, a very, very long time, until – our day comes again and the paintings are finished.

“Well, we’ll speak about that later, Gertrud,” said the young artists, busily wielding his pencil the while, “but won’t your Heinrich be angry if I’m at your home sometimes – or very often, and – talk with you a great deal?”

“Heinrich?” said the girl, “he won’t come any more now.”

“Not today, certainly, but then perhaps tomorrow?”

“No,” said Gertrud, perfectly calmly, “as he was not here by eleven



o'clock, he will stay away until our day comes again."

"Your day? What do you mean by that?"

The girl gave him an earnest stare, but she did not answer his question; and while her gaze strayed after the clouds which passed by high above them, it fixed upon them with a peculiar expression of pain and sadness.

At this moment, Gertrud was really as beautiful as an angel, and in the interest that Arnold took in the completion of the portrait, he forgot everything else. And there was not much time left to him. the young girl suddenly stood up, and throwing a wrap over her head to protect herself from the rays of the sun, she said:

"I must go – the day is so short, and they are expecting me at home."

"But Arnold had finished his little portrait, and indicating the folds of her dress with a few bold strokes, he said, holding the portrait out towards her:

"Have I hit upon your likeness?"

"And that is me?" Gertrud cried quickly and almost in alarm.

"Well, who else could it be?" laughed Arnold.

"And you want to keep the portrait and take it with you?" the girl asked shyly, almost anxiously.

"I certainly do want to," cried the young man, "and then when I am far, far away from here, I'll think of you often and assiduously."

"But will my father allow that?"

"My thinking of you? Can he prevent me doing that?"

“No – but – your taking the portrait with you out into the world.”

“He cannot prevent it, my dear,” Arnold said affably, “but would it be disagreeable, disagreeable to *you* to know that it is in my hands?”

“To me – no!” the girl replied after a short period of reflection – “if – as long as – I really must ask father about it.”

“You’re a foolish child!” the young artist said laughing, “even a Princess would have no objections to an artist acquiring her features for himself. No harm will befall you thereby. But pray don’t run so fast, you wild girl; did you forget that I’m coming with you? – or do you want to leave me behind here without any dinner? Have you forgotten the church paintings?”

“Yes, the paintings,” said the girl, stopping to wait for him. Arnold, having quickly fastened his portfolio, was by her side in a moment, and they continued on their way to the village much more briskly than before.

But this lay much nearer than Arnold had supposed from the sound of the cracked bell, for that which the young man had taken from afar to be only an alder-thicket proved to be, as they drew nearer, a hedged-in row of fruit-trees, behind which lay the old village with its low church tower and its smoke-blackened houses, closely hidden but surrounded by wide fields to its north and northeast.

And here, for the first time, they set foot on a firm and well, laid-out road that was planted with fruit-trees on both sides. But over the village there hung that gloomy haze which Arnold had seen from afar; it subdued the bright sunlight, which could light the old, grey, weather-beaten roofs with only a sinister yellowish glow. – But Arnold hardly spared a glance for all this, because Gertrude, striding along at his side, slowly took his hand

as they approached the first houses, and holding it in hers, she turned with him into the nearest street.

A wondrous sensation thrilled through the vigorous young lad at the touch of this warm hand, and his eyes almost involuntarily sought to meet those of the young girl. But Gertrud did not look over to him; her eyes fixed modestly on the ground, she led the guest to her father's house, and Arnold's attention finally turned to the villagers he met, all of whom silently went past him without giving him a greeting.

This especially struck him as strange, for in all the neighbouring villages they would have almost considered it a crime not to at least bid a stranger a "Good day" or a "How do you do?" Here, nobody thought of doing that, and as in a large town, the people either passed by them silently and indifferently, or stood still every so often and followed them with their eyes – but nobody spoke to them. Even the girl was not greeted by anyone. And how strange the old houses looked with their pointed gables, ornamented with wood-carvings, and their solid, weather-beaten thatched roofs – and in spite of its being Sunday, no window was brightly polished and the round panes, set in lead, looked dull and tarnished and showed the iridescent hues of a rainbow on their dim surfaces. But here and there a casement window was opened as they passed by and friendly girl's faces or old, dignified matrons looked out. He was also struck by the strange costume of the people, which differed substantially from that of the neighbouring villages. Moreover, an almost soundless quiet reigned everywhere, and Arnold, who began at length to feel oppressed by the silence, said to his companion:

“Do you keep Sunday so strictly in your village that the people don’t even have a greeting for each other when they meet? If one didn’t hear a dog bark or a cock crow every now and then, one might take the whole village to be dumb and dead.”

“It’s noontime,” Gertrud said calmly, “when people are not in the mood to talk; this evening you will find them all the louder.”

“Thank God!” cried Arnold, “there are children, at any rate, playing in the street – I was beginning to feel quite uneasy here; in Bischofsroda they celebrate Sunday in a different way, I can tell you.”

“Yes, and there is my father’s house,” said Gertrud, softly.

“But I must not,” said Arnold, laughing, “drop in on him out of the blue at dinner-time. I might come inopportunistically for him, and I like to have friendly faces around me at table. So rather show me the inn, my child, or let me find it for myself, for Germelshausen is probably no exception to other villages. The tavern usually stands close by the church, and if you just follow the steeple, you never go wrong.”

“You are right there; that is just how it is with us,” Gertrud said calmly, “but they will be expecting us at home and you need not fear an unkind reception.”

“They are expecting us? Ah, you mean you and your Heinrich? Yes, Gertrud, if you would take me in his stead today, then I would stay with you – until such time – as you yourself bid me go away.”

He had spoken the last words in an almost unconsciously tender voice while gently pressing the hand that still held his. Then Gertrud stopped suddenly, stared him full in the face and said:

“Would you really do that?”

“With infinite pleasure,” cried the young artist, completely overcome by the girl’s wondrous beauty. But Gertrude made no further reply, and resuming her way, as if she were revolving her companion’s words in her mind, she stopped at last before a high house, with a broad flight of stone steps guarded by iron railings leading up to the door; and she said, having quite reassumed her former, shy and bashful manner:

“This is where I live, good Sir, and if it should please you, then come up with me to my father, who will be proud to see you at his table.”

But before Arnold could open his mouth to reply, the mayor appeared in the doorway at the top of the steps, and while a window was opened, from which an old woman’s friendly face looked out and her head nodded to them, the peasant cried:

“Why, Gertrud, you have stayed out long today, and look, look what a handsome fellow she has brought back with her!”

“My good sir –”

“No formalities on the steps – come in, the dumplings are ready and we don’t want them to go hard and cold.”

“But that isn’t Heinrich!” the old woman cried from the window.

“Didn’t I always say that he wouldn’t come back?”

“All right, mother; all right!” said the mayor. “He’ll do just as well.” And holding out his hand to the stranger, he continued, “You are heartily welcome to Germelshausen, my young sir, wherever the girl may have picked you up. And now come in to dinner and tuck in to your heart’s content – we can discuss everything else afterwards.”

He really left the young artist no further opportunity for any excuse whatsoever, but firmly shaking his hand, which Gertrud had released the moment he set foot on the stone steps, he familiarly drew his arm in his and led him into the broad and spacious living-room.

In the house itself, a musty, earthy atmosphere prevailed, and although Arnold well knew the custom of the German peasant, who likes nothing better than to shut himself off from every bit of fresh air, and even in summer, not infrequently lights the stove to produce the broiling heat he finds agreeable – he was struck by it nonetheless. The narrow hallway had likewise but little that was inviting. The plaster had fallen from the walls and seemed to have just been hastily swept aside. The solitary dimmed window at the back of the hallway barely admitted a scanty light, and the staircase leading to the upper storey looked old and dilapidated.

But he had only a little time to observe all this, for the very next instant his hospitable host threw the door of the living-room open and Arnold found himself in a room, not lofty but broad and spacious, which, being freshly aired, strewn with white sand, and having in its centre a large table covered with a snowy linen cloth, contrasted very pleasantly with the other, somewhat neglected, furnishings of the house.

Besides the old woman, who had shut the window and drawn her chair to the table by this time, a pair of rosy-cheeked children sat in the corner, and a robust peasant woman – but also dressed in completely different costume from that of the neighbouring villages – was just opening the door for a maid-servant to come in with a large dish. And now the dumplings steamed on the table, and everyone pressed up to the chairs

and towards the welcome repast; but nobody sat down, and the children looked at their father with, as it seemed to Arnold, something near anxiety in their eyes.

The mayor walked up to his chair, leaned upon it, and looked down before him, quietly and silently, even gloomily. Was he praying? Arnold saw that he kept his lips firmly compressed, while his right hand hung clenched by his side. There was no sign of prayer in these features, only obstinate, and yet irresolute, defiance. Then Gertrud walked softly up to him and placed her hand on his shoulder, and the old woman stood opposite him, speechless, and looking at him with anxiously beseeching eyes.

“Let us eat!” the man said gruffly, “it’s no use, after all!” And moving his chair to the side and nodding to his guest, he sat himself down, grasped the large ladle and began to serve everyone.

To Arnold, everything about the man’s behaviour seemed almost uncanny, and the depressed mood of the others likewise did little to put him at his ease. But the mayor was not a man to eat his dinner absorbed in gloomy thoughts. When he rapped on the table, the maid-servant came back in, bringing bottles and glasses; and with the excellent old wine which he now poured out, a quite different, more joyous spirits soon came over all the party.

The glorious beverage flowed through Arnold’s veins like liquid fire – never in his life had he tasted anything like it – and Gertrud drank some also, as did the old mother, who sat down at her spinning-wheel in the corner afterwards and sang a ditty about the merry life in Germelshausen in a low voice. But the mayor was like a man transformed. As serious and

taciturn as he had been before, so merry and jovial did he become now; and Arnold himself could not avoid the influence of this exquisite wine. Without Arnold's actually knowing for sure how it had happened, the mayor had taken a violin in his hand and was playing a lively dance, and Arnold, fair Gertrud in his arms, was whirling around with her in the room so madly that he upset the spinning-wheel and the chairs, and bumped into the maid, who was about to take the dishes away, and cut all kinds of comical capers that had the others splitting their sides with laughter.

Suddenly, everybody in the room fell still, and when Arnold looked over to the mayor in astonishment, the latter pointed to the window with his violin bow before putting the instrument back into the large wooden chest from which he had taken it. And Arnold saw a coffin being carried past in the street outside.

Six men clad in white robes bore it on their shoulders, and behind them walked, all alone, an old man holding a little fair-haired girl by the hand. The old man walked down the street like one whose spirit is broken; but the little one, who could barely have reached her fourth year and probably did not yet have any idea who was lying there in the dark coffin, nodded amiably wherever she met a familiar face. And she laughed out loud when a couple of dogs raced past and one of them ran into the school-house steps, going head over heels.

The silence lasted only as long as the coffin was in sight, then Gertrud walked up to the young artist and said:

“Now be quiet for a little while – you have rollicked about quite enough, and the strong wine will go more and more to your head if you



don't. Come, fetch your hat, and we shall take a little walk together. By the time we come back, it will be the hour to go to the inn, for there will be dancing tonight."

"Dancing? That's great," cried Arnold, delighted. "Then I have come at just the right time; and will you give me the first dance, Gertrud?"

"Certainly, if you so wish."

Arnold had already picked up his hat and portfolio.

"What are you going to do with the book?" asked the mayor.

"He draws, father," said Gertrud. "He has taken my likeness. Just have a look at the portrait."

Arnold opened his portfolio and held the drawing out to the man.

The peasant examined it in silence for a while.

"And you want to take this home with you?" he asked at length, "and perhaps put in a frame and hang in the parlour?"

"And why not?"

"May he, father?" asked Gertrud.

"If he does not stay with us," the mayor said, laughing, "I have no objections – but there is something missing in the background."

"What?"

"The funeral procession we saw just now. If you draw that too on the sheet, you may take the portrait with you."

"The funeral procession with Gertrud?"

"There is yet room enough," the mayor said stubbornly, "it must be drawn on, or I won't allow you to take my girl's portrait away all on its own. Nobody can think any ill of it in such solemn company."

Arnold shook his head and laughed at the singular proposition to give the pretty girl a funeral procession as guard of honour. But the old man seemed just to have this *idée fixe*, and to satisfy him, Arnold did as he wished. He could easily erase the melancholy addition later on.

He set down the figures who had just passed by, though only from memory, with skilled hand on the paper, and the whole family crowded round him and watched, with evident astonishment, the rapid execution of the drawing.

“Have I done it right?” Arnold cried at last, jumping up from his chair and holding the picture at arm’s length.

“Splendid!” nodded the mayor. “I’d never have believed you could finish it so quickly. It will do now, so go out with the girl and look around the village – you might, after all, not get the chance to see it again so very soon. But be sure to be back here by five o’clock – we’re celebrating a festival today, and you must be there!”

Arnold was beginning to feel confined and oppressed in the musty room, with the wine going to his head, and he longed to be out of doors. And a few minutes later, he was walking at fair Gertrud’s side down the road which led through the village.

Now the road was no longer so quiet as it had been before; children were playing in the street, here and there old people were sitting before their doors and watching them; and the whole village, with its quaint old buildings, would certainly have had a pleasant aspect if the sun had only been able to penetrate the thick brownish vapour which hung like a cloud over the roofs.

“Is there a moor fire or a forest fire in the neighbourhood?” he asked the girl. “That smoke lies over no other village and cannot come from the chimneys.”

“It is earth-vapour,” Gertrud said calmly. “But have you never heard of Germelshausen?”

“Never.”

“That is strange – and yet the village is so old, indeed – so old.”

“The houses look so, at any rate, and all the people exhibit such peculiar behaviour, and your speech sounds so completely different from that in the neighbouring villages. You seldom leave your village, I suppose?”

“Seldom,” Gertrud said curtly.

“And not a single swallow is here any longer? They cannot surely have migrated yet?”

“A long time since,” the girl answered in a monotone. “None builds their nest in Germelshausen any longer. Perhaps they cannot stand the earth-vapour.”

“But you don’t always have that – do you?”

“Always.”

“Then that must be to blame for your fruit-trees not bearing any fruit, while no farther away than Marisfeld they had to prop up the branches this year, so abundant are the blessings of the season.”

Gertrud gave no word of reply, strolling silently by his side further through the village until they reached its extreme end. Except that, on the way, she would give the occasional friendly nod to a child or speak a few

quiet words – perhaps about the day’s dance and ball-dress – to one of the young girls. And the girls looked at the young artist with truly compassionate eyes, so that his heart – why, he did not rightly know himself – began to throb with tenderness and sorrow. But he did not dare to ask Gertrud for the reason.

Now, they had finally reached the very last houses, and as lively as it had been in the village itself, just as quiet and lonely, indeed, as death-like, did it become here. The gardens looked as if no foot had trod there for many, many years; grass grew in the pathways, and the young stranger found it quite remarkable that not a single fruit-tree bore even a single fruit...

There they met people coming in from outside, and Arnold immediately recognised the funeral procession on its return journey. The people passed silently by them back into the village, and they both turned their steps, almost unconsciously, towards the churchyard.

Arnold now tried to cheer up his companion, who seemed to him to be so very serious, telling her about the other places he had been to and how the outside world looked. She had never seen a railway, nor even ever heard of it, and she listened to his explanation, all attention and astonishment. She knew nothing of the telegraph either, and just as little of all other inventions; and the young artists did not comprehend how it could be possible for people in Germany to still be living so secluded, so absolutely cut off from the rest of the world, and not having the slightest contact with it.

While talking thus, they reached the God’s acre, and here the young

stranger was struck at once by the ancient stones and monuments, though they were so simple on the whole.

“This is an old, old stone,” he said, bending down to the nearest one and deciphering its ornate inscription with some difficulty: “Anna Maria Berthold, née Stieglitz, born on the 1<sup>st</sup> Dcbr. 1188 – died on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1224-“

“That is my mother,” Gertrud said solemnly, and a couple of large, bright tears rose to her eyes and fell slowly down onto her bodice.

“Your mother, my dear child?” Arnold said, astonished. “Your ancestress, yes, she might have been that.”

“No,” said Gertrud, “my own mother – father has married again since, and the woman at home is my stepmother.”

“But is it not written there – ‘died 1224’?”

“What do I care for the year,” Gertrud said sadly, “it hurts very much when you’re parted from your mother like that, and yet-“ she added softly and very sorrowfully – it was perhaps as well, really as well, that she was allowed to go to God beforehand.”

Shaking his head, Arnold bent over the stone to examine the inscription more closely and see whether the first 2 in the date of the year was perhaps an 8, for the ancient script made that not impossible. But the second 2 resembled the first one exactly, and it would be a long time yet before the year would be written as 1884. Perhaps the stone-mason had made a mistake; and the girl was so absorbed in remembrance of the departed that he did not like to disturb her any further through questions that might be bothersome. He therefore left her at the stone, by which she

had knelt down and was softly praying, in order to examine several other monuments. But they all, without exception, bore dates from many hundreds of years before, even back to 930, indeed A.D. 900, and no stone of a more recent date was to be found. And yet the dead were still being buried here, even now, as the last, newly dug grave attested.

From the low churchyard wall, one had a splendid view of the old village, and Arnold seized the opportunity to make a sketch of it. But the strange haze lay over this place also, though he could see the sun shining bright and clear on the hillsides further on towards the woods.

Then the old, cracked bell in the village rang again, and Gertrud, quickly rising to her feet and shaking the tears from her eyes, beckoned affably to the young man to follow her.

Arnold was quickly by her side.

“We must not mourn anymore now,” she said with a smile. “The end of church service has rung, and everyone is going to the dance. Up to now, you will have thought, no doubt, that all the people of Germelshausen were misery-gutses; this evening you shall learn the opposite.”

“But surely that is the church door over there?” said Arnold. “And I see nobody coming out.”

“That is perfectly natural,” the girl said, laughing, “because nobody goes in, not even the priest himself. Only, the old sexton allows himself no rest and rings the beginning and the close of church service.”

“And none of you go to church?”

“No – neither to Mass – nor Confession,” the girl said calmly. “We are at variance with the Pope, who lives among the southerners, and he

won't permit it until we obey him once more."

"But I have heard nothing about that in all my life."

"It was a long time ago," the girl casually remarked. – "Look, there is the sexton coming out of the church all alone and locking the door. He does not go to the inn in the evening but sits quietly alone at home."

"But the priest comes?"

"I should say he does! – and is the merriest of all. He doesn't take it to heart."

"And why has all of this happened?" asked Arnold, who was almost less surprised by the facts than by the girl's candour.

"That is a long story," Gertrud replied, "and the priest has written it all down in a big, thick book. If it will give you pleasure, and you understand Latin, you may read all about it in there. – But," she added warningly, "don't speak about this when my father is by, for he doesn't like it. Look – the young men and women are coming out of their houses, I must hurry home now and get dressed, for I would not like to be the last."

"And the first dance, Gertrud?"

"I'll dance with you, you have my word."

The two of them quickly walked back to the village, where an entirely different spirit prevailed from in the morning. Laughing groups of young people were everywhere; the girls were attired for the festivity and the young men were likewise in their best clothes, and as they passed by the inn, garlands of leaves hung from one window to another, forming a wide triumphal arch over its door.

Arnold, seeing everyone dressed in their finest, did not want to

mingle with the festive revellers in his travelling clothes, so he unstrapped his knapsack in the mayor's house and took out his best suit; and he had just finished his toilet when Gertrud knocked at the door and called him. And how wondrously beautiful the girl looked now in her simple and yet so rich attire – and how cordially she bade him escort her, as father and mother would not follow until later!

Longing for her Heinrich cannot be weighing too heavily on her heart, the young man thought as he drew her arm in his and walked with her to the dance hall through the new gathering dusk; but he took good care not to give utterance to any such thought, for an unusual, strange feeling flashed through his breast, and his heart beat impetuously when he felt the maiden's heart throbbing on his arm.

“And tomorrow I must go away,” he sighed softly to himself. Without his intending it, the words had reached the ears of his companion, and she said with a smile:

“Don't worry about that – we shall be together longer – longer perhaps than you will like.”

“And would you like it, Gertrud, if I stayed with you?” asked Arnold, and he felt the blood rushing violently to his brow and temples.

“Certainly,” the young girl said candidly. “You are kind and friendly – my father likes you too, I know, and – Heinrich didn't come!” she added quietly and as if in anger.

“And if he should come tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” said Gertrud, and she looked at him with her large, dark eyes, “in between there lies a long – long night. Tomorrow! You will



comprehend tomorrow what the word means. But let us not speak of that today," she broke off shortly and pleasantly, "today is the joyful festival which we have eagerly looked forward to for so very, very long, and which we do don't on any account want to spoil for ourselves by gloomy thoughts. And here we have arrived – the young men won't half stare when I bring a new dancer along."

Arnold tried to reply to this, but the noisy music which sounded forth from within drowned out his words. And it was strange tunes the musicians played – he knew not a single one of them; and at first, he was almost dazzled by the glare of the many lights which sparkled towards him. However, Gertrud led him into the middle of the hall, where a crowd of young peasant girls were standing together chattering; only once they were there did she let him go, so he could look about a little and make the acquaintance of the other young men before the actual dancing began.

Initially, Arnold did not feel at ease among the crowd of strangers; also, the peculiar costume and speech of the people repelled him, and as sweetly as these hard, unaccustomed tones sounded in his ear from Gertrud's lips, so harshly did they sound from others'. But the young men were all friendly to him, and one of them came up to the artist, took him by the hand, and said:

"It's sensible on your part, sir, to wish to remain with us – we lead a merry life, and the interim passes quickly enough."

"What interim?" asked Arnold, less astonished at the expression than at the assurance with which the fellow uttered his conviction that Arnold was intending to make this village his home. "You think I'm going to

come back here?”

“You’re intending to go away?” the young peasant quickly asked.

“Tomorrow – yes – or the day after tomorrow – but I am coming back.”

“Tomorrow – is that so?” laughed the young man – “why, then it’s all right – well, tomorrow we’ll speak more about it. Now come, so I may show you our entertainment this once, for if you’re meaning to go away tomorrow, you’ll end up not getting to see it.”

The others laughed secretly among themselves; the young peasant took Arnold by the arm and led him right through the house, which was thronged full of merrily carousing guests. First, they went through rooms in which card-players sat with large heaps of money lying before them, then they entered a bowling-alley which was inlaid with brightly shining stones. In a third room, quoits and other games were being played, and the young maidens ran in and out laughing and singing, and teased the young men, until all of a sudden a flourish from the musicians, who had been merrily playing away up to then, gave the signal for the start of the dance, and Gertrud now stood at Arnold’s side and grasped his arm.

“Come, we must not be the last,” the lovely girl said, “for as the mayor’s daughter, I must open the dance.”

“But what a strange melody that is!” said Arnold. “I can’t catch the time at all.”

“Oh, that will come,” Gertrud smiled. “You’ll catch it in the first five minutes, and I’ll tell you how.”

Loudly rejoicing, everyone now pressed towards the dance hall, the

card players excepted; and Arnold soon forgot all else in the one blissful sensation of holding the wondrously pretty girl in his arms.

Again and again he danced with Gertrud, and nobody else seemed to wish to contend with him for his dancing partner, although the other girls sometimes teased him as they flitted by. There was only one thing that struck and disturbed him: the old church stood close by the inn, and one could clearly hear the shrill, discordant notes of the cracked bell in the hall. But at its first stroke, it was as if a wizard's wand had touched the dancers. The music broke off in the middle of the measure, the merrily surging throng stood silent and motionless, as if spellbound to their places, and everyone voicelessly counted each single, slow stroke. But as soon as the last one died away, the bustle and merrymaking began anew. So was it at eight o'clock, so at nine, so at ten o'clock; and when Arnold made to ask after the reason for such singular behaviour, Gertrud laid her finger on his lips, while looking so serious and sorrowful that he would not have caused her any further distress for the world.

At ten o'clock there was a break in the dancing, and the band, which must have had lungs of iron, marched down into the dining-room ahead of the young people. All was merriment there; wine flowed freely, and Arnold, who could not with propriety fall behind the others, privately calculated what a hole this extravagant evening would make in his modest funds. But Gertrud sat beside him, drinking with him out of the one glass, so how could he entertain such a care in his head? And suppose her Heinrich were to come tomorrow?

The first stroke of the eleventh hour sounded, and again the loud

merriment of the revellers fell still; again there was the breathless listening to the slow strokes. A peculiar horror crept over him, he himself did not know why, and the thought of his mother at home cut him to the quick. He slowly raised his glass and emptied it in greeting to his distant loved ones.

But at the eleventh stroke, the guests sprang up from the tables; the dance was to begin again, and everyone hurried back into the hall.

“Whose health did you drink at the end?” asked Gertrud, when she had drawn her arm in his again.

Arnold hesitated to answer. Would Gertrud perhaps laugh at him if he told her? But no – that very afternoon, she had prayed so fervently at her own mother’s grave, and in a low voice he said:

“My mother’s.”

Gertrud gave no word of reply and walked back up the stairs beside him in silence – but she laughed no more, and before they had taken their places for the dance, she asked him:

“Do you love your mother so much?”

“More than my life?”

“And she you?”

“Does a mother not love her child?”

“And if you did not come back home to her?”

“Poor mother,” said Arnold – “her heart would break.”

“The dance is about to begin,” Gertrud quickly cried – “come, we don’t have a moment to lose!”

And the dance began, wilder than ever; the young men, heated by the strong wine, raged and revelled and shrieked, and there arose a racket

which threatened to drown out the music. Arnold did not feel all that well now amidst this hubbub, and Gertrud had become serious and silent. But the merriment seemed to wax higher with everyone else, and during a pause the mayor came up to them, heartily clapped the young man on the shoulders, and said laughing:

“That’s the way, Mr. Artist, you swing your legs merrily tonight; we shall have time enough to rest our fill. Now Trudy, why are you making such a long face? – is that fit for today’s dance? Be mer- hey, they’re at it again! Now I must look for my old woman, to have the last dance with her. Take your places; the musicians are blowing their cheeks out again!” – and he pushed through the merry throng with a shout of joy.

Arnold had put his arm around Gertrud again for a new dance, when she suddenly freed herself, seized his arm, and softly whispered:

“Come!” Arnold had no time to ask her whither, for she had slipped away from his grasp towards the hall-door.

“Whither away, Trudy?” a couple of her playmates called to her.

“I’ll be right back,” was the brief reply, and a few seconds later she was standing outside, in the fresh evening air, with Arnold in front of the inn.

“Where are you going to, Gertrud?”

“Come!” She seized his arm again and led him through the village. As they were passing her father’s house, she darted inside, to return with a small bundle.

“What are you thinking of doing?” Arnold asked in alarm.

“Come!” was all the answer she gave, and she walked with him past

the houses until they had left the outer ring-wall of the village behind them. Up to this point, they had followed the broad, firm, and travel-beaten road; now, Gertrud turned off to the left and walked up a small, flat hillock from which one could look directly at the brightly lit windows and doors of the inn. Here she stopped, gave Arnold her hand, and said cordially:

“Give my regards to your mother – farewell!”

“Gertrud!” cried Arnold, as astonished as he was perplexed, “do you want to send me away from you thus, right now in the middle of the night? Have I said anything to hurt you?”

“No, Arnold,” said the girl, calling him by his given name for the first time, “it’s just – it’s precisely because I like you that you must go.”

“But I won’t let you go back to the village alone in the dark,” Arnold pleaded, “Girl, you don’t know how much I love you, how firmly and surely you have captured my heart in these few hours. You don’t know –”

“Say no more,” Gertrud quickly interrupted him, “don’t let us say farewell. When the clock has struck twelve – there can hardly be ten minutes to go – then come back to the door of the inn – I’ll be waiting for you there.”

“And until then –”

“Stay on this spot. Promise me that you won’t take a step to the right or to the left until the bell has finished striking twelve.”

“I promise, Gertrud – but then –”

“Then come,” said the girl, and she gave him her hand in parting. Then she turned to go.

“Gertrud!” cried Arnold in a pleading, anguished voice.

Gertrud stood still for a moment as if hesitating, then she suddenly turned around towards him, threw her arms around his neck, and Arnold felt the lovely girl's ice-cold lips upon his. But it was only for an instant; the next second, she tore herself away and fled towards the village, and Arnold, stupefied at her strange behaviour, but mindful of his promise, stood still on the spot where she had left him.

Only now did he notice how the weather had changed in the last few hours. The wind howled through the trees, the sky was covered with dense, driving clouds, and large, single raindrops bespoke a coming storm.

The lights of the inn shone brightly through the dark night, and as the wind whistled over from there, he could hear the noisy sound of the instruments in single, intermittent blasts – but not for long. He had been standing on his spot for only a few minutes when the old church-tower bell began to strike – at the same moment, the music ceased, or it was drowned out by the howling storm which raged so fiercely over the slope that Arnold had to crouch down on the ground to avoid losing his balance.

There, on the ground, he felt the package that Gertrud had brought out of the house – his own knapsack and portfolio. Startled, he stood up straight. The bell had finished striking the hour, the tempest howled past, but nowhere in the village could he see a light any longer. The dogs, which had barked and howled only a short while before, were silent; and dense, damp fog rose up out of the ground.

“Time's up,” Arnold murmured to himself, throwing his knapsack over his shoulder, “and I must see Gertrud one more time, for I cannot part from her like this. The dance is over – the dancers will be going home now,

and if the mayor doesn't want to keep me overnight, I'll stay at the inn – besides, I wouldn't find my way through the forest in the dark.”

He cautiously went back down the gentle slope he had climbed up with Gertrud to come upon the broad white road which led into the village, but he groped around for it in the underground at the bottom in vain. The ground was soft and swampy; he sank into it, in his thin shoes, far over his ankles, and thick elder-bushes suddenly arose all around where he had supposed the firm road to be. Nor could he have crossed it in the darkness; he could not have stepped upon the road and not felt it, and besides, he knew that the ring-wall around the village transversed it – he could not possibly miss that. But he sought the road, with anxious haste, in vain; the ground became softer and swampier the further forward he pressed, the bushes thicker and everywhere interwoven with briars, which tore his clothes and scratched his hands until they bled.

Had he strayed to the right or to the left and gone beyond the village? Afraid to go further astray, he stopped in a tolerably dry spot to wait until the old bell struck one. But it did not strike; no dog barked, no human sound reached his ears; and with great difficulty, wet through and through and shivering with cold, he worked his way back to the higher ground of the hillside on which Gertrud had left him. He did try, a few more times, to push through the thicket from there and find the village, but to no purpose; fatigued to death, gripped by a peculiar horror, he at last shunned the deep, dark, uncanny hollow and sought a tree where he could spend the night under shelter.

And how slowly the hours passed away for him! For, shivering with



cold, he was not able to steal even a mere second's sleep from the long night. Time and again, he listened into the darkness, for he fancied, ever and again, that he had heard the harsh stroke of the bell – only to ever and again find himself disappointed.

At last the first bright light dawned from the far east; the clouds had dispersed, the sky was clear and starry once more, and the awakening birds chirped softly in the dark trees.

And the golden belt of the Heavens grew broader and lighter – now he could clearly make out the tops of the trees around him – but in vain did his eyes seek the old brown church-tower and the weather-greyed roofs. Nothing but a wild alder thicket, interspersed with solitary stunted willows, stretched out before him. No road could be discerned leading away to the left or to the right, nor any sign of a human home in the neighbourhood.

The day dawned brighter and brighter; the first rays of the sun fell over the wide green plain spread out before him, and Arnold, not able to explain this mystery, walked a good way back down the valley. While seeking the place in the night, he must have lost his way without knowing it and wandered farther from the road, and now he was firmly determined to find it again.

At length he reached the stone by which he had drawn Gertrud; he would have known that place again among thousands, for the old elder-bush with its stiff branches marked the spot only too well. He now knew exactly whence he had come and where Germelshausen must lie, and he walked rapidly back through the valley, keeping to exactly the same direction he had followed with Gertrud the previous day. There he

recognised the curve of the slope over which the gloomy haze had lain; only the alder-thicket now separated him from the first houses. Now he had reached it – he pressed his way through it, and – found himself once more in the same swampy morass in which he had waded around the previous night.

Completely at a loss, and not trusting his own senses, he tried to force a passage here, but the dirty swamp-water finally compelled him to seek dry land again, and he now wandered up and down to no purpose. The village had gone – vanished.

Several hours might have passed away in these pointless attempts, and his weary limbs finally failed him. He could go no further and had to rest; and what use to him was the futile searching? In the first village he came to, he could easily get a guide to Germelshausen and then not miss the road again.

Tired to death, he threw himself under a tree – and what a state his best suit was in! – But that did not trouble him now; he took his portfolio on his lap, and Gertrud's portrait out of the portfolio, and his eyes rested with bitter sorrow on the dear, dear features of the girl, who, as he found to his dismay, had already taken only too firm a hold of his heart.

Then he heard the foliage rustle behind him – a dog barked, and when he started to his feet, an old hunter was standing not far from him and observing, with some curiosity, the strange figure, so decently dressed and yet looking so bedraggled.

“Good day!” cried Arnold, heartily glad to meet another human being here, while he quickly thrust the sheet back into the portfolio. “You're just

the man I want, Forester, for I believe I have lost my way.”

“Hmm,” said the old man, “If you have lain here in the undergrowth the livelong night – and it is hardly a half hour’s walk over to Dillstedt to a good inn – then I believe so too. My word, look at you, just as if you’d come rolling head over heels out of thorns and a swamp!”

“You have intimate knowledge of the woods around here?” Arnold then asked, wanting to know above all else where he actually was.

“I should think so,” laughed the hunter, while he struck fire and lit his pipe.

“What is the name of the nearest village?”

“Dillstedt – just over there. If you go up that little hill yonder, you’ll clearly see it lying below you.”

“And how far do I have to go from here to Germelshausen?”

“To where?” cried the hunter, taking his pipe from his mouth in shock.

“To Germelshausen.”

“Lord have mercy on me!” the old man then said, casting a fearful glance around him – “the forest, I know well enough, but how many fathoms deep down in the earth the ‘Enchanted Village’ lies, God only knows – and – is no business of people like us.”

“The ‘Enchanted Village?’” cried Arnold in astonishment.

“Germelshausen – yes –” said the hunter. “Right there in the swamp, where the old willows and alders stand now, it is said to have been situated so and so many hundreds of years ago. Afterwards it sank from sight – nobody knows why or whither, and the legend goes that it is raised

to the light again on a certain day once every hundred years – but I should not wish for any good Christian to happen upon it. – But blast it all, the night’s lodging in the bushes does not seem to have agreed with you. You look white as a sheet. Here – just take a pull at this flask, it will do you good – take a proper one!”

“Thank you.”

“Tut tut, that wasn’t half enough – a good, long swig – yes, like that – this is the real McCoy, and now be off with you, over to the inn and into a warm bed.”

“To Dillstedt?”

“Why, of course – there are none nearer.”

“And Germelshausen?”

“Do me a favour and do not name that place again here, on this very spot where we are standing. Let us leave the dead in peace, especially those who know no peace at all and unexpectedly appear among us time and time again!”

“But the village was here yesterday,” cried Arnold, hardly master of his senses by this time, “I was in it – I ate, I drank, I danced in it.”

The hunter calmly inspected the young man from top to toe, then he said with a smile:

“But it was called by another name, was it not? – you have probably just come over from Dillstedt, there was a dance there last night, and not everyone can take the strong beer that the innkeeper brews now.”

Instead of replying, Arnold opened his portfolio and took out the drawing he had sketched from the churchyard.

“Do you know this village?”

“No!” said the hunter, shaking his head. “There is no such flat tower anywhere in this region.”

“It is Germelshausen,” cried Arnold – “and do the peasant girls in this neighbourhood dress like the girl here?”

“Hmm – no! What is that strange funeral procession you have on there?”

Arnold did not answer him; he slipped the sheets back into his portfolio, and a peculiar, aching feeling throbbed through him.

“You cannot miss the way to Dillstedt,” the hunter said good-naturedly, a hazy suspicion now rising in him that the stranger might not be quite right in the head. “But I’ll accompany you until we see the village before us, if you so wish; that won’t take me far out of my way.”

“No, thank you,” Arnold declined. “I’ll find my way there all right. So the village rises to the upper world only every hundred years?”

“So people say,” the hunter remarked, “but who knows if it is really true.”

Arnold had picked up his knapsack.

“God be with you,” he said, holding his hand out to the hunter.

“Many thanks,” the woodsman replied. “Where are you going now?”

“To Dillstedt.”

“That’s right – beyond that slope you’ll come out onto the broad carriageway.”

Arnold turned away and slowly walked his path. Not until he was on the top of the slope, from which he could see over the whole valley, did he

stop one more time and look back.

“Farewell, Gertrud!” he softly murmured, and as he walked away down the slope, his eyes filled with large, shining tears.