

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Jassy Torrund [Josepha Mose] (1860-1943)

The Doctor's Christmas-Gift

(*Doktors Christkindl*:¹ from *Weiße Narzissen und andere Novellen*, 'White Narcissi and other Novellas', Reclam 1904).

It was the family evening at the old Privy Councillor's, who still lived in his own house and gathered old and young around him like a patriarch. How rare they are nowadays in our fast-living, homeless age, such houses, such families, such cosy togetherness, where one reflects on oneself and remembers the past – instead of always letting one's thoughts only race into the future.

The dishes had been cleared away, and blonde Elizabeth, the little mother of the house, walked quietly around the table sweeping the crumbs from the white damask cloth. The young ones at the lower end of the table chattered about Christmas in low voices, and one of them said with a sigh, "I won't get by on my pocket money, there's no way I'll be able to cope. Oh God, the worries one has at Christmas!"

The old Privy Councillor, the seventy-five-year-old with the thick snow-white shock of hair over the powerful brow and the still young and keen eyes, listened with a smile and took up that last heartfelt sigh. "What do you know of cares?" he said in his clear, calm, sonorous voice. "Listen, I'll tell you about other Christmas cares which go somewhat deeper than

¹ 'Christkindl' means both the Baby Jesus and a Christmas gift.

your childish concern about pocket-money”.

He leaned comfortably back in his chair, lit himself a cigar, and began: “It was the time when cholera raged in our town. I’d been in practice for several years by then, but it was actually only at that time that I learned the meaning of work and care, and, so to speak, earned my spurs as a doctor. The terrible disease nearly became more than we doctors could cope with, many of us were laid low ourselves, and it was almost superhuman what the rest had to do. Fifty to sixty visits to the sick every day was the norm – and I hadn’t gone to bed in eight or ten days.

“At noon on December 24th I came home, dead tired, hungry as a wolf, for they had fetched me away from the breakfast-table at seven in the morning – and with a heart full of heavy care. I had been in the cholera hospital for hours and had gone through dreadful scenes of misery and despair – and I had just come from a consultation over a patient of many years, the mother of seven children not yet reared – and we had had to give her up. The case was hopeless. At those times, you become so disheartened, so despondent in the feeling of your own incompetence. You carry the sorrow of mankind on your shoulders – and yet you cannot help. And at the same time there’s always the gnawing, secret fear: When will it come to you, to yours? Will you yourself not perhaps drag the terrible epidemic into the house to them?

“On the steps, my Polish cook came towards me, waved the beer-jug in her hand and cried to me as she ran past, ‘The little girl’s there, Panie² Doctor, and food is ready, right back, right back!’ And she trotted

² Polish for “Mister,” “Sir.”

on.

“Barely heeding her words, I closed the entrance-door, took off my hat and fur-coat, washed myself in my room and went into the dining-room. Nobody there. I went through all the rooms, looking for my wife, the children – not a sound anywhere. I started to get a very strange feeling. I went through the kitchen, the soup was bubbling on the stove, but there was no-one to be seen. The whole house was deserted. With a vague sensation of fear I opened the bedroom door – and I felt as though my heart was going to stop: there lay my wife in bed, white as snow to the lips, with unnaturally dilated pupils like one who has death already in their heart – and she looked at me. Never in all my life shall I forget that look!

“I was beside her in a flash. Then she held out her hand to me, quite weak and cold and without a pulse, and said softly, ‘Look, Henry, the baby!’ A wave of horror swept through my soul – was she raving? But she had sat with me at the breakfast table that morning, cheerful and in good spirits – and the event was expected in four weeks at the earliest. But God in Heaven! There lay the little mite beside her, and when I stroked its head half unthinkingly, it started to bawl. ‘A nice Christmas gift!’ I thought in the initial shock, and I did not look upon it, God knows, with friendly eyes.

“The hunger and dead-tiredness, which had fallen upon me like wolves on the way home, were forgotten now. I laid the whimpering creature aside and devoted myself to the mother. It really was high time that she received help! – and she became ever weaker. ‘Holy God, she’ll die under my care!’ I thought. And no living soul at hand who could assist me! Later, I heard: Mother-in-law had been there for some hours, but had

had to go home at midday for her husband to have his food on time when he came back, exhausted, from his practise. She had sensibly taken our three children with her and the parlour-maid as well, who had to carry the youngest on her arms. And straight after that they had called the wise woman, before she had finished her work, to the sick-bed of her son, whom the cholera had gripped – and so she went away, hell for leather – and my poor wife lay utterly alone and more deserted than the poorest beggarwoman.

“If I’d only had a drop of wine there to strengthen her, to revive her! I ran through every room, looked in all the cupboards – no wine-bottle to be found anywhere. And the cook was still not back – deuce knew where the woman had got to and where she had put the key to the cellar!

“Then someone started ringing a storm on the doorbell. Nobody else being there, I naturally had to open myself. In the porch there stood a country-coachman, who pulled the fur-cap from his skull.

“‘Doctor, you should come out to Gräbsdorf soon, the Mayor’s children are abed with scarlet fever and his wife...’ He ran his finger through his hair, raised his eyebrows and said in a whisper, ‘The wife might have the Great Sickness.’

“‘The Great Sickness’ – that is what the people called cholera, because they were afraid to give the dreadful epidemic its proper name.

“I groaned – I was within a whisker of cursing. ‘I cannot come now, man, now is impossible. My wife is lying at death’s door herself. Go to my father-in-law, he might be able to get away.’

“‘Doctor, I beg you for Heaven’s sake! The woman absolutely won’t

have any other doctor but you and she's moaning so terribly.'

"Are you here with the coach?'

"Yes I am, Doctor.'

"Then wait – and come back in an hour,' I said, my watch in my hand. Only when the man had gone did I think, why didn't I send him to the nearest shop for wine? I called after him, but it was too late. And I could not leave now – my wife was already lying unconscious. She was barely breathing; the sweat of death flowed out of every pore. I rubbed her temples, her pulse, with eau de cologne, with vinegar, with whatever fell into my hands. I called her by name – she heard no more. And at the foot of the bed lay the small, abandoned mite, whimpering helplessly – already quite blue in the face.

"And again the doorbell rang like crazy, six, eight times in succession. Out I went in a real rage of despair. Before the door, a man with a large basket was grinning all over his face. The first happy face I have got to see this day. And yet it was Christmas Eve – but who was thinking about *that!*

"How dare you, and what do you want anyway?' I yelled at the poor fellow. He, very meekly: "Wine-dealer Dittrich sends his regards, and he takes the liberty of sending the Doctor a small Christmas present..." And out from the basket peeped the silver necks of half-a-dozen bottles of champagne. I'm sure the man must have taken me to be insane, the way I tore the basket with the bottles from his hand – he got his explanation and his tip later – at that moment I thought only of my dying wife, and in all my mortal fear the thought flashed through my soul like lightning: The Lord up

there has sent this to you! I ran back into the room, knocked the neck of one of the champagne bottles on the edge of the table – how could I have had time to look for the corkscrew! – poured the bubbling, sparkling wine into a glass and held it to my wife’s lips. At first she couldn’t even swallow – but once she had the first drops down, it became much easier – and she gradually drank the whole glass, and I gave her a second one after that. Thanks to our Lord and good Dittrich – he was no adulterator! – his wine was good – she came round, colour came into her lips and cheeks, she opened her eyes and looked at me with full and clear consciousness. ‘Am I going to die, Henry?’ she whispered weakly and in confusion.

“God willing, no, my good wife! You shall live for many more years – as shall our little, unexpected Christmas present!’, I said. My eyes had become moist, and half dead from exhaustion, I sank into the chair beside her bed. And now I poured myself a glass of champagne too – I felt that without it, I’d have fallen to the floor.

“Well, my wife recovered and at last Suska came back to the house – how one can be mistaken about time, the whole eternity of the despair and mortal fear I had gone through had lasted barely half an hour!

“I was given a plate of soup and my wife also ate a few spoonfuls, and during this time Suska told me everything that had happened. That the mistress herself had sent her to the brewery for beer so I would want for nothing at lunch-time. And she had thought the mistress was asleep and everything was hunky-dory – and so she had just gone.

“And while we were still eating, the doorbell rang again. A messenger from the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy, where I was the

house-doctor. I should come at once, a man had been brought from Ohlau, both of whose legs had been run over and had to be amputated. And then Suska came: 'Panie Doctor, is coachman from Gräbsdorf there and says he was told to come at two'.

"I ran my hand through my hair. 'Good God, I'm only a man! And I can't go now!'

"Then someone tugged at my sleeve. I turned around. My wife was lying in bed, her Christmas gift in her arms, and smiling at me like a saint with her dear, pale little face, the champagne roses blooming very tenderly and delicately on her cheeks. 'I am much better now, Henry, much better. You can go. Go now, dear husband, and come back in good time so you can give the children their presents. They have been counting the days down and can hardly wait now. And then you can finally have some rest, you poor thing!'

"That's the angel she was – she never thought of herself, always only of me and the children.

"I kissed her brow and impressed upon Suska the need to stay with the mistress, not to leave her alone under any circumstances, and if she were to grow weak again, to send for my father-in-law at once. And then I put on my fur-coat, took my seat in the covered cart, and drove off in God's name into the piercing east wind. At the convent I took both the poor fellow's legs off – and then on to Gräbsdorf. I bathed the mayor's seriously-ill children with my own hands, because nobody else wanted anything to do with this, and bundled them up again – at that time, water-cures were still decried as the devil's handiwork, particularly among the peasants. I

ascertained that the mayor's wife fortunately did not have 'the Great Sickness' but had merely over-exerted herself when slaughtering the pig and – without offence be it said – had overeaten – and I drove back to the town after nightfall.

“It was snowing heavily and the glimmering oil-lanterns fought a laborious battle with the wind and the dark. On this holy evening it could really be seen how terribly the epidemic had raged in our town. In most of the houses all was dark, only very occasionally could a Christmas tree with burning candles be seen here and there. And as I drove through the quiet, dark little streets, flung this way and that in my springless covered cart on the bad, bumpy paving, overwhelmed by stupendously extreme fatigue, which settled on my eyelids like lead, and exhausted by the nervous excitements of the day, a deep, perfect contentment welled up in my soul like a softly glowing candle – an inexpressible gratitude to God, who had preserved my dearest and graciously saved my life from the hardest of all blows. And then I fell asleep – until the cart stopped with a shuddering jolt.

“I had not had myself driven directly home but had wished to take another look at my critically-ill patient on the way.

“Sadly, our diagnosis had been correct – her suffering was over, I came just in time to close the dead woman's eyes and to comfort the despairing husband. For almost an hour I stayed there, and only when he had become a little calmer did I go – with a heavy heart.

“Eleven years had I stood by the couple's side in joy and sorrow, and struggled through many a critical, care-racked hour with them – now the faithful mother's eyes had closed for ever. I can still see the husband

sitting at the table like a broken man – his smallest child on his arm – the other six motherless children all crowded around him, eyes red from weeping, frightened like chicks the hawk has startled. It was heart-rending. – *That* could have happened to me also today – this evening I too could have been sitting like *that* – with my newly motherless children!

“And once again fear gripped me and fell upon me like a beast of prey. Did I really know how things were at my home? What could not all have happened in five hours? If the fit had recurred – and no doctor could be reached for help? God knows where they were to seek my father-in-law in these troubled times, when in every house the sick were crying for the doctor.

“I arrived home and went up the stairs. The children were screaming at me in impatience. I threw off my fur-coat and quietly opened the bedroom door. Praise the Lord – my wife was sleeping soundly and peacefully – the smallest one, bedded down in the cradle, beside her.

“In the front room, the Christmas tree was there ready with all the presents for the children lovingly laid out. That had been my wife’s last work – while putting on the candles, the fit suddenly came over her, Suska related. And I felt no shame before the girl for the tears which poured hotly down my face when I found on my seat the silken green wallet my wife had made for me, with what she had saved from the household money inside it in shining silver coins. Yes, such a wife...”

The old Privy Councillor’s cigar had gone out long before – he passed his hand over his eyes. There was a deep silence in the room, the children and grandchildren listened breathlessly; outside, the leafless

branches knocked against the window-panes, and the December wind swept howling around the corner of the house.

The old gentleman sat up straight. His youngest daughter Elizabeth, the sunshine of his old age, the mother of his house, was standing behind him and had laid her hand on his shoulder.

And the father reached for this slim, soft hand and held it tight and stroked it with gentle fingers – as he had once held tight and stroked another, workworn, dear hand.

“And next – what was next?” begged the children’s eyes and the lips of the young ones.

“Next? – Well, I lit the Christmas tree and gave the little ones the presents that motherly love had laid out for them – and while they sang and danced around the tree, I sat in the corner of the sofa and looked at them as in a dream – and before I could say Jack Robinson, my eyelids fell shut, and by God it was no wonder. And I slept in my corner of the sofa as deeply and soundly as a dormouse which has been eagerly waiting for its winter sleep throughout the livelong summer. The children ran out and were put to bed by our understanding Siska, the tree candles burned down – I slept and slept like a dead man.

“The mistress said, ‘Don’t disturb him, let hm sleep, he has truly earned it’, and sent the girl to bed. And miraculously, the night stayed peaceful, no hand tugged at the doorbell – my first undisturbed night in weeks.

“The next morning, when the Christmas sun was already shining brightly through the window, I woke up. My limbs felt all knocked up – but I

had rested well, and stretching and straightening myself, I went into the bedroom, still as stiff as a poker, to now actually have a proper look at my living Christmas gift for the first time.

“It looked like all newborn babies and had its mother’s blue eyes and, already, real, blonde little hairs – but it seemed to me that this was truly no ordinary child, an uninvited little guest least of all – but a real, darling Christ Child, that the dear Lord had given me especially on Christmas Eve, for comfort in this hard, care-racked time.

“And she has remained such a gift from God for me – my dear Elizabeth – and I really couldn’t manage anymore without my blonde Christ Child from the Time of Cholera, particularly since her good mother closed her eyes.

“Well – and now be merry, children, and don’t let small Christmas cares press down on your young hearts. Life can be different from what we expect – and we still work our way through! And you, Lizzie, sing us a song to bring our thoughts to other things!”

And the soft, alto voice sounded out into the dark December night, and bright and cheerful children’s lips joined in for the old and jubilant melody:

“Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how blissfully,
Christmas comes with its grace divine!”³

³ Johannes David Falk (1768-1826), ‘O du fröhliche, O du selige’.