

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Ludwig Thoma (1867-1921)

Amendment

(from *Lausbubengeschichten*, 'Tales of Scallywags,' 1905)

When I was going home for my Easter vacation, Aunt Fanny said, "Perhaps we'll come to visit your mother. Her invitation to us was so pressing that we shouldn't insult her."

And Uncle Pepi said he didn't know if they could, because he had so much work, but he saw that he couldn't put the visit off any longer. I asked him if he wouldn't rather come in summer, it was still so cold now, and we didn't know but that it might start to snow all of a sudden. But my aunt said, "No, your mother would get angry, we've already promised so often." But I know why they want to come: because at Easter we have smoked meat and eggs and coffee-cake, and Uncle Pepi eats so awfully much. At home he's not allowed to, because Aunt Fanny asks him right away, isn't he thinking of his child?

They accompanied me to the post-bus, and Uncle Pepi was friendly and said it would be good for me if he came, he could pacify the uproar over my report.

It's true that it was dreadfully bad, but I'll find some excuse all right. I don't need him for that.

I was annoyed that they accompanied me because I wanted to buy cigars for the journey home, and now I couldn't. But Fritz was on the omnibus and he told me he had enough, and if it didn't suffice we could buy more cigars at the railway station in Mühldorf.

We weren't able to smoke in the omnibus because chief Magistrate Zirngiebl was on it with his Heinrich, and we knew he was a friend of the headmaster and would snitch on us.

Heinrich told him who we were straight away. He whispered it in his ear, and I heard him say after my name, "He's the last in our class and got an 'Adequate' in Religion." Then the Chief Magistrate looked at me as if I belonged to a menagerie, and all of a sudden he said to me and Fritz:

"Now boys, just you give me your reports, so I can compare them with my Heinrich's."

I said that it was in my trunk, which was on the omnibus roof. He laughed at that and said, he knew that fine well. A good report is always in one's pocket. Everyone on the omnibus laughed, and Fritz and I were dreadfully annoyed until we got out at Mühldorf.

Fritz said he regretted not saying that only travelling journeymen had to hand over their papers to the gendarme. But it was too late now. We drank beer at the railway station and that cheered us up again and we got on the train.

We asked the conductor for a smoking compartment and went into one which already had people inside. A fat man was sitting by the window and there was a large silver horse on his watch-chain. Whenever he coughed, the horse danced and clattered on his stomach. On the other bench sat a small man with glasses, and he always said "District Administrator" to the fat one, and the fat one said "Teacher" to him. But we had already noticed that he was a teacher because he hadn't had his hair cut. Once the train started, Fritz lit a cigar and blew the smoke up at the

ceiling, and I did the same. A woman was beside me; she moved away and looked at me, and in the other compartment the people stood up and looked over. We were awfully glad that they were all so astonished, and Fritz said in a very loud voice that he must order five crates of these cigars for himself because they were so good.

Then the fat man said, "Bravo, that's the rising generation," and the teacher said, "The things you read are no surprise when you see the ruffianly youth of today."

We acted as if we didn't care less, and the woman kept moving further away because I spat so much. The teacher looked so bilious that we couldn't not get angry, and Fritz asked me if I knew why it was that the pupils in the First Latin Class made such poor progress, and it was his opinion that the elementary schools were becoming worse and worse. Then the teacher coughed terribly and the fat man asked if there were no longer any remedies in this day and age for impertinent scallywags. The teacher said one was not allowed to apply them because of fallacious humanitarianism, and because one would be punished if one merely gave a boy a little clout round the head.

Everyone in the carriage grumbled, "That's true," and the woman beside me said that the parents should be grateful when such boys have their bottoms thrashed. And everyone grumbled again and a tall man in the other compartment stood up and said in a deep bass voice, "Sadly, sadly there are no sensible parents anymore."

Fritz didn't care a jot and kicked me so I would be cheerful too. He had taken a blue pince-nez out of his pocket and he put it on and looked at

everyone and blew the smoke out through his nose.

At the next station we bought ourselves beer and we quickly drank it up. Then we flung the glasses out the window, on the chance of hitting a gatekeeper.

The tall man shouted, "These boys need a caning!" and the teacher shouted, "Easy now, or you'll get your ears boxed!" Fritz said, "You can try if you've got the guts." But the teacher did not dare to, and he said, "We are no longer allowed to clout anyone round the head, or we ourselves will be punished." And the tall man said, "Leave it alone, I'll fix these boys all right." He opened the window and roared, "Conductor, conductor!" The train had just stopped when the conductor came running up as if there were a fire. He asked what was wrong and the tall man said, "These boys threw beer-glasses out the window. They must be arrested."

But the conductor was angry because he had thought a disaster had occurred, and it was nothing at all.

He told the man, "You really don't need to make such a fuss because of that." And to us he said, "You must not do that, gentlemen." That pleased me, and I said, "Excuse us, Head Conductor, we did not know where we were supposed to put our glasses down, but we won't chuck any more glasses out." Fritz asked him if he would not like a cigar, but he said no, he did not smoke such strong ones.

Then he went away, and the tall man sat down and said, he thought the conductor was a Prussian. Everyone grumbled again, and the teacher kept saying, "District Administrator, I must impose terrible restraint upon myself, but one is not allowed to clout anyone round the head anymore."

We travelled on, and at the next station we bought ourselves another beer. When I had drunk it all down, I began to feel quite dizzy, and everything started to spin. I stuck my head out the window to see if that would make me better. But it didn't make me better, and I had to get a tight grip on myself, because I thought that if I didn't the people would think I couldn't stomach smoking.

There was no help for it, so I snatched my hat.

The woman jumped up and screamed, and everyone stood up, and the teacher said, "There we go." And the tall man said in the other compartment, "These are the boys who are made into anarchists."

It was all the same to me because I felt so sick.

I thought: When I get well again, I'll never smoke any more cigars and always be obedient and not cause my dear mother any more vexation. I thought how much nicer it would be if I didn't feel sick now and I had a good report in my pocket instead of holding my hat which I'd thrown up into.

Fritz said he thought I'd got sick from a sausage. He wanted to help me so the people would think I was a regular smoker.

But his telling a lie didn't sit right with me. I had suddenly become a good son and had an abhorrence of lies.

I promised the good Lord that I wouldn't commit any more sins if He let me get well again. The woman beside me didn't know that I wanted to mend my ways and she kept screaming, how long must she put up with the stink?

So Fritz took the hat from my hand and held it out the window and

emptied it. But a lot of it fell onto the footboard with a splash, and when the train stopped in the station the expeditor came running up and shouted, "What swine did this? Good God, Conductor, what kind of a pigsty is this?"

Everyone rushed to the windows and looked out at the dirty footboard.

And the conductor came and looked at it and roared, "Who's the swine who did this?"

The tall gentleman said to him, "It's the same one who chucks beer-bottles, and you let him do it."

"What's that about beer-bottles?" asked the expeditor. "You are a vile person," said the conductor, "if you say that I allowed him to chuck beer-bottles around."

"What am I?" asked the tall man.

"You are a vile liar," said the conductor, "I did not allow it."

"Don't you be cursing like that," said the expeditor, "we must sort this out peacefully."

Everyone in the carriage shouted out all at the same time that we were such terrible scallywags and we must be arrested. The teacher roared the loudest, and he kept saying that he was an instructor. I couldn't say anything because I felt so sick, but Fritz spoke for me and he asked the expeditor if one had to be arrested when one got a poisonous sausage at a railway station. In the end the expeditor said that I wouldn't be arrested but the footboard would be cleaned and I had to pay for it. It cost a mark. Then the train drove on, and I had my head out the window the whole time, which made me feel better.

Fritz got out at Endorf, and then my stop came. My mother and Annie were at the station waiting for me.

I still felt a little sick, and I had such a headache.

I was glad it was already night so they did not see how pale I was. My mother gave me a kiss and asked right away, "What's that you smell of, Ludwig?" And Annie asked, "Where's your hat, Ludwig?" Then I thought how sad they might be if I told them the truth, and I said I'd eaten a poisonous sausage in Mühldorf and I'd be happy to have a chamomile tea.

We went home, and the lamp was on in the living-room and the table was laid.

Our old cook Theresa came running up, and when she saw me she cried out, "Jesus and Mary, just look at our boy! That comes from your having him study so much, Mrs. Head-Forester."

My mother said I had eaten something that wasn't right and she should quickly make me a cup of tea. So Theresa hurried into the kitchen and I sat down on the settee. Our Bürschel kept jumping up at me and wanting to lick me. And everyone was pleased that I was there. I was really touched, and when my dear mother asked me if I'd been good, I said yes, but I was going to be much better.

I said when I had the poisonous sausage down my guts, it occurred to me that I might have to die and people would think it no great loss.

So I resolved to be different now and to do everything that gave my mother pleasure and learn a lot and never bring any more punishments home, so they would all be proud of me.

Annie looked at me and said, "No doubt you've brought a dreadfully

bad report home, Ludwig?”

But my mother forbade her to mock me, and she said, “You should not talk like that, Annie, when he is ill and has made a resolve to begin a new life. I’m sure he will keep it and give me much joy.” Then I couldn’t hold back the tears, and old Theresa also heard that I had made such resolutions before my death. She wailed terribly loudly and cried out, “That comes from all the studying, it’ll be the death of our boy yet!”

My mother comforted her because she just wouldn’t stop. Then I went to bed, and it was so nice to lie inside it. My mother appeared at the door with a light and said, “Rest well and get better, child.” I sat up for a long time after, thinking about how I was going to be good from now on.