

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Marga von Rentz (1871- between 1914 and 1922)

Crocus

A Spring-Sketch from the Mountains

The fields and meadows are freshly-green.

Daisies, violets, and anemones are blooming, and the trees and bushes have put out fat buds.

Leaping little brooks run through the meadows. They come from the mountains, which are still resplendent in their winter finery, and laugh and babble.

There is a singing and ringing in the air – nobody knows what it is or whence it comes, but it captivates the senses. The wind passes gently over tree and leaf – tenderly, as if with soft hands trembling with happiness.

The birds sing joyfully into the clear-blue distance.

The spring mood has taken hold of all.

Even the children, who are now sitting on the hard school-bench and taking Botany class, and the teacher also.

Boys and girls are together in the class, but they do not annoy and tease each other today like they usually do. They sit at their places, apparently attentive, yet their thoughts are far away.

Lessons crawl by so – and outside is the alluring sun, in whose broad flood of light the school dust dances up and down, and finches are singing before the windows.

In front of every child lies a half-withered little bunch of delicate crocuses, and they arouse the longing for freedom even more ardently in the impatient young ones.

The teacher stands before the class, leaning with his back against his desk.

For the second time, he begins in a dry tone:

“The crocus is a bulbous plant. The long-shanked, funnel-shaped flowers come directly out of the corm. The leaves of the crocus have a lineal form and unfold at the same time as, or after, the flowers. There are around fifty kinds of these plants. The most widespread ones, which are also found around here, are the spring crocuses, with violet-blue, white or yellow flowers. They thrive in moist, shady meadows and flower in March and April. A valuable dye is obtained from the yellow crocus, saffron, which your mother also uses for baking cakes.”

For a moment the children’s heads turn towards the teacher.

“Lenchen Krause,” he continues, “what kind of plant is the crocus?”

Lenchen stands up slowly.

Her face wears a helpless expression, she does not know what the teacher means; it was only his last words that tore her out of her childish dreams.

The teacher waits – and the little girl is silent. She turns to the left, to her neighbour, and looks at her with pleading eyes.

“No telling the answer!” the teacher warns.

There is total silence in the classroom.

On the map, which hangs on the wall from the previous lesson, a fly

is creeping around. It strolls on a broad golden road straight through Silesia.

Lenchen Krause observes the creature, how it walks with the utmost haste from Breslau to Berlin and suddenly, as if it had taken the wrong road, turns around and sets off steadily for Munich.

Then it flies up and against the window-pane.

“Sit down, Helene,” the teacher says at last and throws a reproachful look at the child. “Write ten times for tomorrow, as imposition, the sentence: ‘The crocus is a bulbous plant’ in your exercise-book, but in your best handwriting, with no blots or fingermarks... Fritz König, tell me, what form do the leaves have?”

Fritz König looks quickly at the bench where the flowers are lying.

“A long form.”

“Long form won’t do, my boy. I have just given a different description of the form of the leaves. Look closely at the leaf one more time – well? – the next one – also nothing? – and next – Sit down! Linke, I did not expect an answer from you, you are too stupid, but Erdmann, you could have known it. – What is all this today? I do not understand why there is such inattentiveness in the class. You may be going home soon enough; however, if things do not improve from now, the whole class will stay here an extra hour. Understand? I must have the necessary attention – or else –”

The rest is said by the swung cane. The children move uneasily back and forth on the benches, then they look at the crocuses. And the teacher begins again:

“The crocus belongs...”

Slowly and sluggishly the lesson crawls on. The teacher gets really angry once again.

Lenchen Krause does not know what kind of dye is obtained from the yellow crocus.

She stammers:

“The yellow crocus is used for baking cakes.”

The class laugh, and the teacher strikes the foremost bench with his cane.

“Indeed? For baking cakes? Why, that’s news to me. The whole crocus with leaves and flowers, roots and everything?”

Lenchen’s eyes fill with tears, and the teacher turns to the whole class.

“One should not think it possible. You are born and raised in the countryside. It emits scents and it blooms around you, but you go through life deaf and blind. As long as you just have your sandwich – Josef, was the free quarter of an hour too short, did you not finish eating, for you to be munching away with both cheeks again? – have your sandwich and can then laze about like sloths, then you are happy. You need nothing more. It’s a shame about every word that one speaks to you blockheads. Everything goes in one ear and out the other. A fine state of affairs, truly!”

Finally, school is over.

Books and exercise-books are stuffed into satchels in the greatest haste; no minute must be lost before going out into freedom.

Is this the same class which showed such bored and dozy faces

only a few moments ago? Are these the same children who had nothing to say and had understood nothing?

A merry, boisterous crowd races out; everybody wants to be the first, nobody the last.

Now they have spring, now they are right in the middle of springtide.

Lenchen Krause and her two brothers turn off from the others and go along a narrow meadow-path. A little brook leaps from stone to stone beside them, and watercress and rampion grow at its edges; and each one of the children picks a handful of salad for their father.

“That’s healthy,” says grandmother.

The old woman is looking through the window-panes of the little cottage keeping an eye out for the children.

The parents are at work, there is much to be done now.

“Pray first!” says grandmother, when the children hungrily reach for the soup.

Today the little ones are quickly full up.

“Come grandmother, come to the Siebenhäuser¹ with us, the crocus meadow is in bloom now – everything is blue all over.”

The children urge and plead, they pull at the old one’s petticoat and grab her hands. “Let go o’ me, ye wild bunch,” grandmother says somewhat crossly, but she goes to the old chest and fetches out a warm jacket and another bonnet. On the chest, which is painted red, a garland of forget-me-nots has been painted, and this is always greatly admired by the

¹ A valley in the Giant Mountains [Riesengebirge] near the town of Schreiberhau (now Szklarska Poręba in Poland) where Marga von Rentz was born.

children.

But today they do not give it a glance, they take each other's hands and play a ring-a-ring-o' roses:

“Ring-a-ring-o' rose-crown,
The potter patched the stove up,
He poured a drop of water,
The stove caved in.”

Then the cottage is securely locked. The gentle springtide air caresses the old woman's furrowed brow and does her good. Grandmother has been in the stuffy little parlour all the long winter, and now it gives her a quiet joy that spring has come again.

The old woman can go forward only slowly; her grandchildren keep running a few steps ahead and then back to her.

Now they have reached the top.

Before them lies a little valley, delightful and full of a spring freshness, and there the crocus-meadow shines.

The flowers are lined up, row after row, forming a thick, marvellous carpet. It looks like a fairytale landscape, that soft purple in the green.

Lenchen Krause looks down in silent reverence; her brothers have also fallen silent for a while.

Then the children rush down the path to the meadow.

The old woman has sat down on a rotten wooden bench by the path and watches the children. Lenchen is blissfully happy. She shouts with joy and laughs as only children can laugh.

Her little cheeks glow and her eyes shine. She brings her

grandmother flowers after flowers, until the latter quickly has a whole heap lying in her lap.

“That’s enough now,” she admonishes, “we have t’ go back home soon. But come here, help tie them into bunches.”

And while all four of them are busily tying, the old woman tells the children about flower-spirits and earth-spirits in her simple way, and then she says, looking musingly at a flower:

“But it’s unbelievable, it’s incredible, how t’ dear Lord can create a single flower like this. Look here now – what a soft, delicate leaf it has an’ what a beautiful colour. Words can’t say how wonderful ‘tis. And there it sleeps all through t’ winter, an’ the snow covers it, an’ when spring comes, it creeps up out th’earth first with a tiny little tip an’ then ever more an’ more, till suddenly it’s standin’ there in its beautiful dress an’ says: ‘Just look, I’m here.’ A spring flower like this, it’s always seemed t’ me like a greetin’ from God, as if He’d sent it down from his lovely Paradise so us poor people don’t forget how beautiful ‘tis up there.”

The children look at the crocus in the old woman’s hand with wide-open, astonished eyes, and very gently, almost timidly, Lenchen passes her index-finger over a petal. A sense of the sublimity of Creation, which shows its wonders even in the smallest things, filled her child’s mind.

At home, grandmother reminds her about the homework.

Lenchen pulls a long face and cannot make up her mind to do it right away.

Sighing, she fetches her satchel and throws it on the table with a crash. The pen scratches and the child groans while writing.

The letters become rather stiff, but in the end it is written there ten times, without mistakes or inkblots:

“The crocus is a bulbous plant.”

Evening comes, the children yawn; the spring air has made them tired.

Their parents have come home from the field, weary after a day filled with work.

Soon everyone lies in a deep sleep.

On the window-sill, on the chest of drawers – the glow of delicate flowers is everywhere.

Only the grandmother does not sleep. She is old and therefore has many slumberless nights. She lies alone and muses and daydreams of the lovely Paradise which she told the children about today. She thinks that she will die soon and enter that everlasting Spring.

And in the midst of her thoughts, she hears little Lenchen turning in her bed and saying out loud and happily in her sleep:

“The crocus is a greetin’ from God.”