

GOTTFRIED KELLER

A VILLAGE ROMEO AND JULIET

(1856)

TRANSLATED BY PAUL BERNARD THOMAS

From volume XIV of
*German Classics of the
Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*

THE GERMAN PUBLICATION SOCIETY
NEW YORK
Copyright 1914

moulin digital editions



2014

A VILLAGE ROMEO AND JULIET

(1856)

TRANSLATED BY PAUL BERNARD THOMAS

TO tell this story would be an idle imitation, were it not founded upon an actual occurrence showing how deeply rooted in human life is each of those plots on which the great works of the past are based. The number of such plots is not great, but they are constantly reappearing in new dress, and then they constrain the hand to hold them fast.

Near the beautiful river which flows by Seldwyla at half a league's distance rises an extensive ridge of well cultivated land, which merges into the fertile plain. Far off at its foot lies a village, comprising several large farmhouses; and there some years ago were three splendid long fields lying side by side and stretching afar over the gentle slope, like three gigantic ribbons. One sunny morning in September two farmers were out plowing in two of these fields—to be explicit, the two outside ones. The middle one had apparently been lying there untilled and desolate for years, for it was covered with stones and high weeds, and a world of little winged creatures were buzzing about in it undisturbed.

The farmers, who were following their plows on either side, were tall, rugged men of about forty years, whose appearance proclaimed at the first glance the self-reliant, well-to-do countryman. They wore short knee-breeches of strong twill, in which each fold had its own unchangeable place and looked as if it were chiseled out of stone. Whenever their plows struck an obstacle, causing them to grip the handles tighter, the light shock made the sleeves of their coarse shirts quiver. Their well-shaven faces, calm and alert, but squinting a little in the glare of the sun, looked steadily ahead and measured the furrow, except perhaps now and then when they would turn around to see whence came some far-off noise that interrupted the stillness of the countryside. Slowly and with a certain natural grace they put forward one foot after the other, and neither said a word, unless it was to give some direction to the hired-man who was driving the magnificent horses.

Thus from a little distance they looked exactly alike, for they represented the original type of the region; and at first sight one could have distinguished them only by the fact that the one wore his white cap with the peak tipping forward over his brow, while the other's fell back on his neck. But even that distinction alternated between them, depending upon the direction in which they were plowing; for when they met and passed each other on the crest of the ridge, where there was a fresh east wind blowing, the one who was facing it had the peak of his cap thrown back, while that of the other, with the wind behind him, stuck out in front. In between there was each time a moment when the gleaming caps stood up-

A Village Romeo and Juliet

right, fluttering in the breeze and shooting skyward like two tongues of white flame.

And so the two men plowed calmly on, and it was a beautiful sight in that quiet, golden September landscape to watch them pass each other on the ridge slowly and silently, and gradually draw apart, ever farther and farther, until they both sank, like two setting constellations, behind the brow of the hill and finally vanished from sight, to appear again after some time. Whenever they came across a stone in the furrow, they would hurl it with a sluggish, powerful fling into the waste field; this, however, happened but rarely, for the latter was already nearly covered with all the stones that had ever been found on the two adjoining fields.

Thus the long morning had partly passed, when a cunning little vehicle, hardly visible as it started up the gentle slope, drew near from the direction of the village. It was a child's cart, painted green, in which the children of the two plowmen, a boy and a little mite of a girl, were together bringing out their fathers' luncheon. There lay in the cart for each a fine loaf of bread wrapped in a napkin, a jug of wine with glasses, and also some little delicacy which the fond housewife had sent along for her industrious husband. There were also packed in it all sorts of strangely shaped apples and pears, which the children had gathered on the way and bitten into; likewise a doll, absolutely naked and with only one leg and a dirty face, which was sitting like a young lady between the two loaves and enjoying the ride. After many a jolt and halt, the vehicle finally came to a stop on the crest of the ridge in the shade of a linden copse that stood on the border of the field.

It was now possible to obtain a closer view of the two wagoners. One was a boy of seven years, the other a little maid of five, and both were healthy and bright. Otherwise there was nothing remarkable about them, except that both had very pretty eyes, and the little girl also a brownish complexion and very curly dark hair, which gave her a fiery, frank appearance.

The plowmen, who had once more arrived at the top, put some clover before their horses, left their plows in the half-finished furrows, and betook themselves like good neighbors to their joint repast, greeting each other now for the first time; for as yet they had not exchanged a word that day.

While the two men were comfortably eating their luncheon and sharing it contentedly and benevolently with the children, who did not leave the spot as long as the eating and drinking continued, they cast sweeping glances over the landscape far and near, and saw the little city among the mountains in the smoky, sunlit haze; for the abundant meal which the people of Seldwyla prepared every noon was wont to send up over their roofs a cloud of far-gleaming, silvery smoke, which floated gaily along their mountains.

"The rogues in Seldwyla are hard at their cooking again!" said

A Village Romeo and Juliet

Manz, one of the farmers.

And Marti, the other, answered:

“One of them came around yesterday to see me about the field.”

“From the District Council! He came to me too,” said Manz.

“So? And he told you too, I suppose, that you ought to use the land and pay the gentlemen rent for it?”

“Yes—until it’s decided who owns the field, and what’s to be done with it. But I had no mind to put the wild waste in order for somebody else. I told them they ought to sell the land and lay aside the proceeds until the owner has been found—which will probably never happen, for anything that’s brought to court in Seldwyla lies there a good while, and besides the matter is a hard one to settle. Meanwhile the rogues would like only too well to get a rake-off from the rent, though, to be sure, they could do that with the money got by selling it. But we’d take care not to bid too high for it, and then we’d know at any rate what we had and who owned the land.”

“That’s what I think too, and I gave the idle gadabout a similar answer!”

They were silent for a moment, and then Manz began again:

“But it’s too bad just the same that the good land must lie there that way and be an eyesore. It has been so for some twenty years, and not a soul bothers his head about it! For there’s nobody here in the village who has any claim at all to the field, and no one knows what ever became of the vagabond trumpeter’s children.”

“Hm!” said Marti, “it’s a queer business! When I look at the black fiddler, who is one day living among the vagrants and the next playing for a dance in one of the villages, I could swear that he’s a descendant of the trumpeter, though, to be sure, he doesn’t know that he still has a field. But what would he do with it?—spree it for a month, and then go on as before! Besides, who has any right to talk when we can know nothing for sure?”

“That might start a pretty business!” answered Manz. “We have enough to do disputing this fiddler’s right to make his home in our community, now that they are forever trying to unload the vagabond on us. Inasmuch as his parents once cast in their lot with the vagrants, let him stay with them too, and saw his fiddle for the tramps. How in the world can we know that he’s the trumpeter’s grandson? As for me, even when I’m sure I recognize the old trumpeter in the fiddler’s black face, I say: To err is human, and the smallest piece of paper, a mere scrap of a certificate of baptism, would satisfy my conscience better than ten sinful human faces!”

“Why, of course!” said Marti. “He says, to be sure, that it was not his fault that he wasn’t baptized. But are we supposed to make our baptismal font portable and carry it around in the woods with us? No, it stands immovable in the church, and instead we have a portable bier hanging outside on the wall! We’re already over-populated in the village; we’ll soon have to have two schoolmasters!”

A Village Romeo and Juliet

With this the meal and the conversation of the two farmers came to an end, and they rose to finish their forenoon's work. The two children, on the other hand, who had already made plans to return home with their fathers, drew their cart under the shelter of the young lindens, and betook themselves on an excursion into the waste field, which to them, with its weeds, bushes and heaps of stones, represented an unfamiliar and fascinating wilderness. After they had wandered hand in hand for a little while in the midst of this green waste, and had amused themselves by swinging their joined hands above the high thistles, they finally sat down in the shade of one of these, and the little girl began to make a dress for the doll out of long plantain-leaves, so that it was presently decked out in a beautiful, green, scalloped skirt. A solitary red poppy, which was still blooming there, was drawn over its head as a hood and fastened on with a blade of grass; all of which made the little figure look like a witch, especially after it had acquired, in addition, a necklace and belt of little red berries. Then it was placed high up on the stalk of a thistle, and contemplated for a while with united glances, until the boy had looked at it long enough and brought it down with a stone. This completely disarranged the doll's toilet, and the girl speedily disrobed it in order to dress it anew. But the moment the doll was again quite naked and rejoiced only in the red hood, the wild youngster snatched the plaything away from his companion and threw it high into the air. The girl ran after it with a cry, but the boy got it first and gave it another fling. He continued to tease her in this way for a long time, the little girl all the while struggling vainly to get hold of the flying doll, which suffered considerable damage at his hands, especially to the knee of its one leg, where a small hole appeared, allowing some bran to trickle out. As soon as the tormentor noticed this hole, he stopped still as a mouse and with open mouth eagerly began to enlarge the hole with his finger-nails, in order to ascertain the source of the bran. His standing still seemed highly suspicious to the poor little girl; she crowded up close to him and with horror was compelled to witness his wicked proceeding.

"Oh, look!" he cried, and jerked the leg around before her nose, so that the bran flew into her face. And when she made a grab for the doll and screamed and begged, he ran away again and did not stop until the whole leg was empty and hung down limp, like a pitiful husk. Then he flung down the much-abused toy once more and assumed a very impudent and indifferent air, as the little girl, crying, threw herself upon the doll and covered it with her apron. Presently she drew it out again and sadly contemplated the poor thing. When she saw the leg she began to cry afresh, for it hung down from the body like the tail of a salamander. The evil-doer, seeing her crying so violently, finally began to feel badly about it and stood anxious and repentant before the wailing child. When she became aware of this, she suddenly stopped crying and struck him several times with

A Village Romeo and Juliet

the doll. He made believe that it hurt him and cried ouch! so naturally that she was satisfied, and they now resumed together the destructive dissection. They bored hole after hole into the little martyr's body, letting the bran run out from all sides. Then they carefully gathered it into a little pile on a flat stone, stirred it around, and looked at it intently.

The one intact member which the doll still retained was its head, and of course this now attracted their chief attention. They severed it carefully from the eviscerated body and peeped with amazement into the hollow interior. When they saw the ominous hole and also the bran, their next most natural idea was to fill the head with the bran. And so the children's small fingers began to vie with one another in putting the bran into the head, which now, for the first time in its existence, had something in it. The boy, however, probably still regarded it as dead knowledge, for he suddenly caught a large blue fly, and holding it, buzzing, in the hollow of his hands, he ordered the girl to empty the head of bran. The fly was then imprisoned in it and the hole stopt up with grass, and after both the children had held the head to their ears, they solemnly put it down on a stone. As it still had on the red-poppy hood, the resonant head now resembled a prophet's poll, and the children with their arms around each other listened in profound silence to its oracles and fairy-tales.

But prophets always awaken terror and ingratitude; the bit of life in the poorly formed image aroused the children's human propensity to be cruel, and it was decided to bury the head. Without asking the imprisoned fly's opinion about it, they dug a grave, laid the head in it, and erected an imposing monument of field-stones over the spot. Then a gruesome feeling came over them, as they had buried something with life and form, and they went some distance away from the uncanny place. On a little spot completely overgrown with green weeds the girl, who was now very tired, lay down on her back and began to sing, monotonously repeating the same words over and over again, while the little boy, who was feeling so drowsy and lazy that he did not know whether to lie down or not, squatted beside her and joined in. The sun shone into the singing girl's open mouth, lighting up her dazzlingly white teeth, and suffusing her round, red lips. The boy saw the teeth, and, holding the girl's head, examined them with curiosity.

"Guess," he cried, "how many teeth we have?"

The girl bethought herself for a moment, as if counting up deliberately, and then said at random:

"A hundred!"

"No, thirty-two!" he exclaimed. "Wait, I'll count them."

Then he counted the little girl's teeth, and as the number did not come out thirty-two, he kept beginning all over again. The girl held still a long time, but as the eager counter did not seem to be going to stop, she got up hurriedly, exclaiming:

A Village Romeo and Juliet

“Now let me count yours!”

The boy then lay down among the weeds, and the girl leaned over him, putting her arms around his head. He opened his mouth and she began to count:

“One, two, seven, five, two, one,”—for the pretty little creature had not yet learned to count.

The boy corrected and prompted her, however, and she too began all over again a great many times. This game seemed to amuse them more than any they had tried that day.

Finally, however, the girl sank down completely on the youthful arithmetician, and the two children fell asleep in the bright midday sun.

In the meantime their fathers had finished plowing their fields, having converted the surface into brown, fresh-smelling loam. But when they reached the end of the last furrow and one of the farmhands started to quit for the day, his master called out:

“What are you stopping for? Turn about again!”

“But I thought we were through,” said the man.

“Hold your tongue and do as I say!” cried the master.

And they turned around and plowed a deep furrow in the middle, ownerless field, making the weeds and stones fly. These latter, however, the farmer did not stop to throw aside; he very likely thought there would be time enough for that later, and for the present was content to do the work in a very rough way.

And so the man plowed swiftly up in a gentle curve, and when he reached the crest and the fresh wind again blew back the tip of his cap, whom should he pass on the opposite side but the other farmer, who, with the tip of his cap forward, was likewise plowing a deep furrow in the middle field and throwing the clods of earth aside. Each probably saw what the other was doing, but neither seemed to see it, and they disappeared from each other’s sight, each constellation silently passing the other and sinking below this round world. Thus the shuttles of fate pass one another, and “what he is weaving, no weaver knoweth.”

Harvest followed harvest, and each saw the children grown larger and handsomer, and the ownerless field grown narrower between its widened neighbors. With every plowing it had lost on either side the width of one furrow, and not a word had been said about it, and seemingly no human eye had noticed the crime. Each year the stones had been thrown in closer together, so that they now formed a regular backbone up and down the entire length of the field; and the wild weeds on it were now so high that the children, although they too had grown, could no longer see each other when they walked on opposite sides. For they no longer went out to the field together, since the ten-year old Salomon, or Sali, as he was called, now sturdily kept company with the larger boys and men; while the brown Verena,¹ though now a fiery girl, was constrained, in order to

A Village Romeo and Juliet

avoid being teased by the other girls as a tomboy, to go about under the guardianship of her own sex. Nevertheless once during each harvest, when everybody was in the fields, they regularly took occasion to climb up the wild stone barrier that separated them and push each other down from it. Although this was the only intercourse they ever had with each other, this annual ceremony was cherished all the more carefully, as their fathers' fields came together nowhere else.

It was finally announced, however, that the field was to be sold and the proceeds provisionally taken in charge by the authorities. The auction took place on the field itself, where, however, with the exception of Manz and Marti, only a few idlers appeared, as nobody had any desire to buy and till the strange tract between the two neighbors. For, although the latter were among the best farmers of the village and had done only what two-thirds of the others would have done under the same circumstance, nevertheless people now eyed them askance for it, and nobody wanted to be hemmed in between them in the diminished orphan-field. Most men are capable of doing, and are ready to do, a wrong which is in the air, when they poke their nose right into it; but as soon as one of them has done it, the others are glad that it was not they who did it or were tempted to do it, and they look upon the chosen man as a vice-gage of their own characters, and treat him with timid awe as the divinely-marked diverter of wrong, while all the time their own mouths are watering for the advantages he enjoys from his crime.

Manz and Marti, therefore, were the only ones who bid for the field in earnest, and after some rather obstinate overbidding it was knocked down to Manz. The officials and onlookers left the field and the two farmers finished their day's work. On their way home they met and Marti said:

"I suppose now you'll put your new and old land together and divide it into two equal strips. At any rate that's what I should have done if I had got it."

"And I shall certainly do that too," answered Manz, "for in one piece the field would be too large for me. But, as I was going to say, I have noticed that you've lately plowed diagonally across the lower end of this field, which now belongs to me, and that you've cut off a good big triangle from it. Perhaps you did so thinking that you'd sooner or later own the whole field anyway. But as it now belongs to me, you of course understand that I have no use for and cannot tolerate any such unseemly bend, and you will surely have no objection to my making the strip straight again. That oughtn't to cause any disagreement between us!"

Marti replied just as coolly as Manz had addressed him: "Neither do I see why we should quarrel about it! As I understand it, you bought the field just as it lies. We looked it over, all of us, and in the course of an hour it hasn't changed a hair's breadth!"

A Village Romeo and Juliet

“Nonsense!” said Manz. “We won’t rake up the past. But too much is too much, and everything must at last be properly straightened out. These three fields have always lain there side by side, as if marked off by a straight-edge. It’s a very curious joke of yours to bring such a nonsensical, ridiculous crook between them. We’d get nicknames if we let that crooked end stay there—it must go, I tell you!”

Marti laughed and said:

“It’s remarkable, the way you’ve suddenly become afraid of ridicule! However, it can be managed. The crook doesn’t bother me at all, but if it annoys you, all right—we’ll make it straight! But not on my side! I’ll hand you that in writing, if you like!”

“Don’t be so funny!” said Manz. “It shall be made straight, and on your side. You may count on that!”

“We’ll see about that!” said Marti, and the two men separated without looking at each other again. They preferred to gaze off into the blue in various directions, as if they saw something remarkable and were obliged to look at it with all their might.

The very next day Manz sent a farm-boy, a hired girl, and his own little son Sali out to the field to clear away the wild weeds and underbrush and stack it into piles, in order to facilitate the subsequent work of carting off the stones. This was something new for him to send out the boy despite his mother’s protests, for Sali was not yet quite eleven years old and had never been held to any work. As he spoke with serious and unctuous words, it seemed as if this severity toward his own flesh and blood were intended to stifle his consciousness of wrong-doing, which was now quietly beginning to show its effects.

Meanwhile the little company he sent out worked merrily at clearing away the weeds, and hacked with gusto at the curious bushes and plants of all kinds that had been growing rankly there for years. For, inasmuch as it was an unusual and in a sense disorderly task, requiring no rule and no care, it counted as a pleasure. The wild stuff, dried by the sun, was piled up and burned with great glee, so that the smoke spread far and wide, and the young people ran about as if possessed. This was the last joyous occasion on the unlucky field, and little Verena, Marti’s daughter, also came stealing out and took part. The unusualness of the event and the joyful excitement offered her a good opportunity to join her young playmate once more, and the children were very happy and lively around the fire. Other children came too, and a very jolly company assembled. But whenever Sali got separated from Verena he would immediately seek to rejoin her, and she likewise, smiling happily all the time, would contrive to slip up to him. To both children it seemed as if this glorious day must not and could not end.

Toward evening, however, old Manz came out to see what had been accomplished, and, although they were all through with the

A Village Romeo and Juliet

work, he scolded them for their jollity and broke up the company. At the same time Marti appeared on his own land, and, seeing his daughter, whistled so shrilly and imperiously to her through his fingers that she ran to him in alarm. Without knowing why, he boxed her ears several times. And so both children went home crying and in great grief—really knowing just as little why they were now so sad as why they had been so happy before. For harshness on the part of their fathers, in itself rather new, was not understood by the unsuspecting creatures, and so could not make a very deep impression upon them.

The following days, when Manz had the stones picked up and carried away, the work became more strenuous and required grown men. It looked as if there would be no end to it, and all the stones in the world seemed to be gathered there. Manz, however, did not have them carted away from the field, but had each load dumped on the contested triangle, which Marti had neatly plowed up. He had previously drawn a straight line as a boundary, and now covered this little plot with all the stones which both men from time immemorial had thrown into the middle field, so that an enormous pyramid arose, which he felt sure that his rival would be slow to remove.

Marti had expected anything but this; he supposed that Manz would go to work with his plow in the same old way, and had therefore waited to see him setting out as plowman. Not until it was almost completed did he hear about the beautiful monument which Manz had erected. He ran out in a rage, took a look at the pickle he was in, and then ran back to fetch the magistrate, in order to get a preliminary injunction against the pile of stones and to have the plot attached. And from this day forth the two farmers were in litigation with each other, and did not rest until they were both ruined.

The thoughts of these hitherto sensible men were now cut as fine as chopped straw, each being filled with the strictest sense of justice in the world. Neither could or would understand how the other, with such manifest and arbitrary injustice, could claim for himself the insignificant corner in question. Manz also developed a remarkable sense for symmetry and parallel lines, and felt himself truly wronged by the foolish obstinacy with which Marti insisted on preserving that most nonsensical and capricious crook. But each held to the conviction that the other, in trying with such downright insolence to defraud him, must necessarily take him for a contemptible blockhead; one might try that sort of thing on some poor, helpless devil, but never on a shrewd and sensible man, able to take care of himself. Each felt that the other was injuring his precious honor, and each gave himself over without restraint to the passion of strife and the resulting decadence.

Thenceforward their life was like the torturing nightmare of two condemned souls, who, while floating down a dark stream on a narrow board, fall into a quarrel, thrash the air, and clinch and try to

A Village Romeo and Juliet

annihilate each other, each thinking that he has hold of the cause of his misfortune. As they had a bad case, both fell into the bad hands of the worst sort of shysters, who inflated their distorted fancies into enormous bubbles and filled them with the most baneful notions. These men were chiefly speculators from the city of Seldwyla, to whom this affair meant easy money. It was consequently not long before each of the rivals had behind him a following of go-betweens, informers, and advisers, who contrived in a hundred ways to get away with all the cash. For the little piece of land with its stone-pile, on which a forest of nettles and thistles was again blooming, was merely the germ, or the foundation, of an involved history and a new mode of life, in which the two men of fifty acquired habits and manners, principles and hopes, that were alien to their former experience. The more they lost, the more they wished and longed for money; and the less they had, the more obstinate they were in expecting to get rich and gain an advantage over each other. They allowed themselves to be seduced into all sorts of swindles, and every year they put money into all the foreign lotteries, tickets for which circulated abundantly in Seldwyla. Never once, however, did they set eyes on a thaler won, although they were always hearing about the winnings of other people, and how they themselves had almost won. Meanwhile this passion was a constant drain upon their money. Occasionally the people of Seldwyla amused themselves by inducing the two farmers, without their knowing it, to buy shares in the same ticket, so that each would base his hope for the other's ruin and downfall upon one and the same lot.

They spent half their time in town. Here each had his headquarters in a miserable dive, where he would get excited and allow himself to be lured into making the most absurd expenditures and into a wretched and inept carousing, which secretly made his heart ache. Thus both of them, really keeping up the quarrel only to avoid being considered blockheads, as a matter of fact were excellent representatives of that type and were so regarded by everybody. The other half of their time they spent sullenly lounging at home, or going about their work and seeking to make up for lost time by a mad, ill-advised rushing and driving which frightened away every decent and trustworthy workman.

And so their affairs went backward at an alarming rate, and before ten years had elapsed they were both heels over head in debt, and stood like the storks, on one leg, at the threshold of their possessions, to be blown over by any breath of air. But however they fared, their hatred for each other increased daily, since each regarded the other as the originator of his misfortune, as his hereditary enemy, his absolutely senseless antagonist, whom the devil had sent to earth on purpose to ruin him. They would spit at the mere sight of each other; no member of either household was permitted, under penalty of the grossest maltreatment, to say a single word to the wife,

A Village Romeo and Juliet

child, or servants of the other.

Their wives behaved quite differently during this impoverishment and debasement of their entire existence. Marti's wife, who was of good stock, was unable to endure the decline; she pined away and died before her daughter was yet fourteen years old. Manz's wife, on the other hand, adapted herself to the changed mode of life. In order to develop into a bad partner, she had only to give free play to a few feminine faults she had always had and let them grow into vices. Her fondness for dainties developed into inordinate greed; her volubility into a radically false and deceitful habit of flattery and slander, so that every moment she said the exact opposite of what she thought, kept everything in a turmoil, and threw dust into the eyes of her own husband. The candor she originally displayed in more or less innocent gossip developed now into an obdurate shamelessness of mendacity. Thus instead of suffering at the hands of her husband, she hoaxed him. When he acted badly, she raised Cain and denied herself nothing; and thus she throve to richest bloom as mistress of the decadent house.

And so the poor children were now in a sorry plight. As there was everywhere nothing but quarreling and anxiety, they could neither cherish pleasant hopes for their future nor rejoice in a pleasant and gladsome youth. Little Verena was apparently in an even worse position than Sali, since her mother was dead and she was left alone in a dreary house under the tyranny of a debased father. At the age of sixteen she had already developed into a slender and graceful girl; her dark-brown curls always hung down almost to her lustrous brown eyes; the dark-red blood shone through her brownish cheeks and gleamed, in a way rarely seen, as a deep scarlet on her fresh lips—all of which gave the dark child a peculiar and marked appearance. Ardent love of life and joyfulness quivered in every fibre of her being; she would laugh and was ready for jest and play whenever the weather was the least bit pleasant, that is, whenever she was not too greatly tormented or harassed by her many cares. These, however, distressed her often enough; for she had not only to bear the grief and the increasing misery of the home, but she had herself to look out for as well; and she liked to dress herself halfway decently and neatly, while her father would not give her the slightest means for it. So little Verena had the greatest difficulty in adorning her charming person after a fashion, in supplying herself with a very modest dress for Sunday, and in keeping together some gay, almost worthless neckerchiefs. The beautiful cheery young girl was therefore tied down and humiliated in every way, and there was little or no chance of her falling into proud ways. Besides this, she had seen at an age of awakening intelligence her mother's suffering and death. The memory of this laid a further restraint upon her joyous and fiery nature; so that it was very lovely, innocent, and touching to see the good child cheered by every glimpse of the sun and ready to

A Village Romeo and Juliet

smile in spite of all her trouble.

At first sight Sali did not seem to fare so ill; for he was now a handsome, strong young fellow, who knew how to look out for himself, and whose very bearing made bad treatment inadmissible. He saw, indeed, the bad domestic management of his parents, and thought he could remember a time when things were different; yes, the earlier picture of his father still fingered vividly in his memory—the strong, wise, calm farmer, the same man whom he now saw before him as a gray-haired fool, a quarreler and an idler, who with mad swagger was treading a hundred absurd and deceitful paths and going backward, like a crab, every hour. If all this displeased Sali and often filled him with shame and sorrow, it not being clear to his inexperience how matters had got into such a state, his anxiety about it was quieted by his mother's flattering treatment. For, in order to be less disturbed in her evil life and to have a good partisan in it, and also in order to gratify her braggart vanity, she let him have whatever he wanted, dressed him neatly and showily, and supported him in everything that he undertook for his pleasure. He accepted all this without much gratitude, since his mother tattled and lied to him far too much for that; and while he found but very little pleasure in it, he did in a sluggish and thoughtless way whatever he pleased, without its ever being anything bad. For he was as yet uninjured by the example of his parents, and still felt the youthful necessity of being, upon the whole, simple, calm, and fairly capable.

Thus he was very much as his father had been at the same age, and this fact imbued the latter with an involuntary respect for his son, in whom, with a confused conscience and pained memory, he respected his own youth. But in spite of this freedom which Sali enjoyed, his life was after all not happy; he probably felt that there was nothing worth while in store for him, and that he was not learning anything worth while—for there had been no such thing as systematic and serious work in Manz's house for a long time. His greatest comfort, therefore, was to take pride in his independence and temporary good name, and in this pride he defiantly idled away the days and turned his eyes away from the future.

The only constraint to which he was subjected was his father's enmity toward everybody that bore the name of Marti or called him to mind. All he knew was that Marti had done his father some injury, and that everybody in Marti's house was equally malevolent; hence he did not find it very hard to look neither at Marti nor at his daughter, or to assume the role, for his own part, of an incipient, but still rather mild enemy. Little Verena, on the other hand, who had more to put up with than Sali and was much more forlorn in her home, felt less disposed to open enmity, and only thought herself despised by the well-dressed and apparently happier Sali. For this reason she kept out of his sight, and whenever he was anywhere near her she would hurry away without his taking the trouble to look

A Village Romeo and Juliet

after her. The result was that several years had passed without his having seen the girl close at hand, so that he had no idea how she looked, now that she was grown up. And yet now and then he wondered about it exceedingly, and whenever anything was said about the Martis, he involuntarily thought only of the daughter, of whose present appearance he had no clear mental picture, and whose memory was not at all odious to him.

But now his father, Manz, was the first of the two enemies to be compelled to give up and abandon house and home. This priority was the result of his having a wife to help him, and a son who likewise made some demands, whereas Marti had been the only consumer in his tottering kingdom, in which his daughter had been allowed to work like a dog, but not to use anything. Manz knew of nothing else to do but to move into town, on the advice of his "friends" in Seldwyla, and set up there as an inn-keeper. It is always a pathetic sight when a quondam farmer who has grown old in the fields, moves with the remnants of his property into town and opens a tavern or saloon there, in order, as a last hope, to play the part of the friendly and clever landlord, when as a matter of fact he feels anything but friendly.

When the Manzes moved away from their farm, people saw for the first time how poor they had already become; for they loaded on the wagon nothing but old, dilapidated furniture, which obviously had not been renovated or replenished for years. But none the less the wife was decked out in her best finery as she took her seat upon the cartload of truck, making a hopeful face, and already, as the future town-lady, looking down with contempt upon the villagers, who were filled with compassion as they peered out from behind hedges at the dubious procession. For she proposed to charm the whole town with her amiability and shrewdness, and whatever her stupid husband could not do, she herself was going to do, just as soon as she occupied the dignified position of "Mine hostess" in an imposing tavern.

This tavern, however, in which another man had already failed, was a miserable hole in a narrow, out-of-the-way alley, which the people of Seldwyla leased to Manz, knowing that he still had a few hundred thalers coming to him. They also sold him a few little casks of adulterated wine and the furnishings of the establishment, consisting of a dozen poor bottles, an equal number of glasses and some fir tables and benches which had once been covered with red paint, but were now bare in spots as the result of scouring. In front of the window an iron ring creaked on a hook, and in the ring a tin hand was pouring red wine out of a mug into a glass. There was furthermore hanging over the door a dried-up sprig of holly, all of which was included in Manz's rent.

In view of all this Manz did not feel as cheerful as his wife, but was filled with wrath and evil forebodings as he urged along the lean

A Village Romeo and Juliet

horses that he had hired from the new farmer. His last shabby little farm-hand had left him several weeks before. As he drove off in this way he did not fail to see that Marti, full of scorn and malicious joy, was pretending to be at work not far from the road, and cursed him, regarding him as the sole cause of his misfortune. As soon as the wagon was under way, however, Sali quickened his steps, hurried on ahead, and went into town alone by side-paths.

“Here we are!” said Manz, as the wagon drew up in front of the dingy hole. His wife was horrified, for it was indeed a sorry-looking tavern. The people hurried to their windows and in front of their houses to see the new farmer-landlord, and with their Seldwyla air of superiority put on a mien of mock sympathy. Angry and with wet-eyes, madam climbed down from the wagon and, sharpening her tongue in advance, ran into the house to keep out of sight for the rest of the day, like a fine lady; for she was ashamed of the dilapidated furniture and worn-out beds that were now unloaded. Sali too was ashamed, but he was obliged to help, and he and his father made a strange layout in the alley, in which the children of all the bankrupts were presently running about and making fun of the ragged rustic crew. Inside the house, however, it looked even more dismal and resembled a regular thieves’-den. The walls were of badly-whitewashed, damp masonry, and aside from the dark, uninviting guest-room with its once blood-red tables, there were only a few wretched little rooms; and the departed predecessor had left behind him everywhere the most discouraging dirt and sweepings.

So it began and so it continued. In the course of the first few weeks there came in now and then, especially in the evening, a tableful of guests, curious to see the country landlord, and to find out whether there was any fun to be had there. In the landlord they found little to look at, for Manz was awkward, silent, unfriendly, and melancholy, and neither knew, nor cared to know, how to conduct himself. He would fill the mugs slowly and clumsily, set them down sullenly before his guests, and try to say something, but without success. All the more zealously did his wife throw herself into the breach, and for a few days she really held the people together—but in a sense quite other than she herself thought. The rather stout woman had put together a singular house-dress, in which she thought herself irresistible; in addition to an undyed country-skirt of linen, she wore an old, green-silk spencer, a cotton apron, and a shabby white collar. Over her temples she had curled her hair—no longer thick—into funny-looking spirals and had stuck a high comb into the knot behind. Thus she pranced and danced about with an effort to be graceful, puckered up her mouth comically to make it look sweet, tripped elastically to the table, laid down the glass or plate of salted cheese, and said with a smile:

“La, now! Isn’t that nice? Fine, gentlemen, fine!” and more such stupid nonsense. For although she generally had a glib tongue, she

A Village Romeo and Juliet

was now unable to say anything clever because she was a stranger and did not know her guests. The people of Seldwyla, those of the worst kind who hung about there, held their hands over their mouths and nearly choked with laughter; they would kick one another under the table and say: .

“God o’ mercy! but she’s a peach!”

“An angel!” said another. “By thunder! It’s worth the trouble to come here—it’s a long time since we’ve seen one like that.”

Her husband observed it all with a frown, gave her a poke in the ribs, and whispered:

“You old cow! What are you doing?”

“Don’t bother me!” she replied indignantly. “You old block-head! Don’t you see what trouble I’m taking, and how I understand dealing with people? But these are only scamps of your following! Just let me go ahead and I’ll soon have more respectable customers here!”

This scene was illuminated by one or two small tallow candles. But Sali, the son, went out into the dark kitchen, sat down on the hearth, and wept over his father and mother.

But the guests soon grew tired of the spectacle which the good Mrs. Manz afforded them, and staid where they were more at ease and could laugh at the wonderful inn-keeping. Only now and then a single customer appeared, who drank a glass and yawned at the walls; or, by way of exception, there came a whole crowd to deceive the poor people with a short-lived, noisy carousal. They grew anxious and uneasy in the narrow hole-in-the-wall, where they hardly saw the sun, and Manz, who had become accustomed to lounging in town for days on end, now found it intolerable between these walls. When he thought of the free expanse of the fields, he would brood and stare gloomily at the ceiling or at the floor, or run out of the narrow front-door and back again, while the neighbors gaped in amazement at the ugly landlord, as they already called him.

But it was not very long before they were reduced to penury and had absolutely nothing left. In order to get anything to eat they had to wait until somebody came and paid a little money for some of the wine they still had on hand; and if he asked for a sausage or the like, they often had the greatest trouble and distress in procuring it. Before long they had no wine save what was kept in a large bottle which they secretly had filled in another saloon, so that they were now called upon to play the host without wine or bread, and to be genial on an empty stomach. They were almost glad when nobody came in, and so they crouched in their little tavern, unable to live or yet to die.

The effect of these sad experiences upon Mrs. Manz was to make her take off the green spencer, and again set about making a change in herself; as formerly the faults, she now allowed some of the virtues of womankind to sprout and grow a little,—for it was a

A Village Romeo and Juliet

case of necessity. She exercised patience, sought to keep the old man on his feet and to direct the boy into good ways, denying herself many things in so doing. In short, she exerted in her way a kind of beneficent influence, which, to be sure, did not reach far or improve things much, but was nevertheless better than nothing or the reverse method, and at any rate helped to pass the time, which otherwise would have come to a crisis much sooner for these people. She was able, according to her light, to offer considerable advice in their miserable plight, and if the advice appeared to be worthless and did no good, she willingly bore the anger of the men. In short, now that she was old she did a great many things which would have served better, had she done them earlier in life.

To have a little something to chew on, and a means of passing the time, father and son resorted to fishing, that is, with the rod, wherever the river was free to all for angling. This was, indeed, the chief occupation of the Seldwyla bankrupts. In fair weather, when the fish were biting well, one would see them strolling out by the dozen with rod and pail, and if one walked along the river-bank, one would find a squatting fisherman at every step; here, a man in a long, brown citizen's coat, his bare feet in the water; there, another, standing on an old willow, in a blue swallow-tail, his old felt hat cocked over one ear; yonder, still another, fishing away in a ragged large-flowered dressing-gown, since it was all he had, his long pipe in one hand, his rod in the other. When one followed around a bend in the river, there would be standing on a stone, fishing without a stitch of clothing on him, an old bald-headed pot-belly, whose feet, in spite of his being so near the water, were so black that one would think he had his boots on. Each one would have beside him a can or box of squirming angleworms, which they used to dig up at odd times. When the sky was overcast with clouds and the weather was murky and sultry, foretelling rain, then these forms would be standing there by the meandering river in the greatest numbers, motionless, like a picture-gallery of saints and prophets. The country people passed by them with wagons and cattle without noticing them; even the boatmen on the river paid no attention to them, while the fishermen would grumble softly about the troublesome boats.

Had anybody prophesied to Manz twelve years before, as he was plowing with a fine span of horses on the hill above the river-bank, that he would one day join these curious fellows and catch fish with them, he would have been not a little enraged. Even now he hurried past behind their backs and hastened up the river like a self-willed shade of the underworld, seeking for his doom a comfortable, lonely place beside the dark waters. Meanwhile neither he nor his son had the patience to stand still with their rods; they recalled the many other ways in which peasants catch fish at times, when they are lively and playful, especially that of taking them by hand in the brooks. Hence they took along their rods merely for appearance, and

A Village Romeo and Juliet

walked up along the banks of the brooks where they knew there were precious fine trout.

Meanwhile Marti, who had remained in the country, fared worse and worse, and his life grew very tedious too; so that, instead of working his neglected field, he likewise resorted to fishing and spent entire days splashing around in the water. Little Verena, who was not allowed to leave his side, had to carry his pail and tackle after him through wet meadows, over streams and marshes of all kinds, in rain or sunshine, and was thus compelled to neglect the most urgent matters at home. For there was not another soul there, nor any one needed, since Marti had already lost the most of his land, and now owned only a few acres, which he and his daughter cultivated in a very slovenly way or not at all.

So it happened one evening when he was walking along the bank of a rather deep and rapid stream, in which the trout were leaping up constantly, the sky being overcast with storm-clouds, that he unexpectedly met his enemy Manz, who was coming along the opposite shore. The moment he saw him a terrible feeling of anger and scorn came over him; for years they had not been so close to each other, except before the bar of justice, where they were not allowed to abuse each other. Filled with fury, Marti now called out:

“What are you doing here, you dog? Can’t you stay in your dirty hole, you Seldwyla cur?”

“You’ll be coming there yourself pretty soon, you scoundrel!” cried Manz. “I see you’ve taken to fishing too, so you won’t have to wait much longer!”

“Shut up, you vile dog!” Marti yelled, for here the current of the stream roared louder. “You got me into this fix!”

And now, as the willows by the stream began to rustle noisily in the rising wind, Manz was obliged to shout still louder:

“If that were only so, I’d be glad of it, you miserable wretch!”

“Oh, you cur!” Marti called over, and Manz yelled back:

“Oh, you ass!—what a fool you are!”

And Marti ran like a tiger along the bank, seeking a place to cross. The reason why he was the more furious of the two was this: he supposed that Manz, being a landlord, had at least enough to eat and drink, and was leading a fairly pleasant life, while for him in his dilapidated home it was unfair that life should be so tedious. Meanwhile Manz too was furious enough as he strode along on his side of the stream. Behind him followed his son, who, instead of listening to the angry quarrel, gazed in curious amazement across at Verena, who was following her father and looking down at the ground in shame, so that her brown curly hair fell over her face. She was carrying a wooden fish-pail in one hand, her shoes and stockings in the other, and had pinned up her dress to keep it from getting wet. Since Sali was walking on the opposite side, however, she had modestly let it drop again, and was now trebly encumbered and both-

A Village Romeo and Juliet

ered; having all the fishing paraphernalia to carry, her dress to hold up, and the quarrel to worry about. Had she glanced up at Sali, she would have discovered that he no longer looked fine or very proud, and that he himself was very much troubled.

While Verena, abashed and confused, was thus gazing down at the ground, and Sali had his eyes fixed on that slender form, charming in all its wretchedness, that was struggling along in such meek bewilderment, they failed to notice that their fathers had become silent, and that both, with increased anger, were making for a wooden footbridge which led across the stream a short distance away and was just coming into sight. Lightning began to flash, strangely illuminating the dark, melancholy waterscape; there was also a muffled roar of thunder in the gray-black clouds, and large rain-drops began to fall. The two savage men rushed simultaneously on the narrow bridge, which shook beneath their weight, clinched and drove their fists into each other's faces, which were pale and trembling with wrath and bursting resentment.

It is not a pleasant sight and anything but pretty, when two ordinarily sedate men, through arrogance or indiscretion or in self-defense, come to blows among a mass of people who do not particularly concern them. But this is innocent child's play in comparison with the profound misery that overwhelms two old men, who know each other well and have known each other for years, when, in fierce enmity and with the obduracy begotten of a lifetime, they clinch with bare hands and pummel each other with their fists. Thus did these two gray-haired men do now. Fifty years before, as boys, they had perhaps had their last fist-fight; but since then neither of them, in the course of fifty long years, had laid hand on the other, except perhaps in their friendly period, when they had greeted each other with a handshake—and even this they had done but rarely, being naturally gruff and self-sufficient.

After they had exchanged one or two blows they stopped, and quivering with rage, silently wrestled with each other, now and then groaning aloud and ferociously gnashing their teeth, while each sought to throw the other over the cracking rail into the water. The children had now come up and saw the pitiful scene. Sali made a leap toward them to assist his father and help him dispatch his hated enemy, who seemed to be the weaker anyway and on the point of succumbing. But Verena, too, throwing down everything and uttering a long scream, sprang up and threw her arms around her father, thinking to protect him by so doing, but really only hindering and encumbering him. The tears were streaming from her eyes, and she looked imploringly at Sali, who was also on the point of seizing and completely overpowering her father. Involuntarily he laid his hand on his own father and tried with firm arm to separate him from his opponent and to calm him. Thus for a moment the fight stopped, or rather the entire group strained restlessly back and forth without

A Village Romeo and Juliet

separating.

Meanwhile the young people, pushing further in between their fathers, had come into close contact with each other, At that moment a rift in the clouds let through a bright evening ray, illuminating the girl's face. Sali looked into the face that was so well known to him, yet now so different, so much more beautiful. Just then Verena, too, saw his surprise, and in the midst of her terror and tears she gave him a short, quick smile. But Sali, aroused by his father's efforts to shake him off, braced up and finally, by dint of urgently imploring words and a firm attitude, succeeded in separating him completely from his enemy. The two old fellows drew a deep breath and began to rail and shout at each other as they turned away; but the children were as quiet as death, scarcely even breathing. As they turned to leave, however, unseen by the old men, they quickly clasped each other's hands, which were still damp and cold from the water and fish.

By the time the two growling men went their ways, the clouds had again overcast the sky; it grew darker and darker, and the rain poured down in streams. Manz jogged on ahead in the dark, wet paths with both hands in his pockets, ducking his head under the down-pour. His features were still twitching and his teeth chattering, and unseen tears, which he let drip rather than betray them by wiping them off, trickled into his bristly beard. His son, however, had noticed nothing, for he was lost in blissful visions as he trudged along. He was aware of neither rain nor storm, darkness nor misery. Everything within him and without him was light, bright, and warm, and he felt as rich and well-born as a prince. He constantly saw that momentary smile on the beautiful face near his own, and now for the first time, a good half hour later, returned it. Filled with love, he laughed through night and storm into the dear face, which appeared out of the darkness on every side, causing him to believe that Verena, on her-way, must of course see him and become aware of his laughter.

The next day his father was as if crushed, and would not leave the house. The whole quarrel and the long years of misery assumed today a new and more definite form, which spread itself out dimly in the oppressive air of the tavern, so that both Manz and his wife slunk languidly and timidly about the spectre, dragged themselves from the bar-room into the little dark bed-rooms, from there into the kitchen, and from this back into the public room again, in which now no guest ever appeared. Finally both of them slunk down in a corner and spent the day in weary, lifeless quarreling and contending with each other. Sometimes they would fall asleep and be molested by restless daydreams, which would rise from their consciences and wake them again.

But of this Sali neither saw nor heard anything; he thought only of Verena. He still felt, not only as if he were inexpressibly rich, but

A Village Romeo and Juliet

also as if he had learned something worth while and knew about an infinitude of goodness and beauty, since he now recalled so definitely and distinctly what he had seen the day before. This knowledge seemed to him as if it had fallen from heaven, and his mind was in a state of incessant happy amazement over it. And yet it seemed to him as if he had in truth always known and realized that which now filled him with such wonderful sweetness. For there is nothing like the wealth and the unfathomable depth of that happiness which comes to a man in such a clear and distinct form, baptized by the parson and well-provided with a name of its own, which does not sound like other names.

On this day Sali felt neither idle nor unhappy, neither poor nor hopeless. On the contrary he was busily engaged in picturing to himself Verena's face and form, which he did incessantly, hour after hour. But during this excited activity the object itself vanished before him almost completely; that is, he finally imagined that after all he did not know exactly how Verena looked; that he had indeed a general picture of her in his memory, but that if he were called upon to describe her, he would be unable to do so. This picture was constantly before his eyes, as if it were actually standing there, and he felt its pleasant impression. And yet he saw it as something that one has seen but once and come under the power of, and does not yet know. He remembered exactly the features of her childhood, but not those he had seen the day before. Had he never caught sight of Verena again, his memory would of course have managed somehow to reconstruct the dear face deftly, so that not a single feature should be missing. Now, however, it cunningly and obstinately refused to perform its function, because his eyes demanded their right and pleasure.

In the afternoon, when the sun was shining warm and bright upon the upper floors of the black houses, Sali strolled out of the gate toward his old home, which now seemed to him like a heavenly Jerusalem with twelve shining gates and made his heart throb as he drew near to it. On the way he met Verena's father, who was apparently going to town. His appearance was very wild and slovenly, his beard, now grown gray, had not been trimmed for weeks, and he looked like a very bad, bankrupt farmer who has lost his land through folly and is now going to make trouble for others. Nevertheless Sali no longer regarded him with hatred as they passed each other, but with fear and awe, as if his life were in Marti's hands and he would prefer to secure it by entreaty rather than by defiance. But Marti measured him from head to foot with an ugly glance and went his way. That, however, was agreeable to Sali, to whom the sight of the old man leaving the village gave a clearer vision of his own purpose. He stole around the village on old, well-known paths and through blind alleys, until he finally found himself in front of Marti's house.

A Village Romeo and Juliet

For several years he had not seen this place so near by; for even while they were still living here the two enemies took care not to trespass on each other's property. For that reason he was now astonished, though he had had much the same experience in his own home, and stared with amazement at the desolate scene before him.

One piece after another of Marti's arable land had been mortgaged away, so that he now owned nothing but the house, the yard in front of it, a bit of garden, and the field on the height above the river, which he tenaciously persisted in retaining longest of all. There was no longer any thought of systematic farming, however, and on the field, where uniform crops of grain had once waved so beautifully at harvest-time, all sorts of poor, left-over seed—turnips, cabbages, a few potatoes, and things of that kind, swept together out of old boxes and torn bags—had been sown and had sprouted up, so that the field now looked like a very badly kept vegetable garden. It was a curious exhibit of samples, adapted for living from hand to mouth, where one could pull up now a handful of turnips if one were hungry and knew of nothing better, now a mess of potatoes or cabbages, and let the rest grow on or rot, as the case might be. Furthermore, everybody ran about on it at pleasure, and the beautiful broad strip of land now looked almost like the ownerless field of yore, the origin of all the trouble.

Consequently there was not a trace of orderly farming around the house. The stable was empty, the door hung on one hinge, and innumerable spiders, grown to half their full size during the summer, had spun their shining webs in the sunlight before the dark entrance. Beside the open barn-door, through which the fruits of the solid ground had once been carted in, there now hung some worthless fishing-tackle, bearing witness to Marti's bungling aquatic operations. In the yard there was not a hen or a dove, not a cat or a dog to be seen. The spring was the only thing there showing signs of life, and even that no longer flowed through the pipe, but gushed out through a crack over the ground and formed little pools all about the place, creating the very symbol of laziness; for although it would have given her father but little trouble to stop up the hole and replace the pipe, Verena was now put to it to get even pure water out of this desolation, and had to do her washing in the shallow pools on the ground, instead of in the trough, which was dried up and full of cracks.

The house itself was just as pitiful to behold. The windows were broken in many places and had paper pasted over them, but even so they were nevertheless the pleasantest feature of the dilapidation. For even the broken panes were washed bright and clean, yes, actually polished, and they shone as bright as Verena's eyes, which in a like manner had to compensate the poor girl for lack of other finery. And just as Verena's curly hair and orange cotton neckerchiefs went well with her eyes, so did the wild, green vegetation, growing in rank

A Village Romeo and Juliet

confusion about the house, the small, waving forest of beans, and a fragrant wilderness of orange wall-flower, go well with these shining windows. The beans clung as best they could, some to a rake handle or the stub of a broom stuck in the ground upside down, others to a rusty halberd, or spontoon, as it was called when Verena's grandfather as sergeant had carried the very thing which she now, from necessity, had planted among the beans; and yonder still others were merrily climbing up a weather-beaten ladder, which had been leaning against the house since time immemorial, and from there were hanging out over the bright windows, as Verena's curly hair hung over her eyes.

This rather picturesque than prosperous farmhouse stood somewhat apart and had no near neighbors; at this particular moment, moreover, there was not a living soul to be seen anywhere about. Sali, therefore, feeling perfectly safe, leaned against an old shed some thirty paces distant, and gazed fixedly across at the quiet, desolate house. He had been leaning and gazing in this way for some little time when Verena came to the door and stood there looking out, her thoughts seemingly concentrated on one object. Sali did not stir or turn his eyes away from her. Finally, chancing to look in his direction, she caught sight of him. They looked at each other for a moment, as if observing an aerial phenomenon, until finally Sali straightened up and walked slowly across the road and the yard toward Verena. When he was near her, she stretched out her hands to him and said, "Sali!" He seized her hands and gazed steadfastly into her face; tears gushed from her eyes, and she turned crimson under his glance.

"What do you want here?" she said.

"Only to see you," he replied. "Can't you and I be good friends again?"

"And our parents?" she asked, turning away her face to hide the tears, since her hands were not free to cover it.

"Are we to blame for what they've done and become?" said Sali. "Perhaps the only way to repair the damage is for us two to stick together and be right fond of each other."

"It'll never turn out well," answered Verena with a deep sigh. "In heaven's name go your way, Sali!"

"Are you alone?" he inquired. "May I come in for a moment?"

"Father has gone to town to make trouble, as he said, for your father. But you cannot come in, because later on perhaps you won't be able to get away unseen as you can now. Everything is still quiet and there's nobody around—I beg of you, go now!"

"No, I won't go like that. Ever since yesterday I've had to think about you all the time, and I won't go away so. We must have a talk together, at least half an hour or an hour—it'll do us good."

Verena bethought herself a moment and said:

"Toward evening I go out to our field—you know which, we have

A Village Romeo and Juliet

only the one—to get some vegetables. I know that nobody else will be there then, because the people are reaping elsewhere. If you wish, meet me there. But go now, and take care that no one sees you; for though nobody associates with us here any more, people would nevertheless make so much talk that my father would be sure to hear about it.”

They now let go each other’s hands, but immediately joined them again as both said simultaneously:

“And how are you, anyway?”

But instead of answering they both asked the same question over again, and the answer lay only in their eloquent eyes, since, as is the way with lovers, they were no longer able to manage words. Without saying anything more they finally separated, half happy, and half sad.

“I’ll come out very soon—only go at once,” she called out after him.

Sali went directly out to the quiet, beautiful height over which the two fields extended. The magnificent, quiet July sun, the passing white clouds floating above the ripe, waving corn, the blue shimmering river flowing by below—all this filled him once more, for the first time in years, with happiness and contentment, instead of pain, and he stretched out his full length in the transparent half-shade of the corn, on the border of Marti’s desolate field, and gazed blissfully toward heaven.

Although it was scarcely a quarter of an hour until Verena joined him, and he had thought of nothing but his happiness and its name, nevertheless it was with an unexpected suddenness that he saw her standing before him and smiling down upon him. Joyfully startled, he jumped up.

“Verena,” he cried, as with a quiet smile she gave him both hands. Hand in hand they walked along beside the whispering corn down to the river and back again, without saying very much. They walked back and forth the same way two or three times, quiet, happy and calm; so that this united couple now also resembled a constellation passing up over the sunny crest of the hill and disappearing behind it, as once their steady-going fathers had done in plowing.

But once, happening to look up from the blue cornflowers on which their eyes were fixed, they suddenly saw another dark star, a swarthy fellow, walking along ahead of them. Whence he had come so unseen, they did not know; he must have been lying in the corn. Verena was startled, and Sali said in alarm:

“The black fiddler!”

In fact the fellow who was strolling along before them was carrying a bow and fiddle under his arm, and he did, moreover, look very black. Besides a little black felt hat and a black sooty smock-frock he wore, his hair, too, was black as pitch, and so was his untrimmed beard, while his face and hands were likewise blackened; for he did all sorts of hand-work, chiefly kettle-mending, and he also helped

A Village Romeo and Juliet

the charcoal-burners and pitch-boilers in the forests. He took his fiddle out with him only when he saw a good chance of business, in case the country-folk were merrymaking somewhere or celebrating a festival.

Sali and Verena walked along behind him, as quiet as mice, thinking that he would turn away from the field and disappear without looking around. And this indeed seemed to be his intention, for he acted as if he had not noticed them. Furthermore they were under a strange spell—they did not dare leave the narrow path and involuntarily followed the uncanny fellow until they reached the end of the field, where that iniquitous pile of stones covered the still disputed corner. A countless number of poppies had settled on it, so that the little mountain at that time looked as red as fire.

Suddenly the black fiddler sprang with a single bound up on the red pile of stones, turned and looked around. The young couple stopped and gazed up in confusion at the dark fellow above; for they could not pass him, because the road led into the village, and they did not like to turn around before his very eyes. He looked at them sharply, and called out:

“I know you—you’re the children of the men who’ve stolen my land here! I’m glad to see how well you’ve fared—and I shall certainly live to see you go the way of all flesh. Look at me, you two sparrows! Do you like my nose, eh?”

He had, in fact, a terrible nose. It stuck out from his withered, black face like a big square, or really looked more like a stout cudgel or club which had been thrown into his face. And under it a small, round hole of a mouth, through which he was all the time puffing and blowing and hissing, puckered itself up and contracted in a strange way. The little felt hat, moreover, looked positively uncanny, being neither round nor square, but [of] such a peculiar shape that, although it lay motionless, it seemed every moment to be changing its form. Of the fellow’s eyes there was scarcely anything to be seen but the whites, since the pupils were incessantly making lightning-like movements and frolicking around zigzag, like two hares.

“Just look at me,” he continued; “your fathers know me well, and every man in this place knows who I am, if he just looks at my nose. Years ago it was proclaimed that a bit of money was lying ready for the heir to this field; I’ve applied for it twenty times, but I haven’t any certificate of baptism or papers of citizenship, and the testimony of my friends, the homeless folk who witnessed my birth, has no legal validity. And so the time expired long ago and I lost the wretched pittance with which I could have emigrated. I’ve besought your fathers to bear witness for me,—their consciences must tell them that I’m the lawful heir. But they chased me out of their houses, and now they themselves have gone to the devil. Oh, well, that is the way of the world, and it’s all the same to me. I’ll fiddle for you, if you want to dance.

A Village Romeo and Juliet

With that he scrambled down on the other side of the stone-pile and made off in the direction of the village, where toward evening the harvest was brought in and the people made merry. When he had disappeared the couple sat down on the stones, very spiritless and sad. They released each other's hands, and supported their sorrowful heads on them. For the fiddler's appearance and his words had aroused them from the happy forgetfulness in which they had been wandering back and forth like two children. And when they sat down on the hard ground of their misery, the bright light of life grew dim and their spirits became as heavy as stones.

Then Verena, happening to recall the fiddler's remarkable figure and nose, suddenly burst out laughing and cried:

"The poor fellow looks too funny for anything! What a nose!" And a charming, sunny merriment spread over the girl's face, as if she had waited for the fiddler's nose to drive away the gloomy clouds.

Sali looked at Verena and noticed this gaiety. She had already forgotten the cause of it, however, and now laughed in his face only on her own account. Puzzled and astonished, Sali stared into her eyes with involuntary laughter, like a hungry man who has caught sight of a delicious loaf of bread.

"By heaven, Verena," he cried, "how beautiful you are!"

Verena only laughed at him more, emitting besides from her resonant throat a few short mischievous notes of laughter, which to poor Sali seemed exactly like the song of the nightingale.

"Oh you witch!" he cried. "Where did you learn to do that? What diabolical arts are you practicing now?"

"Oh, goodness gracious!" said Verena in a coaxing tone, as she took Sali's hand. "That isn't witchcraft. How long it is that I've wanted to laugh! Now and then, perhaps, when entirely alone I've had to laugh at something, but it wasn't real laughter. But now I want to laugh at you for ever and ever, as often as I see you, and I'd like to see you all the time too. Do you really love me just a little bit?"

"Oh, Verena," he exclaimed, gazing into her eyes with honest devotion, "I've never yet looked at a girl, without feeling that I must love you some day, and without my wishing it or realizing it, you've always been in my mind."

"And you in mine even more," replied Verena, "for you never looked at me, and didn't know what I had grown to be like; but I took a good look at you from afar now and then, and secretly even from close by, so that I knew all along how you looked. Do you remember how often we used to come out here as children? And the little cart? How small we were then, and how long ago it was! One would think we were quite old."

"How old are you now?" asked Sali, filled with happy contentment. "You must be about seventeen."

"Seventeen and a half I am," she replied. "And how old are

A Village Romeo and Juliet

you? But I know already,—you'll soon be twenty.”

“How did you know that?” Sali asked.

“Oh, but that's telling!”

“Then you won't tell me?”

“No!”

“Positively no?”

“No, no!”

“You shall tell me!”

“Do you think you're going to make me?”

“We'll see about it.”

Sali carried on this foolish talk while his hands were occupied in pestering the beautiful girl with awkward caresses intended to look like punishment. Defending herself, she likewise protracted with great endurance the silly altercation, which seemed quite witty and sweet to both of them in spite of its emptiness, until Sali became vexed and bold enough to seize Verena's hands and force her down among the poppies. There she lay, her eyes blinking in the sunlight; her cheeks shone like purple, and her mouth was half open, permitting two rows of white teeth to gleam through. Delicate and beautiful, the dark eyebrows interfused, and the young breast rose and fell capriciously under all the four hands which caressed and struggled with one another in helter-skelter fashion. Sali was beside himself with joy to see the slender, beautiful creature before him, and to feel that she was his own—it seemed to him a kingdom.

“You still have all your white teeth,” he laughed. “Do you remember how often we once counted them? Can you count now?”

“These are not the same ones, you child,” said Verena. “Those came out long ago.”

In his simplicity Sali now wanted to play the old game again, and count the shining, pearly teeth. But Verena suddenly closed her red mouth, straightened up, and began to twine a wreath of poppies, which she placed on her head. The wreath was thick and broad and gave the brownish girl a wonderfully charming look, and poor Sali held in his arms something which rich people would have paid a great deal to have as a painting on their walls.

Now, however, she sprang up and cried:

“Heavens, how hot it is here! Here we sit like two fools and get scorched! Come, my dear—let's sit in the high corn.”

They glided in with such a light and nimble tread that they scarcely left a footprint behind them, and built themselves a little prison in the golden grain, which towered up so high above their heads when they sat down that they could see nothing in the world but the azure sky above. They embraced and kissed each other incessantly, until they finally became tired, or whatever one chooses to call it when the kissing of two lovers outlives itself for a moment or two and, right in the intoxication of the flowering season, ominously suggests the transitoriness of all life. They heard the larks singing

A Village Romeo and Juliet

high above them and watched for them with their sharp eyes; when they thought they caught a fleeting glimpse of one gleaming in the sun like a star that suddenly flashes in the blue heavens or shoots out of sight, they kissed again as a reward and tried to get ahead of and defraud each other as much as they could.

“See, there’s one!” whispered Sali, and Verena replied with like softness:

“Yes, I hear it, but I don’t see it.”

“Yes you do. Look sharp, there by that white cloud—a little to the right of it.”

And they both looked eagerly in that direction, and, like two young quails in a nest, opened their bills wide with expectation, to fasten them upon each other as soon as they imagined they had seen the larks.

Suddenly Verena paused and said:

“And so it’s settled, then, that we’ve each got a sweetheart? Doesn’t it seem so to you?”

“Yes,” said Sali, “I think so too.”

“Then how do you like your little sweetheart?” asked Verena. “What kind of a thing is she? What have you to say about her?”

“She’s a very nice little thing,” said Sali. “She has two brown eyes, and a red mouth, and walks on two feet; but of her mind I know less than I do of the Pope at Rome. And what have you to say of your sweetheart?”

“He has two blue eyes, a good-for-nothing mouth, and makes use of two bold, strong arms; but his thoughts are stranger to me than the Emperor of Turkey!”

“It’s really true,” said Sali, “that we don’t know each other as well as if we had never seen each other—the long time since we’ve grown up has made us such strangers. What all has been passing through your little head, my dearie?”

“Oh, not much. A thousand foolish things have tried to start, but my life has always been so gloomy that they could not get a-going.”

“You poor little sweetheart!” said Sali. “But I rather think you’re shrewder than you look—aren’t you?”

“That you can find out gradually—if you love me very much!”

“When you’re once my wife?”

Verena trembled slightly at this last word, and, nestling deeper into Sali’s arms, gave him another long and tender kiss. Tears came into her eyes as she did so, and both of them suddenly became sad when they thought of the hopelessness of their future and of the enmity of their fathers. Verena sighed and said:

“Come, I must go now.”

And so they rose, and were walking out of the cornfield hand in hand, when they saw Verena’s father peering around in front of them. With the petty shrewdness of idle misery he had curiously wondered, on meeting Sali alone, what he was looking for in the vil-

A Village Romeo and Juliet

lage. Remembering the occurrence of the previous day, he finally, as he trudged toward the city, hit upon the right track from sheer ill-will and idle malice. When his suspicions began to assume a definite form, he turned around in the very alleys of Seldwyla and strolled out again into the village, where he looked about in vain for his daughter in the house and yard and among the hedges. With increasing curiosity he ran out to the field, and seeing on the ground Verena's basket, in which she was in the habit of carrying the vegetables, but failing to catch sight of the girl herself anywhere, he went spying around in his neighbor's corn just as the frightened children were coming out of it.

They stood as if petrified, and at first Marti also stood still and looked at them with wicked glances, as pale as lead. Then he began to rave fearfully, making wild gestures and calling them names, and at the same time he reached out furiously to seize the young lad, intending to strangle him. Sali, terrified by the wild man, dodged aside and retreated a few steps, but rushed up again when he saw the old man seize the trembling girl in lieu of himself, give her such a box on the ear that the red wreath fell off, and twist her hair around his hand in order to drag her away and ill-treat her more. Without thinking what he was doing, he picked up a stone and, half in fear for Verena and half in anger, struck the old man on the head. Marti first staggered a little and then sank down, unconscious, on the stone-pile, dragging with him Verena, who was screaming pitifully. Sali freed her hair from the unconscious man's hand and lifted her up; then he stood there like a statue, helpless and vacant-minded.

When the girl saw her father lying there as if dead, she passed her hands over her pale face, shook herself, and said: "Have you killed him?"

Sali nodded mutely and Verena cried out:

"Oh, God! It's my father! The poor man!" Out of her senses, she threw herself on him and raised his head, from which, however, no blood was flowing. She let it sink back again. Sali knelt on the other side of the man, and both gazed into his lifeless face, silent as the grave, and with lamed, motionless hands.

Merely to break the silence, Sali at length said:

"Surely it can't be that he is really dead so soon? That isn't at all certain."

Verena tore off the petal of a poppy and laid it on the pale lips—it moved feebly.

"He still breathes!" she cried. "Run to the village and bring help."

When Sali jumped up and started to go, she held her hand out toward him and called him back.

"But don't come back yourself, or say anything about how it happened. I'll keep silent too—they shan't find out anything from me," she said, and her face, which she turned toward the poor, help-

A Village Romeo and Juliet

less boy, was suffused with painful tears. "Come, kiss me once more! No, be off! It's all over, all over for ever—we can never marry!" She pushed him away, and he ran mechanically toward the village. He met a little boy who did not know him, and charged him to fetch the nearest people, describing to him the exact place where help was needed. Then he made off in despair and wandered about in the woods all night.

In the morning he crept out to the fields to see what had happened. He heard from early-risers, who were discussing the affair, that Marti was still alive, but unconscious, and what a remarkable thing it was, since nobody knew what had happened to him. Now at last he returned to town and hid himself in the dark misery of the house.

...

Verena kept her word; they could get nothing out of her except that she herself had found her father in that condition. And since he was moving and breathing again quite freely on the following day, though, to be sure, without consciousness, and since furthermore no accuser appeared, people took it for granted that he had been drunk and had fallen on the stones; so they let the matter drop. Verena nursed him, never leaving his side, except to get medicine from the doctor or perhaps to cook some thin soup for herself; for she lived on almost nothing, although she was obliged to stay awake day and night and had nobody to help her.

It was almost six weeks before the sick man gradually recovered consciousness, although he began to eat again long before that and was quite cheerful in his bed. It was not, however, his old consciousness that he now regained. On the contrary, the more he talked, the more evident it became that his mind was affected, and what is more, in a most remarkable manner. He could recall but dimly what had happened, and then it seemed to strike him as something jolly which did not particularly concern him; and he was all the time laughing foolishly and in good spirits. While he was still lying in bed he would give utterance to a hundred foolish, senseless, and wanton speeches and whims, make faces and draw his peaked cap of black wool down over his eyes and nose, so that the latter looked like a coffin under a pall.

Verena, pale and care-worn, would listen to him patiently, weeping over his silly behavior, which worried his poor daughter even more than his former badness. Occasionally, when the old man did something too funny, she had to laugh aloud in the midst of her grief; for her suppressed nature, like a drawn bow, was ever ready to spring up for pleasure, whereupon a sadness all the more profound would follow. But when the old man was able to get up, there was absolutely nothing to be done with him. He did one silly thing after another; he would laugh and rummage about the house, sit down in

A Village Romeo and Juliet

the sun and stick out his tongue, or deliver long speeches to the beans.

By this time, moreover, it was all up with the few remnants of his previous property, and the general disorder had reached such a point that even his house and the last field, which had been mortgaged for some time, were now judicially sold. For the farmer who had bought Manz's two fields took advantage of Marti's sickness and his complete demoralization, and with quick resolution made an end of the old lawsuit concerning the contested stony tract. And the lost case completely knocked the bottom out of Marti's tub, while he, in his imbecility, no longer knew anything of these matters.

The auction took place; Marti was provided for by the community in an institution conducted for such poor wretches at the public expense. This institution was located at the capital of the little country. The healthy and voracious lunatic was first well fed, then loaded on a little wagon drawn by oxen, and driven to the city by a poor farmer, who was going to sell one or two sacks of potatoes at the same time. Verena took a seat in the wagon beside her father, to accompany him on this final trip to a living burial. It was a sad and bitter ride, but Verena watched over her father carefully and let him want nothing; nor did she look around or become impatient when the unfortunate man's antics attracted the attention of people, causing them to run after the wagon as it bumped along.

Finally they reached the rambling building in the city, where the long passages, the courts, and a pleasant garden were enlivened by a throng of similar wretches, all of whom were dressed in white blouses and wore durable leather caps on their thick heads. Marti was also dressed in this attire, before Verena's very eyes, enjoyed it like a child, and began to sing and dance.

"God greet you, worthy gentlemen!" he cried out to his new companions. "You have a beautiful house here. Go home, Verena, and tell your mother I'm not coming back again, for I like it here, by Jove! Hey? 'A hedgehog's creeping o'er the way, I'm sure I heard him bellow; O girlie, kiss no gray-haired jay, But kiss some nice young fellow!' 'All the brooks flow into the Rhine; The girl with the blue eyes, She must be mine.' Are you going already, Verena? You look like death in the pot, and yet I'm so happy. 'The she-fox yelps on the plain-y-o, heigho, She must be in terrible pain-y-o, ho ho!'"

An attendant bade him be silent, and gave him some light work to do, while Verena returned to find the wagon. She sat down in the vehicle, drew forth a little piece of bread and ate it; then she slept until the farmer came and drove Her back to the village.

They did not arrive until night. Verena went to the house in which she was born—she could remain there only two days. For the first time in her life she was entirely alone in it. She made a fire to boil the last bit of coffee that she still had left, and sat down on the hearth, for she felt quite wretched. She longed and pined to see Sali

A Village Romeo and Juliet

just once more, and thought of him passionately. But cares and grief embittered her longing, and this in turn made her cares much heavier.

She was thus sitting and resting her head in her hands, when somebody entered through the open door.

“Sali!” cried Verena, looking up; and she threw her arms around his neck. Then they looked at each other in alarm and cried:

“How miserable you look!” For Sali, no less than Verena, looked pale and emaciated.

Forgetting everything, she drew him down to her on the hearth and said:

“Have you been ill, or have you had such a hard time too?”

Sali answered:

“No, I am not exactly ill, only homesick for you. We’re having a high old time at our place nowadays. My father’s running a resort and a refuge for rabble from other parts, and from what I see I judge that he’s become a receiver of stolen goods. So there’s enough and to spare in our tavern now, until they’re caught, and it all comes to a fearful end. My mother helps it along from a bitter eagerness merely to see something in the house, and thinks she can make the mischief acceptable and useful by a certain orderly supervision. They don’t ask me about it, and I couldn’t bother over it much anyway, for day and night I can think of nothing but you. As all sorts of vagabonds come into our place, we’ve heard about what has been happening here, and my father rejoices over it like a child. We also heard about your father being taken to the asylum today. I thought you’d be alone, and so I’ve come to see you!”

Verena now poured out to him all her troubles and sufferings, but with a tongue as glib and confidential as if she were describing a great happiness—for she was, indeed, happy to see Sali beside her. Meanwhile she got together a meager bowlful of warm coffee, which she constrained her lover to share with her.

“So you’ve got to leave here the day after tomorrow?” said Sali. “What in heaven’s name is going to become of you then?”

“I don’t know,” answered Verena, “I shall have to go into service somewhere. But I shan’t be able to stand it without you, and yet I can never have you, even if there were nothing else in the way—simply because you struck my father and deprived him of his reason. That would be a bad basis for our marriage, and neither of us would ever be care-free, never!”

Sali sighed and said:

“A hundred times I’ve wanted to enlist as a soldier, or else hire out as a farm-hand in some distant part. But I can’t go away as long as you’re here, and after this it’ll use me up. I believe my misery makes my love for you stronger and more painful, so that it’s a life-and-death matter. I had no idea of anything like that!”

Verena looked at him with a loving smile. They leaned back

A Village Romeo and Juliet

against the wall and said nothing more; but they gave themselves up in silence to the blissful feeling, which rose above all their sorrow, of being very deeply in love and knowing that it was returned. In that thought they fell asleep on the uncomfortable hearth, without pillow or bolster, and slept as peacefully and quietly as two children in a cradle.

Morning was already dawning when Sali awoke first; he tried as gently as he could to rouse Verena, but she kept falling back against him drowsily and would not wake up. Then he kissed her ardently on the mouth, and she started up, opened her eyes wide, and seeing Sali, cried:

“Heavens! I was just dreaming about you! I dreamt that we were dancing together at our wedding, for long, long hours, and were ever so happy and neatly dressed, and lacked nothing. Finally we wanted very much to kiss each other, but something kept pulling us apart, and now it turns out that you yourself were the disturbing element. But, oh, how nice it is that you’re right here!”

Eagerly she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him as if she would never stop.

“And what did you dream?” she asked, stroking his cheeks and chin.

“I dreamt that I was wandering through the woods on an endlessly long road, with you in the distance ahead of me. Now and then you would look around, motion to me and laugh, and then I was in heaven. That’s all.”

They stepped to the unclosed kitchen door, which led directly into the open air, and had to laugh when they saw each other’s faces. For Verena’s right cheek and Sali’s left, which had been resting against each other in their sleep, were bright red from the pressure, while the other two were paler than usual because of the cool night air. They gently rubbed each other’s faces on the cold, pale side in order to make them red too. The fresh morning air, the dewy, quiet peace which lay over the landscape, and the early morning glow made them happy and self-forgetful. Verena especially seemed possessed by a cheerful spirit of freedom from care.

“And so tomorrow night I must get out of this house and seek another shelter,” she said. “But first I want to be right merry once more, just once, and with you. I’d like to have a good long dance with you somewhere, for I can’t get my dream-dance out of my thoughts.”

“At any rate I shall be on hand to see where you find shelter,” said Sali, “and I’d gladly dance with you, my darling—but where?”

“Tomorrow there’s a kermess in two places not very far from here,” replied Verena, “where people won’t be likely to know or to notice us. I’ll wait for you out by the river, and then we can go wherever we like and enjoy ourselves once, just once. But, dear me, we haven’t any money!” she added sorrowfully. “So we can’t do it after

A Village Romeo and Juliet

all!”

“Just leave that to me,” said Sali, “I’ll bring some money all right!”

“Surely not from your father’s,—from the—the stolen goods?”

“No! Never fear! I’ve still kept my silver watch, and I’ll sell that.”

“I won’t advise you against it,” said Verena blushing, “for I think I should die if I couldn’t dance with you tomorrow!”

“It would be best if we could both die!” said Sali. They embraced in a sad and painful farewell, but as they separated they laughed cheerily in the assurance of hope for the next day.

“But when’ll you come?” cried Verena.

“By eleven o’clock in the morning at the latest,” he replied. “We’ll take a good hearty dinner together.”

“Good, good! Come rather at half past ten!”

But after Sali had started to go, she once more called him back, her face suddenly taking on an expression of despair.

“Nothing will come of it after all,” she said, crying bitterly. “I have no Sunday shoes any more—I even had to put on these clumsy ones yesterday to go to town. I don’t know how to get any shoes!”

Sali stood helpless and puzzled.

“No shoes?” he said. “Then you’ll just have to go in those.”

“No, no, I can’t dance in these.”

“Well then—we’ll have to buy some!”

“Where? With what?”

“Oh, there are shoe-stores enough in Seldwyla, and I’ll have money in less than two hours.”

“But I can’t go around with you in Seldwyla, and you won’t have money enough to buy shoes too.”

“There’ll have to be enough! I’ll buy the shoes and bring them with me tomorrow!”

“Oh, you foolish boy! The shoes you buy won’t fit me.”

“Then give me one of your old shoes, or wait—better still, I’ll take your measure. That won’t require any witchcraft.”

“Take my measure? Why, of course! I hadn’t thought of that!”
Come, come, I’ll find you a string.”

She sat down on the hearth again, drew back her skirt a little and slipped a shoe from her foot, on which she still wore the white stocking put on for the journey of the previous day. Sali knelt down and took the measure as well as he knew how, spanning the length and breadth of the dainty foot with the string, in which he carefully tied knots.

“What a shoemaker!” cried Verena, blushing and laughing down at him fondly.

Sali blushed, too, and held the foot firmly in his hands longer than was necessary, so that Verena drew it back with a still deeper blush. Then, however, she once more passionately embraced and kissed the embarrassed Sali before sending him away.

A Village Romeo and Juliet

As soon as he reached the city he took his watch to a watchmaker, who gave him six or seven gulden for it; for the silver chain he also got a few gulden. He now thought himself rich enough, for never since he had grown up had he possessed so much money at once. If only this day were over and Sunday were here, he thought, so that he could buy with it the happiness which he promised himself on that day. For even if the day after tomorrow loomed up so much the more dark and uncertain, the longed-for jollity of the morrow only gained a more novel splendor, an enhanced brilliancy.

Meanwhile he passed the time fairly well looking for a pair of shoes for Verena; this was the pleasantest business he had ever undertaken. He went from one shoemaker to another, made them show him all the women's shoes they had, and finally bought a light, elegant pair, prettier than any Verena had ever worn. He hid the shoes under his vest, and did not take them out the rest of the day; he even took them to bed with him and laid them under his pillow.

As he had already seen the girl early that morning, and was going to see her again the following day, he slept soundly and peacefully. But he was awake very early and began to put his scanty Sunday attire in order, and to smarten it up as best he could. This attracted the attention of his mother, and she asked him in astonishment what he was going to do, for he had not dressed with such care for a long time. He was going to take a little jaunt and look around a bit, he replied,—otherwise he would get sick in the house.

"He's been leading a strange life of late," muttered his father. "This gadding around—"

"Oh let him go," said the mother. "Perhaps it'll do him good—he looks miserable now!"

"Got any money for your trip? Where did you get it?" asked his father.

"I don't need any," said Sali.

"There's a gulden for you," replied the old man, throwing one down to him. "You can go into the village tavern and spend it there, so they won't think we're so badly off here."

"I'm not going to the village, and don't need your gulden—keep it yourself."

"Well, you've had it! It would be a pity if you had to keep it, you pig-head!" cried Manz, shoving the gulden back into his pocket.

But his wife, who did not know why she was so touched with sadness on her son's account today, brought him a large black Milanese neckerchief with a red border, which she herself had seldom worn, and which he had long coveted. He tied it around his neck, leaving the long ends loose. Moreover, in an access of rustic pride he now for the first time put up over his ears in manly dignity the shirt-collar, which hitherto he had always worn turned down.

Shortly after seven o'clock, with the shoes in the breast pocket of his coat, he set out. As he left the room a strange feeling impelled

A Village Romeo and Juliet

him to offer his hand to his father and mother, and on the street he turned around and looked at the house once more.

“I believe after all,” said Manz, “that the boy is running after some woman. That’s the one thing we need!”

His wife said:

“Oh, I wish to heaven he would make a lucky strike! That would be nice for the poor lad!”

“Right!” said the husband. “It’ll come! That’ll be a fine piece of luck if he happens to run afoul of another such a chatterbox. That would be nice for the poor lad, oh yes!”

Sali first directed his steps toward the river, where he intended to wait for Verena; but on the way he changed his mind and went directly to the village to call for her in her own house. It was too long to wait until half past ten.

“What do we care about people?” he thought. “Nobody helps us, and I am honest and fear nobody!”

And so he stepped into Verena’s room before she expected him, and was himself no less surprised to find her completely dressed. She was sitting there in fine array, waiting for the time of departure—only her shoes were still wanting. But Sali stopped, with open mouth, in the middle of the room when he saw the girl—she looked so beautiful!

She wore only a simple dress of blue linen, which, however, was fresh and clean, and fitted her slender form very well; and over that a snow-white muslin neckerchief, and this was her whole attire. Her brown, curly hair was in very good order, and the locks which were usually so unruly, now lay neatly and prettily about her head. As she had hardly been out of the house for many weeks, her color had now become more delicate and transparent, which was also a result of grief and worry. But into this transparency love and joy poured one crimson tint after another, and on her breast she had a lovely bouquet of rosemary, roses, and splendid asters. She was sitting by the open window, and breathing in sweet silence the fresh, sunny morning air; but when she saw Sali appear, she held out both of her pretty arms, which were bare to the elbows, and cried:

“You did quite right to come so early, and to come here. But have you brought me some shoes? Truly? Then I won’t stand up until I have them on!”

He drew the longed-for articles out of his pocket and gave them to the eager, beautiful girl; she flung the old ones away and slipped into the new ones, which fitted her very well. Now she rose from her chair, balanced herself in the new shoes, and eagerly walked up and down a few times. She drew back her long blue skirt a little, and contemplated with satisfaction the red woolen bows which adorned the shoes, while Sali gazed uninterruptedly at the delicate and charming form which was stirring joyously in lovely excitement before him.

A Village Romeo and Juliet

“You’re looking at my bouquet?” asked Verena. “Didn’t I gather a pretty one? You must know, these are the last flowers I could find in this desolation. Here there was still a little rose, there an aster, and to look at them all in a bunch one would never think that they were gathered from a ruin. But now it’s time for me to go—not a flower left in the garden, and the house empty, too.”

Sali now looked around and observed for the first time that all the movable property that had been there was gone.

“You poor girl,” he said, “have they taken everything away from you already?”

“Yesterday,” she replied, “they took what could be moved and hardly left me my bed. But I sold it right away, and now I’ve got some money too, see!” She drew some new and shining silver pieces from the pocket of her dress and exhibited them. “The probate judge,” she continued, “has been here too and he told me to take this money and set out at once to look for a position in the city.”

“But there’s absolutely nothing more left,” said Sali, after he had glanced into the kitchen. “I see no wood, no pan, no knife! Haven’t you had any breakfast yet?”

“Nothing!” said Verena. “I could have got myself something, but I thought I’d rather stay hungry so that I could eat a lot with you; for it makes me so happy to look forward to it, you can’t imagine how happy it makes me!”

“If I might only touch you,” said Sali, “I’d show you how I feel, you beautiful, beautiful creature!”

“You mustn’t—you’d ruin all my finery, and if we spare the flowers a little, perhaps it will be a good thing too for my poor hair, which is apt to fare badly at your hands.”

“Come then, let’s be off!”

“We must wait until the bed is taken away; for after that I am going to close up the empty house and never come back here! My little bundle I’ll give to the woman to keep for me—the woman who bought the bed.”

Accordingly they sat down opposite each other and waited. The woman came soon; she was a robust farmer’s wife with a loud mouth, and had a boy with her to carry the bedstead. When she saw Verena’s lover and the girl herself dressed up so finely, she opened her mouth and eyes wide, set her arms akimbo, and cried:

“Well, just look, Verena! You’re getting on finely, I see. You’ve got a caller and are decked out like a princess!”

“Well, rather!” replied Verena with a friendly laugh. “Do you know who he is?”

“Oh, I suppose it’s Sali Manz. Mountains and valleys, they say, don’t come together, but people—But take care, child—remember the story of your parents.”

“Oh, that’s all changed now, and everything’s all right,” replied Verena, with a friendly and confiding smile, yes, even condescend-

A Village Romeo and Juliet

ingly. "You see, Sali is my intended!"

"Your intended? You don't say so!"

"Yes, and he's a rich man. He won a hundred thousand gulden in the lottery! Just think of it!"

The woman gave a jump, clapped her hands together in utter amazement, and screamed.

"A hun—a hundred thousand gulden!"

"A hundred thousand gulden!" repeated Verena with solemn assurance.

"Bless my soul! But it isn't true—you're lying to me, child!"

"Well, believe what you like!"

"But if it's true and you marry him, what are you going to do with the money? Are you really going to be a fine lady?"

"Of course! The wedding will take place in three weeks!"

"Get out! You're a wicked story-teller!"

"He's already bought the most beautiful house in Seldwyla, with a large garden and a vineyard; you must come and call on me when we're settled. I'm counting on it."

"Of course I will—little witch that you are!"

"You'll see how beautiful it is there! I'll make a splendid cup of coffee and serve you with fine bread and butter and honey!"

"Oh, you little rogue! You may count on my coming!" cried the woman with an eager face and a watering mouth.

"But if you come at noon, when you're tired after marketing, there'll always be a strong broth and a glass of wine ready for you."

"That'll just suit me!"

"And there won't be any lack of sweetmeats and white rolls for your dear children at home, either."

"I'm beginning to feel quite famished!"

"And a dainty little neckerchief, or a remnant of silk, or a pretty old ribbon for your dresses, or a piece of cloth for a new apron, will also be sure to come to light, when we rummage through my boxes and chests in a confidential hour!"

The woman turned on her heel and shook her skirts in exultation.

"And if your husband should have a chance to make a good trade in real estate or cattle, and should need some ready money, you know where to knock. My dear Sali will always be happy to invest a bit of cash safely and profitably; and I myself expect to have a spare penny now and then to help an intimate friend!"

By this time the woman was completely daft. She said feelingly:

"I've always said that you were a fine, good, beautiful girl! May the Lord prosper you at all times, and bless you for what you do for me!"

"In return, however, I demand that you do the fair thing by me!"

"Most assuredly you may demand that!"

"And that you'll always bring your wares and offer them to me

A Village Romeo and Juliet

before you take them to market,—I mean your fruit, potatoes, or vegetables—so that I may be sure of having a genuine farmer’s wife at hand, one on whom I can rely. I’ll certainly give whatever anybody else offers you for your wares, and with the greatest of pleasure. You know me! Oh, there’s nothing finer than when a well-to-do city-woman, sitting so helpless within her walls, yet needing so many things, and an honest, upright country-woman, with knowledge of all the important and useful things, form a good and lasting friendship! It comes handy in a hundred cases, in joy and sorrow, at christenings and weddings, when the children are instructed and confirmed, when they’re apprenticed, and when they must go out into the world, and in case of poor harvests and floods, fires and hailstorms—from which may God protect us!”

“From which may God protect us!” said the good woman, sobbing and drying her eyes with her apron. “What a sensible and thoughtful little bride you’ll be! Yes, things will go well with you, or else there can’t be any justice in the world! Handsome, tidy, clever, and wise you are, industrious and skilful at all things! There isn’t a finer or better girl than you in the village or out of it, and the one who has you must think he’s in heaven—or else he’s a scoundrel and will have me to deal with. Listen, Sali! See that you treat my Verena right nicely, or I’ll show you who is master! Lucky boy that you are to pluck such a rose!”

“So then take along my little bundle now, as you promised me, and keep it until I send for it. Perhaps, however, I’ll come in the carriage for it myself, if you’ve no objection. I suppose you won’t refuse me a little mug of milk, and I’ll be sure to bring along a nice almond-cake or something to go with it!”

“You little witch! Give me the bundle!”

On top of the bed, which was tied together, and which the woman was already carrying on her head, Verena now loaded a long sack, into which she had stuffed her knick-knacks and belongings, so that the poor woman stood there with a swaying tower on her head.

“It is almost too heavy for me to carry all at once,” she said. “Couldn’t I make two loads of it?”

“No, no, we must go immediately, for we have a long journey ahead of us to visit some aristocratic relatives who have turned up since we became rich. You know, of course, how it is.”

“I understand. Well then, God keep you, and think of me in your grandeur!”

The woman went away with her towering bundle, which she had difficulty in keeping balanced, and behind her followed her little farm-boy, who placed himself under Verena’s once gaily-painted bedstead, bracing his head like a second Samson against its tester, which was covered with faded stars, and grasping the two ornamentally carved posts which supported this tester in front.

As Verena, leaning against Sali, gazed after this procession, and

A Village Romeo and Juliet

saw the moving temple between the garden plots, she said:

“That would make a nice little summer-house or arbor, if one were to plant it in a garden, set a little table and a bench inside it, and sow some morning-glories around it. Would you like to sit in it with me, Sali?”

“Yes, Verena, especially if the morning-glories were grown up!”

“But what are we waiting for?” said Verena. “There’s nothing to detain us any longer!”

“Come then, and close up the house. To whom are you going to turn over the key?”

Verena looked around.

“We’ll have to hang it here on the halberd. I’ve often heard father say it’s been in this house for more than a hundred years, and now it stands there as the last watchman!”

They hung the rusty house-key on a rusty scroll of the old weapon, up which the beans were climbing, and started off. Verena, however, grew paler, and for awhile hid her eyes, so that Sali was obliged to lead her until they had taken a dozen steps. But she did not look back.

“Where are we going first?” she asked.

“We’ll take a regular country walk,” replied Sali, “where we can enjoy ourselves all day long without hurrying, and toward evening I’m sure we’ll find a good place to dance.”

“Good,” said Verena. “All day long we’ll be together, and go wherever we please. But I feel miserable now—let’s go at once to the next village and have a cup of coffee.”

“Of course,” said Sali. “Just hurry up and let’s get out of this village.”

Presently they were out in the open country and walking in silence across the fields, side by side. It was a beautiful Sunday morning in September; there was not a cloud in the sky, the hills and woods were clothed in a delicate gossamer haze, which made the landscape more mysterious and solemn. On all sides the church bells were ringing, here the deep, harmonious peal of a rich locality, there the garrulous, tinkling of the two little bells of a poor village. The loving couple forgot what the end of the day had in store for them, and with a sense of relief gave themselves up completely to the speechless joy of wandering, neatly dressed and free, like two happy people who belong to each other by right, out into the glorious Sunday. Every sound that died away in the Sabbath stillness, and every distant call, sent a thrill through their souls; for love is a bell which echoes back the most indifferent and the most distant sound, converting it into a peculiar music.

Although they were both hungry, the half hour’s walk to the nearest village seemed to them but a stone’s throw, and they entered hesitatingly the tavern at the entrance to the place. Sali ordered a good breakfast, and while it was being prepared they sat as still as

A Village Romeo and Juliet

mice and observed the orderly and pleasant proceedings in the large tidy guest-room. The landlord was also a baker, and the last baking filled the entire house with a pleasant odor. Bread of all kinds was being brought in, heaped up in baskets; for the people got their bread or drank their morning glass here after church. The hostess, a genial and neat-looking woman, was calmly and good-naturedly decking out her children, and as soon as one of them was dismissed it would run up confidently to Verena to display its finery and tell her all about the things in boastful glee.

When the strong fragrant coffee came, the young couple sat down shyly at the table, as if they were invited guests. Presently, however, they grew more lively and whispered quietly, but blissfully, to each other. Oh, how the blooming Verena enjoyed the good coffee, the rich cream, the fresh, warm rolls, the delicious butter and honey, the pancakes, and all the other delicacies that were there! They tasted good to her because she could look at Sali while eating them, and she ate with as much relish as if she had been fasting for a year. She was also delighted with the fine dishes and the little silver coffee spoons; for the hostess seemed to take them for honest young folks who were to be served nicely. Now and then she would sit down by them to talk, and they gave her sensible answers which pleased her.

The good Verena was in such an undecided frame of mind that she did not know whether she had rather go out into the open air again and wander alone with her sweetheart through meadows and woods, or remain there in the tavern in order to dream of being, at least for a few hours, in an elegant home. But Sali facilitated her choice by gravely and busily making preparations for departure, as if they had a definite and important destination to reach. The landlord and landlady accompanied them outside the house and took leave of them in a most benevolent manner for their good behavior, in spite of their obvious poverty; and the poor young creatures said farewell with the best manners in the world, and walked away with decorous propriety.

But when they were out in the open again and had entered an oak wood, an hour's walk in length, they continued to stroll along dreamily side by side in this decorous manner, not as if they came from wretched, quarrelsome, ruined homes, but were children of well-to-do people and were roving about in a cheery and hopeful state of mind. Verena dropped her head pensively on her breast, which was covered with flowers, and with her hands solicitously laid on her dress, walked along on the smooth, damp ground of the forest; Sali, on the other hand, strode swiftly and thoughtfully, his slender form erect, his eyes fixed on the strong oak trunks, as if he were a farmer considering which trees he could fell most advantageously.

They finally awoke from these futile dreams, looked at each other, and discovered that they were still walking in the same digni-

A Village Romeo and Juliet

fied manner as when they left the inn. They blushed and sadly hung their heads. But youth is youth; the forest was green, the sky blue, they were alone in the wide world, and they soon gave way to this feeling again.

But they did not continue to be alone much longer; for the beautiful forest road presently became animated with pleasure-seeking groups of young people, as well as with individual couples who were passing the time after church jesting and singing. For country folk, as well as city people, have their favorite walks and parks, the only difference being that theirs cost nothing for maintenance, and are even more beautiful. They not only take Sunday walks through their blooming and ripening fields with special appreciation, but they also have very choice promenades through the woods and along the green hillsides; here they sit down on a pleasant eminence offering a wide view, there at the edge of a forest, where they sing songs and enjoy the wild beauty. And, as they obviously do this not for penance but for pleasure, it may doubtless be inferred that they have a feeling for nature—a feeling not utilitarian. They are forever breaking off green twigs, young boys, as well as old women seeking out the familiar paths of their youth; and even stiff countrymen in the best years of their busy lives, when they walk out in the country and pass through a forest, like to cut a slender switch and trim off the leaves, leaving only a green tuft at the end. Such a switch they carry before them like a sceptre, and when they enter an office or a court, they respectfully stand the switch up in a corner, but never forget, even after the most serious negotiations, carefully to pick it up again and take it home uninjured, where it is turned over to the youngest son to be ruined.

When Sali and Verena saw the numerous pleasure-seekers, they laughed in their sleeves and rejoiced that they too were a couple; but they slipped aside into narrower forest-paths and lost themselves in the deep solitude. They stopped at the pretty spots, hurried on and rested again, and, just as there was not a cloud in the clear sky, so not a care troubled their spirits at this time. They forgot whence they had come and whither they were going, and withal behaved themselves with such nice propriety, in spite of all the glad emotion and commotion, that Verena's neat and simple adornment remained as fresh and tidy as it had been in the morning. Sali conducted himself on this walk, not like an almost twenty-year-old country-lad or the son of a ruined innkeeper, but as if he were some years younger and had been very well brought up; it was almost comical, the way he kept looking, all tenderness, solicitude and respect, at his dainty, merry Verena. For on this one day which had been granted to them the poor young creatures had to experience all the moods and phases of love; to make up for the lost time of its tender beginnings, as well as to anticipate its passionate ending in the surrender of their lives.

A Village Romeo and Juliet

Thus they walked until they were hungry again, and were glad when they saw gleaming before them, from the top of a shady hill, a village where they could have dinner. They descended rapidly, but entered this place as decorously as they had left the other. There was nobody around to recognize them; for Verena, in particular, had not been out among people during the past few years, and still less had she been in other villages. For that reason they were taken for an agreeable, respectable couple out on some pressing errand. They entered the first tavern of the village, where Sali ordered a substantial meal. A separate table was laid for them in Sunday style, and again they sat down with quiet modesty and gazed at the beautifully wainscoted walls of waxed walnut, the rustic, but polished and well-appointed sideboard of the same wood, and the clean, white curtains.

The landlady came up with an obliging air and put a vase of fresh flowers on the table.

“Until your soup comes,” she said, “you can feast your eyes on the bouquet, if you wish. To all appearances, if, one may guess, you’re a bridal pair on your way to town to be married tomorrow?”

Verena blushed and did not venture to look up; Sali too said nothing, and the landlady continued:

“Well, to be sure, you’re both still young, but it’s a common saying that early marriage means long life. At any rate you look nice and pretty and don’t need to hide yourselves. Decent folk can get somewhere when they marry so young if they’re industrious and true. But, to be sure, they have to be that, for the time is short and yet long, and there are many, many days to come! Ah, well, they’re fine enough and entertaining too, if one employs them well. Pardon my saying so, but it does me good to look at you—you are such a trim little pair!”

The waitress brought the soup, and as she had heard a part of these words, and would have preferred to be married herself, she looked askance at Verena, who seemed to her to be getting on so well in the world. In the adjoining room the disagreeable girl gave vent to her ill-humor, saying to the landlady, who was busy there, in a voice loud enough to be overheard:

“There again you have a couple of fools running off to town to get married just as they are, without a penny, without friends, without a dowry, and without any prospects but begging and poverty. What’s the world coming to when such young things get married, that can’t put on their own jackets or make a coup? I’m so sorry for the handsome young fellow—he is well taken in by his citified young Miss Vanity!”

“Hush! Keep still, you spiteful thing!” said the landlady. “I won’t have anything bad said of them. No doubt they’re two decent folk from the mountains, where the factories are. They’re dressed poorly but neatly, and if they only love each other and are industrious,

A Village Romeo and Juliet

they'll get along better than you with your vicious tongue. You'll wait a long time before anybody comes and takes you, unless you're more agreeable, you vinegar jug!"

And so Verena enjoyed all the delights of a girl on the way to her wedding, the kind and encouraging words of a very sensible woman, the envy of a spiteful "would-be-married," who from sheer vexation praised and pitied her lover, and an appetizing midday meal beside this lover. Her face shone like a red carnation, her heart throbbed, but she nevertheless ate and drank with a good appetite, and treated the waitress all the more civilly, although at the same time she could not refrain from looking tenderly at Sali and whispering to him, so that his own head began to whirl.

Meanwhile they sat comfortably at the table for a long time, as if they hesitated and feared to pass out from the lovely illusion. The landlady brought some sweet pastry for dessert, and Sali ordered with it some choicer, stronger wine, which flowed through Verena's veins like fire when she drank a little of it. But she was careful and merely took an occasional sip as she sat there, modest and bashful as a real bride. She played this role partly out of roguery and a desire to see how it felt, and partly because she was actually in that mood. Her heart was almost breaking with anxiety and ardent love, so that she felt oppressed inside the four walls and expressed a desire to go.

It seemed as if they were afraid to be so alone and off the road again; for they tacitly took the highway and went on through the midst of the people, looking neither to the right nor to the left. But when they were out of the village, and making for the next one, where the kermess was, Verena took Sali's arm and whispered, trembling:

"Sali, why shouldn't we have each other and be happy!"

"I don't know why, either!" he replied, fixing his eyes on the mild autumn sunshine which glinted over the meadows, and puckering up his face comically in a forced effort to control himself. They stopped to kiss each other, but some people appeared and they refrained and went on.

The large village where the kermess was being held was already animated with merry people. From the imposing hotel sounded pompous dance-music—for the young villagers had started to dance already at noon—and in the space before the hotel a small fair had been set up, consisting of a few tables loaded with sweetmeats and cakes, and a couple of booths covered with cheap finery, around which was a crowd of children and those people who for the present were better satisfied with looking on.

Sali and Verena also went up and took a good look at the splendors; for they both had their hands in their pockets, each wanting to give the other some little present, now that for the first and only time in their lives they were at a fair together. Sali bought a large house of

A Village Romeo and Juliet

gingerbread, which was nicely whitened with icing, and had a green roof with white doves perching on it, and a little Cupid peeping out of the chimney in the role of a chimney-sweep. At its open windows chubby-cheeked little people with tiny red mouths were hugging, and actually kissing each other; for the hasty practical painter had made with one daub two little mouths which thus flowed into each other. Black dots represented bright little eyes.

On the pink house-door these verses were to be read:

“Walk in, my dear, but mark you:
That in my house today,
We reckon and pay with kisses;
There is no other way.”

She answered: “Oh, my dearest,
I’m not the least afraid,
I’ve thought the thing all over,
In you my fortune’s made.”

“And if my memory serves me,
That’s why I came this way!”
“Come in then with my blessing,
And be prepared to pay!”

In conformity with these verses a gentleman in a blue coat and a lady with a very high bosom, painted at the left and right on the wall, were bowing each other into the house.

Verena, in turn, gave Sali a heart, on one side of which was pasted a piece of paper with the words:

“An almond sweet is hidden in this heart, you’ll see,
But sweeter than the almond is my true love for thee!”

and on the other side:

“When thou this heart hast eaten, remember this from me,
That my brown eyes shall fade before my love for thee.”

They eagerly read the verses, and never has any printed rhyme been more highly appreciated or more deeply felt than were these gingerbread mottoes; for they regarded what they read as something written especially for them, so well did it seem to fit them.

“Oh!” sighed Verena, “you give me a house! I’ve given you one too, and the only real one; for our hearts are now the houses we live in, and so we carry our homes around with us, like two snails. We have no other!”

“But then we are two snails, each carrying the other’s house,” said Sali.

And Verena replied:

“Then there’s all the more reason why we should cling together,

A Village Romeo and Juliet

so that each of us may be near home!”

But they did not know that they were making just such witticisms in their talk as were to be read on the many-formed cookies, and they went on studying this sweet and simple literature of love which lay spread out there, pasted for the most part on variously decorated hearts of different sizes. They thought everything beautiful and uniquely applicable. When Verena read on a gilded heart, which was covered with strings like a lyre:

“My heart is like a lyre string,
Just touch the thing,
It at once begins to sing,”

she herself began to feel so musical that she thought she could hear her own heart singing. There was a picture of Napoleon, which was likewise called upon to bear an amorous motto; for there was written under it:

“A hero great was Bonaparte,
Of steel his sword, of clay his heart;
A rose adorns my lady leal,
Yet is her heart as true as steel.”

While they seemed to be absorbed in reading, each took occasion to make a secret purchase. Sali bought for Verena a gilded ring with a green-glass stone, and Verena for Sali a ring of black chamois-horn with a golden forget-me-not inlaid on it. They very likely had the same idea, to give each other these poor tokens at parting. With their minds concentrated on these things and oblivious of all else, they did not notice that a wide ring of people had gradually formed around them, and that they were being intently and curiously watched. For, since there were many young lads and girls from their village there, they had been recognized; and now these people were all standing around the well-dressed couple and looking at them in amazement, while they in their reverent devotion seemed utterly oblivious to the world around them.

“Oh, look!” somebody said. “That is actually Verena Marti and Sali from the city. They’ve found and joined each other in fine style! And just look, won’t you!—what tenderness and friendship! I wonder what they’re going to do?”

The astonishment of these spectators was due to a strange combination of sympathy for their misfortune, contempt for the demoralization and depravity of their parents, and envy of the happiness and oneness of the couple, who had a singular, almost grand, air in their amorous agitation, and whose unrestrained devotion and self-forgetfulness seemed as strange to the rough crowd as did their loneliness and poverty.

So when they finally woke up and looked around, they saw noth-

A Village Romeo and Juliet

ing but gaping faces on all sides. Nobody spoke to them, and they did not know whether or not to speak to any one else. But this estrangement and unfriendliness was due on both sides more to embarrassment than to intent. Verena felt anxious and hot, turned pale and blushed; but Sali took her hand and led the poor girl away, she following willingly with her house in her hand, although the trumpets in the hotel were already blaring merrily, and she was so eager to dance.

“We can’t dance here,” said Sali, when they had withdrawn some distance. “We should evidently find but little pleasure here.”

“I suppose,” said Verena sadly, “it’ll be best for us to give up the idea entirely, and I will try to find a lodging.”

“No!” cried Sali. “You shall dance once! That’s why I bought you the shoes. We’ll go where the poor people are having a good time, for that’s where we too belong now. They won’t look down on us there. Whenever there’s a kermess here they always dance in Paradise Garden, because it belongs to the parish. We’ll go there and you can spend the night too if need be.

Verena shuddered at the thought of sleeping in a strange place for the first time in her life; but she unresistingly followed her escort, who was now all that she had in the world.

Paradise Garden was a tavern, beautifully situated on a lonely mountain-slope and commanding a wide view of the country, but frequented on such days of pleasure only by the poorer people, the children of the petty farmers and day-laborers, and even by all sorts of vagrants. It had been built a hundred years before by an eccentric rich man as a small country-house. Nobody had cared to live there after him, and since the place was good for nothing else, the queer country-seat began to run down, and finally fell into the hands of an innkeeper, who made a hotel of it.

But the name and its corresponding architecture had clung to the house. It consisted only of a single story, surmounted by an open platform, the roof of which was supported at the four corners by sandstone figures representing the four archangels, now badly weather-worn. All around the corners sat small, music-making angels, likewise of sandstone, with thick heads and bellies, playing the triangle, the violin, the flute, the cymbal, and the tambourine, which instruments had originally been gilded. The ceiling, the parapet of the platform and the remaining walls of the house were covered with faded frescoes, representing merry bands of angels, and singing and dancing saints. But it was now all blurred and indistinct, like a dream, and furthermore profusely covered with grapevines, while blue grapes were ripening everywhere in the foliage. All around the house stood neglected chestnut-trees, and strong, gnarled rose-bushes, living on without care, were growing here and there as wild as elder-trees grow elsewhere.

The platform served as the dance-hall. As Sali came along with

A Village Romeo and Juliet

Verena they saw from afar couples whirling under the open roof, and a throng of merry guests carousing boisterously around the house. Verena, who was devoutly and sadly carrying her love-house, resembled one of the old paintings of a holy patron-saint holding in her hand the model of a cathedral or cloister which she has founded; but nothing could come of the pious foundation which lay in her mind. As soon as she heard the wild music coming from the platform, however, she forgot her grief, and her only desire was to dance with Sali. They pushed their way through the guests who were sitting in front of the house and in the bar-room—ragged people from Seldwyla enjoying a cheap outing, and poor folks from all parts—ascended the stairs and immediately began to whirl in a waltz, not once taking their eyes from each other.

Only when the waltz was over did they look around. Verena had crushed and broken her house, and was ready to cry over it, when the sight of the black fiddler close beside them gave her an even more violent shock. He was sitting on a bench, which had been placed on a table, and he looked as black as ever; only today he had stuck a sprig of green fir into his little hat. At his feet he had set down a bottle of red wine and a glass, which he never upset, although he kept working his legs as he fiddled, thus executing a sort of an egg-dance. Beside him sat a handsome, but sad-looking young man with a French horn; and a hunchback was playing a bass viol.

Sali was also startled when he saw the fiddler. The latter, however, greeted them most amiably, calling out:

“I knew I’d play for you some time! So have a right good time, you two sweethearts, and drink my health!”

He offered Sali a full glass, and Sali drank his health.

When the fiddler saw how frightened Verena was, he assumed a friendly manner and made her laugh with some jests that were all but graceful. She took courage again, and now they were glad to have an acquaintance there, and to be, in a certain sense, under the special protection of the fiddler. They danced without cessation, forgetting themselves and the world in the whirling and singing and reveling that was going on inside and outside the house and sending its noise from the mountain far out into the country, which had gradually become veiled in the silvery haze of the autumn evening. They danced until it grew dark, and the majority of the merry guests went off, staggering and shouting, in all directions.

Those that still remained were the rabble proper, who had no homes, and proposed to follow up their pleasant day with a merry night. Among these there were some who seemed to be well acquainted with the fiddler, and who looked strange in their motley costumes. Particularly striking was a young fellow who wore a green corduroy jacket and a crumpled straw hat, around which he had bound a wreath of mountain-ash berries. He was dancing with a wild girl who wore a skirt of cherry-colored calico, dotted with white, and

A Village Romeo and Juliet

had a garland of grapevine wound around her head with a cluster hanging down over each temple. This couple was the most exuberant of all; they danced and sang untiringly and were everywhere at once.

Then there was also a slender, pretty girl in a faded black silk dress, who had tied around her head a white cloth, the ends of which fell down her back. The cloth had red stripes woven into it and was a good linen towel or napkin. Beneath it shone a pair of violet-blue eyes. Around her neck and on her breast hung a chain of six strands made of the mountain-ash berries strung on a thread, making a most beautiful coral necklace. This girl danced all the time alone, and obstinately refused to dance with any of the men. None the less she moved about lightly and gracefully, and smiled every time she passed the melancholy horn-player, whereat the latter each time turned his head away. Several other merry women were there, with their escorts, all of poor appearance, but all the more gay and congenial.

When it was quite dark the landlord refused to light any candles, asserting that the wind would blow them out; besides, the full moon would soon be up, he said, and moonlight was good enough, considering what they paid. This announcement was received with great glee; the entire company gathered near the parapet of the merry hall and watched for the rising moon, whose glow was already visible on the horizon. As soon as it appeared and cast its light obliquely across the platform of Paradise Garden, they went on dancing by moonlight, and did it as quietly and properly, and with as much contentment, as if they had been dancing in the brilliancy of a hundred wax candles.

The strange light made everybody more familiar, so that Sali and Verena could not help taking part in the general merriment and dancing with others. But every time they were separated for a little while, they flew together again and were as glad to be reunited as if they had been seeking each other for a year and had met at last. Sali made a sad and ill-natured face whenever he danced with anybody else, and was continually turning his face toward Verena, who did not look at him when she floated by, but glowed like a red rose and seemed to be supremely happy, whoever her partner might be.

“Are you jealous, Sali?” she asked him, when the musicians grew tired and stopped playing.

“Not a bit of it!” he said. “I wouldn’t know how to be!”

“Then why are you so cross when I dance with others?”

“It isn’t that that makes me cross—it’s because I have to dance with some one else myself. I can’t bear any other girl,—I feel as if I were holding a piece of wood in my arms, when it isn’t you! And you? How is it with you?”

“Oh, I am always in heaven when I’m dancing, and know that you are here! But I think I should drop dead if you were to go away

A Village Romeo and Juliet

and leave me here.”

They had gone down stairs and were standing in front of the house. Verena threw both arms about him, nestled her slender, quivering form close to him, pressed her burning cheek, which was wet with hot tears, against his face, and said, sobbing:

“We can’t stay together, and yet I can’t leave you, not a minute, not an instant!”

Sali caught the girl in his arms and hugged her passionately, covering her face with kisses. His confused thoughts were struggling to find a way out, but he could see none. Even if the misery and hopelessness of his origin could be overcome, his youth and inexperienced passion did not fit him to enter upon and endure a long period of trial and renunciation; and then there was the prime difficulty of Verena’s father, whom he had made miserable for life. The feeling that happiness could be had in the middle-class world only in an honorable and irreproachable marriage was just as strong in him as it was in Verena, and in both of the forlorn creatures it was the last flicker of that honor which had formerly glowed in their houses, and which their fathers, each feeling himself secure, had blown out and destroyed by a trifling mistake, when they so thoughtlessly appropriated the land of a missing man, thinking to upbuild this honor by increasing their property, and believing themselves safe in so doing. That very thing happens, to be sure, every day; but now and then fate makes an example of two such upbuilders of their family honor and property by bringing them into collision, when they infallibly ruin and consume each other, like two wild beasts. For it is not only on thrones that “increasers of the realm” make mistakes, but also at times in the lowliest huts; and then they reach an end the exact opposite of that which they were trying to attain, and the obverse of honor’s shield is a tablet of disgrace.

Sali and Verena, however, had seen the honor of their houses as little folk, and now recalled what well-nurtured children they had been, and that their fathers had looked like other men, respected and self-reliant. Then they had been separated for a long time, and when they met again they at once saw in each other the vanished happiness of their homes, whereby the affection of each was made to cling all the more tenaciously to the other. They were so eager to be gay and happy, but only on a solid basis, and this seemed to them unattainable; while their surging blood would have preferred to flow together at once.

“It’s night now,” said Verena, “and we must part!”

“I go home and leave you alone?” cried Sali. “No, that I can’t do!”

“Then day will dawn and find us no better off!”

“Let me give you a piece of advice, you silly creatures!” cried a shrill voice behind them, and the fiddler stepped up to them. “There you stand,” he said, “not knowing what to do and wanting

A Village Romeo and Juliet

each other. I advise you to take each other as you are, without delay. Come with me and my good friends into the mountains; there you need no pastor, no money, no papers, no honor, no bed—all you need is your own good will. It isn't so bad with us—healthy air and enough to eat, if you're up and doing. The green forests are our house, where we love each other in our own way, and in the winter we make ourselves the warmest little nests, or else creep into a farmer's warm hay. So decide quickly: get married here at once and come with us; then you'll be free from all cares, and will have each other forever and ever, at any rate, as long as you please. For you'll grow old living our free life—you can believe that. Don't think I'll take out on you what your fathers did to me. Not at all! It gives me pleasure, to be sure, to see you where you are—but with that I'm content, and I'll stand ready to help and serve you, if you'll follow me.”

He said this in a really sincere and kindly tone.

“Well, think it over a bit—but if you'll take my advice, follow me! Let the world go, marry each other, and ask nothing of anybody. Think of the jolly bridal bed in the depths of the forest, or on a hay-mow, if it's too cold for you!”

With that he went into the house. Verena was trembling in Sali's arms, and he said:

“What do you think? It seems to me it wouldn't be a bad idea to throw everything to the winds and just love each other, without let or hindrance!” But he said this more as a despairing jest than in earnest.

Verena, however, kissed him and replied very candidly: “No, I shouldn't like to go there; for things aren't according to my mind out there either. The young fellow with the horn and the girl with the silk dress belong to each other in that way, and are said to have been very much in love. Now it seems that last week the girl proved false to him for the first time, and he couldn't believe it; that is why he is so sad, and so cross with her and the others who laugh at him. She pretends to be doing penance for it by dancing alone and talking to nobody, and is just making fun of him all the time. But you can tell at once by looking at the poor musician that she'll make up with him this very day. But I shouldn't like to be where things go on in that way; for I should never want to be untrue to you, although I'd be willing to endure everything else to get you.”

Meanwhile, however, poor Verena's love grew more and more ardent on Sali's breast; for ever since noon, when that landlady had taken her for a betrothed girl, and had introduced her as such without correction, the bridal feeling had flamed in her blood, and the more hopeless she was, the wilder and the more uncontrollable it became. Sali's case was just as bad, since the fiddler's talk, however little he was inclined to heed it, had nevertheless turned his head, and he said in a halting, irresolute voice:

A Village Romeo and Juliet

“Come inside; we must at least have something more to eat and drink.”

They entered the guest-room, where there was nobody save the small company of the vagrants, who were already sitting around a table and partaking of a meagre meal.

“Here comes our bridal pair!” cried the fiddler. “Now be merry and jolly and get married!”

They were constrained to sit down at the table, and took refuge from their very selves by so doing; for they were happy merely to be among people for a moment. Sali ordered wine and more eatables, and a gay time began. The sulky man had become reconciled with his unfaithful companion, and they were caressing each other in amorous bliss. The other wild pair were also singing and drinking, nor did they fail to show signs of mutual affection; while the fiddler and the hunchback bass made noise at random.

Sali and Verena kept still with their arms about each other. Suddenly the fiddler commanded silence and performed a jocose ceremony intended to represent a wedding. They were told to join hands, and the company arose and approached in procession to congratulate them and welcome them into the brotherhood. They submitted without saying a word, regarding it as a joke, though meanwhile hot and cold thrills coursed through them.

The little gathering, inflamed by the stronger wine, was now growing more and more noisy and excited, when suddenly the fiddler insisted upon their breaking up.

“We have a long way to go,” he cried, “and it’s past midnight! Come! We’ll escort the bridal pair, and I’ll march ahead and fiddle to beat the band!”

As the helpless and forsaken pair knew nothing better to do, and were quite distracted anyway, they once more allowed things to take their course. They were stationed in front and the other two couples formed a procession behind them, the hunchback bringing up the rear with his bass viol over his shoulder. The black fiddler went ahead down the mountain, fiddling as if possessed, while the others laughed, sang, and leaped along behind.

Thus the wild nocturnal procession marched through the quiet fields, and through the native place of Sali and Verena, the inhabitants of which had long been asleep. When they entered the quiet streets and passed by their lost parental homes, a wild humor came over them in their pain, and they tried to outdo the others in dancing behind the fiddler, and kissed each other and laughed and cried. They also danced up the hill where the three fields were, as the fiddler led them thither. On the crest the black fellow sawed his fiddle twice as wildly, and jumped and hopped about like a ghost. His companions did not let him outdo them in boisterousness, so that the quiet hill was converted into a veritable Blocksberg. Even the hunchback sprang about with his burden, panting, and they all

A Village Romeo and Juliet

seemed no longer to see one another.

Sali grasped Verena's arm more firmly and forced her to stand still; for he was the first to regain his senses. To silence her he kissed her vehemently on the mouth, for she had quite forgotten herself and was singing wildly. Finally she understood him, and they stood still and listened, while their wedding escorts rushed on madly along the field and passed out of sight up the stream without missing them. The fiddle, the laughter of the girls, and the shouts of the men, however, continued to sound through the night for a long time, until finally it all died away and quiet reigned.

"We've escaped them," said Sali, "but how shall we escape ourselves? How avoid each other?"

Verena was unable to answer, and lay panting on his breast.

"Shan't I take you to town and wake up somebody and have them give you shelter? Then tomorrow you can go your way, and you'll certainly prosper—you get along well everywhere!"

"Get along without you?"

"You must forget me!"

"That I shall never do! Could you?"

"That's not the question, my love," said Sali, caressing her hot cheeks as she tossed about passionately on his breast. "The only question now is you. You're quite young, and all may yet go well with you!"

"And not with you, you aged man?"

"Come," said Sali, drawing her away; but they took only a few steps and stopped again, so as to embrace each other more conveniently. The stillness of the world sang and made music in their souls; they could hear nothing but the soft, pleasant gurgling of the river below, as it slowly flowed by.

"How beautiful it is around us! Don't you seem to hear something like a beautiful song and a ringing of bells?"

"It is the swish of the water in the river. Everything else is still."

"No, there's something else—here, there, everywhere!"

"I believe we hear our own blood roaring in our ears."

For awhile they listened to these sounds, imaginary or real, which proceeded from the intense stillness, or which they confounded with the magic effects of the moonlight playing near and far over the white, autumnal mist that lay deep on the lowlands.

Suddenly something occurred to Verena; she felt in her bodice, and said:

"I bought you another keepsake that I meant to give you." She gave him the simple ring and put it on his finger herself. Sali then produced his ring, and put it on her finger, saying:

"So we had the same thoughts!"

Verena held out her hand in the pale, silvery light and contemplated the ring:

"Oh, what a lovely ring!" she said laughing. "And so, we're really

A Village Romeo and Juliet

and truly engaged now—you're my husband and I'm your wife. Let's think we are just for a minute—only until that cloud over the moon has passed, or until we've counted twelve! Kiss me twelve times!" Sali's love was certainly just as strong as Verena's, but for him marriage was not such a living, burning question,—not so much a definite Either-or, and immediate To-be-or-not-to-be,—as for Verena, who was capable of feeling only the one thing, and saw in it with passionate decisiveness a simple issue of life or death. But now at last he saw a light, and what was womanly feeling in the young girl forthwith became in him a wild and hot desire, and a bright glow lighted up his senses. Vehemently as he had embraced and caressed Verena before, he now did it in a different and more tempestuous way, overwhelming her with kisses. In spite of her own intense feeling Verena noticed this change at once, and a violent trembling thrilled her entire being; but before the streak of cloud had crossed the moon she too was convulsed by passion. With impetuous caresses and struggles their ring-adorned hands met and clasped each other tightly, as if celebrating a wedding on their own account, without the command of a will.

Sali's heart now pounded like a hammer, and the next moment stood still. He drew a deep breath and said softly: "There's but one thing for us to do, Verena—consummate our marriage this hour, and then go out of the world together. There's the deep water—there nobody can separate us again. We shall have been united—whether for a long or a short time does not matter."

Verena at once replied:

"Sali—that thought occurred to me long ago and I decided that we could die, and then everything would be over. Then swear you'll do it!"

"It's already as good as done! Nothing but death shall ever take you from me now!" cried Sali beside himself. But Verena drew a deep sigh of relief, and tears of joy streamed from her eyes. She pulled herself together, and leaped as lightly as a bird across the field down toward the river. Sali hurried after her, thinking that she was trying to run from him, while she thought he was trying to hold her back. And thus they raced along, Verena laughing like a child unwilling to be caught.

"Do you repent now?" cried one to the other, as they reached the river and embraced.

"No, it makes me more and more happy!" each replied. Free from all cares they walked downstream along the bank, outstripping the hurrying waters, so eager were they to find a resting-place; for their passion now saw only the blissful intoxication of their union, and in this was concentrated the entire import and value of the rest of their lives. What was coming afterward, death and annihilation, was a mere breath, a nothing, and they thought less of it than a spendthrift thinks, when he is squandering his last possession, of

A Village Romeo and Juliet

how he is going to live the next day.

“My flowers shall go first!” cried Verena. “Look, they are all faded and withered!” She took them from her breast and threw them into the water, singing aloud:

“But sweeter than the almond is my true love for thee!”

“Stop!” cried Sali. “Here is your bridal bed!”

They had come to a wagon-road which led from the town to a river; and here was a landing-place where a large boat, loaded high with hay, lay moored. In wild humor Sali instantly began to untie the strong ropes. Verena laughed and caught his arm, crying:

“What are you doing? Are we going to end by stealing the farmer’s hay-boat?”

“That is their wedding present—a floating bedstead, and a bed such as no bride ever had. Besides, they’ll find their property down below, where it’s bound anyway, you see, and they’ll never know what happened to it. Look!—it’s already rocking and moving out!”

The boat lay in the deep water, a few steps from the bank. Sali lifted Verena high up in his arms and carried her through the water out toward it; but she caressed him with such boisterous vehemence, squirming like a fish, that he was unable to keep his footing in the current. Striving to get her face and hands into the water, she cried:

“I want to try the cool water too! Do you remember how cold and wet our hands were when we shook hands for the first time? We were catching fish then—now we’re going to be fish ourselves, and two fine big ones!”

“Be quiet, you dear little imp!” said Sali; for what with his lively sweetheart and the waves he was having trouble to keep his balance, “or it’ll carry me away!”

He lifted his burden into the boat and swung himself up after her; then he lifted her up on the high-piled, soft, fragrant cargo, and swung himself up after her; and as they sat there aloft the boat gradually drifted out into the middle of the river, and then floated, slowly turning, downstream.

The river flowed now through, high, dark forests, which overshadowed it, and again through open fields; now past quiet villages, now past isolated huts. Here it widened out into a placid stretch, as calm as a quiet lake, where the boat almost stopped; there it rushed around rocks and rapidly left the sleeping shores behind. And as the morning glow appeared, a city with its towers emerged from the silver-gray stream. The setting moon, as red as gold, made a shining path up the stream, and crosswise on this the boat drifted slowly along. As it drew near the city, two pallid forms, locked in close embrace, glided down in the frost of the autumn morning from the dark mass into the cold waters.

A short time afterward the boat floated, uninjured, against a

A Village Romeo and Juliet

bridge and staid there. Later, the bodies were found below the city, and when it was ascertained whence they came, the papers reported that two young people, the children of two poverty-stricken, ruined families, that lived in irreconcilable enmity, had sought death in the water, after dancing and making merry together all the afternoon at a kermess. Probably—so the papers said—this occurrence had some connection with a hay-boat from that region, which had landed in the city without a crew; and the assumption was that the young people had stolen the boat to consummate their desperate and God-forsaken marriage—a fresh evidence of the increasing demoralization and savagery of the passions.

¹Keller usually calls his heroine Vrenchen, a diminutive of Verena, which is the name of a saint; but occasionally he uses the pet” forms, Vreeli and Vrenggel. As these forms look odd in English, and hardly suggest the girl’s real name, it has seemed best to call her Verena, and to sacrifice whatever effect is due to the German diminutive.—Translator.