

**THE OWL'S NEST.
TRANSLATED
FROM THE GERMAN**

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THE OWL'S NEST

BY

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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY

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THE OWL'S NEST.

THE hawthorn and syringa bushes in the corners of the Gerold Manor courtyard were covered with blossoms; the water from the fountain, sparkling in the bright May sunlight, splashed in the stone basin, while the sparrows twittered upon the roofs of the stables and barns. It seemed as if on this day all bloomed, sparkled, and twittered more than ever in the Gerold court with a feeling of true home comfort, for the bushes, the fountain, the sparrows in their old nests, were going to remain; they would not be driven out, like the startled spiders and moths behind old cupboards and chests at the manor. Yes, it looked truly miserable there, almost as in time of war: the walls were so bare, and there was dire confusion upon the floor of the dining-room! There was nothing of all that frugal housewives had collected in the way of linen and of bedroom furniture, and their husbands' collection of silver and household effects, as well as hunting paraphernalia, which was not put into that room in order to be exposed to the cold, scrutinizing gaze of strangers, and later on to be scattered in various directions, to wander through the world sundered from all familiar associations.

How insolently the auctioneer's voice with its monotonous "No. 1—No. 2!" rang through the open windows of the room, a voice which seemed to be permeated with the thick dust of furniture and books. It was almost surprising that one of the veterans did not rise from his sleep of centuries in the subterranean vault of the chapel near by, protesting against this voice with its "by rights" accent! There moldered below many a fist which had once with vigorous blows bravely defended the posses-

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since gained or perhaps only usurped. But the present owner of Geroldcourt, from before whose eyes everything that was not clinched and riveted was now being borne away, had gentler blood in his veins. He was a noble, handsome man with dreamy eyes, with a brow which thought and study had furrowed and at the same time exalted.

At this moment he was sitting in his quiet back room, in the corner where the syringas reached far above the windows. At every breath of wind, the white and blue blossoms tapped upon the windows which, fastened tightly, shut out with tolerable success the noise of the auction in the dining-hall, whence occasionally only came a faint sound.

Herr von Gerold was writing at a pine table which had been generously left him out of the bankrupt estate. He evidently cared not that his manuscript now lay upon the scoured surface of a kitchen table; his mind, turned from the outer world, was deep in problems, while his hand traced small running characters upon the paper; he only seemed to awaken to a consciousness of things external and an expression, like that of delight on a child's face, flitted across his own, when the syringas without nodded to him.

There was some one beside him, however, in the room; a tiny, plump, fair-haired girl, who had crept into one of the window-corners. There was something as dear to the heart of the little one, as his manuscript was to the man writing there—it was her playthings. She had collected in the corner all that belonged to her alone,—yes, to her alone! The pretty, decorated set of china the kind Princess had sent her, and all her dolls, those in trains as well as the crying babies, which had arrived on birthdays and Christmases in long boxes, upon the lids of which Aunt Claudine had herself written each time: "To little Elizabeth von Gerold." Papa had always read it to her.

Little Elizabeth sat in the midst of her treasures, as in a nest, her youngest baby in her arms and her large, blue eyes fixed timidly and anxiously upon the door through which, a short while before, the "naughty men" had gone with the last pictures and the pretty clock.

She patted her doll in a softly caressing manner, other-

wise she was as quiet as a mouse; for papa looked so annoyed if she disturbed him at his writing. Nor did a sound escape her lips, when the dreaded door opened noiselessly, but the doll glided from her lap to the floor, the plump form rose from the willow chair, toddled through the room as quickly as the tiny limbs could carry her, and, with a face radiant with delight, held up her arms to the lady who entered.

Ah, she had come, Aunt Claudine, her pretty aunt, whom the child loved a thousand times more than Fräulein Duval, her governess, who always said to the other servants:

"*Pi donc*, what a *pauvre* house! It is nothing for Claire Duval!—I shall leave!"—And she left, and was not at all polite to papa, and the child had cleansed her cheek from Fräulein Duval's cold, unpleasant kiss. . . . Yes, it was certainly quite different, when two, soft hands lifted her and a sweet mouth kissed her tenderly.

Then the young lady crossed the floor as noiselessly as she had entered—only her dark silk dress rustled somewhat—and laid her hand upon the shoulder of the writer.

"Joachim!" she said in a gentle voice, leaning forward to look into his face.

He started up.

"Ah, Claudine!" he cried in evident terror. "Little sister, dear child, you should not have come here! . . . You see, I take it lightly, I am already over it; but you will be deeply grieved at the sweeping away to the four winds of all you hold dear. Poor, poor child! How your tear-swollen eyes pain me!"

"But a few tears, Joachim," said she with smiling lips, though in her voice there was still a trace of sadness.

"The black horse is to blame for that, our old mail-carrier, who fetched the mail-bag daily. Only think, he recognized me at once, the faithful beast, as he was led past me——"

"Yes, and Peter is gone, aunt," said little Elizabeth. "Good Peter will not come any more; and the carriage is gone too, and papa will have to walk to the Owl's Nest."

"He need not walk, dear heart; I brought a carriage," comforted Aunt Claudine. "I will not lay aside my wraps, Joachim——"

"I cannot ask you to in this house. I cannot even offer you any refreshment. The cook served our last potato-soup and then left, for she had to go to her new place. . . . You see, these are bitter pangs which you are experiencing, and which you might have spared yourself. You will have to struggle with yourself a long time, in order after your return to court to dissipate the disagreeable phantom of these memories."

She shook her lovely head slowly.

"I shall not return to court. I shall remain with you," she declared resolutely.

He drew back.

"How—with me? Would you share my—my beggar's livelihood? Never, Claudine, never!" He extended his hand as if to ward her off. "Our beautiful swan, the apple of our eyes, the delight of so many, is to pine in the Owl's Nest! What do you think me, that you attribute such selfishness to me? . . . I willingly, yes, with a light heart, retire to the old house, to *your* house and inheritance, which you have generously placed at my disposal,—it will be cosy and homelike to me, for I have my work which glorifies everything, which sweetens my frugal fare and gilds the old walks; but you—you?"

"I anticipated this protest, and therefore acted independently," said she firmly, looking affectionately in his face with her gentle, long-lashed eyes. "I know very well that you do not need me, you self-sufficient, silent hermit; but what will become of your little Elizabeth?"

With a startled glance he turned towards the child, who was trying to put on a small, cotton circular, such as is worn by the Thuringen peasants, preparatory to setting out.

"Fräulein Lindenmeyer is there," said he, with hesitation.

"Fräulein Lindenmeyer was grandmamma's faithful waiting-woman, and has all her life been as true as gold; but now she is old and gray; we cannot possibly entrust her with the care of the child. And what do you think would be the dear, old, sentimental soul's instruction?" she continued eagerly, while a mournful smile flitted across her features. "No, let me alone for my wrongdoings! I should not have gone to the old Princess; I should have refused the position of lady-in-waiting, to

remain with you, to help support the backward-rolling wheel. Matters have looked bad at Geroldcourt for some time before——”

“Before your brother foolishly brought home from Spain a spoiled wife, who, for years, suffered in the German climate, until the angel of deliverance freed her from her torture, is it not so, Claudine?” he completed with an access of bitterness. “In addition to that he was a miserable agriculturist, a good-for-nothing, who studied field flowers and grasses under the microscope, and praised their beauty, and forgot that they were detrimental to good pasturage. Yes, it is true! The, at this time, rather neglected estate could not have fallen into worse hands than mine; but am I alone responsible? Am I to blame that there is within me no drop of peasant’s blood, which was always tolerated in the blue-blooded veins of our ancestors? The plow and the breeding of cattle earned the greater part of the Gerold wealth, now scattered to the four winds, and I am forced to blush in the presence of the meanest day-laborer in the village, who by industry and toil seeks to improve his potato-patch. I take nothing with me but my pen and a handful of ready money, which is to provide myself and my child with bread until my manuscript is completed and disposed of. Therefore do I write with ‘throbbing pulses’——”

He paused. With a bitter smile he advanced to the young lady and laid both hands upon her shoulders.

“Yes, do you see, child, darling sister? we two, the two last, are swimming birds which the honest old domestic fowl, the old Gerold genus, hatched at the close of its long earthly career! As children we instinctively took a particular channel, I, the dreamer, the hypercritic, the star-gazer, and you the nightingale with the sweet voice, the graceful and elegant form. And now you come to the wood-gatherer and bookworm, such as I am, and wish to go with him to the Owl’s Nest”——he shook his head energetically——“you shall not go even to the threshold of the old house, Claudine. Drive home again in your carriage! My legs have become stiff from sitting still in this corner, whither I fled from the bustle; the walk to the Owl’s Nest will do them good, and Friedrich, our faithful Friedrich, will carry the child if she gets tired. And now a brief farewell, Claudine!”

He opened his arms to clasp his sister in a last embrace, but she drew back.

"Who has told you I *can* return?" she asked, seriously. "I asked for my dismissal and it was granted me. My dear old Princess understood me, and without a question on her part, she knew exactly how matters lay. And now, do you be sensible, to me, Joachim,"—a deep, dark blush suffused her cheeks suddenly,—“and in silence accept the fact that there was another reason for my return besides the desire to be with you. Take me as I come to you, with sealed lips, but with a heart filled with true sisterly love—will you?”

He drew her silently to him and kissed her brow.

She breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"We shall surely have frugal fare," continued she, "but it is no beggar's livelihood," said she, with a gentle, merry smile. "Her Highness would hear of nothing but that I should receive my salary as usual, and grandmamma's legacy yields a nice little sum annually. Consequently, we shall not starve, and you shall not write with 'throbbing pulse' in the future. I will not permit it! You shall complete your excellent work undisturbed, at your own pleasure. Now, we will get ready."

Her eyes roved about the bare room and rested on a small trunk.

"This is all I can rightfully take with me," said Herr von Gerold, following her glance. "Not much more than the last descendant of the Gerolds unwittingly laid claim to on his entrance into life,—the most absolutely necessary clothing for the body. But no,—what atrocious ingratitude!" He put his hand to his brow and his eyes gleamed. "Listen, Claudine, is this not odd? Think! do you know of a friend, one who without hesitation would take two thousand dollars from his pocket with his right hand without his left hand knowing it? I know of no one, no matter how I rack my brains, no one in God's world! . . . And yet, yesterday a few boxes were placed for me in the adjoining room, *by legal authority*, for I am supposed to have bought them back at the auction through some one commissioned to do so. I, the beggar! I laughed in the porter's face. But they went along and did not take with them my books, my valuable, little library, for which my eyes were filled with tears when profane