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Paul Heyse

Table of Contents

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translated from the German by Frances A. Van Santford

YOU must know that I am a clergyman's daughter from Baden, the sixth of fourteen children, boys and girls, in varied succession. Although I could have found a goodly number of living playthings at home, I nevertheless chose for my favorite doll a stranger child — the daughter of our sexton — a puny little thing who was neither very pretty nor very clever; but the small creature somehow bewitched me as soon as I knew her; and for days at a time, when I had nothing else to do, I would devote myself to her, would take her walking, play with her, and save for her all the choice morsels from my own plate. They were not many, to be sure, for in a parsonage so rich in children, Jack Pinchpenny is steward; but there came holidays and birthdays, and of what wee good things fell to my share, the little Lisbeth — for so my treasure was called — had to have the larger half.

She was indeed a singular child, different from my troop of romping brothers and sisters, whose ways, mannerly and unmannerly, I knew by heart.

She was just turned three, when my father was transferred to the parish of which her father was sexton. But she engaged my attention at once — she had such great brown eyes, and never laughed or cried, but looked about her as subdued and thoughtful as a grown person. Yet she was bright and nimble too, as a squirrel, when she ran through the meadows in her scant little skirts and bare brown feet, chasing the butterflies. But when she had caught one she would hold it carefully in her tiny hand, and then suffer it to fly away again. She would sit for hours at a time on the doorstep and watch the chickens that ran peeping around her to pick up the crumbs she threw them, or the swallows as they darted about the church roof, their wings glistening in the sunshine. She had no brothers or sisters with whom she could play, and for inanimate toys she cared nothing. Before I had known her many days I became very fond of the child. I, who at eleven could not live without dolls, thought it a great pity that she had none of her own; and accordingly, I presented her with one of mine, whose hands and face I had washed clean, and for which I had made a new frock. I can see yet how she regarded the pretty puppet admiringly, nodded to me and flushed a little; but my present she laid at her side and did not further concern herself with it. That annoyed me, for I had taken no small credit to myself on the score of my generosity and condescension. But I fancied her indifference might, after all, be only embarrassment; and perhaps she was not pleased with the dress, which was not specially fine. With a second one, however, on which I had sewed some tinsel, things went no better. I had to conclude that little Lisbeth was no lover of dolls, and this weaned me from my own. From that time, the child became my doll; and I was not happy unless I could hold her in my arms, or clasp her wee hand and run about with her.

To this her family consented readily enough. Her mother had her hands full in attending to their poor housekeeping, and her father in cultivating their little garden patch and feeding and milking their one lean cow. This cow, too, was a good friend of Lisbeth; but the child did not know what to do with the great dumb beast, and was more at home with the smaller ones in the dooryard and upon the village street.

It was curious to see upon what confidential terms she was with them all, just as though she understood their language. I came upon her sometimes, as she was imitating the voices of these different creatures — the cooing of the doves, the cackling of the hens, the hum of the bees, and the manifold bird voices; if, however, she became

aware that I was listening, she was silent at once.

Human speech she learned later than most children, and she made little use of it; whereas my own brothers and sisters prattled the livelong day. None of my own family understood why I preferred to steal away to the sexton's child when I had a little time to myself. But one smile from Lisbeth as she saw me coming, or one shy caress, was sweeter to me than sugarplums, or a high mark at school.

When my darling was five years old, her father bought a pair of rabbits, for which he built a little hutch at the end of the kitchen garden; he wished to provide a cheap roast, every second Sunday, with his dish of turnips and cabbage, for otherwise little meat would come upon his table. Now this was a great boon for Lisbeth. All her other pets would run away as soon as they had snatched the food from her hands; and cats and dogs, who are greedy parasites, but withal, caressing and sensitive to human tenderness, were not tolerated in this small household. But these sleek, silky−soft little gourmands, because they could furnish a roast and were blessed with a numerous progeny, engaged the sexton's care and attention. The task of feeding them was entrusted to Lisbeth, who was not yet in school, and could wish for no more pleasant employment. But to eat them when a rabbit roast came upon the table, she could in no way be induced.

She was as confidential with these new members of the family as with everything else that crept or flew. No prettier sight could be seen than was offered when this small person opened the grating of the hutch, and the whole nimble company rushed, crowding around her, rolling over each other, nibbling at the little skirt, tumbling on her small naked feet, and emitting that piping, squeaking sound which is peculiar to these creatures when they are hungry. Their little foster−mother held a switch in her hand, with which she warded off the more importunate ones, giving them a gentle tap upon their smooth heads. Then she went on to a low pen between the house and garden, where the refuse from the kitchen was thrown cabbage stalks, lettuce leaves, and whatever else she had gathered from the houses of the peasants, who gladly gave her what they had to spare of such fodder, for they were fond of the quiet child.

Now, this grave little person would seat herself upon a hewn stump, and keep watch for hours at a time while her young charges were feeding. Now and then, when one of them fell short, or was pushed aside by its saucy fellows, with a light tap of her whip she would restore justice once more. Nothing could lure her away from this occupation.

When the nibbling mouths were at last satisfied, the little foster−mother would lift one of the flock by its soft ears, place it in her lap, and gently stroke its back or scratch it softly upon the head; and so in turn all of the others, neglecting none. Whereupon she would gather her flock, with coaxing call and tap of the switch, and drive it slowly back to the grated inclosure. Between the wires she would thrust some juicy cabbage leaves, pom la bonne bouche, and stand watching the young company munching contentedly.

Ah, she was a strange, sweet child, this little Lisbeth!

"Dear," I said to her once, "what will you do when you have to go to school? They will have to let you take Haunesle" this was the name of her especial pet, a black rabbit with white ears "in your school−bag with you, so that you can feed it with your biscuits at recess time."

The child looked at me with her large, serious eyes, and said: "I would rather not learn anything than to have to go away from them."

Poor little innocent! She little dreamed that she would never study upon any earthly school−bench.

But I beg your pardon if I prate too garrulously of my childish recollections; the end shall come now all the sooner.

One Monday morning in the spring I drove with my father to see a brother clergyman who had a little daughter with whom I had formerly been the best of friends. Now, after a two years' separation, I was to spend the entire day with her; but somehow the prospect did not seem so very attractive. My friend had read a variety of books in the meantime, and carried her head quite high in the air, for she fancied herself a miracle of learning. And I, with my Robinson and Leinhart, seemed to myself like a stupid rustic, in comparison. Moreover, it was the first time that I had not seen Lisbeth for a whole long day, and the thought was like a premonition, and oppressed my heart. So I was not sorry when the time came to depart and I could bid adieu to my accomplished friend.

It was dark night when we reached our village, and I observed at once that a light was still burning in the sexton's house, where they usually went to bed with the chickens. At our own house, too, there was unusual commotion; my mother came out to meet us with a very disturbed face, and said something in a low tone to my father, whereat he cast a pitying glance at me and sent me at once to bed.

It did not help matters that they tried to spare me, so that I should not lose my night's sleep. By dint of questioning, I got it all out of our old Katharine.

Only to think! that forenoon, as the weather was fine, Lisbeth had let her little flock run about on a green near the house, where all kinds of juicy weeds grew; when, on a sudden, a strange butcher's−boy had come along that way, stopped a moment to watch the sight and, then, as ill−luck would have it, one of the silly little animals had sprung between his dog's legs. But the great brute could not understand the fun, and had snapped at it and caught the poor sinner by the nape of his neck.

For Lisbeth to see this and spring at the dog, screaming and lashing her switch, took but an instant. The dog, as he felt the whip, dropped the rabbit, gave a yelp, and sprung at the child, biting her arm. He would have torn her to pieces had not his master seized him by the collar and forced him back. The blood spurted from the sleeve of the child's little frock, but she had not seemed aware of it; for she had bent over the rabbit, lifted it, stroked it, and ran with it in her apron back to the house. Once inside, still she did not pay any attention to her wound, but had rushed to the well with the little animal, who had not lost one drop of blood and was only benumbed of fright. When the mother first became aware of the accident, she set up a loud wail as she saw what had happened to her child. Then Lisbeth had said her arm hurt her, and with that she had fallen in a swoon.

They had put her to bed and sent for the barber, who had examined the wound and looked grave for they could not say whether the dog were mad or not. Later, the butcher's−boy had vouched for the dog it was not mad. But the bite had gone deep and an artery was severed. It was a severe accident; and, though the bandage had stopped the bleeding, they must continue to use cold applications until ice could be brought from the nearest town.

I wanted to go on at once, but my mother would not hear of it. When I was allowed to go to Lisbeth, early the next morning, I found her sitting up in her little bed, in a fever. She had Haunesle on the blanket, and was stroking him with her hot hand; but she recognized no one, save him and me. It was a heart−breaking sight, and I had hard work to keep from weeping aloud. But neither commands nor threats could drive me from that chamber the whole day and the night following. Only towards morning my eyes would close for an hour or so, and when I opened them again, my poor darling had closed hers forever. The doctor, for whom my father had sent to town, explained that the compress had not been applied with sufficient care; a fragment of the sleeve had remained in the wound and caused blood−poisoning.

That was the first great sorrow of my young life, and it made me stiff and stony, so that I went about like one in a dream, and could be interested in nothing. On the third day, with two of my sisters, I followed the little coffin to the churchyard. Of my father's address at the grave I did not understand a word; and as the little coffin was covered with wreaths and the clods of earth were thrown upon it, I burst into tears and suffered myself to be led home, unresisting, by my mother, and put to bed. Then there fell upon me, after my long watching and grief, a leaden slumber. I did not hear my three younger sisters, who slept with me in the attic chamber, as they undressed

themselves and went to bed.

Now, all this happened in mid−summer, and the air in the room where the four beds stood continued to grow hot and close, till at last an Alp, of a hundred−weight, seemed resting upon my chest, and, with a groan, I sat upright to shake it off. The full moon shone in as bright as day, so that I could plainly distinguish the faces of my sisters, and even see how heavily they were breathing. I arose, and went to open the window; but as I turned around, the door which was opposite the window opened softly, and in stepped the child whom we had buried that afternoon. She remained standing at the threshold, and looked at me with wide−open eyes. She was in the white frock, just as she had lain in her coffin, the wreath slightly awry on her brown hair, she was quite pale but not deathly in hue, and in other respects there was nothing uncanny about her. I was terrified, but only for an instant, then I could look at her without fear. I nodded to her and said: "Are you really little Lisbeth? And what do you want of me?"

But the poor child made no answer; only stretched one arm toward me and beckoned me.

"What do you mean?" I asked again. "Don't you want to lie down again and go to sleep? Or shall I go with you anywhere?"

Still she would not talk, but made a painfully beseeching gesture, and beckoned me again.

"Well, then," I said for I had never been able to refuse her anything in life "wait, and I will come directly." So I slipped into my petticoat, and drew on my stockings my sisters slept on tranquilly. As the child turned about on her little bare feet her steps were inaudible; I glided after her, and we descended the stairs without so much as one board creaking. So we two slipped out at the back door, which was never locked, through the parsonage garden, where the moonlight silvered every shrub, and into the narrow lane separating our garden from the churchyard. I had no idea but that the child would take me to her freshly−made grave; and dearly as I loved her, and devotedly as I would have followed her even to a much more gruesome place, I shuddered, grew icy cold, and was about to ask her again what was her intention, when she suddenly turned the corner of the churchyard wall and hastened past it, swaying like a little white cloud on before me toward her home, which was on the other side of the churchyard. "What does she want there," I wondered to myself. "Does she want to see her poor mother once more?" No, she did not go into the house. Along the hedge which inclosed the sexton's garden, she went, swifter and swifter; now through the grated door, and straight toward the little hutch in the corner where her pets were confined. There she stood still and looked around at me for the first time, raised both her little hands as though she were praying, and, as I nodded to her, stepped back between the rows of cabbages as if to let me pass. I did not understand at once what she wished, but I went at random toward the little inclosure, and slid the bolt of the grated door. Then I saw at a glance the meaning of the dead child's entreaties. The largest among the little tenants lay about exhausted of hunger, and only moved their ears feebly as they saw me. Of the smaller ones, Haunesle alone was alive, and he was so weak that he could only blink at me with his pink eyes. Not a morsel of food, however small, in any corner; the dish of water empty. Who, in their grief at the loss of this child, could think of her nurslings? And so, she herself had had no rest in her grave, but had risen, before all had perished by starvation, and had summoned her best friend to their rescue.

As I looked around toward her, and was on the point of saying that she could go to sleep again, for I would now care for them, the gentle ghost had vanished. The moon shone broadly over the garden−beds; I could count the leaves on every head of cabbage; but little Lisbeth was no longer to be seen.