

THE PATH TO THE CEMETERY

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THE PATH to the cemetery ran always parallel to the highway, always side by side, until it had reached its goal; that is to say, the cemetery. On the other side there were human habitations, new structures of the suburbs, part of which were still in process of completion, and then came fields. As to the highway itself, this was flanked by trees, by knotty beeches of a good old age, and the road was half paved and half bare earth. But the path to the cemetery was thinly strewn with pebbles, which gave it the character of an agreeable foot-path. A small, dry ditch, filled with grass and wildflowers, extended between the two.

It was spring, and almost summer already. The whole world smiled. God's blue skies were covered with masses of small, round, compact little clouds, dotted with many snow-white little clumps which had an almost humorous look. The birds twittered in the beeches, and a mild wind swept across the fields.

A wagon from the neighbouring village crept towards the city; it rolled partly upon the paved, partly upon the unpaved part of the highway. The driver let his legs dangle on both sides of the shaft and whistled execrably. In the back part of the wagon there sat a little yellow dog with its back to him, and along its pointed little nose looked back with an unutterably grave and collected mien at the way it had just come. It was an incomparable, a most diverting little dog, worth its weight in gold; but it plays no part in this affair and so we must turn our faces from it.—A detachment of soldiers went marching by. They came from the garrison near by, marched in their own dust, and sang. A second wagon crept from the direction of the city towards the next village. The driver slept, and there was no little dog, for which reason this vehicle is entirely without interest. Two journeymen came striding along, the one hunched-backed, the other a giant in stature. They went barefooted, carrying their boots on their backs, called out cheerily to the sleeping driver, and strode on bravely. The traffic was moderate, regulating itself without complications or accidents.

The way to the cemetery was trodden by a solitary man; he walked slowly, with lowered head, and supported himself on a black stick. The man was called Piepsam, Lobgott (Praise-god) Piepsam and nothing else. We proclaim his name with a certain emphasis because subsequently he acted in a most peculiar manner.

He was dressed in black, for he was on the way to the graves of his loved ones. He wore a rough, cylindrical silk hat, a frock-coat shiny with age, trousers which were not only too narrow but also too short, and black kid gloves which were shabby all over. His throat, a long, lean throat with a large Adam's apple, lifted itself from a turnover collar which was frayed and displayed corners which had already become a little rough. But when the man raised his head, which he did at times in order to see how far he still was from the cemetery, then one was treated to a strange sight, a remarkable face, a face which beyond all question one was not likely soon to forget.

This face was smooth-shaven and pale. Between the hollowed-out cheeks there protruded a nose which thickened bulbously at the end, a nose which glowed with an irregular, unnatural red and which, quite superfluously, paraded a mass of little excrescences, unhealthy growths which gave it an unconventional and fantastic look. This nose, the dark rubicundity of which contrasted sharply with the dull pallor of the rest of the face, embodied something unreal and picturesque; it looked as though it were merely affixed like a masquerade nose, like a melancholy joke. But it was not this alone. The man kept his mouth, a broad mouth with sunk corners, tightly closed, and whenever he looked up, he lifted his black eyebrows, which were shot through by little white hairs—lifted them beneath the brim of his hat, so that one might see how inflamed his eyes were and what dark circles surrounded them. In short, it was a face to which one could not permanently refuse the deepest sympathy.

Lobgott Piepsam's appearance was not a joyous one; it fitted in but badly with this charming forenoon, and it was even too dismal for one who was about to pay a visit to the graves of his loved ones. But looking into his heart and soul, one was forced to confess that there were sufficient grounds for all this. He was a trifle depressed?—it is difficult to convey this to people so merry as yourselves—perhaps a bit unhappy?—a trifle badly treated? Well, to tell the truth, he was all of these things not only a trifle, but to a high degree; he was, without any exaggeration, in a bad way.

First of all, he drank. But of this more anon. Furthermore he was a widower, had lost both parents, and stood abandoned by everybody; he had not a single soul to love him in all the world. His wife, whose maiden-name had been Lebzelt, had been reft from his side after she had borne him a child little less than half a year ago; it was the third child ar

it had been still-born. Both of the other children had also died—one of diphtheria, the other of really nothing at all—perhaps out of a general ineptitude. But this had not been enough, for soon after this he had lost his job, had been driven out of his petty position; and that bore a close relation to that passion of his which was mightier than Piepsam.

Formerly he had been able to resist it to some degree, although there were periods when he had been intemperately addicted to it. But after wife and children had been taken from him, after he had lost all his friends and stood alone in the world and without a single support or hold, his vice had mastered him and had broken his spiritual resistance more and more. He had been an official in the service of an insurance society, a kind of higher copyist with a monthly salary of ninety marks. While in his irresponsible condition, he had become guilty of gross negligence, and after having been repeatedly warned, he had been finally discharged as unreliable.

It is clear that this did not by any manner of means lead to a moral revolt on the part of Piepsam, but that he was thenceforth utterly doomed. For you must know that ill fortune slays the dignity of a man—it is just as well to have a little insight into these things. There is a strange and dreadful concatenation of cause and effect here. There is no use in a man's protesting his own innocence; in most cases he will despise himself for his misfortune. But self-contempt and vice have a strange and horrible interrelationship; they feed each other, they play into each other's hands, in a way to make one's blood run cold. And that is the way it was with Piepsam. He drank because he did not respect himself, and he respected himself less and less because the continual shameful defeats of all his good resolutions devoured all his self-confidence. In a wardrobe in his home there usually stood a bottle containing a poisonous yellow fluid, a most pernicious fluid—we must be cautious and not mention its name. Lobgott Piepsam had literally knelt before his wardrobe and almost bitten his tongue in two; and in spite of this he would go down in defeat in the end.—We take no pleasure in relating these facts, but they are, after all, instructive.

And here he was walking along the path to the cemetery and prodding the ground with his black cane. A gentle wind played about his nose, but he did not feel it. His eyebrows elevated, he bent a hollow and turbid look upon the world about him—a lorn and miserable creature.—Suddenly he heard a noise behind him and pricked up his ears; a soft rushing sound was approaching with great rapidity from the distance. He turned about and stood still.—It was a bicycle, the tires of which crunched along the pebble-strewn path. It came on in full career, but then slackened its speed, for Piepsam stood in the middle of the way.

A young man sat in the saddle, a youth, a careless youth on a tour. He

himself, great heavens, surely made no pretensions to belonging to the great and glorious one of the world! He rode a machine of middling quality—it does not really matter of what make—a wheel costing, say, about two hundred marks. And with this he went pedalling a bit through the country, fresh from the city, riding with flashing pedals into God's green world—hurray! He wore a coloured shirt and a grey jacket, sports leggings, and the jauntiest little cap in the world—a very joke of a cap, with brown checks and a button on the top. And from under this cap a thick mop of blond hair welled forth and stood up above his forehead. His eyes were of a lightning-blue. He came on like Life itself and tinkled his bell, but Piepsam did not move a hair's breadth out of the way. He stood there and looked at Life with a rigid stare.

It looked angrily at him and rode slowly past him, whereupon Piepsam also began to walk on. But when it was ahead of him, he said slowly and with a weighty emphasis: "Number nine thousand seven hundred and seven."

He then pursed up his lips and stared incontinently at the ground, at the same time feeling that Life's eyes were bent upon him in perplexity.

It had turned round, had seized the saddle from behind with one hand, and rode very slowly.

"What?" it asked.

"Number nine thousand seven hundred and seven," repeated Piepsam. "Oh, nothing. I'll report you."

"You will report me?" Life asked, turned still further round, and rode still more slowly, so that it was obliged to wobble to and fro with the handle-bars.

"Certainly!" replied Piepsam at a distance of five or six steps.

"Why?" asked Life, and dismounted. It stood still and seemed full of expectancy.

"You know why well enough."

"No, I don't know why."

"You must know."

"But I do not know why," said Life, "and moreover I am not at all interested why." With this it was about to mount its wheel again. It was not at all at a loss for words.

"I will report you," said Piepsam, "because you ride here, on this path to the cemetery, and not out there on the high-road."

"But, my dear sir!" Life said, with an impatient and angry laugh, turned round once more, and stood still. "You see tracks of bicycles along the entire path. Everybody rides here."

"That's all one to me," retorted Piepsam; "I'll report you just the same."

"Well, do whatever you like!" Life cried, and mounted its wheel. It

really mounted, it did not disgrace itself by making a mess of this; it gave a single thrust with its foot, sat securely on the saddle, and put forth all efforts to reacquire a speed in accordance with its temperament.

"If you keep on riding here, here on the path to the cemetery, I shall most surely report you!" cried Piepsam in a high and trembling voice. But Life really troubled itself very little about this; it rode off with increasing speed.

Had you seen Lobgott Piepsam's face at this moment, you would have been greatly frightened. He pressed his lips so firmly together that his cheeks and even the rubicund nose were twisted quite out of place, and his eyes, from beneath his unnaturally raised eyebrows, stared with an insane expression after the vehicle as it rolled away. Suddenly he dashed forwards. At a run he traversed the short distance which separated him from the machine, and seized the tool-case beneath the saddle. He held on to it with both hands, literally attached himself to it, and with lips still pressed together in an unnatural manner, dumb, and with wild eyes, he tugged with all his strength at the balancing bicycle as it speeded forwards. Anyone seeing him might well have doubted whether he intended, out of malice, to hinder the young man from riding on, or whether he had been seized by the desire to let himself be taken in tow, to jump on behind and ride along with the young man—to go himself riding a bit through the country, riding with flashing pedals into God's green world—hurray!—The wheel was not able to withstand this desperate drag for any length of time; it stood still, it wobbled, it fell over.

And then Life grew wild. It had lighted upon one foot; then it drew back its right arm and gave Herr Piepsam such a blow on the chest that he staggered back several paces. Then, with a voice which swelled into a threatening tone, it said: "You must be drunk, you fool! You must be off your head! If you dare to hold me up again, I'll give you a smash in the jaw—do you hear? I'll break your neck! And don't you forget it!"

With this it turned its back upon Herr Piepsam, gave an indignant tug to its cap, drawing it tighter upon its head, and once more mounted its wheel. No, it was certainly not at a loss for words. And the business of mounting succeeded as well as before. Again it merely thrust down one foot, sat securely in the saddle, and had the machine once more under full control. Piepsam saw its back diminish more and more rapidly.

He stood there panting and stared after Life. It did not take a header, no accident overtook it, no tire burst, and no stone lay in its path; lightly it sailed on. And then Piepsam began to shout and to scold—one might have called it a bellowing, for it was no longer a human voice.

"You shall not ride there!" he cried. "You shall not! You shall ride out there and not on the path to the cemetery, do you hear? You get off—get off at once! Oh, oh! I'll report you! I'll sue you! God! if you would

only take a tumble, if you would only fall off, you windy brute, I would kick you, kick you in the face with my boots, you damned rogue! . . ."

Never had the like been seen before! A man calling bad names on the way to the cemetery, a man with a swollen face, bellowing, a man whose scolding renders him hopping mad, who cuts capers, throwing his arms and legs about, and seems unable to control himself. The wheel was really no longer in sight, yet Piepsam still raved and danced in the same spot.

"Hold him! hold him! He is riding on the path to the cemetery! You villain! You impudent clown! You damned ass! If I could only get hold of you, wouldn't I skin you alive, you silly ass, you stupid windbag, you tomfool, you ignorant bounder!—You get off! You get off this very instant! Will nobody kick him into the dirt, the scoundrel?—Riding for pleasure, eh? On the way to the cemetery! Knock him off his wheel, the damned oaf! Oh! Oh! If I only had you, what wouldn't I do? And what else? Eyes blue as lightning, eh? May the devil scratch them out of your face, you ignorant, ignorant, ignorant bounder! . . ."

Piepsam now took to language which is not to be repeated; he foamed, and poured forth in his cracked voice the most shameful terms of reprobation, while the contortions of his body continually increased. A couple of children with a basket and a terrier came over from the high-road; they climbed across the ditch, stood about the screaming man, and looked curiously into his distorted visage. A few labourers, who worked on the new buildings in the vicinity, or had just begun their mid-day rest, also became attentive, and a number of men as well as some of the women who were mixing mortar came walking towards the group. But Piepsam continued to rave on; he was growing worse and worse. In his blind and insane rage he shook his fists towards heaven and in all directions, shook his legs convulsively, turned himself round and round, bent the knee and leaped into the air again, succumbing to his excessive efforts to shout as loud as possible. He did not pause a single moment in his tirade, he hardly took time to breathe, and it was really astonishing where all his language came from. His face was terribly swollen, his high hat sat far back on his neck, and his false shirt-front, which was not fastened, hung out of his waistcoat. He had long ago arrived at generalities and poured out things which had not the remotest connexion with the subject in hand. They dealt with his dissipated life and with religious matters, uttered in a most unsuitable tone and viciously intermingled with curse-words.

"Come on, come on, all of you!" he bellowed. "Not you, not only you, but the rest of you, you with the bicycle caps and eyes blue as lightning! I'll shout truths into your ear so that your blood will run cold for ever, you windy rogues! . . . You grin, do you? Shrug your shoulders? . . ."

I drink . . . certainly I drink! I even guzzle, if you care to hear it! What does that mean? It's a long road that knows no turning! The day will come, you good-for-nothing rubbish, when God shall weigh all of us. . . . Oh! oh! The Son of Man will come in the clouds, you innocent *canaille*, and His justice is not of this world! He will cast you into the outermost darkness, you merry wretches, where there is howling and . . ."

He was now surrounded by quite an imposing group of people. A few laughed and a few looked at him with wrinkled brows. More workmen and several more mortar-women had come over from the buildings. A driver had got off his wagon, halting it upon the high-road, and, whip in hand, had also climbed across the ditch. A man took Piepsam by the arm and shook him, but that had no effect. A squad of soldiers marched by and, laughing, craned their necks to look at him. The terrier could no longer hold back, but braced his forelegs against the ground and, with his tail thrust between his legs, howled directly into his face.

Suddenly Lobgott Piepsam cried once more at the top of his voice: "You get off, you get off at once, you ignorant bounder!" described a half-circle with one arm, and then collapsed. He lay there, suddenly struck dumb, a black heap amidst the curious. His cylindrical silk hat flew off, rebounded once from the ground, and also lay there.

Two masons bent over the immovable Piepsam and discussed the case in that whole-hearted and sensible tone common to working-men. Then one of them went off at a quick stride. Those who remained behind undertook a few more experiments with the unconscious one. One man dashed water in his face out of a bucket, another poured some brandy out of a bottle into the palm of his hand and rubbed Piepsam's temples with it. But these efforts were crowned with no success.

A short interval thus elapsed. Then wheels were heard, and a wagon came along the high-road. It was an ambulance, drawn by two pretty little horses and with a gigantic red cross painted on each side. It came to a halt, and two men in neat uniforms climbed down from the driver's seat, and while one went to the back part of the wagon to open it and to draw out the stretcher, the other rushed upon the path to the cemetery, pushed the staring crowd aside, and, with the help of one of the men, carried Herr Piepsam to the wagon. He was laid upon the stretcher and shoved into the wagon like a loaf of bread into an oven, whereupon the door snapped shut and the two uniformed men climbed to the driver's seat again. All this was done with great precision, with a few practised turns of the hand, quick and adroit, as by trained apes.

And then Lobgott Piepsam was driven away.