A young millionaire - K 2076

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THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

A German Village Story

by

AUGUSTA BENDER.

Escaped from the sweltering heat, the dust and turmoil of the closely built city, I love to wander back in thought to the quiet fields of my childhood on the other side of the ocean. What else can one do on the long still summer afternoons, when great Pan holds his midday siesta, or during the evenings when the numberless host of crickets and locusts keep one awake till after midnight with their shrill monotonous chirping?

It is a time for home-sickness and longing. With the old songs old memories rise from their graves, and sounds and voices long since died away are heard again by the inward ear and tell the old sad story of past life and long forgotten love.

When my thoughts thus wander up the lonely village road-- moving the faster the nearer they approach the parental roof-- then they suddenly start back like prancing steeds who seem to see a ghost by the wayside. For yonder at the corner, where the large sign-post extends its arms, rises gloomy and dark the haunted house--the terror of my early youth and childhood.

And again when the moon shines through my window, creeps over the floor and slowly--slowly reaches my bed and face then I quickly start up as if I had heard mysterious commotions before my door, as if somebody were bringing me,

It was a corner house with a sign-post in front of it, as here the way from the main street branched off towards the little R. hamlet of Eichheim. This way, too, was a post-road, like the main street, a broad and well kept highway, as are all the "Chaussées" in Germany.

And in this house lived the only friend of my intellectual aspirations - my neighbor Katherine Hartnagel. - To my childish ideas, however, she was no neighbor at all, because her house lay across the street beyond two intervening houses, at a distance of some seventy or eighty paces from our own door. And how far this seemed to me, then, and yet I could see at any time, from our sitting room window what was going on in their garden behind the shed and before their barn and stables.

sad

by word or letter some unhappy news. But instantly I remember that all my dearest ones are dead, that my old friends have forgotten me, and that I am of no value to anyone around me. Then, with a deep sigh, I turn my head

away from

out of the moonlight and ~~e~~ become conscious that I have heard nothing but one of those long forgotten voices of my home; and then I try to go to sleep again.

But it is a fruitless effort, and I lie awake the rest of the night thinking of my native village far away on the Franconian tableland. I see in my mind the long main street with its two rows of houses and behind them the orchards and meadows, terminating in the little cabbage gardens; over-towered by the hills which we euphoniously called "the mountains."

They seemed very high to me, those hills , when I was a child and I often wondered what was behind them, and how far it was to the mighty Rhine, which was said to be at least a hundred times as large as our village brook; and even to the big ocean, which to my imagination was entirely boundless.

But my youthful thoughts did not always wander "over the hills and far away" where now I write. They also busied themselves with the simple life around me, where everybody knows whatever happens under every roof of the village. And among other things, I knew the part that riches played in love affairs, as well as in every transaction of the community, from the election of the Burgomaster down to that of the beadle.

These things did not then affect me much, for I inno-

cently believed that our village life was quite exceptionally prosaic and that in the enchanting distance over the hills, it was quite impossible that people should care for nothing but richess and the things which could be bought with gold. That was the reason why I longed so to go away; the far-off country to me was the enchanting land of poetry. I hoped to find in reality what is only to be found in the realms of art.

As things were, I used to look down upon my neighbors with pity and wonder, not comprehending in the least, why an old stocking full of rusty Kronenthalers could be more charming ~~with~~ to their heart and sight than one of those delightful little story books which, by some chance or miracle I got hold of. fell into my hand It was the house of my neighbor

Still less could I comprehend the here and there intellectual aspirations of some people who were my neighbors. ~~There was~~ Katherine Hartnagel, for instance, whose father was the inhabitant of the Haunted House. To my childish ideas, however, she was no neighbor at all, because her house lay across the street, beyond two intermediate houses, and at a distance of some seventy or eighty paces from our own door. How far this seemed to me! then and yet I could see at any time, from our sitting room window, what was going on in their garden behind the shed and before their barn and stables. in front of

~~The house~~ Itself was a corner house with a sign-post before it, as here the way from the main street branched off towards the little hamlet of ~~Utzengi~~ Utzingen. This too was a post-road, like the main street, a broad and well

~~kept highway, as are all the so called "Chaussees" in Germany.~~

When I say that Katherine Hartnagel ~~had~~ sympathised with my intellectual aspirations, I do not mean that she was peculiarly gifted, or that she had a craving for knowledge or some elevated ideal; but that she used to read what was within her reach, although she would probably not have longed for it, if it had not been there, and that she was very liberal in her religious ideas. These she inherited from her father, but I think she never confessed them to anyone but me.

Katherine was about ten years my senior, but I did not feel the desparity of years between us, for ~~at that period of my life,~~ I was always longing to gain knowledge, and regarded every older person wise and able to minister to my desire to learn. Friendly visits were exchanged between us. From the age of six years and upwards I often went with my spinning wheel to Katherine's house on a winter forenoon or afternoon: And in like manner she would come to me.

In spring time we met on the meadow behind the village where the linen, we had spun during the winter, was spread out to bleach. Katherine was quite communicative, yet it seemed to me there was always a tinge of sadness about her, I never heard her laugh heartily like other girls, and I do not think that any of the young men of the village cared for her personally. But they all had an eye ~~for~~ to her money.

I myself was rather fond of Katherine, but not at all of her father, who had the reputation of being greedy and spiteful. I never saw him smile unless some misfortune happened to another in the neighborhood; then he laughed as

it were, with closed lips, and every muscle of his face participated in this inward chuckle which to me was most odious.

Katherine's mother died when I was eight years old, a few years later, she lost an older and only sister in the early part of her married life, and her oldest brother was killed in the forest, during the yearly wood-cutting, by a falling tree.

Nobody felt sorrowful for the bereaved father nor perhaps for Katherine either; she was considered too good a calculater not to know that fewer children make larger portions in an inheritance. All her sister's property reverted to them, as her husband, agreeably to a contract made, did not get a penny of it, and her brother was as yet, unmarried.

So Katherine was an heiress now. There was only one brother living and he was a few years her senior. I cannot recall anything that would reflect especial credit on his charqcter. Certainly he would never marry a girl poorer than himself, but that could be said of all ~~of~~ the young men of ~~my~~ our neighborhood. I could not forsee that he would be as ill disposed in his riper years, as I knew his father to be, but I could judge from his countenance that he was as little happy as the others of the family. ~~I was always a close observer, although at times not as good an interpreter of character, fo. I often could not understand the motives underlying actions.~~

Nothing, therefore, could be more in harmony with this singular family than the house they lived in. As I said before, it was a corner house with a sign-post in front of it: It was reputed to be one of the few which remained standing from

the time of the great plague during the thirty years war, some centuries ago, and in those times it had been an inn.

It certainly was very large for an old house, it consisted of two stories, the upper one projecting over the lower; while all other old houses of the first part of the seventeenth century had only one story from the ground to the roof. The windows were small and the floors of the second story were very much sunken. There was also a "secret apartment" somewhere in the house as in all those buildings that outlived the turbulent olden times,--a dark room without windows or any apparent entrance, and therefore not to be found by plundering soldiers at first sight.

Katherine often told me when I was quite a little girl that in this mysterious apartment there was a dumb man always standing in the corner; that he never opened his lips at all, but when asked what he wanted he pointed with his long lean fingers here or there nodding and shaking his head violently.

It was several years before I found out that Katherine had made fun of my credulity and that such a thing as a dumb man who forever stood erect in the corner of a dark hidden room was an utter impossibility.

My fancy, however, was excited and was not so easily brought back to charmless reality. The thought of that mysterious man in the secret apartment kept hold of me throughout my childhood; and often when I passed the house on some dreary winter evening, I ~~fancied~~ imagined I saw the nodding man behind the window of the upper story, pointing at me with his great long fingers. This was especially the case

when I had gone away from home without leave, to go coasting on the hillside, sleighing on the mountain, or for a good slide on the ice-covered meadows; for I was very fond of these dangerous sports.

Sometimes I fancied I saw mysterious lights flitting to and fro behind the little dark windows, and I no longer wondered that some very old people believed the house to be haunted. It was said that a dreadful murder was perpetrated there during the thirty years war. My elder brothers laughed and joked at this story , and I jioned them, yet this thought would always come to me, whenever I passed the house alone at night. This I very frequently was obliged to do as I had to fetch our drinking water from a neighboring well, a task which I bravely performed during my whole childhood. But when about the age of fifteen something happened in this house, which, meek-tempered as I was , induced me to break out into open revolt. For sever al weeks I stoutly refused to pass that dreadful house at night; and never afterwardswhen I came home on a visit, at a late hour could I pass the "haonted house" without a shudder and a terrible vision.--

This vision brought back to my sight that dreary afternoon in February, when they carried out of the back door of the shed the body of Katharine's brother, with his black hair clustering wildly around his temples, his limbs stiff and motionless--for he had hung himself with a rope to the cross beam. Aroused by the dreadful shrieks and lamentations of poor Katherine I witnessed the ghastly scene from the windows of our sitting room. She had come to the shed

hanged by means of a rope attached

in order to fetch some wood, but too late for the ensuing efforts of resuscitation to be of any use.

I was the more unnerved as I was much excited by a precious occurrence which had happened in our neighborhood about a fortnight before. A railroad was built through our fields,--connecting the two famous University towns of Heidelberg and Würtzburg, and in digging the ground the laborers had found the skeleton of a man. It was pronounced by the physician to be that of a very young man and to have been in the ground for about ten years. ~~Nobod~~

Nobody knew who it might have been, for no person had been missed in the whole neighborhood. The fallow-ground in which the body was found belonged to our dismal neighbors. Little wonder then, that Katherine's brother turned very pale and became mute when he first heard of the unearthing of a body on that field. But this circumstance attracted no further attention, though he shunned speaking on the subject and appeared very shy and strange when people reminded him of it--~~that~~ but it was in his nature to look that way, having always been a man of few words and rare smiles.

That he grew paler and more shy after this occurrence was only remembered when he was dead; but even then nobody thought of bringing him into any connection with the mysterious skeleton, for as I said before nobody in the whole neighboring country was missed. Some, it is true, within a space of years had gone to America and had never been heard of by their friends and relations; but that often occurred in the case of emigrants and was not considered

strange at all.

Thus no cause could be found for the desperate act of our neighbor's son, not even a hopeless affair of the heart for who would have thought him capable of such a folly as love! There was only one rumor of trouble in his life which, however, was neither to the credit of his heart nor brain, but showed how avaricious the members of this melancholy family were thought oto be. It was said that the unhappy man had by mistake fertilized a neighbor's land instead of his own while the ground was covered with a light sheet of snow and that this unretrievable blunder had broken his heart when he found it out after the snow had melted away in February.

But dead he was, and by his own hand, and there was no living voice above the grave to shed any light upon the cause of it. With the other young people of our community I follwed the corpse to the grave yard, where in spite of his crime he was buried in holy ground according to the customs of our enlightened century and with the sanction of our humanely thinking pastor.

"Do not judge with harsh severeness
When thou seest another fail--"

were the lines that we sang before the house and through the village as we slowly wended our way to the cemetery. I shed heartfelt tears, and really pitied the broken down father and sister; and I was even a little angry with the pastor for making some allusions in his funeral sermon to the hard and greedy disposition of the bereaved parent, for whom he hoped that this visitation was to lift up his mind

and heartand make him strive for purer things henceforth--
I thought this exhortation entirely needless: I was unable to imagine that after such a dreadful event people could live on as if nothing had happened,--but so they did.

The father became even more grasping and hard-hearted and exulted in others' misfortunes--and the daughter, now the only child, became more self-conscious, more proud and haughty towards people less rich than herself. At the same time, however, she seemed to me to become more and more unhappy, although she was made a great deal more of than ever before as a still richer heiress --nay, the richest in the whole village. She had more suitors than ever now, although she was getting older, and pretty she was never considered--for the want of cheerfulness and vivacity.

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I was of the general opinion in this matter; but I remember that the outlines of her face were regular and that her black eyes had a wild, weird expression which the more educated would have called romantic.

But year passed after year without her giving any sign of encouragement to any of her suitors. I had left the village by this time, but never omitted to make inquiries about her when I came home on a visit about twice a year. But at last, on one of these occasions, they told me astonishing news: They said that Katherine was going to marry her servant, Heckenjoseph's Christian!

There would have been nothing very remarkable in this, if Christian had been like other young men of the village, for he was almost as rich as she and only hired himself out

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as a servant according to ancient village custom because he was an orphan. His older brother, on marrying, had become possessed of his parents' house and had appropriated all the personal property, so that Christian was obliged to lease his land and hire himself out as help in another household, until he should find a bride who had a house of her own.

He certainly could have done so long before, if only, as I said, he had been like other young ~~fellows~~ lads; for though not quite an idiot he was supposed not to be able to count up to ten. For this reason I was startled when I heard that such a reputed imbecile was to be married; it was soon found out, however, that in spite of his supposed weak mind he was very good at figures and not at all inclined to be taken advantage of in regard to his property.

Katherine found that out herself when it was too late for her to profit by it. For everybody ~~knew~~ thought she had married him from pure avarice, and not for love or regard for him; and her father, to free himself from imputations, washed his hands ~~in the fountain of innocence~~ of it declaring to everybody who would listen to him that he held no part in the game whatever.

I think myself that he did not exactly urge his daughter to marry the servant, although he may have found it very convenient not to be obliged to pay him any more wages.

Katherine was universally blamed and called more avaricious than her father. Nobody seemed to take into account that she might have married some other young man quite as ri

as rich as her servant and one possessed of ordinary intelligence.

To me the whole matter was a psychological mystery and still more so, when at a later visit at home I ~~learned~~ heard that the marriage of these two strange personages had made no apparent difference whatever in their former relations. They were mistress and servant still,--he retaining his little garret under the roof, and never allowed access to her apartments which occupied the whole upper floor.

THat village gossip was rife about this singular relation can easily be imagined. To me it was a matter of serious interest. I began to suspect some hidden motive apart from avarice, some motive known to nobody but Katherine. What was it?

I believed with the rest that she planned to have in a husband merely a servant, and that for that reason she chose the only one in the community whom she considered stupid enough never to assert himself as her husband and claim her person and property. At the same time she calculated upon assuming towards him the very rights of property that she repudiated. But in this she was greatly mistaken. He never gave her a penny of his own and when he took back his land to cultivate it himself he set all the products apart in barn and loft and allowed his wife and father-in-law only enough for a kind of equivalent for his board.--In all these transactions he was so persistent and tenaceous that Katherine had soon to give up ~~soon~~ the idea of making a convenience of him.

Some two or three years afterwards they separated: He living again with his older brother and she alone with her father, towards whom she grew more and more imperious and undutyful. Katherine's father was quite old and feeble now, His disposition became more and more querulous and whining, and he openly complained in the street and fields of his unloving daughter and his wretched situation.

He died and his daughter was tearless. She leased her acres so as not to be obliged to keep servants and day laborers and henceforth lived all alone in the large dreary house, hardly ever leaving it except to do some unexpected and foolish thing. She never addressed a word to anybody except when people spoke to her first, and then she would chide them and call them bad names.

She could not behave long in this way without making everyone think that she was laboring under some kind of mental aberration. Consequently she was more and more avoided, except by children and malicious people who taunted her and took pleasure in egging her on to make ill-natured remarks. If left alone she seemed harmless and merely melancholy; but she continued to display strange freaks in regard to her property, one day buying the most useless things she could lay hands on and another complaining piteously of hunger and starvation; and at last the village authority found it necessary to appoint a guardian for her.

Years went by, in which I had not only gone "over the hills" but also over the sea, and the intervals of my visits to my native place became long and far between.

Some years ago, a little while before I left Germany for the fifth time, I made a farewell visit to my native village; of course it was a great event. The March wind blew over the fields and meadows as before and swept the dust through the lonely streets and round the corners of the quiet houses. I took a long stroll over the fields and meadows and back through the village exchanging nods and smiles to some old familiar faces behind the window panes. And when I came to the "haunted house" I also nodded to the ghastly figure behind the half closed shutters. I do not know whether it was from habit or from absent mindedness for I was well aware that by that time nobody exchanged any more friendly salutes with "~~Therese~~ crazy Katherine", as she was openly called by all.

But hardly had I done so when to my great surprise she beckoned me to come in. I naturally hesitated and she beckoned anew. As I was told, however, that she had never done any bodily harm to anyone, I should have thought it cowardly to be afraid of her. So I went up the neglected steps, and immediately afterwards I heard the pushing of bolts and rattling of keys behind the door.--It was nearly dusk, and in spite of my resolution to be courageous I felt my heart throb violently.

The door opened from within. I entered silently and followed the wretched hermit into the room. It looked almost as large to me as in the days of my childhood, because now there was hardly anything in it. The well remembered spinning wheel in the corner was gone. I saw no bed

nor picture of any sort, nothing that bespeaks cheer and comfort. An old crooked oaken table and a few tottering chairs were the only articles of furniture left; The floor was grey and unswept, the windows were covered with dust ans spider webs; all told of the utter neglect into which things had fallen.--

"Sit down" said my strange hostess after a long mutual silence, during which she held me spell bound with her strange eyes, which shone with a lustre of fever or excitement. "Why did you nod and smile at me" she said planting herself before my chair. In the fading light of the evening I saw how feeble and wasted she was, how prematurely old her face appeared and how long and thin were her hands and arms.

"I am departing again for America" I said with all the calmness I could command.

"Oh, are you indeed?" She exclaimed with a sudden flash of recognition in her wild black eyes, "and you will never return from there?"

"Perhaps never" said I, wiping away a tear which had found its way into my eye.

"Did they tell you I am crazy?" She asked after a pause in removing her black hair a little from her withered forehead.

"I think you are not--well" replied I, unwilling to answer her question in a direct manner.

"You are quite right" she said sitting down and pressing her temples with both her hands, I have never been quite well since--since--Oh! how I would like to speak of

it, but then I am afraid you will tell your mother.--

"My mother is dead" said I turning away my face.

"Dead! did she die"?the woman asked wonderingly.

"It was seven years last autumn."

"Indeed? I wonder I did not know it; but never mind I soon shall go there myself."

"Go where?"

"To where the dead are of course; I do not know exactly where that is, do you? They always said you know everything."

"I thought you did not believe in immortality," said I more and more astonished at the wretched woman's lucidity of mind.

"I did not when I was young"she replied; but I know at present that nothing dies at all on earth--no sin of ous-no crime.-- I always thought the child was dead but it came back to me."

"Your child?" Said I in the utmost amazement, you never had a child."

"Oh yes, but you did not know of it--nobody knew, and that was the worst of it--nobody but my family and I, and that is why they killed him."

"Who were they?" I asked not knowing whether this was insanity or not. The accusation sounded dreadfully real and seemed to come out of a heart full of human woes and misery.

"Who?" she slowly replied, "my father and my brothers of course, for at that time there were two of them. Ha! take that dreadful skeleton away from my eyes!" and she

began to shriek and moan and to bury her afce in her treme ling hands.

"There, said I, getting up and opening the door of the adjoining chamber allthe while acting as if I took something up from the floor and shut it up.--"There I have put it away; look about you and see, Katherine," and I sat down again.

"yes, indeed, "said she, taking off her hands, but it will rise again; it always does. And yet it is not my fault that he is dead; for I loved him more than father and mother and would have followed him to America as I premised, but they would not let him go there."

"Why not?"

"Because he was poor, dont you know? Well, perhaps you do not, you were quite a little girl then, seven or eight years old--and it is almost impossible that you should remember "handsome Wilhelm," as the girls used to call him."

"Oh yes, I perfectly remember him," I rejoined. He was your day-laborer or your servant."

"Both--one after another; so you really remember him?

"Indeed I do"I continued;it seems to me as if I could see him before ~~him~~ me now: wonderful fine eyes he had, of forget-me-not blue, golden hair and a very fair face with boyish round cheeks. He must then have been quite young."

"Nineteen or twenty" she answered with great clearness; we were both very young--too young, ~~to~~ you see, and that is why we were so very forgetful of our different fortunes

and of everything else around us--yes, everything. We talked often and long of our marriage, when we went to the fields and meadows together, until we dreamed that we were married.-- you may imagine the consequences."

"I wept and worried a while from shame and anxiety, but gradually I took courage and made plans for our formal marriage and broke all to my mother. She did not cry as I thought she would, nor did my father and brothers storm at me; indeed, I wondered that they took it so quietly. Alas! I had no idea of their dreadful deceitfulness.

"They quietly talked to my sweet-heart and pursuaded him to go to America, where I should join him as soon as my state of health would permit me. They agreed to supply him with the necessary money for his travelling expenses and for establishing himself on a farm in the West. And if he should refuse to go there he could never hope to obtain my hand.

"Poor boy!" the unhappy woman sighed after a long pause, poor boy! he believed it all; he was too innocent and honest for this bad world and that ~~caused~~ cost him his fair young life. He cried and lamented a good deal at first, but soon he mustered up his courage and his spirits, made a little bundle of his scanty clothing, took the money my father had counted out to him, and we embraced each other before the very eyes of my parents and brothers, and I made repeated vows of our eternal love and fidelity.

"It was a dark, stormy night in late November, when he bade us that heart-breaking good-bye. He was to tra-

vel a few miles on foot until he should reach the railroad at Moosbrook, and my brothers promised to join him outside the village and accompany him some distance. They were very careful that nobody should know it, nor that they had provided Wilhelm with money; for no one had suspected our intimacy.

"He alas! had behaved with utmost discretion and circumspection--poor lad! He paid for it with his heart's blood. They followed him in order to kill him and then they buried him in my father's field on the Gerstenhaide. I suppose you saw his skeleton.--Poor boy! they could not even now leave him undisturbed. They dug him up, but his mouth was dumb; he could never say who had laid him so low, although my brother was very much afraid of ~~his doing~~ the skeleton. He was haunted by it day and night, but it never spoke a word to him. He need not have hung himself-fool that he was! and yet, who knows, who knows! perhaps the dead can speak after all! Did you not see him move his lips when they laid him in the charnel-house, or did anyone see him do it?"

"I did not see him at all," I replied shuddering; for it had grown almost dark by this time, and the strange unhappy woman talked in tones so unearthly and despairing that I felt my blood curdle and my feet rooted to the spot. "You had a child," said I at last to turn her thoughts and mind from the dreadful skeleton.

"Yes I had a child" she continued after having for a time , eyed me with a wondering glance, but nobody knew it, nobody pitied the tortures they subjected me to. They

kept me locked up for weeks in our secret apartment, that my cries might not arouse any suspicion in the neighborhood, nor anybody hear my baby cry when it should see the light of day.--Alas! she never saw it, I think; for that room was always as dark as a grave. I did not know if she was dead or living, for I became as senseless as a log of wood--and when I re covered my consciousness, the child was gone, gone forever! Do you think they have killed her as they killed her young father? No? Well then, I tell you, I never could believe it either. She was all right, they said, and better cared for than she ever would have been with me. The dead, of course, are always cared for, I only wonder, why they can never keep silent, dear souls? I often hear my baby cry at nights, and Wilhelm too. They shriek for help and mercy, poor things! and I--I could never lift a finger or hand for them. Do you hear her cry in the chamber there--"my mother the witch"--she sais. We used to sing it ourselves sometimes, but then it never yelled in my ears like this! Do go and bid her keep still-only a little--a very little while longer. I very soon shall be with her; I cannot live forever, I hope."

"You should not keep so much alone, I finally remarked. I think if you would let me speak to some of your friends--"

"Do not mention friends to me! " she exclaimed passionately. "I do not want any friends or relatives, for they can do nothing but kill--kill! Oh, I was well aware why they always wanted me to get married, you know, but my heart

yearned for no other love again. They would have killed him, too, I fear, and that is why I fooled them all-- ha! ha!"

No curse would have sounded so terrible. I almost felt my hair rise on end and despaired of finding a way to get out of the dreadful house without awakening the slumbering ~~theme~~ fiend in the deranged soul of that poor crazed woman.

I finally got up pretending to look out of the window. But I merely wanted to see how it was fastened in order to cry for help if need should be.

"What are you going to do?" she said, throwing a curious look at me.--"Don't tell my brother in going out, of what I have told you just now. He is always lurking in corners and by-ways with that dreadful rope around his neck I can never turn my head without seeing either him or the other one, and then people laugh at me and call me crazy. And yet I can never weep, I can never tell anybody of the dreadful pain I feel."

"You will soon be relieved," I said, with a pitying look at her withered form.

"Oh yes, " she said rising on her feet, I know I shall, and for that reason I have told you my story at last, promise me never to tell anybody while I am living."

"Never," said I in reaching out my hand to her, as I turned away for the last time from the haunted house.

Katherine died the following autumn.