

SHORT STORY

Unearthing

by Christian Nikolaus Opitz



"Flowers for the Forgotten" by Michael Pacheco

Notes to the reader: One, the present text is a collage, borrowing from the writings of Elisabeth Bürstenbinder (pseud. E. Werner), Claire von Glümer, Ludwig Harder, Wilhelmine von Hillern, Eugenie John (pseud. E. Marlitt), Adolph Streckfuß, Emma Eva Henriette von Twardowska (pseud. E. Hartner), and Ursula Zoëge von Manteuffel, as translated from German into English by Annis Lee Wister (1830–1908). Two, the present text is autofictional, based on memories of my own childhood. And yes, both notes are equally true.

It is towards the end of June. Not yet the height of summer, but the afternoon sun seems already determined to scorch up the courtyard. A fenced-off kitchen garden, comprising rows of salad-heads and celery-stalks, stretches along the old-fashioned farmhouse. On the ledge of a window stand a couple of dried cactus-plants and several bottles of distilled herbs; the cork of one of them is gone, and its contents are filled with flies and beetles.

In the oppressive heat of the day, nothing is stirring but a handful of chickens, their heads turning curiously from side to side. They're pecking and scratching the ground between the extensive back-buildings and stables; but there is nothing to be found except for dry sand. Suddenly, though, they flutter up and scatter in all directions as a strange, elfish creature springs from behind the creaking gate of the threshing-hall. It is a boy of barely twelve years, but tall and lithe beyond his age, with thin agile legs showing like sticks below his short trousers. His sunburnt face is dripping with perspiration. He has spent the last hours climbing like a monkey all over the trellises of the back-buildings and running fearlessly along the ridges of the roofs, creeping through the skylights into the granaries and haylofts. No ladder is too steep for him, no corner too dark. I know this, for as you may have guessed, the boy is me.

From the open door of the house I can hear my grandmother bustling about. I wonder what the time is and go inside to check the old cuckoo clock in the kitchen. The hands point to three minutes to four. In the low room, the atmosphere is stifling from the heat of the pressing iron and the steam from dampened linen that my grandmother is engaged in ironing. I sit down on the bench beside her and lean back exhausted. A few minutes pass in profound silence. Then the door in the clock opens, and out hops the cuckoo, flaps his wings, calls "cuckoo" four times, then disappears, slamming the door behind him. I jump up again and turn to leave the room, telling my grandmother that I'm off to the lake. She nods, then stoops to press a kiss upon my forehead as she is wont to do in taking leave of me, but I shrink away from the caress and squeeze past her.

I slip out the back gate and take the foot-path across the heath. This way I can gain the lake without having to pass through the village. As I walk slowly on, the feathery grass sways and rustles beneath my steps. The salt asters are not yet in flower, the brownish-green heath lies smooth and level as a table. The glare of the four-o'clock sun is broken by no shady tree or shrub. In the distance I can make out the church-tower of the neighbouring village; across this wide level plain it is visible for miles around. Above me some bird of prey wheels in dizzying flight, higher and higher, until it vanishes in the afternoon haze.

In the midst of the barren heath, there are five grave-mounds, one large and four smaller ones; underneath are the bodies of giants, who, as the legend goes, once trod the earth. The larger mound is crowned with blackthorn bushes, and down its sides wild orchids blossom. The old king is buried there with his golden crown on his forehead and his long, white beard flowing down over his purple robe. Profound solitude broods around the slumbering mystery, but the birds that come to perch upon the blackthorn and the bees and butterflies that rove over the heath all share my knowledge of the spot. And I often lie down in these bushes, my hands clasped underneath my head, watching the ants creep in and out of their holes in the ground. I envy them; they know more than I do. They have seen the mysteries buried in the mound and, perhaps, have even crawled over the old king's purple robe.

Up to this time the large mound has been my garden, my undisputed territory. The path from the village that runs towards the lake is rarely trodden and leaves the giant graves far on one side. Never can I remember to have seen a stranger in their vicinity. But now a troop of unknown people has appeared; they are hewing great blocks of earth out of the side of my mound. The sun is still blazing so fiercely. I have to shade my eyes with both hands to get a clearer view. Three men, in silent expectation, are standing on the hillock while several workmen are digging and excavating. I see the pickaxe rise and fall, and every time it goes down, it seems to me as if a piece of flesh were being cut out of a beloved body.

For a moment I stand still, almost breathless, and my heart throbs so wildly that I can almost hear it. Then, without an instant's reflection, filled with a strange compassion and yet spurred on by a burning desire to see what will be brought to light, I speed wildly across the heath to reach the excavation site. But the next moment I'm overcome by shyness — assailed by the childish terror that the sight of strange faces always inspires in me. I shrink back and return to the path on which I have set out.

Where the path meets the lake, weeping willows dip their boughs into the placid water, and tall silver poplars are mirrored in it. The centre of the lake is smooth as a golden tablet. Only now and then gentle ripples from the shore inscribe strange characters upon its surface. On the banks, ducks are lying comfortably in the green grass, and there are people standing

about, old and young, and the young are shouting and running, and in childish glee they toss their balls in the air and skip stones on the water. I do not venture towards them but follow the circuitous paths winding around the lake. From time to time the shore advances into the water, forming narrow tongues of land whereon grow blackthorn and hazel bushes. I head for one of the little bays thus produced and undress among the reeds and the shrubs that screen me from observation. Then I wade into the lake until the water closes over me.

Above the heath the evening sky has faded to a pale glow. Only a faint crimson still clings to the horizon. My supper must be awaiting me, but I cannot go home yet. I must see in what condition the strangers have left the poor, plundered grave-mound.

I find the blackthorn bushes rooted up and lying about withering at the foot of the hill. And where they used to grow, there is a wide opening revealing clay and yellow sand. The old king, with his long, silver beard, and the purple robe covering his gigantic body no longer lies in the hill — a dark empty hollow is there instead. The blood rushes to my head, and for a moment, it seems as if every light on the heath were extinguished, as if all the coloured butterflies were dead and gone forever. I run towards home like a hunted hare.