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Childhood: A Paradise (English Translation)

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Childhood: A Paradise (English Translation)

She turned bad. And nobody was surprised. Yes, everyone saw it coming. Barely 16 years old, she already ranked among the lost, and for this she had her childhood to thank, that paradise of which we hear so much sung and spoken. Be that as it may! For many it is a paradise, to which in later times, when the gates have long since been closed, they look back filled with longing and emotion. A father's love and a mother's tenderness, childhood, innocence, and childish joys. How gladly and with how much emotion one thinks of these things when father or mother are no more and the childish joys have been transformed into endless worries. But this paradise isn't for everyone. And the eyes of these young lost souls would have popped out of their heads, if someone had tried to persuade them that childhood is the paradise of life. "I laugh them to scorn, the miserable liars!" That would have been their answer.

She came into the world in the orphanage in Vienna. They christened her Anna because she glimpsed the light of the beautiful world right on St. Anne's Day. No maternal bliss at the first cry of a child could be noticed at her birth. She wasn't the sweet little rosy angel at which one gapes as if at a miracle, and whose little feet and hands one covers with kisses--her mother just heaved an anxious sigh when she heard that the little one was alive and would probably survive. "Should we christen her Anna?" "Please yourself, name her what you want. It's all the same to me." For her any name was good enough. There was no one who might have pondered which name would be the most beautiful, so as to give the child the most lovely name; no one who might have cuddled her. Her mother, a very young, poor serving maid, cried in her pillows and didn't even look at the child. The father, a lad still bound to compulsory military duty, was staying somewhere in a garrison. He was never the slightest bit concerned about his child. That was the easiest for him. Anna never found out what her father looked like, was also never curious to know.

From the orphanage she was boarded out in Bohemia, in her mother's native village. The woman who took her in did business in a big way. Most of the children who boarded there died... which was no wonder. It was more of a miracle that even one of the children survived. Her mother paid irregularly; the child was treated accordingly. She didn't die--in spite of hunger and cold and beatings and every type of neglect, she didn't die. She just "wouldn't die," as the saying goes. But more than that: she even developed into a pretty and healthy little creature. Already in her third year one could get her to do various tasks. By the time she was five years old, she was dragging the smaller boarded children around the room and in the yard. She didn't do it willingly. But what can't be accomplished by a good beating! She did it--but too bad for the little ones placed in her hands, when she was alone with them! She tormented the helpless noisy little brats to her heart's content with finesse. Those who themselves have never experienced compassion don't know how to show it to others. She didn't even know that something called compassion existed on earth.

In her sixth year she went "home" to her mother, who had decided to get married. It was annoying to the woman to pay the board money for the "brat," and so she took the child into her house. A fatted calf wasn't killed at Anna's homecoming. Her stepfather walked around her and looked at her from the front and the back. "So you're here. Nice, nice. She is big and strong. She'll eat a lot, but she can work. It's

stupid that we have to send her to school! We could use her for all sorts of things here at home. Well! In her free time she can help you."

And that's what she did. Her mother, still smart and full of zest for life, didn't concern herself much about her new little one when it was born. She loved to dance and found it boring to sit around by a cradle. Her husband had as much joy in living as she did. He also had nothing against cards and brandy. It was a dissolute household... Often the two fought, reproached each other for their faults, and the man threatened to kill his wife because she was unfaithful. "You were always like that. Just look at her, your brat! I have to feed and support her; anybody else would toss such a cuckoo's egg out on the street."

Anna heard such words every day. Just the sight of her kept her stepfather's jealousy alive; he hated her. Her own mother hated her as well. She had to put up with a lot because of the child. The child was her concretely embodied, undeniable guilt. Daily she had to suffer as this guilt was thrown up in her face. And if she reproached her husband for his defects, he pointed the child out to her: "Whoever brings such a dowry along into the house should just plain keep her mouth shut." --"Stay out of my way!" her mother often screamed furiously at the girl. "You are my misfortune! Did I ask for you? Others have it good--their children die. But my burden stuck around. Why me?"

She was the serving girl and the nanny in the house. Almost every year a new baby came. Luckily one of them died now and again-- otherwise she would never have been able to manage them all. But four of them were left and they were small, and she had to supervise and look after the whole little flock as soon as she had fulfilled her required hours at school. She dragged the smallest one around on her arm, she tugged at the hand of the second-smallest, she shouted shrilly at both of the older ones to watch out when they gave her the slip and ran into the street as she saw a wagon rolling up. Not that she was exactly concerned about the life, the health, the straight limbs of the children. But she feared the responsibility, the punishment. They were naughty brats. They had figured out what a distorted position the reluctantly tolerated "child" occupied in the house and treated their stepsister accordingly. She couldn't complain. Who would have conceded that she was right? Who would even listen to her? She had to thank God if the children didn't complain to their parents about her. And that happened often enough. With and without reason. Before their parents she was always in the wrong. And the children knew this and exploited the fact.

To be without rights! In the whole wide world to have no one who will do justice to us! Once someone said to her at school that parents are God's representatives on earth. And since then she has never again been able to pray. Pray to someone who chooses for himself this sort of representatives? Well, that would certainly be futile effort. He most certainly wouldn't grant one's prayers. Neither the religion instructor nor the teachers knew about her home situation. Therefore, they weren't able to tell her that God would never have appointed such representatives as her parents. They didn't understand the questioning, despairing, embittered gaze of the child as they attempted to explain the fourth commandment to the little girl and impress it upon her. Probably they didn't even notice the child's peculiar look. There were too many in the class. How could the teachers have been able to know and study the character of each individual child! They had far too little time for that.

Maybe she had a bright mind; maybe she would have learned well and gladly. At home no one gave her time to do her lessons. And because of that, she fell increasingly behind. She was one of the worst students, was constantly scolded and punished, and lost little by little all desire to learn. Maybe she could

have become good, self-sacrificing, honest. Who could possibly know? What might have been good in her was stifled and stamped out from an early age. No one loved her, and she loved no one. She was withdrawn, malicious, false, vindictive, cruel. A true word came seldom over her lips. And for that reason she was beaten and beaten again and--oddly enough!--didn't improve at all. Quite to the contrary, she became worse from year to year.

As a thirteen-year-old child she came before the court. One of her stepbrothers had hurt himself badly through his own carelessness. But she had been there. She was supposed to be looking after the boy and protecting him from harm. Her stepfather punished her so mercilessly that through witnesses the matter came before a judge, and the man had to answer for his brutality. She looked forward to the trial. Maybe there still was justice in the world. She was being taken under someone's wing. Oh, certainly! They would lock her stepfather up in the penitentiary and not leave her at home any longer. She had envied the orphans, who, nicely clothed and kindly treated, could go for a walk. Maybe they would put her in an orphanage. Oh! That would be wonderful.

She didn't know yet how justice is appointed on earth, and that it is administered in degrees; that the strongest enjoy the most under the law, the weakest the least; that the man comes first, he is protected the most jealously. Long after the man comes the woman. Finally, after a larger gap comes the child. And at the end--without rights, like an object--the animal limps along. Her stepfather was reprimanded because he had overstepped the bounds of domestic punishment. With that they released him and the child. She stared at the judge and spoke no word. Now she knew that she could hope for nothing from any side, that human society was as much her enemy as the father who had disowned her, the mother who had been worse to her than a stepmother.

And now she has gone bad. She was pretty--perhaps to her misfortune. Today she is dried up and corrupt in body and soul, without a home and without family. Her mother cursed her, and she just laughed. But when on the street she sees good mothers with carefully tended, loyally protected, cheerful children, then she stands still and she twists her mouth, as if she wants to weep and isn't able.

Childhood--a paradise. Well, of course, for many, thank goodness! For many, rich and poor, it is a paradise. For some, however, it is hell.