



Prose Fiction

Sophie

2003

The Honor Student

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Ebner-Eschenbach, Marie von, "The Honor Student" (2003). *Prose Fiction*. 463.
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The Honor Student (English Translation)

The Honor Student
by
Marie von Ebner Eschenbach

Translated by Michelle Stott James

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Mother and son sat across from one another at the table, which served as a worktable and a dining table, and of which half was already set for the evening meal. A petroleum lamp with a green shade brightly illuminated the school books which the boy had piled up in front of him and which looked tremendously well taken care of after more than half a year of use. It was the end of March, and in a few months George Pfanner must emerge as an Honor student from the third grade, just as he had from each of the earlier preparatory and grammar school classes. He must!! The well-being and suffering of the house depended on this, the--at least relative--peace of his mother, the sleep of her nights.... If it appeared to his father that "his boy" slackened in diligence, she was called to account. This had a much stronger effect on the youth than the sternest exhortation and punishment would have had. For his mother he felt love to the point of adoration, and he meant the world to the bleak, prematurely aged woman. The two belonged to each other, understood one another without words. They had, without admitting it to themselves, formed an alliance of defense and resistance against a third party, with whom they always secretly disagreed, even when he was right, because in the depths of their souls they felt continual outrage against him. Mrs. Agnes would have been astonished and most likely indignant if someone had said to her that her feeling for her husband had long since become nothing more than a mixture of fear and pity. George would have challenged the entire school to a fight before he would have suffered a disrespectful word to be said about his father. But neither the mother nor the son felt comfortable when they were around him. His presence oppressed, extinguished every cheerful impulse at its first flicker. And yet this man's only purpose in life was concern for the welfare of his child in the present and the future.

Mrs. Agnes let her work sink into her lap and looked at the Black Forest clock, which swung its tin pendulum on the wall next to the wardrobe. Already so late, and her husband still hadn't come from the office. They piled such a merciless load of work on him there, and he took care of it without a murmur, and even brought work home with him just to be certain that he pleased his superiors and would be considered for the next promotion.

Yes, the man slaved away, and it was very understandable that he returned home overtired and sullen. And the boy, the dear, beloved boy, slaved away as well. Especially today. His cheeks burned dark red, even his scalp had reddened, and he knit his brow. He sat there in his shirt sleeves, his elbows propped on the table. He pressed his chin into his clenched hands and stared

helplessly down at his notebook. He had already done the sum three times and come up with a different result each time, and none of them--that he could see clearly--could be the right one.

His mother didn't dare speak to him for fear of disturbing him. She furtively cast a worried look at him from time to time, then became absorbed again in her work and industriously patched the damaged lining of the jacket he had taken off.

Now a noise could be heard in the next room. The key was turning in the lock of the kitchen door.

"Your father's coming," said Mrs. Agnes. "Are you finished, Georgie?"

"With the math not by a long ways." He grimaced, and under his blonde eyelashes tears suddenly welled up.

"For goodness sake, Georgie, don't cry, you know--your father..."

Then he came in, and she stood up and approached him, and he replied to her timid welcome with an unusually friendly: "Well, how are you?"

Civil Servant Pfanner was just a little shorter than his wife, and unusually thin. His clothes hung loosely on his body. His thick, iron gray hair stood out brushlike from the part. His eyebrows, which still remained black, formed two broad, almost straight lines over the dark, very intelligent eyes. His mouth was shadowed by a massive moustache, also still black, which Pfanner carefully tended and which gave the official of the imperial and royal Austrian national railway a military look.

Pfanner had brought a large pile of documents along with him, but still wasn't gruff. He let his wife help him out of his overcoat and said softly and calmly: "Bring the food, and put out the lamp in the kitchen. I don't know why it is lighted. -- Keep studying!" he ordered his son, who had turned to him and looked at him timidly and anxiously.

"It is so hard," murmured George.

His father was now standing behind his chair: "Hard, you lazy boy? Overcoming your laziness, that's what is hard for you, nothing else. For a child who has talent, nothing is hard. You're lazy."

"I've finished everything," said George with a dry sob and suppressed the tears which again threatened to well up in his eyes, "except for the math..." then his voice died out, the sentence ended in a shrill note of misery, and at the same time the youth's head hung even lower. Punishment must follow his confession, he awaited the inevitable with dull resignation, the well-known blow of the small hard hand, which fell like a hammer and marbled George's ear and cheek green and blue for days.

But today his father didn't become angry. After a little while his arm reached over the shoulder of the boy, his index finger indicated a place in the sum, whose carefully written figures covered a page of the notebook.

"There is an error. Can't you see?"

Could it be possible that George still couldn't see it? That he didn't have a clue, even when his father began to explain? He did it in a completely different way than the teacher. The right concept just wouldn't, wouldn't become clear to the child, in spite of all his effort and trouble. Added to that was fear: Now father's patience will wear thin, now he will hit me. By the end he thought only of the blow and wished that the punishment had already been executed, so that he wouldn't have to fear it any more.

"Pay attention, you aren't paying attention!" cried Pfanner, and went to his place at the head of the table, which had been set for him. The mother had served the evening meal. Potatoes in the skin, a nice piece of butter, a loaf of bread, a dish with cold meat. These she placed hesitantly before her husband, and his disapproval wasn't long in coming.

"Meat in the evening--what's this all about? I expect you not to introduce anything new."

She excused herself. She lied. The neighbor woman had received such a nice cut of meat, which she had already paid for, from the country and had handed the piece over to her for a cheap price. "There's enough there for tomorrow as well," she added, in order to prevent a repeated censure, which would have been worse. But she would have endured even the worst. This was about a battle in which she, the otherwise weak-willed woman, could not yield for anything in the world.

Supper was long since past, the mother had long since gone to bed, father and son still sat at their work. Pfanner was concerned with drawing up a statistical table, George still wasn't finished with his math. The attention of neither one was completely on his task. Each of them had experienced something good today, and the memory of this arose again and again to divert and sidetrack them.

Pfanner had run into the Assistant Director, who started talking with him and assured him of his own and the Director's high opinion of him. According to him, the Director was just waiting for the first opportunity to bestow the proper commendation for the subordinate's tireless diligence and zeal.

"For exceptional performance, exceptional distinction. You can count on that." With these words, the high official had left him, and Pfanner had walked on, deeply moved by an intoxicating feeling of happiness. What could he hope for? Promotion to a higher level? A large monetary compensation? That is perhaps what he would most prefer. George's savings book would in that way receive an unexpected enrichment. On the last day of each month he took the few guilders, arduously saved from his salary, from the box and had them deposited, so that he wouldn't needlessly forfeit even a penny of interest.

The clerk at the savings bank always laughed: "What are you bringing today, Mr. Civil Servant, half a guilder or a whole one?"

Pfanner's pride suffered under this mockery. And now he imagined how he would feel, if he could lay down a hundred or even two hundred and carelessly say: Please enter this today in my boy's book.

His George possessing a fortune, even a small one--he loved him more, when he thought of that.

The future capitalist held his quill in his hand and reflected. Not about his math problems. His thoughts carried him far away, out of the bleak, sparsely furnished room into the open air, where new life was already beginning to stir, and a spring announced itself, in which he would once again have no part. Summer would follow spring, the school would be closed, and his comrades would go on vacation, some to the vicinity of Vienna, other lucky ones clear out into the country, into the actual countryside, or even into the mountains, into the forests, to the shimmering lakes and rivers, to booming waterfalls... He was the only one who never emerged from the cheerless streets of the suburbs, never got away from the wearying, boring, detested pavement which tore his shoes and chafed his feet. And besides that, his father's perpetually repeated: "Learn! Have you been studying? Children exist in order to study."

But his boy cried out inwardly: Not only to study! Previously he had on occasion plucked up some courage and said: "The others are on vacation now and aren't studying."

Then his father became angry. "Are they honor students? And even if a couple of them are, they aren't careless and distracted like you, you lazy boy. Maybe they don't even have talent like you have, but they have diligence, iron diligence. Vacations... what are vacations! A hard-working person doesn't need them, doesn't want them. Do I take a vacation?" It was a point of pride for Pfanner that he had never yet taken a vacation.

Nevertheless, in spite of all fatherly severity, a true extinguisher of every bright, merry impulse, there had been a few years in which George had enjoyed some delight in springtime. And today was the blessed day on which a long cherished, fervent desire had been fulfilled. He carried in his pocket the means to reawaken pleasure in springtime.

One floor below the Pfanner family, on the third floor of the building opposite theirs, lived a shoemaker who owned a nightingale. When spring arrived, he hung her cage under the window sill against the wall. The cage was narrow and small, had thick bars and offered its inhabitant little space and little light. She sang wondrously in her sad captivity. Her sweet songs sounded not only plaintive and wistful, but also bright and joyous, as if filled with blissful delight at their own splendour, intoxicated with triumph at their own enthralling power. The tones which gushed forth from the tiny breast filled the narrow street with melodiousness.

George spent every free moment at the window, leaned out and sent the nightingale his loving regards. The shoemaker, as could easily be seen, didn't bother much about the sweet singer. If she had belonged to George, how he would have cherished and cared for her! She was his happiness, his benefactress, she conjured spring into his sad room and beauty and poetry into his dreary life. He listened to her, and fantastic lovely pictures arose before him, landscapes in the purple greenness of new young life, breathed through with the scent of flowers, suffused in light. Everything that he had read and heard about, which he longed to see, which would remain for him eternally unattainable.

It went on this way until midsummer, then the nightingale stopped singing, and the shoemaker took the cage back into his room. Last spring George had waited in vain for the appearance of the cage. The shoemaker had perhaps given the nightingale away, or maybe she had died, and with her all the beautiful dreams that her songs awakened, and the secret, mysterious bliss of abandoning himself to them and dwelling on them.

Now, however, a few weeks ago, on a grey, frosty February morning, the painfully missed tones of the nightingale resounded to meet him as he came into the vicinity of the school. He gave a

cry of joy, looked around, looked up at the houses, but nowhere could he detect a bird cage, and nowhere was there an open window, out of which the song could have come. The tones sounded, now stronger, now weaker in his ears. They wandered, came nearer, moved away, and suddenly George laughed out loud. The nightingale which sang so splendidly strolled before him, stopped, warbled his mating call into the air, went a bit further, turned around and then came toward him. His name was Salomon Levi. He was fifteen years old and wore boots that were worn down at the heels, a black caftan, a stiff, broad-brimmed hat. Along his thin cheeks dangled a pair of gleaming, raven black earlocks.

"Hey, Salomon!" George had cried out. "What's going on? Have you turned into a nightingale?"

The one so addressed carried a peddler's tray twice as wide as he was on a greasy strap, and limped indefatigably from early morning into the evening, back and forth on the wharf in front of the street where the school was. His stock enjoyed great respectability among the students of status, and consisted of wallets and coin purses, mirrors, knives, watch chains and such things. The young peddler also carried all sorts of toys, which exerted a strong attraction on George. He had never, not even as a small child, possessed a toy.

"Buying toys--throwing money away, nonsense!" said Pfanner. "A child who has imagination, a child like mine, doesn't need such things. A piece of wood or a wooden horse are the same for him, to him both are a living horse. A doll in silk clothing or the bootjack wrapped in newspaper, the one as well as the other is a living child for him."

For George, the appeal of that which had been denied to him clung to every object on Salomon's display tray. He never went past it without a pang in his heart, and struck up a conversation with Levi at any excuse, in order at his leisure to be able to look at all the treasures which Levi offered for sale, and even to be able to touch them.

"Oh, Salomon," he said to him once, "how lucky you are! You can always walk up and down and don't have to go to school anymore, you have so many beautiful things and can look at them all day. How glad you must be!"

Salomon looked at him wistfully. George labored under such delusions! If Salomon could sell all the "beautiful things" and many more as well, and if he received money for them and could study, then he would be glad.

They had a talk daily, only a short one, because George knew that his father almost always would be waiting for him at home with his clock in his hand, and if George was a couple of minutes late, then there would be an unpleasant time for his poor mother.

But even as superficial as the meetings of the two boys were, they gradually established a strong bond. Each of them was acquainted with suffering; each felt sorry for the other and envied him as well. They would gladly have exchanged lives. They negotiated often about it and had already been good friends before that February morning on which the honor student had called out to the peddler, "Have you turned into a nightingale?"

Pure delight filled him as Salomon showed him a small instrument, not larger than a nut, in which all the flute tones of a nightingale slept. One only needed to take it between one's lips and dexterously move it with one's tongue, to awaken the sweet song. He could have thrown himself to his knees and implored Salomon "Be kind, be magnanimous, make me a gift of the

nightingale!" But he could imagine the picture of his father, he could hear the words "You are the son of a civil servant, don't you dare accept anything, not the tiny stub of a pencil, not a quill. From none of your fellow students, from no human being." So he stuttered with uneven breath:
"How much does the nightingale cost?"

It cost 20 Heller and Salomon had already sold a couple of dozen today and hoped to be able to sell yet another two dozen, and soon his entire stock, because they were going tremendously well.

George thought about that. "Will there be none left in five days...? I will have 20 Heller together and can pay you for the nightingale."

Salomon was incredulous. George had already attempted several times to save his lunch money in order to make a purchase from him, but had never managed to get further than eight, at the most ten Heller. Then he suddenly had gotten too hungry one afternoon and had paid out all his money all at once, for a particularly tempting pretzel. At the baker's on the corner one could get such delicious things! He had also at times given away his little store of copper coins to those who were poorer than he was. Salomon doubted with good reason the ability of the "young Master" to save anything. Nevertheless he granted his wish. One nightingale remained unsold, the best one. Whoever understood how to handle it could draw particularly sonorous tones from it.

And today George had purchased it, had gloriously stood before Salomon, had counted ten 2-Heller pieces into his hand, and had received the nightingale.

The instruction in the use of it had gone well. The little instrument wandered from one mouth to the other, and immediately, with admirable rapidity, George picked up the art from the peddler.

"What a musical talent! I had to practice for three days before I was able to play. You can play immediately, better than I can."

George retorted blissfully that it was so easy. Oh, if only everything were so easy, if it could also be this way with math and history and Greek!

Salomon's melancholy eyes lighted up. "Studying would be easy for me," he said, and looked very haughty and very sad.

Now it was close to 11:00. Mrs. Agnes had gone to bed on Pfanner's orders, but she wasn't asleep; from the dark alcove she observed her husband, who drew lines, wrote captions with undiminished zeal, and her boy, who leaned tired and pale over his notebook or looked up with dreamy eyes at the grey spot which the smoke from the lamp had gradually painted on the ceiling. He still couldn't answer yes to his father's grimly repeated "Are you done?"; he just wasn't paying attention. He had put one hand in his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the nightingale and squeezed it sometimes with great, tender love, as if it were something living and could feel it.

The way home, which usually seemed endless, had been too short for him today. Almost the whole time he had played the nightingale, and children and even adults had stopped and listened to him and had been gladdened by the sweet music. It would have made him happy if he could have given a demonstration of his newly-learned art for his mother. But that just couldn't

be, his mother would have immediately said: You must show that thing to your father, you know he doesn't like toys. And if George had answered: It isn't a toy, it is an instrument, she would still have stood firm: Behind your father's back you are not allowed to do anything or have anything. She had always kept things this way until today.

But George couldn't forget that years ago the youngest son of their neighbor, Karl Walcher, had loaned him his flute; he would gladly have given it as a gift, except for Pfanner's spartan ban. Everything George had ever heard, from the children's songs that his mother hummed to him to solemn church hymns, he remembered everything and produced the melody correctly on the highly primitive little instrument. Mrs. Walcher and her sons had admired him, and even his father had occasionally bestowed on him an approving: "Not bad!" But his joy had soon been spoiled.

"Stop this nonsense --go study!" soon came the word. The flute was guilty for the smallest omission, for any absent-mindedness on the part of the boy. Soon, frightfully soon, his father had given it back to its owner. Most certainly he wouldn't tolerate the nightingale either, and therefore it must remain hidden from him, the beloved, marvelous thing.

When George finally was allowed to go to bed, it took its place under his pillow. After midnight he woke up, put it to his lips. Only to kiss it, of course, to play it was out of the question... But, to be sure-- his parents were asleep. Between them and him, on the wall projection of the alcove, the quick gait of the Black Forest clock ticked away robustly, drowning out every faint noise. Still, it wouldn't work ... and while he thought: won't work, the tip of his tongue was already moving the cool little plate of metal. Against his will, almost without any help from him, the nightingale began to raise its song. It lamented, it tempted, it proclaimed unrealizable yearning. Its tones soared, swelled, broke off suddenly. Dear God in Heaven... Too loud, too loud! His father slept very lightly... Dreadfully frightened, with cold shivers of anxiety running down his spine, George stuck his head under the covers. The next morning at breakfast his father told of a peculiar dream which he had had during the night. The shoemaker had bought a nightingale again, and it had seemed to Pfanner that he had heard it sing so loudly that it woke him up, and then, this was the odd thing, he had imagined that he still heard it after he was awake. His wife was greatly amazed, she had also dreamed something very similar, and that must have some meaning.

George stood up and went to the window, so that his parents wouldn't see that he was blushing.

Mrs. Agnes had her secret as well, and in order to protect it, she had to use all sorts of excuses which very frequently were far removed from the truth. For some time the table had been more amply laid at all meals, though Pfanner had not granted more household money than before. His wife couldn't always tell the truth when he confronted her about it. He had listened grudgingly and felt himself humiliated when she had only confessed that she had made some articles of clothing and, with Mrs. Walcher as the intermediary, had sold them privately. He could never be allowed to find out that she had taken a non-essential article of clothing or household gadget to the pawn shop, that she had disposed of a little piece of jewelry which she had brought with her from home. He thought very highly of these remains of a former state of prosperity; it flattered him to have gotten his once very beautiful wife-- it's just too bad how quickly light blondes fade! - from a good and at that time almost rich family. The smallest chance could reveal everything and then-- Agnes closed her eyes and trembled at the thought of what would happen then. All the same, the child must at all costs be fed better than had previously been the case.

A year ago Mrs. Assistant Officer Walcher had already spoken her views about this in her curt, outspoken way: "It always seems to me that you feed your Georgie too meagerly, Mrs. Civil Servant. A boy like that needs to eat quite a bit. 'Studying saps your energy, and you must stoke a small stove more often than a big one,' my husband says. He and I have often gone to sleep hungry-- God save us, an Assistant Officer with a salary of a thousand guilders!-- but our two boys had always had enough to eat. And they are as bright as buttons. Your Georgie is shooting up, he will soon catch up with his father, but he isn't filling out at all."

"Do you think that he looks bad?" Mrs. Agnes had exclaimed in dismay.

Well, no, Mrs. Assistant Officer wouldn't exactly say that, but he should certainly have more "protein" and a better "color": "There must be sufficient food," she emphasized the word with pleasure, it sounded so cultured. "'Sufficient', my husband says. 'Otherwise so much studying will weaken their nerves.'"

This conversation had settled it; the mother's love had defeated the honest woman's loathing for falseness and lies. To remonstrate with her husband, to attempt to bring him to even the smallest extra expenditure would no more have occurred to her than to try to persuade a stone to turn itself into bread. A discussion between him and her just never occurred. From the beginning of their marriage, his domineering and negative nature had precluded any possibility of approaching him in trust. What could a woman have to say to him? He was himself, and beyond him was duty, and the world as he understood it was answerable to these two highest powers. Only when a son was born to him did a second being appear who was as important to him as he was to himself. A continuation of his "I", a perfected continuation. Everything which had been denied to his ambition, which he had not achieved, his son was to achieve.

He had emerged from poverty and baseness, had received an insufficient education, and had never had the prospects of rising to a higher position. He lived as a low-level civil servant and would die as one. But the son: he would graduate from the Gymnasium at the head of his class, would win his Doctor's cap summa cum laude. Already radiating the glory of the most fertile promise in the first beginnings of his career, he would climb from success to success, from honor to honor-- that's what his son should do. When he surrendered to these images, imagination took the sober civil servant Pfanner, the unerring calculator, the dry rational man, on its wings and rushed him away over all the peaks of probability. And then when he descended again to the earth and happened to see his George come walking along idly, he scolded him: "Go study!"

He personally, always living in the future, despising the present and what it offered, alienated himself more and more from those of his same level. He was obliging to them, did work which would have come to them, but in doing it he had his eye only on his own advantage, the bettering of his position. As much as possible he avoided contact with them, the get-togethers in the coffeehouse and the regulars' restaurant. He got together with his colleagues very seldom. At the "Golden Weasel," where the gatherings of the civil servants occurred, at which a few of the superiors and friends of the superiors were also present, absolutely every time Pfanner bumped into the man he hated, the ornamental locksmith Mr. Obernberger. Years ago this man had considered it a great advantage to be allowed to meet with the employees of the railroad at the restaurant. Now this stance had shifted. Since work from the Obernberger ornamental locksmith's shop had won first prize at the exhibition, since he employed many hundreds of workers in his workshops, lived in his own house, drove up in his own carriage and wore the ribbon of the Franz-Josef Order in his buttonhole, most of the men rushed to meet him at the door, and at the table he was given the place at the right hand of the supervisor.

Pfanner could have overlooked all of this and not let it bother him. But this locksmith had a son, and this son followed hard on his George's heels at the Gymnasium, could catch up with him, could outstrip him, because the damned boy had talent, his worst enemy had to admit that. "Talent worth a million," as Mr. Obernberger said, "but not a Heller's worth of diligence."

It was after school. Pepi Obernberger and George Pfanner walked together part of the way. They had both been called on by the professor of Greek, and Pepi had gotten through better than George. George walked along next to him, subdued and with a very red face. His father never neglected to ask: "Did the professor call on you, and who else, and how did it go?"

"You always know," said George to his comrade. "You knew everything very well again today. I would be happy if I could always know the answers as well as you."

Pepi immediately started to boast: He didn't care a fig about all that! The stupid rubbish wasn't his thing. Case endings, comparison of adjectives, stupid stuff! It didn't give him any trouble. If that dope of a professor would put a new cylinder into his hand organ and start to crank it up, perhaps then he would start to listen a little. At home he didn't look at any books, that was much too dull for him.

"You're putting me on!" George broke in incredulously, and he corrected himself: "Almost none, cross my heart! May the devil reward the old white-wigs for always giving me such good grades. It really makes me mad, because it gives my old man the stupid idea of making a professor out of me. But no! Rather than become such a ridiculous old fogey and do without everything wonderful: cycling, riding, hunting, dancing, driving a coach, playing billiards in the coffee house, climbing glaciers--I would rather shoot myself!"

George looked at him attentively. He was so entirely the spitting image of his father, the good, cheerful Mr. Obernberger with the round head and the round face and the friendly smiling mouth. And this person was talking about suicide?

"Don't talk like that!" George cried. "You won't commit an unforgivable sin; suicide is an unforgivable sin and is cowardice."

"Nonsense!" Pepi retorted derisively. "How can you be such a donkey and parrot back everything that they say at school. But you never have your own ideas. You've got your head stuffed with cardboard. Bye!" --You pedant! he added in his thoughts and turned the corner in order to reach the next tram stop.

George went forward slowly and told himself uneasily that every step brought him closer to the house where his father certainly was already waiting for him with the continual question, which he would answer today with such great timidity.

Oh, the sad house, the bleak, large building with the long halls and the narrow stairs, and the room in which the three of them always sat and where none of them could escape the others. To that place he must return, today and tomorrow and every day for another five years. How was he supposed to live through it, and if he did survive, new studies would begin, the hardest ones. The future reared up before him like a grey mountain which he would never be able to climb over; a desolate, hopeless feeling akin to despair seized his heart and suffused it with inexpressible bitterness. Suddenly a defiance he had never known before came over him. Although the clock in the nearby tower struck 6:30, although he knew well that he would have to say: Yes, I wasted

time along the way, he sat down on a bench in the little square before the opening of the street in which his parents apartment was, drew the nightingale out of his pocket and started to play. It comforted, it soothed every bitter feeling. It helped him find a bridge out of deep dejection into genuine cheerfulness.

He didn't have just distress and sorrow in his soul; deep in its innermost parts, under oppressive shadows, the flame of young joie de vivre blazed red and warm, and an unspoken feeling of happiness, always damned to silence, wanted to sing out for a change. It rejoiced in the mild air, soaring up toward the bright spring sky, with the voice of the nightingale.

George didn't find his father at home. He had been there, had changed clothes, and had gone out to a civil servant's meeting at the regulars' restaurant. Mother and son didn't articulate what a celebration it was for them to be alone. Now George was sorry for every minute which he had dawdled away on the way home. The room suddenly seemed homey and friendly to him, the air purer, and the lamp seemed to gleam more brightly than usual. Under it, in a glass, was a little bouquet of violets. Mrs. Walcher had brought it.

George bent over it and drew in its delicate fragrance: "Kind Mrs. Walcher"; he smiled slyly at his mother. "Did she get these from the country too, like she recently got the good piece of rabbit?"

Mrs. Agnes blushed. Had Georgie found her out? She avoided his gaze, she didn't answer, she only said: "Your father told me to tell you to get to your studies."

"Quite right", he retorted cockily and tossed his school satchel in a wide curve onto the sofa, so that, soaring upward, it described a cheerful hop.

"But George, today you seem like a different person."

"Yes, of course, mother!" He rushed toward her and closed her in his arms.

She resisted: "Be sensible."

"No, today for a change I'm not sensible. I must love and kiss you, your dear face, your dear hands. Every finger gets a kiss."

Well! Oh, the child's tenderness did her good. "But now sit down and eat, everything is getting cold."

And they sat down and ate and tucked it away and chatted and didn't think about tomorrow and were happy, as poor people are who exist entirely in the present, enjoy the moment, their gaze averted from the future which can bring them no good.

After supper the mother went to the sewing machine and wanted to be industrious for another hour or so. The old sewing machine, which for the last while could only be set in motion with difficulty and which had refused to obey altogether more than once, skimmed away today like a sled on a solidly frozen track. What had happened? Just yesterday mother had thought that the old faithful machine would never be useable again, and that it couldn't even be repaired in the factory. What had happened? Father had taken it apart and repaired it excellently.

"Father?" that made George think. "Has father learned to repair sewing machines?"

"Certainly not. But you know, your father can do many things that he hasn't studied how to do. He has a talent for everything."

He hasn't studied and can do it, because he has talent. Therefore, to be able to do something that one hasn't been taught to do means that one is talented. He sank into brooding.

"But mother, I have talent too."

She had to laugh. It was truly as if doubt spoke out of his words: "Well, I think you hear that often enough to know it," and she reached her hand tenderly into his tousled blonde mop of hair.

"If only it is true, mother, if it is really true," he swallowed with effort and moistened his lips, which had become dry, with his tongue. The sadness which had seized him after his conversation with Pepi threatened to stir in him again, but the presence of his mother swiftly banished it. His heart opened up wide, not the smallest secret remained inside. He spoke about everything which had previously lain dumb and silent inside him, and while he spoke, many things became clear and settled, which he had never admitted to himself. The effort which studying cost him, and that it was becoming so difficult for him to "learn things by heart."

Others memorized much easier, and remembered them much longer.

"You don't have a very good memory," said his mother, and thought that occurs often with very talented people. She gave her son to understand something along this line; he shrugged his shoulders.

"Those who have talent, you said yourself, can do things they were never taught to do. Maybe I don't have such a great talent for studying at school. But perhaps for something else... Singing in grammar school made me so glad. I always had an "A" there... and remember, the flute! Oh, if I had been allowed to learn to play the flute, or even the violin... Now I don't have anything more than just--should I tell you? Should I? Yes? --Just keep sitting there--very calmly."

He stood up and went into the darkest corner of the alcove, and softly the tones of the nightingale whirled out to the mother. She was amazed, laid her hands in her lap and listened, and didn't hear that the kitchen door was opened, and now also the door to the main room.

"Ten thirty," said Pfanner as he came in, "and you are still up, and where is the boy?"

He was in a bad mood.

At the meeting, a motion which Pfanner and a few older employees had introduced had been rejected. Then, at the common dinner Obernberger had turned up with a basket of bottles in his powerful right hand and had served Bordeaux and champagne in such a good, unassuming manner, that even the Chief Representative gave in and had a wee drop. Only Pfanner refused flatly. For him, a drink offered by the "locksmith" would have turned to poison. Once again Obernberger boasted ad nauseam about his Pepi and recounted the lad's mad pranks with such pride and contentment, that Pfanner finally couldn't control himself any longer: "If my boy screwed around that way, there'd be hell to pay."

Then followed all sorts of excuses for Pepi, and a tender praise of the good kid that he is in spite of his cockiness, and what a golden heart he has and--such talent! The professors had no doubt that this year he would be the head of his class.

Head of his class-- the son of the locksmith! Suddenly Pfanner had an acrid taste in his mouth, and he couldn't stand the food. His George had only been the head of his class in the first grade, in the second grade he had been an honor student, and now in the third grade, to all appearances he would only manage to be the fourth, the last honor student. He had had a "fair" in Greek and a "satisfactory" in geometry. What would become of him if from now on he no longer managed to stay in honor classes? What would happen if from year to year he fell behind in his performance? Pfanner already saw that all was lost, all efforts had been given in vain, all sacrifices made for nothing. In the end, the son would not turn out to be anything different from the father, a pathetic minor official. This son, to whom all means of assistance had been offered, who had only to stretch out his hand and take them. But he had it too good, he was feeling fine, and he abandoned himself to his carelessness and his laziness. Filled with bitterness, and with the resolution to tighten the reins, Pfanner had gone home. There he found his wife sitting idly in the room and listening to the birdsong which his big boy, hidden in the alcove, imitated.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" he snapped at him, as George emerged at his command. "Do you have a sense of honor, or none? What do you have there in your hand? Open your hand!"

The youth obeyed. The thought of offering an explanation didn't even occur to him. Pfanner found out everything, and his displeasure, his indignation knew no limits. This child! Truly a wayward child. There he is, almost fourteen years old, playing with a duck call, or whatever it is. He plays by day and night, yes, yes--now he remembered--and had even made fools of his parents. When he is supposed to be studying in the evening, he can't keep his eyes open, but he can play all night. "But just wait...give me that worthless thing!"

A futile resistance by the weaker one, a swift victory for the stronger one, the sweep of an arm...
The window was open-- the nightingale flew out.

Mrs. Agnes winced. George stood there with his eyes nearly popping out of his head: "Father, my only pleasure!" he cried out, and, let come what may, the hardest words, the most cruel blows, he had to weep for his "only pleasure", weep, sob, throw himself on the floor and writhe in wretchedness and despair. He didn't even hear how his father raved and shouted, didn't see that his father twisted a knot in his handkerchief, didn't feel as blow after blow rained down on him. He knew and felt only that he was a poor child from whom everything that mattered to him was always taken away.

"Stand up! Be quiet! Be quiet this moment!" ranted Pfanner and he didn't have the least sympathy for the child, who finally got up from the floor and made a fierce effort to repress his sobs. Rather, his rage demanded yet another head on which to pour itself. Who was guilty for the wanton carelessness of the boy, who even supported him in it? The mother, the criminally weak, foolish mother! If the boy never gets anywhere in life, if he grows up to be a burden and even a disgrace to his parents--idleness is the source of all vice--if he sinks into misery, the responsibility lies on her conscience, and at some time she will be called to account for it.

Pfanner understood how to silence his surroundings. No sound crossed his wife's lips. To a certain degree she had gotten used to his excessive exaggeration in the course of her marriage,

and now she was even happy that he was blaming her. In that way she at least served as a shield for her boy for a while.

The man shouted and raved, and while doing so he took off his coat and vest and hung them carefully over a chair. Even in a fury against his fellow human beings he took good care of his belongings. Now there was a pause, but only as preparation for a further terrible incident, for the question: "Have you done your homework?"

"I will do it tomorrow", replied George anxiously and hesitantly. "Tomorrow is Sunday..."

"Sure. Bring your homework!" Pfanner looked it over. "A fable to translate from German to Latin. Greek grammar to learn: irregular declinations. Geometry: three problems. History: a review from the Crusades to Rudolf von Hapsburg. And you haven't done any of this? Nothing at all? And you think you can manage it all tomorrow?" He decreed: "You will review your history tonight, read it through attentively. If you read something carefully in the evening, you know it word for word the next morning."

"There are twenty-six pages", George dared to object. "Twenty-six pages, four of which are illustrations." He put the book down in front of the boy. "Sit down and start studying!"

The lad did as he was told. All right, fine, then he will sit down and study. That he is tired and sleepy, what does that matter, it's all the same to him, he studies. If only he could study himself to death, that would be the best of all. If he were dead, he would have peace, and his mother would have peace, she wouldn't be abused on his account. So he started to read: "In the first centuries, devotion and a sense of faith already drove the Christians to the holy sites..."

On fair Sunday afternoons Pfanner regularly took a walk, and George was allowed to accompany him. A pleasure which the mother by choice had long since foregone, and from which the child returned home sadder than when he had left. To go walking with his father meant to miss every diversion, every pleasure. Over there, in the merry Prater you could engage in target practice, you could ride on the ferris wheel or the carousel. There they had theater productions, wax museums, a women's choir, gypsy music, and an aquarium and a panoramic lookout and so many other wonderful things that George's fellow students told about. If he dared to hint about it, or to ask the question "Have you ever been in the Prater? Have you ever heard the gypsies playing?" his father answered with contempt: What one could see and hear at the Prater was all miserable stuff which only uneducated and crude people enjoyed. In the circle of their walk he avoided everything which could have aroused his own curiosity or which might even have tempted him to enjoy the day: at least once a year, no--once in many years. He didn't want to! Didn't want to pay out a couple of guilders unnecessarily, which could be put into the child's savings account.

When they came home, a good, nourishing evening meal awaited them.

"Because today is Sunday," Agnes excused herself, since Pfanner had lately accused her of wasting money.

A suspicion had arisen in him which he didn't articulate but which tormented him and which must either be gotten rid of or confirmed. Recently he had inquired about the price of food, had done some figuring and come to the conclusion that the expenditures which his wife allowed herself on an ongoing basis could not possibly be covered by the grocery money she had at her

disposal. She wanted him to believe that she had earned the surplus? Ridiculous! He, the son of a poor seamstress, knew what his mother had earned in twelve hours of hard work daily. His wife, who ran her household without any such financial aid, should not assert to his face that she was able to get hold of a regular income. So what did she use to cover the additional expenditures? Pfanner wasn't satisfied for long with the evasive answers that she gave him. One day he subjected her to a severe interrogation, and she, driven into a corner, nauseated by the humiliating pain of always having to think up new excuses--confessed.

All right then, yes, she sold things, she pawned things, she gave all she had so that the child, who lived under incessant intellectual strain could be properly nourished in the years of development and of greatest growth.

Pfanner became angry, sneered: What had he himself had in these same years? Who had asked then how he was being nourished? George was growing up like the son of a Privy Councillor in comparison. He, at fourteen years, had had to earn his own bread, literally just bread! and that not even freshly baked. Privation had affected him very well, he had always been healthy. Why should his kid be different than he was and be treated like a weakling who had to be fattened up?

For the first time in her long marriage, Agnes persevered in her resistance to her husband. The moment she had so greatly feared had come, and it found her stronger than she could ever have believed she would be. Calmly she endured Pfanner's accusations, and while he accused her of going behind his back, she was brooding about the possibility of going behind his back yet again. It must be done, for the sake of the child.

The pale, lanky boy who at that moment came into the room with a "Good evening, father and mother!" just wasn't as capable of resistance as his father had been; he remained standing in the doorway, breathing heavily, as if the stifling, stormy atmosphere that filled the room had fallen upon his chest.

A few days later George celebrated his fourteenth birthday. He had brought two honor grades home from school. With solemn earnestness and with the admonition to take good care of the expensive gift, his father presented him with a new summer suit, a nice-looking cap and a well-crafted pair of low shoes. In the afternoon Pfanner remained sitting longer than usual at the table and, after Mrs. Agnes had left the room, he spoke with more detail and trust to George than was otherwise his way.

He knew well that the mother thought him cruel and felt that he demanded too much from his son. If she had her way, he would admittedly have good times now, let school just be school and only do what he pleased. But then? How would the future look after a wasted childhood? And isn't the future what matters most? George should approach his future armed with the power of knowledge. To be sure, knowledge cannot be won without effort. Did George want to be the coward who shuns effort, or the hero who seeks it out, grapples with it, conquers it? There is no victory except for this one. Without it, no high goals can be achieved.

"Your goals must be high ones!" exclaimed Pfanner. "Now you are no longer a child, and I can tell you that the goal which you should choose for yourself is to become a statesman. One who with a superior mind and a strong hand subdues the devil of discord which is tearing up our homeland, transplants the great expression 'Equal rights for all' from people's lips into their hearts, and sets it into action and makes us united, great and happy. Just think, to be a man who would be capable of this! He would be the deliverer, the liberator, the idol of his people."

George listened to him, filled with admiration. That his father spoke with him as with an equal made him infinitely proud. His belief in himself, which had begun to waver, awakened anew. "It is a big thing to be a respectable human being, and the person of average gifts can be contented with that," his father had said among other things, "an extraordinarily gifted person owes it to himself and others to become a great man. With such a person it all depends on his will, on his unshakeable decision..."

He couldn't go to sleep that evening. The pictures of the future which his father had sketched were too vividly there before him. Although he had no real conception of the profession of a statesman, he saw himself at the moment on the rostrum facing an assembly which received him with scornful shouts, enmity looked out of all eyes, in every face a "No!" was written. And he started to speak, and gradually the shouts became silent, and the malevolent expression vanished from the faces, interest and agreement were activated and began to express themselves, at first sporadically, then with increasing frequency, finally completely unanimous. He had enthralled his listeners with the power of his words. And all of them, from the first to the last, saw the leader in him and followed him with eagerness and delight because they knew that he wanted that which was good and wise, and that the path along which he led them was the path to their well-being.

After that on his way to school he no longer stopped by Salomon. He returned only a curt greeting for the friendly wave and bow of the peddler. But one time he actually did delay there. Salomon had just looked at him too imploringly and asked much too wretchedly: "Did I do something wrong, young Master, are you angry with me?"

"You must be joking," replied George, "why would I be angry with you?"

It just seemed that way to Salomon. Maybe the nightingale hadn't held up, you can't look into it to see why, and perhaps the young Master would like another one. Salomon was prepared to give him one for half price.

"Another one for half price", replied George. The temptation to accept the enticing offer gripped him powerfully. But he passed the test, he triumphed in a short inner battle.

"No, no, I don't need a nightingale any more, I don't want one!" he cried. "I am now fourteen years old, and it isn't proper for me to play any more. I must study, I must strive to remain an honor student, I can't have any other thoughts besides studying."

He carried out this resolution.

There were days on which his diligence bordered on frenzy. They passed by and left behind a dreadful exhaustion. He confided to no one, not even his mother, what was happening within him during this time. I will go crazy, he thought. There is no blood, there are no brains in my head; it is white and empty inside. The studying has eaten everything up and will now have to stop, because it can't find anything else to eat. This is absolutely natural and completely silly and is a state of torment from which it is impossible to regain one's balance...

He sat at his books as if he were dozing, and exactly at this time Pepi condescended to give in to a sudden impulse of diligence, and kept up with him, went ahead of him in great leaps. In every subject in which he was called upon to recite, he received an honors grade.

And once again George asked him: "How do you do it, so that you always know the answer? Tell me how you do it."

Pepi stuck his hands in his pockets and flung his legs out as if he wanted to cast them from him: "Too boring!... Stupid questions!..." Only in broken sentences did he deign to answer. His old man had backed off because he had threatened to shoot himself. And so he wanted to do something for the old man's sake, and was therefore no longer restraining his genius. "And now I will just give him pleasure and become the head of the class."

"Yes, sure, if you can do it!"

"If I can do it?"

"It isn't absolutely certain. Rott is still there, and Bingler."

"I will be head of the class", Pepi repeated, full of conceit. "Everything will happen just as I want it to--exactly that way!"

"The way you want it to be?"

"Exactly so. You can't understand such a thing. Certainly not you, you poor bonehead. Because you are only a bonehead, you can't understand. You just want to do things; I can accomplish whatever I want to."

George started to strut: And I can too, he wanted to answer, but his voice broke...

It seemed to him that the ground split open and an unbridgeable abyss yawned between him and his gifted comrade. Over there, amidst fruitful fields in which everything flourished and flowered, stood Pepi, and wherever his foot stepped arose a fountain, and whatever his hand touched became marvelous fruit. And he himself on this side, on barren, stony ground which only reluctantly and grudgingly allowed a shady twig, a nourishing blade to break through.

Why the screaming injustice, why should the other guy get everything and he such a stingy little bit?

Pepi observed his silent struggle and grimaced disdainfully. "Bonehead (Büffler)!" he said. "Cramming (büffeln) comes from buffalo (Büffel), and buffaloes belong to the genus of cattle."

Then a wild fury seized the usually gentle George. He jumped at Pepi and grabbed him by the throat.

The one thus unexpectedly attacked bellowed and defended himself with hands and feet, and soon the two were surrounded by a shouting horde that took part in the duel, almost entirely in George's favor. For once to see the greatly envied, greatly hated Pepi withdraw entirely conquered afforded each individual an exquisite pleasure. Woefully beaten up, in tattered clothing he left the scene. This took place not far from the school, and on the street corner Salomon had stood and had watched the battle with intense interest. He accompanied George with congratulations and cries of approbation; George however sadly dismissed him with a wave. He had done something which contradicted his entire being, was ashamed of his success

and viewed with dismay his new jacket, upon which traces of the fighting could be seen. Now he began to run, in order to get home before his father. Bathed in sweat he stepped into the kitchen, pressed his ear against the lock of the door to the main room and listened. Everything quiet, only the sewing machine purred, his mother was alone. O, praise and thanks to God! Hastily he entered and spluttered out the story of his newest experience: "And now mend my jacket mother, mend my jacket!"

Supper was eaten in silence. A gloomy disgruntlement reigned in the house. Pfanner continued to sulk because of his wife. He had taken the notes for all the articles she had pawned, in order to redeem them little by little. God knows, with what bitterness. Every guilder that he took to the pawnshop was a theft from his son's savings book; from the future fortune which was supposed to cover the costs of the young man's doctoral orals and his year of military service. There were moments when he hated her, she who was guilty of this theft. It wasn't in her power to make up for it, but it was in his power to make her repent and suffer for it. Day after day the same torture was repeated. Day after day he demanded to see the household accounts, went through every single entry, criticized each one. With refined art he humiliated the mother in the presence of the child through the show of mistrust that he put on.

"Whoever has deceived once, no matter what the intention, will deceive again! You have to watch out for such a one."

Tormented, George looked over at her and threw kisses to her behind his father's back. She was being shamed for his sake, he was the innocent creator of her anguish. And she, guessing all that was going on within him, overcame herself, made a great effort to remain composed and steadfast through all the insults which she experienced. Her husband perceived as indifference that which was the highest heroism, and sharpened the brine in his expressions of his contempt. Today had gone on as usual, and Agnes was hardly able to maintain her self-control any longer, when she was startled by a fierce tug at the doorbell. She screamed; George was frightened as well. It was something completely unusual, that someone demanded admittance to their home at this time of evening.

"Nervous, like frogs under an electrical charge," growled Pfanner. "Haven't you ever in your lives heard someone ring the bell? Go see who it is," he ordered his wife.

She quickly lighted a candle and hurried into the kitchen. The bell was already ringing a second time, even more impatiently, more fiercely than before. As Agnes opened the door, a large, broad-shouldered, well-dressed man stood there and asked: "Is Mr. Civil Servant Pfanner at home?"

Who could it be? Perhaps one of Pfanner's superiors, the Inspector or even the Chief Inspector?

"Yes, he is at home," she said, "please come in."

Without a greeting he went past her; he clearly thought she was the maid, and she didn't mind the error. In her grey, washed out percale dress, in her patched shoes, she wouldn't have wanted to be thought by one of the superiors to be the wife of a royal and imperial official. Politely she opened the door to the main room for the stranger, retired into the kitchen, and as the last thing heard her husband say in an absolutely disrespectful tone: "Mr. Obernberger? To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Obernberger closed the door behind him, the maid shouldn't listen in on the conversation between him and Pfanner.

"My visit won't be a pleasure to you," he replied in an agitated tone, "I have come to make a complaint."

Hoho! This could become unpleasant. Pfanner had a bad conscience. Had one of the disdainful speeches that he was in the habit of making about Obernberger gotten back to the "locksmith"? Perhaps even to one of the superiors by whom the Master was held in high esteem? A cursed affair! Pfanner hid his dismay behind a particularly gruff manner: "Well, out with it, don't be embarrassed. I can take it," he said.

George had jumped up and fetched a chair. Obernberger sat down. Sternly and searchingly he looked at the youth who remained standing before him with downcast eyes and convulsively intertwined fingers.

"Mr. Obernberger! Mr. Obernberger!" said George softly and imploringly.

Oh, if he had thought of Mr. Obernberger earlier, he would never have beaten up his son. Mr. Obernberger was always so kind to him when he met him, and recently, when he had come in his carriage to pick Pepi up from school, he had invited George to take a ride. It would have been bliss to accept the invitation, but he didn't dare. His father would certainly have said: "Have you forgotten that you should accept no favors?"

The longer Obernberger let his eyes rest on George, the more mild their expression became, and now he addressed him: "Do you know that I was on my way to the School Director to lodge a complaint about you? But I don't want to ruin your good citizenship grade, and I will be satisfied with a domestic punishment, which your father will certainly give you, when he hears what happened. Mr. Civil Servant," he turned to Pfanner. "George attacked my son today after school and choked him, and others got involved, and my Pepi came home in tatters, and his right eye is so black and swollen that he won't be able to read or write for a couple of days. And this happened without the slightest provocation."

"Without the slightest provocation?" repeated Pfanner; he half raised himself from his chair, and it seemed as if he wanted to leap at his son.

"Not without provocation," George more gasped than spoke. "He said that I am a bonehead. Cramming comes from buffalo, and buffaloes belong to the genus of cattle, he said."

Pfanner was silent and again sat upright in his chair. Obernberger was taken aback.

"Is that true?" he asked, and George vowed: "It is true."

"Get out!" Pfanner suddenly shouted at him and pointed with an outstretched arm toward the kitchen door.

Outside, the mother stood near the stove and trembled from head to foot and asked herself what new disaster could be befalling her George. He ran to her, was pale as wax, and greenish shadows stretched along his nose down to the corners of his mouth: "Mother, mother!" he forced out, "what is going to happen to me now?"

In the main room, though, something outrageous was happening. Pfanner apologized for his son. The lad was timid by nature and just too gentle for a boy. If for once he had started slugging, he must have been severely provoked. He is also absolutely truthful, assured the father, who had never yet caught him in a lie.

"Can you say the same about your Pepi?" asked Pfanner, and he put on a certain military expression which he had acquired when at one point, after a few months of his term of service, he had been promoted to corporal.

The good-natured Obernberger was still touched by the impression that the mortal fear on George's face had made upon him. The large, broad man completely melted in the presence of the small, quick-tempered Pfanner. A powerful snowman in the presence of a pile of glowing coals. He had no reason to rely on his Pepi's love for the truth, and because he didn't want to admit this, he became silent.

"Ask your Pepi on his word of honor whether my son really hit him without any reason," said Pfanner. "Eye to eye with my boy, in our presence, he should say it again. If he can do that, then I will invite you to a hiding such as has never yet happened here, although I don't stint on blows with my boy."

They kept to this arrangement. Mr. Obernberger, who had come as a judge, left the apartment of the civil servant with the feeling that he had suffered a defeat. He didn't pay any attention to the two who bowed deeply as he strode through the kitchen.

George ran ahead of him, opened the door with humble assiduousness and murmured: "Pardon me, Mr. Obernberger, pardon me!" so softly, with a voice so stifled by timidity and tears, that the factory owner, absorbed by unpleasant thoughts, didn't even hear it.

When Agnes and George went back into the main room, Pfanner had before him a large sheet of paper covered with numbers, which he was checking over with the utmost concentration. George fetched his notebooks and got to work. Half an hour went by before the father addressed his son, and then--a miracle--it happened for once in not an unfriendly manner. He satisfied himself that George was almost finished with his homework.

"Have you been called on to recite in history yet?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"That's odd. So late?"

"Maybe tomorrow. We have history tomorrow."

"Well, then you will of course get an honors grade?"

"I don't know, maybe."

"You!" his father screamed at him. "Do you know what that means if you don't get an honors grade? Do you know what a 'satisfactory' will cost you?"

"I know," replied George tonelessly.

"It will cost you your place as an honor student, you lazy boy!"

"I'm not lazy, father."

The father raised his head, utterly astonished. His docile lad had been the hero of a fistfight today, and now he presumed to contradict him. What had happened? Had the man awakened in the youth? Would he in the end actually become as spirited as he had always wished?

Mrs. Agnes had laid her hand on the arm of her son when he contradicted his father: "For heaven's sake, Georgie!"

"Be quiet," Pfanner barked at her, "let him speak. I'm not lazy, he asserts. All right, speak, it's allowed, I command it!" he pressed the boy.

"I study all day long," said George. "I can't study any more than I already do. I don't know what else I can do to satisfy you." The recklessness of despair came over him, and he dared to add: "Other parents are satisfied when their children get a 'satisfactory', and I'm supposed to get only 'excellent' and 'commendable'... And I'm supposed to slave away... And I..." He couldn't go on, wrung his hands, banged his forehead on the table and writhed in a pain that shocked even his father. For the first time in his life he felt helpless before the child.

"I already have a 'satisfactory' in Greek!" cried George in wheezing, crushed tones. "If I get another 'satisfactory', then I won't be an honor student any more. And I will certainly get another 'satisfactory'..."

That was too much. These words put an end to Pfanner's patience. Everything in him which had started to soften a bit became rigid again: No longer an honor student! This boy, who had the ability to claim a place among the most excellent students, wanted to crawl through school with the huge crowd of those who were mediocre? Fooey on the boy!

"Either you keep your place as an honor student, or I will turn you over to a shoemaker as an apprentice."

"Do it, father, do it! But why exactly a shoemaker!" retorted George, totally out of control. "You could give me to Mr. Obernberger and I will become an ornamental locksmith ...Or else I could earn my bread through music..."

"George, George, for heaven's sake!" repeated his mother. She saw her husband become pale with fury, saw his fists clench: "Music? Great, fine! I'll buy you a barrel organ, you can play it in the houses and wait for the pennies that they throw out the windows to you."

George pressed his chin on his chest and stared at the floor.

Pfanner jumped up and struck a heavy blow on the nape of the child's neck: "Not another word! And--note this well, don't ever come home again with a bad grade. Don't you dare!"

"No, no," murmured George. Now he was entirely without fear. So much the better if he didn't need to come home again. His father wouldn't be annoyed with him any longer and wouldn't torment his mother any more because of him. If only he had never come into the world... or if he were already out of it--if only he were dead! The next morning his father was filled with a frightfully threatening taciturnity. The dark rings under his reddened eyes, with him the surest sign of a sleepless night, made him look as if he were ill. He ate breakfast hastily, took his papers under his arm, put on his hat and left the room without replying to the greetings of his wife and his son. They heard him slam the kitchen door so hard that it boomed.

George ordered his notebooks and books in his school bag, was ready, took them all out again one by one, ordered it all again, slowly and deliberately. His mother urged him to hurry. Suddenly he left everything and threw himself into her arms, and she pressed him to her heart. They didn't speak, no accusation crossed their lips, but accusations burned red-hot in their hearts. How happy they could be, the two of them, how blissful, if it weren't for the father's ambition, the blind, foolish man who demanded from the little apple tree, which God had planted in his garden, the driving force of an oak.

George had already said farewell three times, and still couldn't bring himself to leave.

"You'll be late, Georgie," said Mrs. Agnes. "Run now, run! And don't be so sad," she added and stroked his cheeks.

"You are sad yourself," he answered.

"Oh--it'll pass, when I start working it will go."

"Well, adieu," he said and strode resolutely to the door and down the stairs to the first floor. There he stopped, collected himself, turned around suddenly and charged back again in hurried bounds, and when he came to the top, he saw his mother standing in front of the door to the apartment, in same spot to which she had accompanied him.

"What's the matter?" she asked, as if starting from sleep, threw her head back and made an effort to put on a stern expression. "Did you forget something?"

"I didn't say goodbye to you properly," and he flung his arms around her neck and kissed her with stormy tenderness.

He came late to school. The first lecture had already begun fifteen minutes earlier when he entered and took his place.

"Where were you?" his neighbor whispered in his ear. "You were called on to recite, and weren't here."

"Bad luck, bad luck," murmured George and made every conceivable effort to listen attentively. Strange things were going on in his head. It buzzed and hammered in there, and the voice which rang down to him from the lectern-- otherwise a loud, powerful voice--, was lacking in resonance. The words which it spoke weren't articulated, they flowed into each other like waves... Another strange thing! The broad hall seemed to have lengthened incredibly. It was no longer a hall, it was a long corridor, filled with peculiarly cold, white light, and far, far away at

the end stood a black line on a pedestal. George had to forcibly collect all his mental energy to get it straight in his mind: this is the professor who is giving a lecture.

He closed his eyes, leaned back and thought: I won't be able to learn today. But after a while it got better, he was able to tear himself out of the weird dreamlike state he had ended up in. The second lecture had begun. The one who was now speaking was a very popular teacher who was admired by the entire school, the professor of history. He had called up a student who usually was barely mediocre, and he passed with distinction. George followed. Oh! if he could only have as much luck as his predecessor. It almost seemed that it would be so. The professor was testing materials George had reviewed not long ago and said: "Good, except for two dates. You will get a 'commendable'. But I would like to be able to give you an 'excellent', and therefore I will ask you a few more questions. Name for me all the German emperors up to Rudolf the First."

This wasn't a hard question. Full of confidence he began to answer it and carried it off gloriously up to Otto III. There his memory betrayed him--he let the scholarly and pious emperor reach a great age and let Heinrich II be the first Salier.

The professor shrugged his shoulders regretfully and interrupted him: "It's not going well. Try something else! Tell me the story of Konradin."

Oh--he knew that! He had told it to his mother; so movingly, that she had had to cry. Konradin was--well--was of course King Enzo... Or no, actually--Enzio was Konradin...

A barely suppressed malicious snicker arose; Pepi was laughing at him. The eyes of the professor fastened themselves solidly on him. He understood that these good, benevolent eyes were asking with concern: Are you in your right mind?

He wanted to cry: No! I am completely bewildered and confused!

"I feel sorry for you," said the professor, "but--you tell me yourself--what grade have you earned?"

George whispered something completely unintelligible. It seemed to the teacher that it was a thank-you. The lad knew nothing today, but he guessed a great deal, guessed the heartfelt sympathy which he instilled into his teacher.

Before the third lecture began, he left the school and went slowly up the street. It was a spring day with summery sunshine, the sky was cloudless, the air still free of dust and fumes. George strode with glassy, popping eyes between the people who thronged the main street of the suburb. It struck one or the other of them how strangely "lost" he looked. No one had the desire or the time to ask him what was wrong. Only a carpenter's boy who was dragging a handcart and whom he bumped into called to him: "Hey! where is your skull? Attached to your cap?"

Involuntarily George clutched at his head. He was bareheaded, had left his cap at the school and also his school things. But that didn't matter. No one would ask him about them. Now he couldn't go home again. "Don't ever come home again with a bad grade!" These words roared unrelentingly in his ears. Now he would have to receive it, the bad grade, the first really bad one. What would his father do to him now? And how his mother's feelings would be hurt... No, no, father and mother, he doesn't dare, he won't come back again, he is going where many another unhappy student has gone: into the Danube. And this one thought, the longer he saw it before

him as the inevitable, the only one, the more got used to it. This thought with the dark core had a dazzling atmosphere and began to radiate a great brightness. Now it took shape in this way: I must go into the Danube, but I also want to, and gladly. How good it will be to be dead, not to have to hear anymore: Study! How good also that there won't be conflict between his parents any more. But you are committing suicide, it occurred to him, and suicide is a mortal sin. He shuddered. "Dear God! Infinitely kind God!" he groaned and looked imploringly up toward heaven. "Don't count my death as a sin! I don't want to commit a sin, I want to die for the peace of my parents. My death is a self-sacrifice."

A self-sacrifice!

He clung to this word; it brought him comfort. It transformed a deed of despair into a heroic deed and the most terrible guilt into martyrdom. It arose before the poor, wandering, searching child like a star in the night. No more consideration, no more reflection, no more doubt, not the least ability to imagine anything else, just the raging, uncontrollable longing to experience a release and to bring a release.

He had arrived at the end of the street and turned into the side street which led to the wharf. Leaden fatigue filled his limbs, his head burned and hurt to the point of unconsciousness. The Danube is a cool, soft bed, there one can find peace and refreshment. It's only necessary to make it that far, just to get there! A dull anxiety drove him onward: They begrudge me the release, they are behind me, are chasing me. He began to run, and in doing so, it seemed to him that he always remained in the same spot. That was dreadful, to have to fight once again such a terrible battle with the insurmountable.

"Where are you going? Why are you in such a hurry?" a familiar voice addressed him. The peddler stood before him.

"You?" he said, "you, Salomon?" He took a little time to say farewell to the poor youth.

He too was miserable, for whom it would have been sheer bliss to sit in the school from which George had escaped, and who must stroll up and down from early morning until late in the night in dust and sunburn, and who looked so ill, and his frail form was already completely crooked from carrying the heavy peddler's tray. Yes, yes, he on whom that which is too heavy is laid becomes crippled. Poor Salomon, whom the policeman frightens away and threatens to take him in when, completely exhausted, he would like to rest for a few moments on a bench. Away, away on tired feet in the worn-out, split boots... George's glance skimmed across them and suddenly he bent over, quickly took off his new low shoes and laid them on the peddler's tray.

"Take them, I don't need them anymore", he said and--laughed. Yes, later Salomon swore to it that he laughed, and how inexpressibly painful this laugh had sounded dawned on him only later, after it was all over. At first, in his joyful astonishment he had eyes only for the beautiful, good shoes which had fallen into his lap as if out of the cornucopia of luck. When he reflected on the fact that George wouldn't be allowed to give his shoes away and probably was just playing a joke on him, and he looked around and cried: "Young Master! young Master!" -- the loud shouting of many voices came to his ears: "In the water!" -- "He jumped in!" -- "Help! Help!"

From all sides they rushed up, ran, crawled up the steep embankment, stood with necks outstretched, horror, or apathetic or despicable curiosity in their faces, and pointed: "There! Over there! Do you see him?"

Preparations were made to save him--in vain. A rapid had seized the swimming body and hurled it headfirst against a bridge piling.

With piercing laments Salomon pushed through the crowd to the bank. He had thrown off the shoes, scattered his wares carelessly as he was running... God! God! He jumped into the water--went to his death, he whom Salomon had admired and envied and who had always been so kind to him.

Pfanner had reached and carried out a difficult decision. He had gone to the Director of the Gymnasium to ask for his forbearance with George. Even a few days ago he still would have held such a step to be impossible and would have believed that he would degrade himself and George through taking it.

With all the warmth and obligingness that were by any means at his disposal, he articulated the request that his son be graded leniently, even though the lad had slackened a bit in diligence in the last while. His father guaranteed that from now on it would go better.

"Slackened in diligence?" This was something new to the director. As far as he knew, so far none of the professors had complained about George's lack of diligence. "I would be happy," he said, "if I could say as much good to all parents about their sons, as I can tell you about George. He is superbly esteemed by all the teachers, is very well-behaved, and also not in the least untalented..."

"Oh, I believe that!" threw in Pfanner arrogantly.

"Not in the least untalented," repeated the director coolly, "but also not exceptionally talented. I fear that you are demanding too much of him, that you believe him to have greater ability than he has. If you force him to overstretch his strength, you will ruin him."

The civil servant came into the office deeply dejected. So he was supposedly demanding too much of his boy, so he was ruining him, so the boy was supposedly only an average talent? He didn't believe it. These school people are so often wrong. How many people, of whom their teachers didn't think very highly, have become great men. He went to work, buried himself in it, sought escape in it from the heavy burden that weighed down on his heart.

Around noon the clerical assistant notified him that someone was there who wished to speak with him. In the corridor Mrs. Walcher awaited him in a frightfully distraught state. Something dreadful has happened, she stuttered, the worst thing that anyone could imagine. He should come with her at once. "What is the worst thing?" he snapped at her.

"What has happened to my boy?"

Her answer was a gesture of despair.

A solemn funeral service was prepared for the favorite of the Gymnasium. All the professors, all his school comrades took part. Master Obernberger followed the procession, crying like a child, and his Pepi had shaken off all his pride for the day.

The father strode with a correct posture behind the coffin. Every word which was spoken at the grave in praise of his son seemed to do him good, while the mother collapsed deeper and deeper into herself.

"It would be best for her," said Mrs. Walcher very anxiously to her husband, "if one could just go ahead and bury her at the same time."

The two couples set off on the return trip in the same coach. Pfanner and his wife didn't exchange a single syllable. The one timidly avoided the other's gaze. Arriving at home, Agnes gave in to the urgent appeals of her friend, to come over to her place first.

At least she will have a couple of hours of peace, thought her faithful friend.

When evening came and her accustomed duties called her, Agnes mechanically got down to preparing supper. She entered the main room to light the lamp. But Pfanner had already done that himself. The lamp burned on the table, and there lay the books and the cap which the school clerk had brought back. Before him Pfanner had opened a thin little book-- the child's fortune, which had been saved up guilder by guilder. And in the broken figure which sat there and viewed all the things, a heart-rending hopelessness expressed itself. What was now going on in this soul!

Agnes approached him softly.

The woman whom he had crushed and trodden upon and lowered to the level of a serving machine in this moment felt herself to be the greater and the stronger and, in comparison with him--the happier one. She could think of her child without self-reproach, he had taken his leave of her with tender love.

"Pfanner," she said.

He started and stared at her with dismay. Did she want to call him to account? His lips twitched and trembled, he couldn't utter a sound. Something akin to old age lay in his twisted features.

Then hate retreated, every reproach became silent. She came slowly closer and said: "You only wanted the best for him."

Taken by surprise, in humble gratitude he took both her hands, laid his face in them and sobbed.