

FREDERIK VAN EEDEN

THE QUEST

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The Quest

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Frederik van Eeden

The Quest / The authorized translation from the Dutch of De kleine Johannes

PART I

I

I will tell you something about Little Johannes and his quest. My story is very like a fairy tale, but everything in it really happened. As soon as you lose faith in it, read no farther, for then it was not written for you. And, should you chance to meet Little Johannes, you must never speak to him about it, for that would grieve him and make me sorry I had told you all this.

Johannes lived in an old house with a big garden. It was hard to find the way about them, for in the house were many dark halls, flights of stairs, chambers, and spacious garrets; and in the garden everywhere were fencings and hot-houses. To Johannes it was a whole world in itself. He could make far journeys in it, and he gave names to everything he discovered. For the house he chose names from the animal kingdom; the caterpillar loft, because there he fed the caterpillars and watched them change their state; the chicken room, because once he had found a hen there. This had not come of itself, but had been put there by Johannes' mother, to brood. For things in the garden, preferring those products of which he was most fond, he chose names from the vegetable kingdom, such as Raspberry Mountain, Gooseberry Woods, and Strawberry Valley. Behind all was a little spot he named Paradise; and there, of course, it was exceedingly delightful. A great sheet of water lay there – a pond where white water-lilies were floating, and where the reeds held long, whispered conversations with the wind. On the opposite side lay the dunes. Paradise itself was a little grass-plot on the near shore, encircled by shrubbery. From the midst of this shot up the tall nightingale-plant. There, in the thick grass, Johannes often lay gazing through the swaying stalks to the gentle hill-tops beyond the water. He used to go every warm summer evening and lie looking for hours, without ever growing weary of it. He thought about the still depths of the clear water before him – how cozy it must be down amid the water plants, in that strange half-light. And then again, he thought of the far-away, gloriously-tinted clouds which hovered above the dunes – wondering what might be behind them, and if it would not be fine to be able to fly thither. Just as the sun was sinking, the clouds piled up upon one another till they seemed to form the entrance to a grotto; and from the depths of that grotto glowed a soft, red light. Then Johannes would feel a longing to be there. Could I only fly into it! he thought. What would really be beyond? Shall I sometime – sometime be able to get there?

But often as he made this wish, the grotto always fell apart in ashen, dusky flecks, and he never was able to get nearer to it. Then it would grow cold and damp by the pond, and again he would seek his dark little bedroom in the old house.

He lived there not entirely alone. He had a father who took good care of him, a dog named Presto, and a cat named Simon. Of course, he thought most of his father, but he by no means considered Presto and Simon so very much beneath him, as a big man would have. He confided even more secrets to Presto than to his father, and for Simon he felt a devout respect. That was not strange, for Simon was a big cat with glossy, black fur, and a thick tail. By merely looking at him one could see that he was perfectly convinced of his own greatness and wisdom. He always remained dignified and proper, even when he condescended to play with a rolling spool, or while gnawing a waste herring-

head behind a tree. At the extreme demonstrativeness of Presto he closed his green eyes disdainfully, and thought: "Well – dogs know no better!"

Can you realize now, that Johannes had a great awe of him? He held much more intimate relations with the little brown dog. Presto was neither beautiful nor superior, but an unusually good and sagacious dog, never farther than two steps away from Johannes, and patiently listening to whatever his master told him. I do not need to tell you how much Johannes thought of Presto. But he still had room in his heart for other things. Does it seem strange that his little dark bedroom, with the diamond window-panes, held also a large place? He liked the wall-hangings, with the big flowers in which he saw faces – faces he had so often studied when he was ill, or while he lay awake mornings. He liked the one small picture that hung there. It represented stiff figures walking in a still stiffer garden beside a smooth lake, where sky-high fountains were spouting, and coquetting swans were swimming. He liked best, however, the hanging clock. He always wound it up carefully and seriously, and considered it a necessary courtesy to watch it while it was striking. At least that was the way unless he happened to be asleep. If, through neglect, the clock ran down, Johannes felt very guilty and begged its pardon a thousand times. You would have laughed, perhaps, if you had heard him in conversation with his room. But confess how often you talk to your own self. It does not appear to you in the least ridiculous. Besides, Johannes was convinced that his hearers understood him perfectly, and he had no need of an answer. Secretly, however, he expected an answer some day from the clock or the wall-paper.

Johannes certainly had schoolmates, but they were not properly friends. He played with them, invented plots in school, and formed robber bands with them out-of-doors; but he only felt really at home when he was alone with Presto. Then he never longed for the boys, but felt himself at ease and secure.

His father was a wise and serious man, who often took Johannes with him on long expeditions through the woods and over the dunes. They talked but little – and Johannes followed ten steps behind his father, greeting the flowers he met. And the old trees, which must always remain in the selfsame place, he stroked along their rough bark with his friendly little hand. Then the good-natured giants rustled their thanks.

Sometimes his father wrote letters in the sand, one by one, and Johannes spelled the words which they formed. Again, the father stopped and taught Johannes the name of some plant or animal.

And Johannes often asked questions, for he saw and heard many perplexing things. He often asked silly questions. He wanted to know why the world was just as it was, why plants and animals must die, and if miracles could take place. But Johannes' father was a wise man, and did not tell all he knew. That was well for Johannes.

Evenings, before he went to sleep, Johannes always made a long prayer. His nurse had taught him. He prayed for his father and for Presto. Simon, he thought, did not need to be prayed for. He prayed a good while for himself, too, and almost always ended with the wish that some day there might be a miracle. And when he had said *Amen*, he peeped expectantly around the darkening room, at the faces on the wall-hangings, which looked still stranger in the faint twilight; and at the door-knob, and the clock, where the miracle ought now to begin. But the clock always kept on ticking in the very same way – the door-knob did not stir – it grew quite dark, and Johannes fell asleep without having seen the miracle.

But some day it would happen. He knew it would.

II

It was warm by the pool and utterly still. The sun, flushed and tired with his daily work, seemed to rest a moment on the rim of the dunes, for a breathing spell before diving under. The smooth water reflected, almost perfectly, the flaming face of the sun. The leaves of the beech tree which hung over the pond took advantage of the stillness to look at themselves attentively, in the mirror-like water. The solitary heron, standing on one foot between the broad leaves of a water-lily, forgot that he had come out to catch frogs, and, deep in thought, was gazing along his nose.

Then came Johannes to the grass plot, to see the cloud-grotto. Plump! plump! sprang the frogs from the bank. The mirror was all rippled, the image of the sun was broken up into broad bands, and the beech leaves rustled angrily, for they had not yet viewed themselves long enough.

Fastened to the bare roots of a beech tree lay a little old boat. Johannes had been strictly forbidden to get into it; but, oh, how strong the temptation was this evening! The clouds had already taken the semblance of a wondrous portal, behind which the sun would soon sink to rest. Glittering ranks of clouds ranged themselves at the sides, like a golden-armored life-guard. The face of the water reflected the glow, and red rays darted through the reeds like arrows.

Slowly, Johannes loosened the boat-rope from the roots. He would drift there, in the midst of the splendor. Presto had already sprung into the boat, and before his master intended it the reeds moved apart, and away they both drifted toward the evening sun.

Johannes lay in the bow, and gazed into the depths of the light-grotto. Wings! thought he. Wings now, and away I would fly!

The sun had disappeared, but the clouds were all aglow. In the east the sky was deep blue. A row of willows stood along the bank, their small, pale leaves thrust motionlessly out into the still air. They looked like exquisite, pale-green lace against the sombre background.

Hark! What was that? It darted and whizzed like a gust of wind cutting a sharp furrow in the face of the water. It came from the dunes – from the grotto in the clouds!

When Johannes looked round, a big, blue dragon-fly sat on the edge of the boat. He had never seen one so large. It rested there, but its wings kept quivering in a wide circle. It seemed to Johannes that the tips of its wings made a luminous ring.

That must be a fire dragon-fly, he thought – a rare thing.

The ring grew larger and larger, and the wings whirled so fast that Johannes could see nothing but a haze. And little by little, from out this haze, he saw the shining of two dark eyes; and a light, frail form in a garment of delicate blue sat in the place of the dragon-fly. A wreath of white wind-flowers rested upon the fair hair, and at the shoulders were gauzy wings which shimmered in a thousand hues, like a soap bubble.

A thrill of happiness coursed through Johannes. *This* was a miracle!

"Will you be my friend?" he whispered.

That was a queer way of speaking to a stranger. But this was not an every-day case, and he felt as if he had always known this little blue being.

"Yes, Johannes," came the reply, and the voice sounded like the rustling of the reeds in the night wind, or the pattering of rain-drops on the forest leaves.

"What is your name?" asked Johannes.

"I was born in the cup of a wind-flower. Call me Windekind."¹

Windekind laughed, and looked in Johannes' eyes so merrily that his heart was blissfully cheered.

¹ Windekind = Child of the *Winde* or Windflower.

"To-day is my birthday," said Windekind. "I was born not far away, of the first rays of the moon and the last rays of the sun. They say the sun is feminine.² It is not true. The sun is my father."

Johannes determined forthwith to speak of the sun as masculine, the next morning, in school.

"Look! There comes up the round, fair face of my mother. Good evening, Mother! Oh! oh! But she looks both good-natured and distressed!"

He pointed to the eastern horizon. There, in the dusky heavens, behind the willow lace-work which looked black against the silver disk, rose the great shining moon. Her face wore a pained expression.

"Come, come, Mother! Do not be troubled. Indeed, I can trust him!"

The beautiful creature fluttered its gauzy wings frolicsomenly and touched Johannes on the cheek with the Iris in its hand.

"She does not like it that I am with you. You are the first one. But I trust you, Johannes. You must never, never speak my name nor talk about me to a human being. Do you promise?"

"Yes, Windekind," said Johannes. It was still so strange to him. He felt inexpressibly happy, yet fearful of losing his happiness. Was he dreaming? Near him, Presto lay calmly sleeping on the seat. The warm breath of his dog put him at rest. The gnats swarmed over the face of the water, and danced in the sultry air, just as usual. Everything was quite clear and plain about him. It must be true! And all the time he felt resting upon him the trustful glance of Windekind. Then again he heard the sweet, quavering voice:

"I have often seen you here, Johannes. Do you know where I was? Sometimes I sat on the sandy bottom of the pond, among the thick water plants, and looked up at you as you leaned over to drink, or to peep at the water beetles, or the newts. But you never saw me. And many times I peeped at you from the thick reeds. I am often there. When it is warm I sleep in an empty reed-bird's nest. And, oh! it is so soft!"

Windekind rocked contentedly on the edge of the boat, and struck at the gnats with his flower.

"I have come now to give you a little society. Your life will be too dreary, otherwise. We shall be good friends, and I will tell you many things – far better things than the school-master palms off upon you. He knows absolutely nothing about them. And when you do not believe me, I shall let you see and hear for yourself. I will take you with me."

"Oh, Windekind! dear Windekind! Can you take me there?" cried Johannes, pointing to the sky, where the crimson light of the setting sun had just been streaming out of the golden cloud-gates. That glorious arch was already melting away in dull, grey mist, yet from the farthest depths a faint, rosy light was still shining.

Windekind gazed at the light which was gilding his delicate features and his fair locks, and he gently shook his head.

"Not yet, Johannes, not yet. You must not ask too much just now. Even I have not yet been at my father's home."

"I am always with my father," said Johannes.

"No! That is not your father. We are brothers, and my father is your father, too. But the earth is your mother, and for that reason we are very different. Besides, you were born in a house, with human beings, and I in a wind-flower. The latter is surely better. But it will be all the same to us."

Then Windekind sprang lightly upon the side of the boat, which did not even stir beneath his weight, and kissed Johannes' forehead.

That was a strange sensation for Johannes. Everything about him was changed.

He saw everything now, he thought, much better and more exactly. The moon looked more friendly, too, and he saw that the water-lilies had faces, and were gazing at him pensively.

² In Dutch, the word sun is feminine.

Suddenly he understood why the gnats were all the time dancing so merrily around one another, back and forth and up and down, till their long legs touched the water. Once he had thought a good deal about it, but now he understood perfectly.

He knew, also, what the reeds were whispering, and he heard the trees on the bank softly complaining because the sun had set.

"Oh, Windekind, I thank you! This is delightful. Yes, indeed, we will have nice times together!"

"Give me your hand," said Windekind, spreading his many-colored wings. Then he drew Johannes in the boat, over the water, through the lily leaves which were glistening in the moonlight.

Here and there, a frog was sitting on a leaf. But now he did not jump into the water when Johannes came. He only made a little bow, and said: "Quack." Johannes returned the bow politely. Above everything, he did not wish to appear conceited.

Then they came to the rushes. They were wide-spread, and the boat entirely disappeared in them without having touched the shore. But Johannes held fast to his guide, and they scrambled through the high stalks to land.

Johannes thought he had become smaller and lighter, but perhaps that was imagination. Still, he could not remember ever having been able to climb up a grass stalk.

"Now be ready," said Windekind, "you are going to see something funny."

They walked on through the high grass, beneath the dark undergrowth which here and there let through a small, shining moonbeam.

"Did you ever hear the crickets evenings in the dunes? It is just as if they were having a concert. Is it not? But you can never tell where the sound comes from. Now they never sing for the pleasure of it; but the sound comes from the cricket-school where hundreds of little crickets are learning their lessons by heart. Keep still, for we are close to them."

Chirp! Chirp!

The bushes became less dense, and when Windekind pushed apart the grass blades with his flower, Johannes saw a brightly lighted, open spot in the thin, spindling dune-grass, where the crickets were busily learning their lessons.

Chirp! Chirp!

A big fat cricket was teacher, and heard the lessons. One by one the pupils sprang up to him; always with one spring forward, and one spring back again, to their places. The one that made a bad spring was obliged to take his stand upon a toadstool.

"Pay good attention, Johannes. Perhaps you too can learn something," said Windekind.

Johannes understood very well what the little crickets answered. But it was not in the least like that which the teacher of his school taught. First came geography. They knew nothing of the parts of the world. They were only obliged to learn twenty-six dunes and two ponds. No one could know anything about what lay beyond, said the teacher, and whatever might be told about it was nothing but idle fancy.

Then botany had its turn. They were all very clever at that, and there were many prizes distributed: selected grass blades of various lengths – tender and juicy. But the zoology astonished Johannes the most. There were springing, flying, and creeping creatures. The crickets could spring and fly, and therefore stood at the head. Then followed the frogs. The birds were mentioned, with every token of aversion, as most harmful and dangerous. Finally, human beings were discussed. They were great, useless, dangerous creatures that stood very low, since they could neither fly nor spring; but luckily they were very scarce. A wee little cricket who had never yet seen a human being got three hits with a wisp because he numbered human beings, by mistake, among the harmless animals.

Johannes had never heard anything like this before.

Suddenly, the teacher called out: "Silence. The springing exercise!" Instantly all the little crickets stopped studying their lessons and began to play leap-frog. They played with skill and zeal, and the fat teacher took the lead.

It was such a merry sight that Johannes clapped his hands with joy.

At the sound, the entire school rushed off in a twinkling to the dunes; and the little grass plot was as still as death.

"See what you have done, Johannes!" cried Windekind. "You must not be so rude – one can very well see that you were born among human beings."

"I am sorry. I will try my best to behave. But it was so funny!"

"It is going to be funnier still," said Windekind. They cut across the grass plot and ascended the dunes on the other side.

Ah, me! It was hard work in the deep sand, but Johannes caught hold of Windekind's light blue garment, and then he sped quickly and lightly up the slope. Half-way to the top was a rabbit-hole.

The rabbit whose home it was lay with his head and forepaws out of the entrance. The sweet-briar was still in flower, and its faint, delicate fragrance mingled with that of the wild thyme which was growing near.

Johannes had often seen rabbits disappear into their holes. He wondered what it was like inside them, and about how many could sit together there, and if it would not be very stifling. So he was very glad when he heard his companion ask the rabbit if they might take a peep inside.

"Willingly, so far as I am concerned," said the rabbit, "but unfortunately, it just happens that I have resigned my dwelling this evening for the giving of a charity-festival. So, really, I am not master in my own house."

"Ah, indeed! Has there been an accident?"

"Alas, yes!" said the rabbit, sorrowfully. "A great calamity. We shall not recover from it in years. A thousand jumps from here a house for human beings has been built-a big, big house – and there those creatures with dogs have come to live. Fully seven members of my family have perished through their deeds, and three times as many more have been bereft of their homes. And matters are still worse with the Mouse and the Mole families. And the Toads have suffered heavily. So we have gotten up a festival for the benefit of the surviving relatives. Everybody does what he can. I gave my hole. One ought to have something to spare for his fellow-creatures."

The compassionate rabbit sighed and, pulling a long ear over his head with his right forepaw, wiped a tear out of his eye. His ear was his handkerchief.

Then something rustled in the grass, and a stout, clumsy figure came scrabbling up to the hole.

"Look!" said Windekind. "Here comes Father Toad – hopping along."

Then followed a pun at the toad's expense.

But the toad paid no attention to the jest. His name furnished occasion for frequent jokes. Composedly he laid down by the entrance a full ear of corn, neatly folded in a dry leaf, and then he climbed dexterously over the back of the rabbit into the hole.

"May we go in?" asked Johannes, who was full of curiosity. "I will give something, too!"

He remembered that he still had a biscuit in his pocket-a little round biscuit of Huntley and Palmer's. As he pulled it out he noticed for the first time how small he had become. He could scarcely lift it with both hands, and could not understand how his pocket had contained it.

"That is very rare and expensive," said the rabbit. "It is a costly gift."

The entrance was respectfully made free to them both. It was dark in the cave, and Johannes let Windekind go in front. Soon, they saw a pale-green light approaching. It was a glow-worm, who obligingly offered to light the way for them.

"It promises to be a very pleasant evening," said the glow-worm, as he led them on. "There are a great many guests. You are elves, I should say. Is it not so?" With these words, the glow-worm glanced at Johannes somewhat suspiciously.

"You may announce us as elves," replied Windekind.

"Do you know that your king is at the party?" continued the glow-worm.

"Is Oberon here? That gives me a great deal of pleasure," exclaimed Windekind. "I know him personally."

"Oh!" said the glow-worm. "I did not know I had the honor to..." and his light nearly went out from fright. "Yes, His Majesty much prefers the open air, but he is always ready to perform a charitable act. This is going to be a most brilliant affair!"

It was indeed the case. The main room in the rabbit cave was splendidly decorated. The floor had been trodden smooth, and strewn with fragrant thyme. Directly in front of the entrance a bat was hanging, head downward. He called out the names of the guests, and served at the same time as a measure of economy for a curtain. The walls of the room were tastefully adorned with dry leaves, spider-webs and tiny, suspended bats. Innumerable glow-worms crept in and out of these, and all around the ceiling; and they made a most beautiful, ever-changing illumination. At the end of the chamber was a throne, built of bits of phosphorescent wood. It was a charming spectacle.

There were many guests. Johannes felt himself rather out of place in the strange crowd, and drew close to Windekind. He saw queer things there. A mole was chatting with a field-mouse about the handsome decorations. In a corner sat two fat toads, nodding their heads at each other, and bewailing the continued dry weather. A frog, arm in arm with a lizard, attempted a promenade. Matters went badly with him, for he was timid and nervous, and every once in a while he jumped too far, thus doing damage to the wall decorations.

On the throne sat Oberon, the elf-king, encircled by a little retinue of elves. These looked down rather disdainfully upon their surroundings. The king himself was most royal in his affability, and conversed in a friendly way with various guests. He had come from a journey in the Orient, and wore a strange garment of brightly colored flower-petals. Flowers like that do not grow here, thought Johannes. On his head rested a deep blue flower-cup, which was still as fragrant as though it had just been picked. In his hand was his sceptre – the stamen of a lotus-flower.

All present were quietly lauding his goodness. He had praised the moonlight on the dunes, and had said that the glow-worms here were almost as beautiful as the fireflies of the Orient. He had pleasantly overlooked the wall decorations, and a mole, even, had noticed that he nodded approvingly.

"Come with me," said Windekind. "I will present you." And they pressed forward to the place where the king sat.

When Oberon recognized Windekind, he greeted him joyfully, and gave him a kiss. At that the guests whispered to one another, and the elves threw envious glances at the pair. The two plump toads in the corner mumbled together something about "fawning and flattering," and "not lasting long," and then nodded very significantly to each other.

Windekind talked with Oberon for a long time in a strange language, and then beckoned to Johannes to come closer.

"Give me your hand, Johannes," said the king. "Windekind's friends are mine also. Whenever I can I will help you, and I will give you a token of our alliance."

Oberon released from the chain about his neck a little gold key, and gave it to Johannes who took it respectfully and held it shut close in his hand.

"That little key may be your fortune," said the king. "It fits a golden chest which contains a precious treasure. Who holds that chest I cannot say, but you must search for it zealously. If you remain good friends with me and with Windekind – steadfast and true – you will surely succeed." With that, the elf-king inclined his beautiful head, cordially, while Johannes, overflowing with happiness, expressed his thanks.

At this moment, three frogs, who were sitting together upon a little mound of damp moss, began to sing the introduction to a slow waltz, and partners were taken for the dance. Those who did not dance were lined along the side walls by the master of ceremonies – a lively, fussy little lizard – to the great vexation of the two toads who complained that they could not see. Then the dancing began.

And it was so comical! Every one danced in his own way, and fancied, of course, that he danced better than any one else. The mice and frogs sprang high up on their hind feet, and an old rat whirled round so wildly that all the dancers retreated before him. A fat tree-slug took a turn with a mole, but soon gave it up, under pretense that she was taken with a stitch in the side. The real reason was that she could not dance very well.

However, everything moved on seriously and ceremoniously. It was a matter of conscience with them, and all looked anxiously toward the king to find a sign of approval upon his countenance. But the king was afraid of causing discontent, and looked very sedate. His followers considered it beneath them to take part in the dancing.

Johannes had contained himself well, through all this seriousness, but when he saw a tiny toad whirling around with a tall lizard, who now and then lifted the unhappy toad high up off the floor and described a half circle with her in the air, he burst out into a merry laugh.

Then there was consternation. The music stopped and the king; looked round with a troubled air. The master of ceremonies flew in full speed up to the laugher, and urgently besought him to conduct himself with more decorum.

"Dancing is a serious matter," said he, "and nothing at all to be laughed at. This is a dignified company, who are dancing not merely for the fun of it. Every one was doing his best, and no one wished to be laughed at. That was very rude. More than that, this is a mourning feast – a sorrowful occasion. One should conduct himself respectably here, and not behave as though he were among human beings."

Johannes was frightened at that. Moreover, he saw hostile looks. His familiarity with the king had made him many enemies. Windekind led him to one side.

"We would better go away," he whispered. "You have made a mess of it again. That is the way when one is brought up among human beings."

Hastily, they slipped out under the bat-wing portiere, and entered the dim passage. The polite glow-worm was waiting for them.

"Have you had a good time?" he asked. "Did King Oberon speak with you?"

"Oh, yes. It was a jolly festival," said Johannes. "Do you have to stay here all the time, in this dark passage?"

"That is my own choice," said the glow-worm, in a bitter, mournful voice. "I care no more for vanities."

"Come," said Windekind, "you do not mean that!"

"It is just as I say. Formerly – formerly there was a time when I, too, went to feasts, and danced, and kept up with such frivolities; but now I am purified through suffering, now..." And he became so agitated that his light went out again. Fortunately they were near the outlet, and the rabbit, hearing them coming, moved a little to one side, so that the moonlight shone in.

As soon as they were outside by the rabbit, Johannes said: "Will you not tell us your history, Glow-worm?"

"Alas!" sighed the glow-worm, "it is a sad and simple story. It will not amuse you."

"Tell us! Tell us, all the same!" they cried.

"Well, then, you know that we glow-worms are very peculiar beings. Yes, I believe no one would contradict that we glow-worms are the most highly gifted of all who live.

"Why? I do not know that," said the rabbit. At this, the glow-worm asked disdainfully, "Can you give light?"

"No, indeed, I cannot," the rabbit was obliged to confess.

"Now *we* give light – all of us. And we can make it shine or can extinguish it. Light is the best gift of Nature, and to make light is the highest achievement of any living being. Ought any one then to contest our precedence? Moreover, we little fellows have wings, and can fly for miles."

"I cannot do that, either," humbly admitted the rabbit.

"Through the divine gift of light which we have," continued the glow-worm, "other creatures stand in awe of us, and no bird will attack us. Only one animal – the human being – the basest of all, chases us, and carries us off. He is the most detestable monster in creation!"

At this sally Johannes looked at Windekind as though he did not understand. But Windekind smiled, and motioned to him to be silent.

"Once, I flew gaily around among the shrubs, like a bright will-o'-the-wisp. In a moist, lonely meadow on the bank of a ditch there lived one whose existence was inseparably linked with my own happiness. She sparkled beautifully in her light emerald-green as she crept about in the grass, and my young heart was enraptured. I circled about her, and did my best, by making my light play, to attract her attention. Gratefully, I saw that she had perceived me, and demurely extinguished her own light. Trembling with emotion, I was on the point of folding my wings and sinking down in rapture beside my radiant loved one, when the air was filled with an awful noise. Dark figures approached. They were human beings. In terror, I took flight. They chased me, and struck at me with big black things. But my wings went faster than their clumsy legs."

"When I returned – "

Here the narrator's voice failed him. After an instant of deep emotion, during which the three listeners maintained a respectful silence, he continued:

"You may already have surmised it. My tender bride – the brightest, most glowing of all – she had disappeared; kidnapped by cruel human beings. The still, dewy grass-plot was trampled, and her favorite place by the ditch was dark and deserted. I was alone in the world."

Here the impressionable rabbit once again pulled down an ear, and wiped a tear from his eye.

"Since that time I have been a different creature. I have an aversion for all idle pleasures. I think only of her whom I have lost, and of the time when I shall see her again."

"Really! Do you still hope to?" said the rabbit, rejoiced.

"I more than hope – I am certain. In heaven I shall see my beloved again."

"But – " the rabbit objected.

"Bunnie," said the glow-worm, gravely, "I can understand that one who was obliged to grope about in the dark might doubt, but when one can see, with his own eyes! That puzzles me. There!" said the glow-worm, gazing reverently up at the star-dotted skies; "there I behold them – all my forefathers, all my friends, and her, too, more gloriously radiant than when here upon earth. Ah, when shall I be able to rise up out of this lower life, and fly to her who beckons me so winsomely? When, ah, when?"

With a sigh, the glow-worm turned away from his listeners and crept back again into the dark passage.

"Poor creature!" said the rabbit. "I hope he is right."

"I hope so too," added Johannes.

"I have my doubts," said Windekind, "but it was very touching."

"Dear Windekind," began Johannes, "I am very tired and sleepy."

"Then come close to me, and I will cover you with my mantle."

Windekind took off his little blue mantle and spread it over Johannes and himself.

So they lay down on the gentle slope, in the fragrant moss, with their arms about each other's neck.

"Your heads lie rather low," said the rabbit. "Will you rest them against me?"

They did so.

"Good-night, Mother!" said Windekind to the moon.

Then Johannes shut the little gold key tight in his hand, pressed his head against the downy coat of the good rabbit, and fell fast asleep.

III

Where is he, Presto? – Where is he? What a fright to wake up in the boat, among the reeds, all alone, the master gone and not a trace of him! It is something to be alarmed about.

And how long you have been running, barking nervously, trying to find him, poor Presto! How could you sleep so soundly and not notice the little master get out of the boat? Otherwise, you would have wakened as soon as he made the least move.

You could scarcely find the place where he landed, and here in the downs you are all confused. That nervous sniffing has not helped a bit. Oh, despair! The master gone – not a sign of him. Find him, Presto, find him!

See! straight before you on the hillside. Is not that a little form lying there? Look! look!

For an instant the little dog stood motionless, straining his gaze out into the distance. Then suddenly he stretched out his head, and raced – flew with all the might of his four little paws toward that dark spot on the hillside.

And when it proved to be the grievously wanted little master, he could not find a way to fully express his joy and thankfulness. He wagged his tail, his entire little body quivering with joy – he jumped, yelped, barked, and then pushed his little cold nose against the face of his long-sought friend, and licked and sniffed all over it.

"Cuddle down, Presto, in your basket," said Johannes, only half awake.

How stupid of the master! There was no basket there, as any one could see.

Very, very slowly the day began to break in the mind of the little sleeper.

Presto's sniffings he was used to – every morning. But dream-figures of elves and moonshine still lingered in his soul as the morning mists cling to the landscape. He feared that the chill breath of the dawn might chase them away. "Eyes fast shut," thought he, "or I shall see the clock and the wall-paper, just as ever."

But he was not lying right. He felt there was no covering over him. Slowly and cautiously he opened his eyelids a very little way.

Bright light. Blue sky. Clouds.

Then Johannes opened his eyes wide and said: "Is it really true?"

Yes, he lay in the middle of the dunes. The cheerful sunshine warmed him, he breathed the fresh morning air, and in the distance a fine mist skirted the woods. He saw only the tall beech tree beside the pond, and the roof of his house rising above the foliage. Bees and beetles hummed about him; above him sang the ascending skylark; from far away came the sound of barkino-does, and the rumble of the distant town. It was all as plain as day.

But what had he dreamed and what not? Where was Windekind? And where was the rabbit?

He could see neither of them. Only Presto, who sat up against him as close as possible, watching him expectantly.

"Could I have been sleep-walking?" murmured Johannes, softly.

Beside him was a rabbit-hole. But there were a great many such in the dunes. He sat up straight, so as to give it a good look. What was it he felt in his tightly shut hand?

A thrill ran through him from the crown of his head to his feet as he opened his hand. There lay a bright little gold key.

For a time he sat speechless.

"Presto," said he then, while the tears sprang to his eyes, "Presto, then it *is* true!"

Presto sprang up and tried, by barking, to make it clear to his master that he was hungry and wanted to go home.

To the house? Johannes had not thought of that, and cared little to return. But soon he heard different voices calling his name. Then he began to realize that his behavior would be considered

neither kind nor courteous; and that, for a long time to come, there would be no friendly words in store for him.

For an instant, at the first trouble, his tears of joy were very nearly turned into those of fear and regret. But when he thought about Windekind, who now was his friend – his friend and confidant – of the elf-king's gift, and of the glorious, indisputable truth of all that had occurred, he took his way home, calm and prepared for anything.

But the meeting was more difficult than he expected. He had not fully anticipated the fear and distress of the household over his absence. He was urged to promise solemnly that he never again would be so naughty and imprudent.

"I cannot do so," said he, resolutely. They were surprised at that. He was interrogated, coaxed, threatened; but he thought of Windekind and remained stubborn. What could it matter if only he held Windekind's friendship – and what would he not be willing to suffer for Windekind's sake! He pressed the little key close to his breast, and shut his lips together, while he answered every question with a shrug of his shoulders. "I cannot promise," said he, again.

But his father said: "It is a serious matter with him – we will let him be, now. Something unusual must have happened. Sometime, he will tell us about it."

Johannes smiled, silently ate his bread and butter, and then slipped away to his little bedroom. There, he snipped off a bit of the curtain cord, strung his precious key upon it, and hung it around his neck, on his bare breast. Then, comforted, he went to school.

It went very badly that day at school. He knew none of his lessons, and paid absolutely no attention. His thoughts flew continually to the pond, and to the marvelous happenings of the evening before. He could scarcely believe that a friend of the elf-king could again be obliged to figure sums, and conjugate verbs.

But it had all truly been, and not one of those around him knew anything about it. No one could believe or understand – not even the master – no matter how fierce he looked, nor how scornfully he called Johannes a lazy dog. He endured the angry comments with resignation and performed the tasks which his absent-mindedness brought upon him.

"They have not the least idea of it. They may rail at me as much as they please. I shall remain Windekind's friend, and Windekind is worth more to me than all of them put together; yes, master and all."

That was not respectful of Johannes. But after all the hard things he had heard about them the evening before, his esteem for his fellow-creatures had not been increased.

More than that, he was not sensible enough to put his wisdom to the best use; or, rather, to keep silent.

When his master stated that human beings only were gifted by God with reasoning powers, and were placed as rulers over all the other animals, he began to laugh. That cost him a bad mark, and a severe rebuke. And when his seat-mate read aloud from his exercise-book the following sentence: "The sun is very old – she is older than my cross old aunt," Johannes instantly cried out, "*He* is older!"

Everybody laughed at him, and the master, astonished at such amazing stupidity, as he called it, made Johannes remain after school to write out this sentence a hundred times: "The age of my aunt is very great, the age of the sun is greater; but the greatest thing of all is my amazing stupidity."

His schoolmates had all disappeared, and Johannes sat alone writing in the great school-room. The sun shone gaily in, lighting up a thousand motes on the way, and forming on the white-washed walls great splashes of light which, with the passing hours, crept slowly forward. The teacher had gone away, and shut the door behind him with a bang. Johannes was already on the fifty-second "age of my aunt," when a nimble little mouse, with silky ears, and little black beads of eyes, came out of the farthest corner of the room and ran without a sound along by the wall. Johannes kept as still as death, not to frighten away the pretty creature. It was not afraid, and came up close to where he was

sitting. Then, peering round a moment with its bright keen little eyes, it sprang lightly up – one jump to the bench, the second to the desk on which Johannes was writing.

"Hey!" said he, half to himself, "but you are a plucky little mouse!"

"I do not know whom I should be afraid of," said a mite of a voice; and the mouse showed his little teeth as if he were laughing.

Johannes had already become used to many wonderful things, but this made him open his eyes wide. In the middle of the day, and in school! It was past all belief.

"You need not be afraid of me," said he, softly – for fear of startling the mouse. "Have you come from Windekind?"

"I came just to say to you that the teacher is quite right, and that you roundly deserved your punishment."

"But Windekind said that the sun was our father."

"Yes, but it was not necessary to let anybody else know it. What have human beings to do with it? You must never speak of such delicate matters to them – they are too coarse. A human being is an astonishingly cruel and clumsy creature, who would prefer to seize and trample to death whatever came within his reach. We mice have had experience of that."

"But, Mousie, why do you stay in this neighborhood? Why do you not go far away – to the woods?"

"Alas! we cannot do that now. We are too much accustomed to town food. Provided one is prudent and always takes care to avoid their traps and their heavy feet, it becomes possible to endure human beings. Fortunately, we still retain our nimbleness. The worst of it is that human beings help out their own clumsiness by covenanting with the cat. That is a great calamity, but in the woods there are owls and hawks, and we should all certainly perish there. Now, Johannes, remember my advice. There comes the teacher!"

"Mousie, Mousie! Do not go away! Ask Windekind what I must do with my key. I have hung it around my neck, on my bare breast. But Saturday I have to take a bath, and I am so afraid somebody will see it. Tell me, Mousie dear, where I can safely hide it."

"In the ground – always in the ground. Everything is safest there. Shall I take, and keep it?"

"No, not here, at school!"

"Bury it then, out in the dunes. I will tell my cousin, the field-mouse, that he must keep watch of it."

"Thank you, Mousie."

Tramp! tramp! The master was coming. In the time it took Johannes to dip his pen, the mouse had disappeared. The master himself, who was impatient to go home, excused Johannes from the forty-eight remaining lines.

For two long days Johannes lived in constant fear. He was closely watched, and no opportunity was allowed him for escaping to the dunes. Friday came, and he was still carrying around that precious key. The following evening he must take his weekly bath; the key would be discovered and taken away from him. He grew stiff with fear at the thought of it. He dared not hide it in the house – nor in the garden – no place seemed to him safe enough.

It was Friday afternoon and the twilight began to fall. Johannes sat before his bedroom window, looking wistfully out over the green shrubs of the garden to the distant dunes.

"Windekind, Windekind, help me!" he whispered, anxiously.

There was a gentle rustling of wings near him, then came the fragrance of lilies-of-the-valley, and suddenly he heard the sweet, familiar voice.

Windekind sat near him on the window-seat, making the little lily-bells swing on their slender stalk.

"At last! Have you come? I have longed for you so!" said Johannes.

"Come with me, Johannes; we will go and bury your key."

"I cannot," said Johannes, with a sigh.

But Windekind took him by the hand, and, light as the feathery seed of a dandelion, he was drifting away through the still evening air.

"Windekind," said Johannes as they went, "I think so much of you! I believe I would willingly give up every human being for you. Presto, even."

"And Simon?" said Windekind.

"Oh, it cannot make much difference to Simon whether I like him or not. He thinks such things childish, I believe. Simon cares only for the fishwoman; and not even for her, save when he is hungry. Do you believe, Windekind, that Simon is an ordinary cat?"

"No! He has been a human being."

Buz-z-z-z! Just then a big May-bug flew against Johannes.

"Cannot you look out for yourself better than that?" grumbled the May-bug. "H'm! You elfin baggage! You fly as if you owned all the air there was. You have learned that from the do-nothings who only just fly round and round for their own pleasure. One who always does his duty, like me – who always seeks food, and eats as hard as he can, is put out by such actions." And away he flew, buzzing loudly.

"Is he vexed because we are not eating anything?" asked Johannes.

"Yes, that is May-bug fashion. Among the May-bugs it is considered the highest duty to eat a great deal. Shall I tell you the story of a young May-bug?"

"Yes, do, Windekind."

"He was a fine, young May-bug who had only just crept out of the sod. What a surprise it was! For four long years he had been under the dark ground, waiting for the first warm evening. When he got his head up out of the clods and saw all that foliage, and the waving grass, and the singing birds, he was greatly perplexed. He did not know what to do. He touched the near-by grass blades all over with his feelers, thrusting them out in fan shape. From this he perceived, Johannes, that he was a male. He was very handsome in his way – with shining black legs, a plump, powdered after-part, and a breastplate that gleamed like a mirror. Happily, he soon discovered, not far away, another May-bug – not quite so handsome, but who had flown out a full day earlier and thus was of age. Quite modestly, because he was still so young, he hailed this other one.

"What do you want, little friend?" said the second one condescendingly, observing that it was a novice: 'Do you want to inquire the way?'

"No, but you see,' said the younger, politely, 'I do not know what I ought to be doing here. What does one do when he is a May-bug?'

"Indeed,' said the other, 'do you not know that? Well, that is excusable. Once *I* did not know. Listen, and I will tell you. The chief concern of a May-bug's life is to eat. Not far from this is a delicious linden hedge that was put there for us to eat from as busily as possible.'

"Who planted the linden hedge there?' asked the young beetle.

"Well, a great creature who means well by us. Every morning he comes along the hedge, picks out those that have eaten the most, and takes them with him to a splendid house where a bright light shines, and where all the May-bugs are very happy together. But those who keep flying about the whole night instead of eating are caught by the bat.'

"Who is that?' asked the novice.

"A fearful monster with sharp teeth, that all of a sudden comes flying after us, and crunches us up with a horrible crack.' As the beetle said this, they heard above them a shrill squeaking which pierced through to the marrow. 'Hey! There he is!' exclaimed the older one. 'Look out for him, my young friend. Be thankful that I have warned you in good time. You have a long night before you – make the best of it. The less you eat the greater the chance of your being devoured by the bat. Only those who choose a serious calling in life can enter the great house with the bright light. Bear that in mind! A serious calling!'

"Then the beetle, who was a whole day the older, scabbled away among the blades of grass, leaving the other behind, greatly impressed. Do you understand what a calling is, Johannes? No? Well, neither did the young beetle know. It had something to do with eating, he knew, but how was he to get to the linden hedge?

"Close beside him stood a slim, strong grass-stem swaying gently in the evening wind. He grasped it, and hugged it tightly with his six little crooked feet. It seemed as tall as a giant viewed from below, and fearfully steep. But the May-bug was determined to reach the very tip of it.

"This is a calling,' he thought, and he began to climb, pluckily. It was slow work – he often slipped back; but still he made progress, and at last, when he had climbed to the tip-top and was swinging and swaying there, he felt content and happy. What a view! It seemed to him as if he overlooked the world. How blissful it was to be surrounded, on all sides, by the air! He breathed it in eagerly. How marvelously it cheered him up! He would go still higher!

"In ecstasy he lifted up his shields, and made his filmy wings quiver. Higher he would go! Higher! Again he fluttered his wings – his feet let loose the grass-stem, and – oh, joy! – He was flying, free and clear, in the still, warm evening air!"

"And then?" asked Johannes.

"The continuation is not cheerful. I will tell it you a little later."

They had flown away over the pond. A pair of belated white butterflies fluttered along with them.

"Where are you going, elves?" they asked.

"To the big wild-rose that blossoms on yonder hill."

"We will go, too! We will go, too!"

In the distance, the rose-bush with its many pale-yellow satiny flowers was already visible. The buds were red, and the open roses showed little stripes of the same color, in token of the time when they still were buds.

In solitary calm, this sweet wild-rose bloomed, and filled the region with its marvelous fragrance. So delicious is this that the dune-elves live upon it alone.

The butterflies fluttered up to it, and kissed flower after flower.

"We come to entrust a treasure to you," said Windekind. "Will you take care of it for us?"

"Why not? why not?" whispered the wild-rose. "Watching does not tire me, and I do not think to go away from here, if no one carries me off. And I have sharp thorns."

Then came the field-mouse – the cousin of the mouse at the school. He dug a passage under the roots of the rose-bush, and pulled in the little key.

"If you want it back again, you must call on me. And then the rose need not be harmed."

The rose interlocked its thorny twigs close over the entrance, and took a solemn oath to guard the trust. The butterflies were witnesses.

The next morning, Johannes woke up in his own little bed, with Presto, the clock, and the wall-hangings. The cord around his neck, and the little key upon it, had disappeared.

IV

"Oh, boys, boys! How dreadfully tedious it is in summer!" sighed one of the three big stoves which stood together, fretting, in a dark corner of the garret in the old house. "For weeks I have not seen a living soul nor heard a sensible word. And that emptiness within. It is horrible!"

"I am full of spider-webs," said the other. "In winter that would not happen."

"And I am so dusty that I shall be shamed to death next winter when the black man appears, as Van Alphen says." This bit of learning the third stove had gotten, of course, from Johannes, as he sat before the hearth winters, reciting verses.

"You must not speak so disrespectfully of the Smith," said the first stove – which was the eldest. "It pains me."

And a number of shovels and tongs also, which lay here and there on the floor, wrapped in paper to keep them from rusting, expressed freely their indignation at the frivolous remark.

Suddenly, they all stopped talking; for the trap-door was lifted, a ray of light darted to the far corner, exposing the entire dusty company, to their surprise and confusion.

It was Johannes whose coming had disturbed their talk. He had always enjoyed a visit to the garret; and now, after all the recent happenings, he often went there to find quiet and seclusion. There, too, closed with a shutter was a window, which looked out over the hillside. It was a keen delight to open that shutter suddenly, and after the mysterious gloom of the garret, to see before him all at once the wide-spread, clearly lighted landscape, framed by the gently undulating lines of the hills.

Three weeks had passed away since that Friday evening, and Johannes had not seen nor heard anything of his friend. His little key was now gone, and there was nothing to prove to him that he had not been dreaming. Often, he could not reason away the fear that all had been only imagination. He kept his own counsel, and his father remarked with anxiety that Johannes, since that night in the dunes, had certainly been ill. Johannes, however, was only longing for Windekind.

"Ought not he to care as much for me as I do for him?" he mused, while he leaned against the garret window and gazed out over the verdant, flowery garden. "And why does he not come oftener, and stay longer? If *I* could!.. But perhaps he has other friends, and cares more for them than for me? I have no other friend – not one. I care only for him – so much, oh, so much!"

Then he saw defined against the deep blue sky a flock of six white doves which wheeled with flapping wings above the house. It seemed as if one thought impelled them, so swiftly and simultaneously, again and again, they altered their direction, as if to enjoy to the full the sea of sunlight in which they were circling.

All at once they flew toward Johannes' little attic-window, and, with much fluttering and flapping of wings, alighted on the gutter. There they cooed, and bustled back and forth, with little, mincing steps. One of them had a little red feather in his wing. He tugged and pulled at it until he held it in his beak. Then he flew up to Johannes and gave it to him.

Johannes had scarcely taken it when he felt that he had become as light and fleet as one of the doves. He stretched himself out, up flew the flock of doves, and Johannes soared in their midst, through the free, open air and the clear sunshine. Nothing was around him but the pure blue, and the bright gleaming of the white dove-wings.

They flew over the garden toward the woods, whose tree-tops were waving in the distance like the swell of a green sea. Johannes looked down below, and saw his father sitting at the open window of the living-room. Simon sat on the window-sill, his forepaws folded, basking in the sunshine. "Can they see me?" he thought; but he did not dare call to them.

Presto was tearing through the garden paths, sniffing about every shrub, behind every wall, and scratching against the door of every hot-house or out-building, trying to find his master.

"Presto! Presto!" cried Johannes. The dog looked up, and began to wag his tail and whimper, plaintively.

"I am coming back, Presto. Watch!" cried Johannes, but he was too far away.

They swept over the woods, and the crows flew croaking out of the high tree-tops where their nests were. It was midsummer, and the odor of the blossoming lindens streamed up from the green woods below them.

In an empty nest at the top of a tall linden tree sat Windekind with the wreath of wind-flowers upon his head. He nodded to Johannes.

"Is that you? That is good," said he. "I sent for you. Now we can stay together a long while – if you would like to."

"Indeed, I would like to," said Johannes.

Then he thanked the kind doves who had brought him thither, and dropped down with Windekind into the woods.

It was cool and shady there. The golden thrush was fluting his strain – nearly always the very same, but yet a little different.

"Poor bird!" said Windekind. "He was once a bird-of-paradise. That you can still see by his strange, yellow feathers; but he was given another covering and expelled from Paradise. There is a word which can bring back again his former glorious covering, and restore him to Paradise, but he has forgotten it. Day after day he tries to find that word. He sings something like it, but it is not the right word."

Countless flies were glistening like floating crystals in the sunbeams that fell through the dark foliage. Listening acutely, one could hear their buzzing like a great, monotonous concert, filling the entire forest. It was as if the sunbeams sang.

Thick, dark-green moss covered the ground, and Johannes had become so small again that it appeared to him like a new-grown woods at the bottom of the great forest. What elegant little stems and how closely they grew! It was difficult to pass between them, and the moss-woods seemed dreadfully large.

Then they came upon an ant-path. Hundreds of ants ran busily to and fro, some carrying bits of wood, little leaves, or blades of grass in their jaws. There was such a tumult that it almost made Johannes dizzy. They were all so busy it was a long time before one of the ants would stop to speak with them. At last they found an old ant who had been stationed to keep watch over the small plant-lice from which the ants draw their honey-dew. Since his small herd was quiet he could devote a little time to the strangers, and show them the great nest. It was situated at the foot of an old tree-trunk, was very large, and had hundreds of entrances and little chambers. The plant-louse herder gave explanations, and led the visitors around everywhere, till they came to the cells of the young, where the larvæ crept out of their white cocoons. Johannes was amazed and delighted.

The old ant said that they were living under great stress on account of the military campaign which was about to be executed. They were going, with a huge force, to attack another ant colony not far away; to destroy the nest, and to steal or kill the larvæ. To accomplish this, they would need all the help possible, and thus they must first settle the most urgent affairs.

"What is the reason for this military expedition?" asked Johannes. "It does not seem nice."

"Indeed," said the herder, "it is a very fine and praiseworthy enterprise! You must know that it is the Fighting-Ants we are going to attack. We are going to extirpate their species, and that is a very good deed."

"Are not you Fighting-Ants, then?"

"Certainly not! What makes you think so? We are Peace-Ants."

"Then what does that mean?"

"Do you not know? I will explain. Once, all the ants were continually fighting – not a day passed without great slaughter. Then there came a good, wise ant who thought it would save a great deal of trouble if all the ants would agree to fight no more.

"When he said that, they all found it very strange; and what did they do but begin to bite him into pieces. Later, came still other ants who were of the very same opinion. These also were bitten into mince-meat. But so many of them kept coming that the biting-up became too much work for the others.

"Then they named themselves Peace-Ants, and all agreed that the first Peace-Ant was right. Whoever dissented was, in his turn, bitten up. Thus, nearly all the ants nowadays have become Peace-Ants, and the remnants of the first Peace-Ant have been preserved with great care and respect. We have the head – the authentic head. We have laid waste twelve other colonies, and have murdered the ants who pretended to have the genuine head. Now, there are only four such colonies left. They call themselves Peace-Ants, but they are really Fighting-Ants; because, you see, we have the true head, and the Peace-Ant had but one head. We are going, one of these days, to stamp out the thirteenth colony. You see now, that this is a good work."

"Yes, indeed," said Johannes, "it is very ... remarkable."

Really he had become a little afraid, and felt more comfortable when they had taken their leave of the obliging herder and, far away from the ant colony, were resting awhile on a swaying grass-blade, in the shadow of a graceful fern-leaf.

"Whoo!" sighed Johannes, "that was a stupid, blood-thirsty set."

Windekind laughed, and swung up and down on his grass-blade.

"Oh," said he, "you must not call them stupid. Human beings go to the ants to learn wisdom from them."

Thus Windekind showed Johannes all the wonders of the woods. They flew together to the birds in the tree-tops, and in the close hedges; went down into the clever little dwellings of the moles, and saw the bees' nest in the old tree-trunk.

Finally, they came to an open place surrounded with undergrowth. The honeysuckle grew there in great abundance. It twined its wanton tendrils over all the shrubs, and its fragrant garlands adorned the luxuriant foliage. A flock of tomtits hopped and fluttered among the leaves, and chirped and chattered clamorously.

"Let us stay a little longer," said Johannes. "It is delightful here."

"Good," said Windekind. "Then you will see some more comical things."

Little blue-bells were growing in the grass. Johannes went up to one of them, and began to chat about the bees and the butterflies. These were good friends of the blue-bell, and so the conversation flowed smoothly on.

What was that? A great shadow passed over the grass, and something like a white cloud descended upon the blue-bell. Johannes scarcely had time to get out of the way. He flew to Windekind, who was sitting high up in a honeysuckle. From thence he saw that the white cloud was a handkerchief, and just then a portly woman sat down hard upon the handkerchief, and upon the poor little blue-bell that was under it.

He had not time to lament, for the sound of voices and of cracking branches filled the open place, and a crowd of people approached.

"Now we are going to have a laugh," said Windekind.

There they came – human beings. The women with baskets and umbrellas in hand; the men with high, stiff black hats on. Almost all the men were very, very black. In the sunny, green forest, they looked like great, ugly ink spots on a splendid picture.

Bushes were thrust rudely aside, and flowers were trampled under foot. Many more white handkerchiefs were spread over the meek grass; and the patient mosses, sighing, yielded to the weight that bore them down, and feared never to recover from the shock.

The smoke of cigars curled up over the honeysuckle vines, spitefully driving away the delicate fragrance of their flowers; and loud voices scattered the merry tomtits, that, chirping their fright and indignation, sought refuge in the nearest trees.

One man rose up from the crowd, and went to stand on a little mound. He had long, light hair, and a pale face. He said something, and then all the people opened their mouths frightfully wide and began to sing so hard that the crows flew up, croaking, from their high nests, and the inquisitive rabbits that had come to the edge of the glade, just to look on, took fright and started on a run, and kept it up a quarter of an hour after they were safe again in the dunes.

Windekind laughed, and whisked away the cigar smoke with a fern-leaf. The tears came into Johannes' eyes, but not from the smoke.

"Windekind," said he, "I want to go away – it is so ugly and horrid here."

"No, we must stay a while longer. You will laugh; it is going to be still more comical."

The singing was over, and the pale man began to speak. He shouted, so that all could hear, but what he said sounded very kind. He called the people brothers and sisters, and spoke of glorious nature, and the wonders of creation, of God's sunshine and of the dear birds and flowers...

"What is that?" asked Johannes. "Why does he speak of those things? Does he know you? Is he a friend of yours?"

Windekind shook his garlanded head disdainfully.

"He does not know me; still less the sun, the birds, the flowers. Everything he says is false."

The people all listened very attentively. The fat woman who was sitting on the blue-bell began several times to cry, and wiped away her tears with her skirt, because she had not the use of her handkerchief.

The pale man said that God had caused the sun to shine so brightly for the sake of their meeting. Then Windekind laughed and, out of the thick foliage, threw an acorn at his nose.

"He shall find it otherwise," said he. "My father shine for him! How conceited!"

But the pale man was too full of enthusiasm to mind the acorn, which appeared to have fallen out of the sky. He spoke a long time, and the longer the louder. At last he grew purple in the face, clenched his fists, and shouted so loud that the leaves trembled and the grasses waved hither and thither in astonishment. When at last he calmed down, they all began to sing again.

"Fie!" said a blackbird, who had heard the uproar from the top of a high tree. "What a frightful racket! I would rather the cows came into the woods. Just hear that! For shame!"

Now, the blackbird is a critic, and has fine taste.

After the singing, the people brought all sorts of eatables from baskets, boxes, and bags. They spread out papers, and distributed rolls and oranges. Bottles and glasses, too, came to light.

Then Windekind called his allies together, and the siege of the feasting company began.

A gallant frog jumped into the lap of an old lady, close beside the bread she was just about to eat, and remained sitting there, astonished at his own daring. The lady gave a horrible shriek, and stared at the intruder in amazement, without daring to stir. This mettlesome example found imitators. Green caterpillars crept valiantly over hats, handkerchiefs, and rolls, awakening fright and dismay. Big, fat spiders let themselves down glistening threads into the beer glasses, and upon heads or necks, and a loud, continual screaming accompanied their attack. Innumerable small flies assailed the people straight in the face, offering their lives for the good of the cause by tumbling into the food and drink, and, with their bodies, making it unfit for use. Finally, came multitudes of ants, a hundred at a time, and nipped the enemy in the most unexpected places. Men and women sprang up hurriedly from the long-crushed moss and grass; and the blue-bell was liberated through the well-aimed attack of two ear-wigs upon the ankles of the plump woman. Desperation seized them all; dancing and jumping with the most comical gestures, the people tried to escape from their pursuers. The pale man stood his ground well, and struck out on all sides with a small black stick; till a pair of malicious tomtits,

that considered no method of attack too mean, and a wasp, that gave him a sting through his black trousers on the calf of the leg, put him out of the fight.

The jolly sun could no longer keep his countenance, and hid his face behind a cloud. Big rain-drops descended upon the struggling party. Suddenly, as though it had rained down, a forest of big black toadstools appeared. It was the outstretched umbrellas. The women drew their skirts over their heads, exposing white petticoats, white-stockinged ankles, and shoes without heels. Oh, what fun it was for Windekind! He laughed so hard he had to cling to the flower-stem.

Faster and faster fell the rain, and a greyish, glistening veil began to envelop the woods. Water dripped from umbrellas, high hats, and black coats. The coats shone like the shells of the water beetle, while the shoes kissed and smacked on the saturated ground. Then the people gave it up – dropping silently away in little groups, leaving many papers, empty bottles, and orange peels for unsightly tokens of their visit. The little glade in the woods was again solitary, and soon nothing was heard but the monotonous patter of the rain.

"Well, Johannes! Now we have seen human beings, also. Why do you not laugh at them, as well?"

"Oh, Windekind! Are all human beings like that?"

"Some of them are much worse and more ugly. At times they swear and tear and make havoc with everything that is beautiful or admirable. They cut down trees, and put horrid, square houses in their places. They wantonly trample the flowers, and kill, for the mere pleasure of it, every animal that comes within their reach. In their cities, where they swarm together, everything is dirty and black, and the air is dank and poisonous with stench and smoke. They are completely estranged from Nature and her fellow-creatures. That is why they make such a foolish and sorry figure when they return to them."

"Oh, Windekind! Windekind!"

"Why are you crying, Johannes? You must not cry because you were born among human beings. I love you all the same, and prefer you to everybody else. I have taught you the language of the birds and the butterflies, and how to understand the look of the flowers. The moon knows you, and good, kind Earth loves you as her dearest child. Why should you not be glad, since I am your friend?"

"Oh, Windekind, I am, I am! But then, I have to cry about all those people."

"Why? If it makes you sad, you need not remain with them. You can live here, and always keep me company. We will dwell in the depths of the woods, on the lonely, sunny dunes, or in the reeds by the pond. I will take you everywhere – down under the water among the water-plants, in the palaces of the elves, and in the haunts of the goblins. I will hover with you over fields and forests – over foreign lands and seas. I will have dainty garments spun for you, and wings given you like these I wear. We will live upon the sweetness of the flowers, and dance in the moonlight with the elves. When autumn comes, we will keep pace with the sun, to lands where the tall palms rise, where gorgeous flowers festoon the rocks, and the face of the deep blue sea lies smiling in the sun. And I will always tell you stories. Would you like that, Johannes?"

"Shall I never live with human beings any more?"

"Among human beings there await you endless sorrow, trouble, weariness, and care. Day after day must you toil and sigh under the burden of your life. They will stab and torture your sensitive soul with their roughness. They will rack and harass you to death. Do you love human beings more than you love me?"

"No, no, Windekind! I will stay with you."

Now he could show how much he cared for Windekind. Yes, for his sake he would leave and forget each and everything – his bedroom, Presto, and his father. Joyfully and resolutely he repeated his wish.

The rain had ceased. From under grey clouds the sunlight streamed over the woods like a bright smile. It touched the wet, shining leaves, the rain-drops which sparkled on every twig and stem, and adorned the spider-webs, stretched over the oak-leaves. From the moist ground below the shrubbery

a fine mist languidly rose, bearing with it a thousand sultry, dreamy odors. The blackbird flew to the top of the highest tree, and sang in broken, fervent strains to the sinking sun, as if he would show which song suited best, in this solemn evening calm, as an accompaniment to the falling drops.

"Is not that finer than the noise of human beings, Johannes? Yes, the blackbird knows exactly the right tone to strike. Here everything is in harmony – such perfect harmony you will never find among human beings."

"What is harmony, Windekind?"

"It is the same as happiness. It is that for which all strive. Human beings also. Yet they are like children trying to catch a butterfly. They simply drive it away by their silly efforts."

"Shall I find it here with you?"

"Yes, Johannes; but then you must forget human beings. It is a bad beginning to have been born among human beings; but you are still young. You must put away from you all remembrance of your human life, else it would cause you to err and plunge you into conflicts, perplexities, and misery. It would be with you as with the young May-bug I told you about."

"What else happened to him?"

"He had seen the bright light which the older beetle had spoken of, and could think of nothing better to do than promptly to fly to it. Straight as a string, he flew into a room, and fell into human hands. For three long days he suffered martyrdom. He was put into cardboard boxes, threads were tied to his feet, and he was made to fly. Then he tore himself free, with the loss of a wing and a leg, and finally, creeping helplessly around on the carpet in a vain endeavor to reach the garden, he was crushed by a heavy foot."

"All creatures, Johannes, that roam around in the night are as truly children of the sun as we are. And although they have never seen the shining face of their father, still a dim remembrance ever impels them to anything from which light streams. And thousands of poor creatures of the darkness find a pitiful death through that love for the sun from whom they were long ago cut off and estranged. Thus a mysterious, irresistible tendency brings human beings to destruction in the false phantom of that Great Light which gave them being, but which they no longer understand."

Johannes looked up inquiringly into Windekind's eyes. But they were deep and mysterious – like the dark sky between the stars.

"Do you mean God?" he asked shyly.

"God?" The deep eyes laughed gently. "I know, Johannes, of what you think when you utter that name; of the chair before your bed beside which you make your long prayer every evening; of the green serge curtains of the church window at which you look so often Sunday mornings; of the capital letters of your little Bible; of the church-bag with the long handle; of the wretched singing and the musty atmosphere. What you mean by that name, Johannes, is a ridiculous phantom; instead of the sun, a great oil-lamp where hundreds of thousands of gnats are helplessly stuck fast."

"But what then is the name of the Great Light, Windekind? And to whom must I pray?"

"Johannes, it is the same as if a speck of mold turning round with the earth should ask me its bearer's name. If there were an answer to your question you would understand it no more than does the earth-worm the music of the spheres. Still, I will teach you how to pray."

Then, with little Johannes, who was musing in silent wonder over his words, Windekind flew up out of the forest, so high that beyond the horizon a long streak of shining gold became visible. On they flew – the fantastically shadowed plain gliding beneath their glance. And the band of light grew broader and broader. The green of the dunes grew dun, the grass looked grey, and strange, pale-blue plants were growing there. Still another high range of hills, a long narrow stretch of sand, and then the wide, awful sea.

That great expanse was blue as far as the horizon, but below the sun flashed a narrow streak of glittering, blinding red.

A long, fleecy margin of white foam encircled the sea, like an ermine border upon blue velvet.

And at the horizon, sky and water were separated by an exquisite, wonderful line. It seemed miraculous; straight, and yet curved, sharp, yet undefined – visible, yet inscrutable. It was like the sound of a harp that echoes long and dreamfully, seeming to die away and yet remaining.

Then little Johannes sat down upon the top of the hill and gazed – gazed long, in motionless silence, until it seemed to him as if he were about to die – as if the great golden doors of the universe were majestically unfolding, and his little soul were drifting toward the first light of Infinity.

And then the tears welled in his wide-open eyes till they shrouded the glory of the sun, and obscured the splendor of heaven and earth in a dim and misty twilight.

"That is the way to pray," said Windekind.

V

Did you ever wander through the woods on a beautiful autumn day, when the sun was shining, calm and bright, upon the richly tinted foliage; when the boughs creaked, and the dry leaves rustled about your feet?

The woods seem so weary. They can only meditate, and live in old remembrances. A blue haze, like a dream, surrounds them with a mysterious beauty, and glistening gossamer floats through the air in idle undulations – like futile, aimless meditations.

Yet, suddenly and unaccountably, out of the damp ground, between moss and dry leaves, rise up the marvelous toadstools; some thick, deformed, and fleshy; others tall and slender with ringed stems and bright-colored hoods. Strange dream-figures of the woods are they!

There may be seen also, on moldering tree-trunks, countless, small white growths with little black tops, as if they had been burnt. Some wise folk consider them a kind of fungus. But Johannes learned better.

"They are little candles. They burn in still autumn nights, and the goblin mannikins sit beside them, and read in little books."

Windekind taught him that, on such a still autumn day, while Johannes dreamily inhaled the faint odor of the forest soil.

"What makes the leaves of the sycamore so spotted with black?"

"Oh, the goblins do that, too," said Windekind. "When they have been writing nights, they throw out in the morning, over the leaves, what is left in their ink bottles. They do not like this tree. Crosses, and poles for contribution bags, are made out of sycamore wood."

Johannes was inquisitive about the busy little goblins, and he made Windekind promise to take him to one of them.

He had already been a long time with Windekind, and he was so happy in his new life that he felt very little regret over his promise to forget all he had left behind. There were no times of anxiety or of loneliness – times when remorse awakens. Windekind never left him, and with him he was at home in any place. He slept peacefully, in the rocking nest of the reed-bird that hung among the green stalks, although the bittern roared and the raven croaked so ominously. He felt no fear on account of pouring rains nor shrieking winds. At such times he took shelter in hollow trees or rabbit-holes, and crept close under Windekind's mantle, and listened to the voice which was telling him stories.

And now he was going to see the goblins.

It was a good day for the visit – so very still. Johannes fancied he could already hear their light little voices, and the tripping of their tiny feet, although it was yet midday.

The birds were nearly all gone – the thrushes alone were feasting on the scarlet berries. One was caught in a snare. There it hung with outstretched wings, struggling until the tightly pinioned little foot was nearly severed. Johannes quickly released it, and with a joyful chirp the bird flew swiftly away.

The toadstools were having a chatty time together.

"Just look at me," said one fat devil-fungus. "Did you ever see anything like it? See how thick and white my stem is, and see how my hood shines! I am the biggest of all. And that in one night!"

"Bah!" said the red fly-fungus. "You are very clumsy – so brown and rough. I sway on my slender stalk like a grass stem. I am splendidly red, like the thrush-berry and gorgeously speckled. I am handsomer than any of you."

"Be still!" said Johannes, who had known them well in former days. "You are both poisonous."

"That is a virtue," said the red fungus.

"Do you happen to be a human being?" grumbled the big fellow, scornfully. "If so, I would like to have you eat me up!"

Johannes did not do that, however. He took little dry twigs, and stuck them into his clumsy hood. That made him look silly, and all the others laughed – among them, a little group of tiny toadstools with small, brown heads, who in a couple of hours had sprung up together, and were jostling one another to get a peep at the world. The devil-fungus was blue with rage. That brought to light his poisonous nature.

Puff-balls raised their round, inflated little heads on four-pointed pedestals. From time to time a cloud of brown powder, of the utmost fineness, flew out of the opening in the round head. Wherever on the moist ground that powder fell, tiny rootlets would interlace in the black earth, and the following year hundreds of new puff-balls would spring up.

"What a beautiful existence!" said they to one another. "The very acme of attainment is to puff powder. What a joy to be able to puff, as long as one lives!"

And with devout consecration they drove the small dust-clouds into the air.

"Are they right, Windekind?"

"Why not? For them, what can be higher? It is fortunate that they long for nothing more, when they can do nothing else."

When night fell, and the shadows of the trees were intermingled in one general obscurity, that mysterious forest life did not cease. The branches cracked and snapped, the dry leaves rustled hither and thither over the grass and in the underwood, and Johannes felt the draft from inaudible wing-strokes, and was conscious of the presence of invisible beings. And now he heard, clearly, whispering voices and tripping footsteps. Look! There, in the dusky depths of the bushes, a tiny blue spark just twinkled, and then went out. Another one, and another! Hush! Listening attentively, he could hear a rustling in the leaves close beside him, by the dark tree-trunk. The blue lights appeared from behind this, and held still at the top.

Everywhere, now, Johannes saw glimmering lights. They floated through the foliage, danced and skipped along the ground; and yonder was a great, glowing mass like a blue bonfire.

"What kind of fire is that?" asked Johannes. "How splendidly it burns!"

"That is a decayed tree-trunk," said Windekind. Then they went up to a bright little light, which was burning steadily.

"Now I will introduce you to Wistik.³ He is the oldest and wisest of the goblins."

Having come up closer, Johannes saw him sitting beside his little candle. By the blue light of this, one could plainly distinguish the wrinkled, grey-bearded face. He was reading aloud, and his eyebrows were knit. On his head he wore a little acorn cap with a tiny feather in it. Before him sat a spider – listening to the reading.

Without lifting his head, the goblin glanced up from the book as the two approached, and raised his eyebrows. The spider crept away. "Good evening," said the goblin. "I am Wistik. Who are you?"

"My name is Johannes. I am very happy to make your acquaintance. What are you reading?"

"This is not intended for your ears," said Wistik. "It is only for spiders."

"Let me have just a peep at it, dear Wistik!" said Johannes.

"I must not. It is the Sacred Book of the spiders. It is in my keeping, and I must never let it out of my hands. I have the Sacred Book of the beetles and the butterflies and the hedgehogs and the moles, and of everything that lives here. They cannot all read, and when they wish to know anything, I read it aloud to them. That is a great honor for me – a position of trust, you know."

The mannikin nodded very seriously a couple of times, and raised a tiny forefinger.

"What were you reading just now?"

"The history of Kribblegaw,⁴ the great hero of the spiders, who lived a long while ago. He had a web that stretched over three trees, and that caught in it millions of flies in a day. Before

³ Wistik = Would that I knew.

⁴ Kribblegaw = Quarrel = quick.

Kribblegaww's time, spiders made no webs, and lived on grass and dead creatures; but Kribblegaww was a clever chap, and demonstrated that living things also were created for spider's food. And by difficult calculations, for he was a great mathematician, Kribblegaww invented the artful spider-web. And the spiders still make their webs, thread for thread, exactly as he taught them, only much smaller; for the spider family has sadly degenerated."

"Kribblegaww caught large birds in his web, and murdered thousands of his own children. There was a spider for you! Finally, a mighty storm arose, and dragged Kribblegaww with his web, and the three trees to which it was fastened, away through the air to distant forests, where he is now everlastingly honored because of his nimbleness and blood-thirstiness."

"Is that all true?" asked Johannes.

"It is in this book," said Wistik.

"Do you believe it?"

The goblin shut one eye, and rested his forefinger along the side of his nose.

"Whenever Kribblegaww is mentioned, in the Sacred Books of the other animals, he is called a despicable monster; but that is beyond me."

"Is there a Book of the Goblins, too, Wistik?"

Wistik glanced at Johannes somewhat suspiciously.

"What kind of being are you, really, Johannes? There is something about you so – so human, I should say."

"No, no! Rest assured, Wistik," said Windekind then. "We are elves; but Johannes has seen, formerly, many human beings. You can trust him, however. It will do him no harm."

"Yes, yes, that is well and good; but I am called the wisest of the goblins, and I studied long and hard before I learned what I know. Now I must be prudent with my wisdom. If I tell too much, I shall lose my reputation."

"But in what book, then, do you think the truth is told?"

"I have read much, but I do not believe I have ever read that book. It is not the Book of the Elves, nor the Book of the Goblins. Still, there must be such a book."

"The Book of Human Beings, perhaps?"

"That I do not know, but I should hardly think so, for the Book of Truth ought to bring great peace and happiness. It should state exactly why everything is as it is, so that no one could ask or wish for anything more. Now, I do not believe human beings have got so far as that."

"Oh, no! no!" laughed Windekind.

"Is there really such a book?" asked Johannes, eagerly.

"Yes!" whispered the goblin. "I know it from old, old stories. And hush! I know too, where it is, and who can find it."

"Oh, Wistik, Wistik!"

"Then why have you not yet got it?" asked Windekind.

"Have patience. It will happen all right. Some of the particulars I do not yet know, but I shall soon find it. I have worked for it and sought it all my life. For to him who finds it, life will be an endless autumnal day – blue sky above and blue haze about – but no falling leaves will rustle, no bough will break, and no drops will patter. The shadows will not waver, and the gold on the tree-tops will not fade. What now seems to us light will be as darkness, and what now seems to us happiness will be as sorrow, to him who has read that book. Yes, I know this about it, and sometime I shall find it." The goblin raised his eyebrows very high, and laid his finger on his lips.

"Wistik, if you could only teach me..." began Johannes, but before he could end he felt a heavy gust of wind, and saw, exactly above him, a huge black object which shot past, swiftly and inaudibly.

When he looked round again for Wistik, he caught just a glimpse of a little foot disappearing in a tree-trunk. Zip! – The goblin had dashed into his hole, head first – book and all. The candles burned more and more feebly, and suddenly went out. They were very queer little candles.

"What was that?" asked Johannes, in a fright, clinging fast to Windekind in the darkness.

"A night-owl," said Windekind.

They were both silent for a while. Then Johannes asked: "Do you believe what Wistik said?"

"Wistik is not so wise as he thinks he is. He will never find such a book. Neither will you."

"But does it exist?"

"That book exists the same as your shadow exists, Johannes. However hard you run, however carefully you may reach for it, you will never overtake nor grasp it; and, in the end, you will discover that it is yourself you chase. Do not be foolish – forget the goblin's chatter. I will tell you a hundred finer stories. Come with me! We will go to the edge of the woods, and see how our good Father lifts the fleecy, white dew-blankets from the sleeping meadow-lands. Come!"

Johannes went, but he had not understood Windekind's words and he did not follow his advice. And while he watched the dawn of the brilliant autumn day, he was brooding over the book wherein was stated why all is as it is, and softly repeating to himself, "Wistik!"

VI

It seemed to him during the days that followed that it was no longer so merry and cheerful as it had been – in the woods and in the dunes – with Windekind. His thoughts were no longer wholly occupied with what Windekind told or showed him. Again and again he found himself musing over that *book*, but he dared not speak of it. Nothing he looked at now seemed beautiful or wonderful. The clouds were so black and heavy, he feared they might fall upon him. It pained him when the restless autumn winds shook and whipped the poor, tired trees until the pale under sides of the green leaves were upturned, and yellow foliage and dry branches flew up in the air.

What Windekind related gave him no satisfaction. Much of it he did not understand, and whenever he asked one of his old questions he never received a full, clear, satisfactory answer.

Thus he was forced to think again of that book wherein everything stood so clearly and plainly written; and of that ever sunny, tranquil, autumn day which was to follow.

"Wistik! Wistik!"

Windekind heard it.

"Johannes, you will remain a human being, I fear. Even your friendship is like that of human beings. The first one after me to speak to you has carried away your confidence. Alas! My mother was quite right!"

"No, Windekind! But you are so much wiser than Wistik; you are as wise as that book. Why do you not tell me all? See, now! Why does the wind blow through the trees, making them bend and sway? Look! They can bear no more; the finest branches are breaking and the leaves are torn away by hundreds, although they are still so green and fresh. They are so tired, and yet again and again they are shaken and lashed by this rude and cruel wind. Why is it so? What does the wind want?"

"My poor Johannes. That is human language!"

"Make it be still, Windekind! I like calm and sunshine."

"You ask and wish like a human being; therefore there is neither answer nor fulfilment. If you do not learn better to ask and desire, the autumn day will never dawn for you, and you will become like the thousands of human beings who have spoken to Wistik."

"Are there so many?"

"Yes, thousands. Wistik pretended to be very mysterious, but he is a prater who cannot keep his secret. He hopes to find that book among human beings, and he shares his knowledge with any one who, perhaps, can help him. And so he has already caused a great deal of unhappiness. Many believe him, and search for that book with as much fervor as some do the secret of the art of making gold. They sacrifice everything, and forget all their affairs – even their happiness – and shut themselves up among thick books, and strange implements and materials. They hazard their lives and their health – forget the blue heavens, good, kindly Nature, and even their fellow-beings. Sometimes they find beautiful and useful things, like lumps of gold. These they cast up out of their caves, on the sunny surface of the earth. Yet they do not concern themselves with these things – leaving them for others to enjoy. They dig and drudge in the darkness with eager expectancy. They are not seeking gold, but the book. Some grow feeble-minded with the toil, forget their object and their desire, and wander about in aimless idleness. The goblin has made them childish. They may be seen piling up little towers of sand, and reckoning how many grains are lacking before they tumble down. They make little waterfalls, and calculate precisely each bend and bay the flow will make. They dig little pits, and employ all their patience and genius in making them smooth and quite free from stones. If these poor, infatuated ones are disturbed in their labor, and asked what they are doing, they look at you seriously and importantly, shake their heads and mutter: 'Wistik! Wistik!' Yes, it is all the fault of that wicked little goblin. Look out for him, Johannes!"

But Johannes was staring before him at the swaying, creaking trees. Above his clear child-eyes wrinkles had formed in the tender flesh. Never before had he looked so grave.

"But yet – you have said it yourself, that there was such a book! Oh, I know – certainly – that there is something in it which you will not tell me concerning the Great Light."

"Poor, poor Johannes!" said Windekind. And above the rushing and roaring of the storm his voice was like a peaceful choral-song borne from afar. "Love me – love me with your whole being. In me you will find more than you desire. You will realize what you cannot now imagine, and you will yourself be what you have longed to know. Earth and heaven will be your confidants – the stars your next of kin – infinity your dwelling-place. Love me – love me! Cling to me as the hop-vine clings to the tree – be true to me as the lake is to its bed. In me alone will you find repose, Johannes."

Windekind's words were ended, but it seemed as though the choral-song continued. Out of the remote distance it seemed to be floating on – solemn and regular – above the rushing and souging of the wind – peaceful as the moonlight shining between the driving clouds.

Windekind stretched out his arms, and Johannes slept upon his bosom, protected by the little blue mantle.

Yet in the night he waked up. A stillness had suddenly and imperceptibly come over the earth, and the moon had sunk below the horizon. The wearied leaves hung motionless, and silent darkness filled the forest.

Then those questions came back to Johannes' head again – in swift, ghostly succession – driving out the very recent trustfulness. Why were human beings as they were? Why must he leave them – forego their love? Why must the winter come? Why must the leaves fall, and the flowers die? Why? – Why?

There were the blue lights again – dancing in the depths of the underwood. They came and went. Johannes gazed after them expectantly. He saw the big, bright light shining on the dark tree-trunk. Windekind lay very still, and fast asleep.

"Just one question more," thought Johannes, and he slipped out from under the blue mantle.

"Here you are again!" said Wistik, nodding in a friendly way. "That gives me a great deal of pleasure. Where is your friend?"

"Over yonder. I only wanted to ask you one more question. Will you answer it?"

"You have been among human beings, have you not? Is it my secret you have come for?"

"Who will find that book, Wistik?"

"Ah, yes. That's it; that's it! Will you help me if I tell you?"

"If I can, certainly."

"Listen then, Johannes." Wistik opened his eyes amazingly wide, and lifted his eyebrows higher than ever. Then he whispered along the back of his little hand:

"Human beings have the golden chest, fairies have the golden key. The foe of fairies finds it not; fairies' friend only, opens it. A springtime night is the proper time, and Robin Redbreast knows the way."

"Is that true, really true?" cried Johannes, as he thought of his little key.

"Yes," said Wistik.

"Why, then, has no one yet found it?" asked Johannes. "So many people are seeking it!"

"I have told no human being what I have confided to you, I have never yet found the fairies' friend."

"I have it, Wistik! I can help you!" cried Johannes, clapping his hands. "I will ask Windekind."

Away he flew, over moss and dry leaves. Still, he stumbled now and then, and his step was heavy. Thick branches cracked under his feet where before not a grass-blade had bent.

There was the dense clump of ferns under which they had slept: how low it looked!

"Windekind!" he cried. But the sound of his own voice startled him.

"Windekind?" It sounded like a human voice! A frightened night-bird flew up with a scream.

There was no one under the ferns. Johannes could see nothing.

The blue lights had vanished. It was cold, and impenetrably dark all around him. Up above, he saw the black, spectral tree-tops against the starlight.

Once more he called. He dared not again. His voice seemed a profanation of the stillness, and Windekind's name a mocking sound.

Then poor little Johannes fell to the ground, and sobbed in contrite sorrow.

VII

The morning was cold and grey. The black, glimmering boughs, all stripped by the storm, were weeping in the mist. Little Johannes ran hurriedly on over the wet, down-beaten grass – staring before him toward the edge of the woods where it was lighter, as if that were the end in view. His eyes were red from crying, and strained with fear and misery. He had been running back and forth the whole night, looking for the light. It had always been safe and home-like with Windekind. Now, in every dark spot lurked the ghost of forlornness, and he dared not look around.

At last, he left the woods and saw before him a meadow over which a fine, drizzling rain was falling. A horse stood in the middle of it near a leafless willow-tree, motionless and with drooping head, while the water dripped slowly from its shining sides, and out of its matted mane.

Johannes walked along by the woods. He looked with tired, anxious eyes toward the lonely horse and the grey, misty rain, and he whimpered softly.

"All is over now," he thought. "The sun will never come out again. After this it will always be with me as it is now – here."

But he dared not stand still in his despair; something more frightful yet would happen, he thought.

Then he saw the grand enclosure of a country-seat, and, under a linden tree with bright yellow foliage, a little cottage.

He went within the enclosure, and walked through broad avenues where the ground was thickly covered with layers of brown and yellow linden leaves. Purple asters grew along the grass-plots, and other brilliant autumn flowers were flaming there.

Then he came to a pond. Beside it stood a large house with low windows and glass doors. Rose-bushes and ivy grew against the wall. It was all shut up, and wore a gloomy look. Chestnut-trees, half stripped of their foliage, stood all around; and, amid their fallen leaves, Johannes saw the shining brown chestnuts.

Then that chill, deathly feeling passed away. He thought of his own home. There, too, were chestnut-trees, and at this season he always went to find the glossy nuts. Suddenly he began to feel a longing – as though he had heard the call of a familiar voice. He sat down upon a bench near the house, and gave vent to his feelings in tears.

A peculiar odor caused him to look up. A man stood near him with a white apron on, and a pipe in his mouth. About his waist were strips of linden bark for binding up the flowers. Johannes knew this scent so well; it made him think of his own garden, and of the gardener, who brought him pretty caterpillars, and showed him starlings' eggs.

He was not alarmed, although it was a human being who stood beside him. He told the man that he had been deserted and was lost, and he gratefully followed him to the small dwelling under the yellow-leaved linden-tree.

Indoors sat the gardener's wife, knitting black stockings. Over the peat fire in the fireplace hung a big kettle of boiling water. On the mat by the fire lay a cat with folded forepaws – just as Simon sat when Johannes left home.

Johannes was given a seat by the fire that he might dry his feet. "Tick, tack! – Tick, tack!" said the big, hanging clock. Johannes looked at the steam which rose, hissing, from the kettle, and to the little tongues of flame that skipped nimbly and whimsically over the peat.

"Now I am among human beings," thought he.

It was not bad. He felt calm and contented. They were good and kind, and asked what he would like best to do.

"I would like best to stay here," he replied.

Here he was at peace, but if he went home, sorrow and tears would follow. He would be obliged to maintain silence, and they would tell him that he had been naughty. He would have to see all the past over again, and think once more of everything.

He did long for his little room, for his father, for Presto – but he would rather endure the silent longing where he was, than the painful, racking return. It seemed as if here he might be thinking of Windekind, while at home he could not.

Windekind had surely gone away now – far away to the sunny land where the palms were bending over the blue seas. He would do penance here, and wait for him.

And so he implored the two good people to let him stay. He would be obedient and work for them. He would help care for the garden and the flowers, but only for this winter; – for he hoped in his heart that Windekind would return in the spring.

The gardener and his wife thought that Johannes had run away because he was not treated well at home. They sympathized with him, and promised to let him stay.

He remained, and helped them in the garden and among the flowers. He was given a little bedroom, with a blue wooden bedstead. From it, mornings, he could see the wet, yellow linden leaves slipping along the window-panes; and nights, the dark boughs rocking to and fro – with the stars playing hide-and-seek behind them. He gave names to the stars, and called the brightest Windekind.

He told his history to the flowers – almost all of which he had known at home; the big, serious asters, the gaudy zinnias, and the white chrysanthemums which continued to bloom so late in the rude autumn. When all the other flowers were dead the chrysanthemums still stood – and even after the first snowfall, when Johannes came one morning early to look at them, they lifted their cheerful faces and said: "Yes, we are still here. You didn't think we would be, *did* you?" They were very brave, but two days later they were all dead.

But the palms and tree-ferns still flourished in the green-house, and the strange flower-clusters of the orchids hung in their humid, sultry air. Johannes gazed with wonder into the splendid cups, and thought of Windekind. On going out-of-doors, how cold and colorless everything looked – the black footsteps in the damp snow, and the rattling, dripping skeletons of trees!

Hour after hour, while the snowflakes were silently falling until the branches bowed beneath their weight of down, Johannes walked eagerly on in the violet dusk of the snow-shadowed woods. It was silence, but not death. And it was almost more beautiful than summer verdure; the interlocking of the pure white branches against the clear blue sky, or the descending clouds of glittering flakes when a heavily laden shrub let slide its snowy burden.

Once, on such a walk, when he had gone so far that nothing was to be seen save snow, and snow-covered branches – half white, half black – and all sound and life seemed smothered under its glistening covering, he thought he saw a tiny white animal run nimbly out in front of him. He followed it. It bore no likeness to any that he knew. Then he tried to grasp it, but it sped away and disappeared in a tree-trunk. Johannes peered into the round, black opening, and thought – "Could it be Wistik?"

He did not think much about him. It seemed mean to do so, and he did not wish to weaken in his doing of penance. And life with the two good people left him little to ask for. Evenings, he had to read aloud out of a thick book, in which much was said about God. But he knew that book, and read it absent-mindedly.

The night after his walk in the snow, however, he lay awake in bed, looking at the cold shining of the moonlight on the floor. Suddenly he saw two tiny hands close beside him – clinging fast to the bedside. Then the top of a little white fur cap appeared between the two hands, and at last he saw a pair of earnest eyes under high-lifted eyebrows.

"Good evening, Johannes," said Wistik. "I came to remind you of our agreement. You cannot have found the book yet, for the spring has not come. But are you keeping it in mind? What is the thick book I have seen you reading in? That cannot be the true book. Do not think that."

"I do *not* think so, Wistik," said Johannes. He turned over and tried to go to sleep again, but he could not get the little key out of his head.

And from this time on, as he read in the thick book, he kept thinking about it, and he saw clearly that it was not the true book.

VIII

"Now he will come," thought Johannes, the first time the snow had melted away, and here and there little clusters of snowdrops began to appear. "Will he not come now?" he asked the snowdrops. They could not tell, but remained with drooping heads looking at the earth as if they were ashamed of their haste, and wished to creep away again.

If they only could have done so! The numbing east winds soon began to blow again, and the poor, rash things were buried deep in the drifted snow.

Weeks later came the violets, their sweet perfume floating through the shrubbery. And when the sun had shone long and warmly on the mossy ground, the fair primulas opened out by hundreds and by thousands.

The shy violets, with their rich fragrance, were mysterious harbingers of coming magnificence, yet the cheerful primulas were gladness itself. The awakened earth had taken to herself the first sunbeams, and made of them a golden ornament.

"Now," thought Johannes, "now he is surely coming!" In suspense he watched the buds on the branches, as they swelled slowly day by day, and freed themselves from the bark, till the first pale-green points appeared among the brown scales. Johannes stayed a long time looking at those little green leaves, and never saw them stir. But even if he only just turned around they seemed to have grown bigger. "They do not dare while I am watching them," he thought.

The foliage had already begun to cast a shade, yet Windekind had not come. No dove had alighted near him – no little mouse had spoken to him. When he addressed the flowers they scarcely nodded, and made no reply whatever. "My penance is not over yet," he thought.

Then one sunny spring morning he passed the pond and the house. The windows were all wide open. He wondered if any of the people had come yet.

The wild cherry that stood by the pond was entirely covered with tender leaves. Every twig was furnished with little, delicate-green wings. On the grass beside the bush sat a young girl. Johannes saw only her light-blue frock and her blonde hair. A robin was perched on her shoulder, and pecked out of her hand. Suddenly, she turned her head around and saw Johannes.

"Good day, little boy," said she, nodding in a friendly way.

Again Johannes thrilled from head to foot. Those were Windekind's eyes – that was Windekind's voice!

"Who are you?" he asked, his lips quivering with feeling.

"I am Robinetta, and this is my bird. He will not be afraid of you. Do you like birds?"

The redbreast was not afraid of Johannes. It flew to his arm. That was like old times. And it must be Windekind – that azure being!

"Tell me your name, Laddie," said Windekind's voice.

"Do you not know me? Do you not know that I am Johannes?"

"How could I know that?"

What did that mean? Still, it was the well-known, sweet voice. Those were the dark, heavenly-deep, blue eyes.

"Why do you look at me so, Johannes? Have you ever seen me before?"

"Yes, I do believe so."

"Surely, you must have dreamed it!"

"Dreamed?" thought Johannes. "Can I have dreamed everything? Can I be dreaming now?"

"Where were you born?" he asked.

"A long way from here, in a great city."

"Among human beings?"

Robinetta laughed. It was Windekind's laugh. "I believe so. Were not you?"

"Alas, yes! I was too!"

"Are you sorry for that? Do you not like human beings?"

"No. Who *could* like them?"

"Who? Well, Johannes; but you are an odd child! Do you like animals better?"

"Oh, much better – and flowers."

"Really, I do, too – sometimes. But that is not right. Father says we must love our friends."

"Why is that not right? I like whom I choose whether it is right or not."

"Fie, Johannes! Have you no parents, then, nor any one who cares for you? Are you not fond of them?"

"Yes," said Johannes, remembering. "I love my father, but not because it is right, nor because he is a human being."

"Why, then?"

"I do not know – because he is not like other human beings – because he, too, is fond of birds and flowers."

"And so am I, Johannes. Look!" And Robinetta called the robin to her hand, and petted it.

"I know it," said Johannes. "And I love you very much, too."

"Already? That is very soon," laughed the girl. "Whom do you love best of all?"

"I love – " Johannes hesitated. Should he speak Windekind's name? The fear that he might let slip that name to human ears was never out of his thoughts. And yet, was not this fair-haired being in blue, Windekind himself? Who else could give him that feeling of rest and happiness?

"You!" said he, all at once, looking frankly into the deep blue eyes. Courageously, he ventured a full surrender. He was anxious, though, and eagerly awaited the reception of his precious gift.

Again Robinetta laughed heartily, but she pressed his hand, and her look was no colder, her voice no less cordial.

"Well, Johannes," said she, "what have I done to earn this so suddenly?"

Johannes made no reply, but stood looking at her with growing confidence.

Robinetta stood up, and laid her arm about Johannes' shoulders. She was taller than he.

Thus they strolled through the woods, and picked great clusters of cowslips, until they could have hidden under the mountain of sun-filled yellow flowers. The little redbreast went with them – flying from branch to branch, and peering at them with its shining little black eyes.

They did not speak much, but now and then looked askance at each other. They were both perplexed by this adventure, and uncertain what they ought to think of each other.

Much to her regret, Robinetta had soon to turn back.

"I must go now, Johannes, but will you not take another walk with me? I think you are a nice little boy," said she in taking her leave.

"Tweet! Tweet!" said the robin as he flew after her.

When she had gone, and her image alone remained to him, he doubted no more who she was. She was the very same to whom he had given his friendship. The name Windekind rang fainter, and became confused with Robinetta.

Everything about him was again the same as it had formerly been. The flowers nodded cheerfully, and their perfume chased away the melancholy longing for home which, until now, he had felt and encouraged. Amid the tender greenery, in the soft, mild, vernal air, he felt all at once at home, like a bird that had found its nest. He stretched out his arms and took in a full, deep breath – he was so happy! On his way home, wherever he looked he always saw gliding before him the figure in light blue with the golden hair. It was as though he had been looking at the sun, until its image was stamped upon everything he saw.

From this day on Johannes went to the pond every clear morning. He went early – as soon as he was wakened by the squabbling of the sparrows in the ivy about his window, and by the tedious chirping and chattering of the starlings, as they fluttered in the water-leader in the early sunshine.

Then he hurried through the dewy grass, close to the house, and watched from behind the lilac-bush until he heard the glass door open, and saw the bright figure coming toward him.

Then they wandered through the woods, and over the hills which lay beyond. They talked about everything in sight; the trees, the plants, and the dunes. Johannes had a strange, giddy sensation as he walked beside her. Sometimes he felt light enough again to fly through the air. But he never could. He told the story of the flowers and of the animals, as Windekind had given it to him. But he forgot how he had learned it, and Windekind existed no more for him – only Robinetta. He was happy when she laughed with him, and he saw the friendship in her eyes; and he spoke to her as he had formerly done to his little dog – saying whatever came into his head, without hesitation or shyness. When he did not see her he spent the hours in thinking of her; and each thing he did was with the question whether Robinetta would find it good or beautiful.

And she, herself, appeared always so pleased to see him. She would smile and hasten her steps. She had told him that she would rather walk with him than with any one else.

"But, Johannes," she once asked, "how do you know all these things? How do you know what the May-bugs think, what the thrushes sing, and how it looks in a rabbit-hole, or on the bottom of the water?"

"They have told me," answered Johannes, "and I have myself been in a rabbit-hole and on the bottom of the water."

Robinetta knitted her delicate eyebrows and looked at him half mockingly. But his face was full of truth.

They were sitting under lilac trees, from which hung thick, purple clusters. Before them lay the pond with its reeds and duck-weed. They saw the black beetles gliding in circles over the surface, and little red spiders busily darting up and down. It swarmed with life and movement. Johannes, absorbed in remembrances, gazed into the depths, and said:

"I went down there once. I slipped down a reed to the very bottom. It is all covered with fallen leaves which make it so soft and smooth. It is always twilight there – a green twilight – for the light falls through the green duck-weed. And over my head I saw the long, white rootlets hanging down.

"The newts, which are very inquisitive, came swimming about me. It gives a strange feeling to have such great creatures swimming above one; and I could not see far in front, for it was dark there – yet green, too. And in that darkness the living things appeared like black shadows. There were paddle-footed water-beetles, and flat mussels, and sometimes, too, a little fish. I went a long way – hours away, I believe – and in the middle was a great forest of water-plants, where snails were creeping, and water-spiders were weaving their glistening nests. Minnows darted in and out, and sometimes they stayed with open mouths and quivering fins to look at me, they were so amazed. There I made the acquaintance of an eel whose tail I had the misfortune to step on. He told me about his travels. He had been as far as the sea, he said. Because of this, he had been made King of the Pond – for no one else had been so far. He always lay in the mud, sleeping, except when others brought him something to eat. He was a frightful eater. That was because he was a king. They prefer a fat king – one that is portly and dignified. Oh, it was splendid in that pond!"

"Then why can you not go there again – now?"

"Now?" asked Johannes, looking at her with great, pondering eyes. "Now? I can never go again. I should be drowned. But there is no need of it. I would rather be here by the lilacs, with you."

Robinetta shook her little blonde head wonderingly, and stroked Johannes' hair. Then she looked at her robin, which seemed to be finding all kinds of tid-bits at the margin of the pond. Just then it looked up, and kept watching the two with its bright little eyes.

"Do you understand anything about it, Birdling?"

The bird gave a knowing glance, and then went on with its hunting and pecking.

"Tell me something more, Johannes, of what you have seen."

Johannes gladly did so, and Robinetta listened attentively, believing all he said.

"But what is to prevent all that, *now*? Why can you not go again with me to all those places? I should love to go."

Johannes tried his best to remember, but a sunny haze obscured the dim distance over which he had passed. He could not exactly tell how he had lost his former happiness.

"I do not quite know – you must not ask about it. A silly little creature spoiled it all. But now it is all right again; still better than before."

The perfume of the lilacs settled gently down upon them; and the humming of the insects over the water, and the peaceful sunshine, filled them with a sweet drowsiness; until a shrill bell at the house began to ring, and Robinetta sped away.

That evening, when Johannes was in his little room, looking at the moon-shadows cast by the ivy leaves which covered the window-panes – there seemed to be a tapping on the glass. Johannes thought it was an ivy leaf fluttering in the night wind. Yet it tapped so plainly – always three taps at a time – that Johannes very gently opened the window and cautiously looked about. The ivy against the house gleamed in the blue light. Below, lay a dim world full of mystery. There were caverns and openings into which the moonlight cast little blue flecks – making the darkness still deeper.

After Johannes had been gazing a long time into this wonderful world of shadows, he saw the form of a mannikin close by the window, half hidden by a large ivy leaf. He recognized Wistik instantly, by his great, wonder-struck eyes under the uplifted brows. A tiny moonbeam just touched the tip of Wistik's long nose.

"Have you forgotten me, Johannes? Why are you not thinking about it now? It is the right time. Did you ask Robin Redbreast the way?"

"Ah, Wistik, why should I ask? I have everything I could wish for. I have Robinetta."

"But that will not last long. And you can be still happier – Robinetta, too. Must the little key stay where it is, then? Only think how grand it would be if you both should find the book! Ask Robin Redbreast about it. I will help you whenever I can."

"At least, I can ask about it," said Johannes.

Wistik nodded, and scrambled nimbly down the vines.

Before he went to bed, Johannes stayed a long time – looking at the dark shadows and the shining ivy leaves.

The next day he asked the redbreast if he knew the way to the golden chest. Robinetta listened, in astonishment. Johannes saw the robin nod, and peep askance at Robinetta.

"Not here, not here!" chirped the little bird.

"What do you mean, Johannes?" asked Robinetta.

"Do you not know about it, Robinetta, and where to find it? Are you not waiting for the little gold key?"

"No! no! Tell me – what is that?"

Johannes told her what he knew about the book.

"And I have the little key. I thought you had the golden chest. Is it not so, Birdie?"

But the bird feigned not to hear, and fluttered about among the fresh, bright beech leaves.

They were resting against a slope on which small beech and spruce trees were growing. A narrow green path ran slantingly by, and they sat at the border of it, on thick, dark-green moss. They could look over the tops of the lowest saplings upon a sea of green foliage billowing in sun and shade.

"I do believe, Johannes," said Robinetta, after a little, "that I can find what you are looking for. But what do you mean about the little key? How did you come by it?"

"Why! How did I? How was it?" murmured Johannes, gazing far away over the green expanse.

Suddenly, as though fledged in the sunny sky, two white butterflies met his sight. They whirled about with uncertain capricious flight – fluttering and twinkling in the sunlight. Yet they came closer.

"Windekind! Windekind!" whispered Johannes, suddenly remembering.

"Who is that? Who is Windekind?" asked Robinetta.

The redbreast flew up, chattering, and the daisies in the grass before him seemed suddenly to be staring at Johannes in great alarm with their white, wide-open eyes.

"Did he give you the little key?" continued the girl. Johannes nodded, in silence; but she wanted to know more.

"Who was it? Did he teach you all those things? Where is he?"

"He is not any more. It is Robinetta now – no one but Robinetta. Robinetta alone!" He clasped her arm, and pressed his little head against it.

"Silly boy!" she said, laughing. "I will find the book for you – I know where it is."

"But then I must go and get the key, and it is far away."

"No, no, you need not. I will find it without a key – to-morrow – I promise you."

On their way home, the little butterflies flitted back and forth in front of them.

Johannes dreamed of his father that night – of Robinetta, and of many others. They were all good friends, and they stood near looking at him cordially, and trustfully. Yet later, their faces changed. They grew cold and ironical. He looked anxiously around; on all sides were fierce, hostile faces. He felt a nameless distress, and waked up weeping.

IX

Johannes had already sat a long while, waiting. The air was chilly, and great clouds were drifting close above the earth in endless, majestic succession. They spread out sombre, wide-waving mantles, and reared their haughty heads toward the clear light that shone above them. Sunlight and shadow chased each other swiftly over the trees, like flickering flames. Johannes was in an anxious state of mind, thinking about the book; not believing that he should really find it that day. Between the clouds – much higher – awfully high, he saw an expanse of clear blue sky; and upon it, stretched out in motionless calm, were delicate, white, plume-like clouds.

"It ought be like that," he thought. "So high, so bright, so still!"

Then came Robinetta. The robin was not with her.

"It is all right, Johannes," she cried out. "You may come and see the book."

"Where is Robin Redbreast?" said Johannes, mistrustfully.

"He did not come. But we are not going for a walk."

Then he went with her, thinking all the time to himself:

"It cannot be! Not *this* way! – it must be entirely different!"

Yet he followed the sunny, blonde hair that lighted his way.

Alas! things went sadly now with little Johannes. I could wish that his story ended here. Did you ever have a splendid dream of a magical garden where the flowers and animals all loved you and talked to you? And did the idea come to you then, that you might wake up soon, and all that happiness be lost? Then you vainly try to hold the dream – and not to wake to the cold light of day. That was the way Johannes felt when he went with Robinetta.

He went into the house – and down a passage that echoed with his footsteps. He breathed the air of clothes and food; he thought of the long days when he had had to stay indoors, of his school-tasks, and of all that had been sombre and cold in his life.

He entered a room with people in it – how many he did not see. They were talking together, yet when he came they ceased to speak. He noticed the carpet; it had big, impossible flowers in glaring colors. They were as strange and deformed as those of the hangings in his bedroom at home.

"Well, is this the gardener's little boy?" said a voice right in front of him. "Come here, my young friend; you need not be afraid."

And another voice sounded suddenly, close beside him: "Well, Robbi, a pretty little playmate you have there!"

What did all this mean? The deep wrinkles came again above the child's dark eyes, and Johannes looked around in perplexity.

A man in black clothes sat near – looking at him with cold, grey eyes.

"And so you wish to make acquaintance with the Book of Books! It amazes me that your father, whom I know to be a devout man, has not already given it to you."

"You do not know my father – he is far away."

"Is that so? Well, it is all the same. Look here, my young friend! Read a great deal in this. Upon your path in life it will..."

But Johannes had already recognized the book. It could not possibly come to him in *this* way! No! he could not have it so. He shook his head.

"No, no! This is not what I mean. This I know. This is not it."

He heard sounds of surprise, and felt the looks which were fastened on him from all sides. "What! What do you mean, child?"

"I know this book; it is the Book of Human Beings. But there is not enough in it; if there were there would be rest among men – and peace. And there is none. I mean something else about which no one can doubt who sees it – wherein is told why everything is as it is – precisely and plainly."

"How is that possible? Where did the boy get that notion?"

"Who taught you that, my young friend?"

"I believe you have been reading depraved books, boy, and are repeating the words!"

Thus rang the various voices. Johannes felt his cheeks burning, and he began to feel dizzy. The room spun round, and the huge flowers on the carpet floated up and down. Where was the little mouse which had warned him so faithfully that day at school? He needed him now.

"I am not repeating it out of books, and he who taught me is worth more than all of you together. I know the language of flowers, and of animals – I am their intimate friend. I know, too, what human beings are, and how they live. I know all the secrets of fairies and of goblins, for they love me more than human beings do."

Oh, Mousie! Mousie!

Johannes heard coughing and laughing, around and behind him. It all rang and rasped in his ears.

"He seems to have been reading Andersen."

"He is not quite right in his head."

The man in front of him said:

"If you know Andersen, little man, you ought to have more respect for God and His Word." "God!" He knew that word, and he thought about Windekind's lesson.

"I have no respect for God. God is a big oil-lamp, which draws thousands to wreck and ruin."

No laughing now, but a serious silence in which the horror and consternation were palpable. Johannes felt even in his back the piercing looks. It was like his dream of the night before.

The man in black stood up and took him by the arm. That hurt, and almost broke his heart.

"Listen, boy! I do not know whether you are foolish or deeply depraved, but I will not suffer such godlessness here. Go away and never come into my sight again, wretched boy! I shall ask about you, but never again set foot in this house. Do you understand?"

Everybody looked at him coldly and unkindly – as in his dream the night before. Johannes looked around him in distress.

"Robinetta! Where is Robinetta?"

"Well, indeed! Corrupt my child? If you ever speak to her again, look out!"

"No, let me go to her! I will not leave her. Robinetta!" cried Johannes.

But she sat in a corner, frightened, and did not look up.

"Out, you rascal! Do you hear? Take care, if you have the boldness to come back again."

The painful grip led him through the sounding corridor – the glass door rattled, and Johannes stood outside, under the dark, lowering clouds.

He did not cry now, but gazed quietly out in front of him as he slowly walked on. The sorrowful wrinkles were deeper above his eyes, and they stayed there.

The little redbreast sat in a linden hedge and peered at him. He stood still and silently returned the look. But there was no trust now in the timid, peeping little eyes; and when he took a step nearer, the quick little creature whirled away from him.

"Away, away! A human being!" chirped the sparrows, sitting together in the garden path. And they darted away in all directions.

The open flowers did not smile, but looked serious and indifferent; as they do with every stranger.

Johannes did not heed these signs, but was thinking of what the cruel men had done to him. He felt as if his inmost being had been violated by a hard, cold touch. "They *shall* believe me!" thought he. "I will get my little key and show it to them."

"Johannes! Johannes!" called a light, little voice. There was a bird's nest in a holly tree, and Wistik's big eyes peeped over the brim of it. "Where are you bound for?"

"It is all your fault, Wistik," said Johannes. "Let me alone."

"How did you come to talk about it to human beings? They do not understand. Why do you tell them these things? It is very stupid of you."

"They laughed at me, and hurt me. They are miserable creatures. I hate them!"

"No, Johannes, you love them."

"No! No!"

"If you did not, you would not mind it so much that they are not like yourself; and it would not matter what they said. You must concern yourself less about human beings."

"I want my key. I want to show it to them."

"You must not do that; they would not believe you even if you did. What would be the use of it?"

"I want my little key – under the rose-bush. Do you know how to find it?"

"Yes, indeed! Near the pond, is it not? Yes, I know."

"Then take me to it, Wistik."

Wistik climbed up to Johannes' shoulder, and pointed out the way. They walked the whole day long. The wind blew, and now and then showers fell; but at evening the clouds ceased driving, and lengthened themselves out into long bands of gray and gold.

When they came to Johannes' own dunes, he felt deeply moved, and he whispered again and again: "Windekind! Windekind!"

There was the rabbit-hole, and the slope against which he had once slept. The grey reindeer-moss was tender and moist, and did not crackle beneath his feet. The roses were withered, and the yellow primroses with their faint, languid fragrance held up their cups by hundreds. Higher still rose the tall, proud torch-plants, with their thick, velvety leaves.

Johannes tried to trace the delicate, brownish leaves of the wild-rose.

"Where is it, Wistik? I do not see it."

"I know nothing about it," said Wistik. "You hid the key – I didn't."

The field where the rose had blossomed was full of primroses, staring vacantly. Johannes questioned them, and also the torch-plants. They were much too proud, however, for their tall flower-clusters reached far up above him; so he asked the small, tri-colored violets on the sandy ground.

But no one knew anything of the wild-rose. They all were newly-come flowers – even the arrogant torch-plant, tall though it was.

"Oh! where is it? Where is it?"

"Have you, too, served me a trick?" cried Wistik. "I expected it – that is always the way with human beings!"

He slipped down from Johannes' shoulder, and ran away into the tall grass.

Johannes looked hopelessly around. There stood a small rose-bush.

"Where is the big rose?" asked Johannes, "the big one that used to stand here?"

"We do not speak to human beings," said the little bush.

That was the last sound he heard. Every living thing kept silence. Only, the reeds rustled in the soft, evening wind.

"Am I a human being?" thought Johannes. "No, that cannot – cannot be. I will not be a human being. I hate human beings."

He was tired and faint-hearted, and went to the border of the little field to lie down upon the soft, grey moss with its humid, heavy fragrance.

"I cannot turn back now, nor ever see Robinetta again. Shall I not die without her? Shall I keep on living, and be a man – a man like those who laughed at me?"

Then, all at once, he saw again the two white butterflies that flew up to him from the way of the setting sun. In suspense, he followed their flight. Would they show him the way? They hovered above his head – then floated apart to return again – whirling about in fickle play. Little by little they left the sun, and finally fluttered beyond the border of the dunes – away to the woods. There, only

the highest tips were still touched by the evening glow that shone out red and vivid from under the long files of sombre clouds.

Johannes followed the butterflies. But when they had flown above the nearest trees, he saw a dark shadow swoop toward them in noiseless flight, and then hover over them. It pursued and overtook them. The next moment they had vanished. The black shadow darted swiftly up to him, and he covered his face with his hands, in terror.

"Well, little friend, why do you sit here, crying?" rang a sharp, taunting voice close beside him.

Johannes had seen a huge bat coming toward him, but when he looked up, a swarthy mannikin, not much taller than himself, was standing on the dunes. It had a great head, with big ears, that stood out – dark – against the bright evening sky, and a lean little body with slim legs. Of his face Johannes could see only the small, glittering eyes.

"Have you lost anything, little fellow? If so, I will help you seek it," said he. But Johannes silently shook his head.

"Look! Would you like these?" he began again, opening his hand. Johannes saw there something white, that from time to time barely stirred. It was the two white butterflies – dead – with the torn and broken little wings still quivering. Johannes shivered, as though some one had blown on the back of his neck, and he looked up in alarm at the strange being.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Would you like to know my name, Chappie? Well, just call me Pluizer⁵ – simply Pluizer. I have still prettier names, but that you do not yet understand."

"Are you a human being?"

"Better yet! Still, I have arms and legs and a head – just see what a head! And yet the boy asks if I'm a human being! Well, Johannes, Johannes!" And the mannikin laughed with a shrill, piercing sound.

"How do you know who I am?" asked Johannes.

"Oh, that is a trifle for me! I know a great deal more. I know where you came from, and what you came here to do. I know an astonishing lot – almost everything."

"Ah! Mr. Pluizer..."

"Pluizer – Pluizer. No ceremony!"

"Do you know then?.." But Johannes suddenly stopped. "He is a human being," thought he.

"About your little key, do you mean?" asked the mannikin.

"Yes, indeed I do."

"But I did not think human beings could know anything about that."

"Silly boy! And Wistik has babbled to so many about it!"

"Do you know Wistik, too?"

"Oh, yes – one of my best friends, and I have a great many of them. But I know about the little key, without the help of Wistik. I know a great deal more than Wistik. Wistik is a good enough fellow, but stupid – uncommonly stupid. Not I – far from it!" And Pluizer tapped his big head with his lean little hand in a very pert way.

"Do you know, Johannes," he continued, "a great defect in Wistik? But you never must tell him, for he would be very angry."

"Well, what is it?" asked Johannes.

"He does not exist. That is a great shortcoming, but he will not admit it. And he says of me that I do not exist – but that is a lie. *I* not exist? The *mischief* – I do!"

And Pluizer, thrusting the little butterflies into his pocket, suddenly threw himself over, and stood on his head in front of Johannes. Then he made a very ugly grimace, and stuck out his long

⁵ Pluizer = Shredder.

tongue. Johannes, who did not yet feel quite at his ease alone with this remarkable creature, at the close of the day, in the lonely dunes, was quaking now, with fear.

"This is a most charming way of seeing the world," said Pluizer, still standing on his head. "If you like, I will teach you to do it. Everything looks much clearer and more life-like."

And he sprawled his spindle legs out in the air, and whirled around on his hands. As the red afterglow fell upon his inverted face, Johannes thought it frightful; the small eyes blinked in the light, and showed the whites on the wrong side.

"You see, this way the clouds look like the floor, and the ground the cover, of the world. You can maintain that as well as the contrary. There is no above nor below, however. Those clouds would make a fine promenade."

Johannes looked at the long clouds. He thought they appeared like a plowed field, with blood welling up from the red furrows. And over the sea the splendor was streaming from the gates of that grotto in the clouds.

"Could one get there, and go in?" he asked.

"Nonsense!" said Pluizer, landing suddenly on his feet again, to the great relief of Johannes. "Nonsense! If you were there, it would be precisely as it is here – and the beauty of it would then appear still a little farther off. In those beautiful clouds there, it is misty, grizzly, and cold."

"I do not believe you," said Johannes. "Now I can very well see that you are a human being."

"Oh, come! Not believe me, dear boy, because I am a human being! And what particular thing do you take yourself for?"

"Oh, Pluizer! Am I too a human being?"

"What did you suppose? An elf? Elves do not fall in love." And Pluizer suddenly dropped down exactly in front of Johannes – his legs crossed under him – grinning straight into his face. Johannes felt indescribably distressed and perplexed under this scrutiny, and would have liked to hide, or make himself invisible. Still he could not even turn his eyes away.

"Only human beings fall in love, Johannes. Do you hear? And that is good; otherwise before long there would be no more of them. And you are in love as well as the best of them, although you are still so young. Who are you thinking about, this instant?"

"Robinetta!" whispered Johannes, barely loud enough to be heard.

"Whom do you long for most?"

"Robinetta!"

"Who is the one without whom you think you cannot live?"

Johannes' lips moved silently: "Robinetta!"

"Now, then, you silly fellow," sneered Pluizer, "how can you fancy yourself to be an elf? Elves do not fall in love with the children of men."

"But it was Windekind," stammered Johannes, in his embarrassment. At that, Pluizer looked terribly angry, and he seized Johannes by the ears with his bony little hands.

"What stuff is this? Would you frighten me with that dunce? He is sillier than Wistik – far more silly. He does not know it, though. And what is more, he does not exist at all, and never has existed. I alone exist, do you understand? If you do not believe me, I will make you feel that I *do* exist."

And he shook poor Johannes by the ears – hard. The latter cried out: "But I have known him so long, and I have traveled so far with him!"

"You have dreamed it, I say. Where, then, are the rose-bush and the little key? Hey! – But you are not dreaming now! Do you feel that?"

"Auch!" cried Johannes; for Pluizer was tweaking his ears.

It had grown dark, and the bats were flying with shrill squeakings close to their heads. The air was black and heavy – not a leaf stirred in the woods.

"May I go home?" begged Johannes. "To my father?"

"Your father? What do you want of him?" asked Pluizer. "That person would give you a warm reception after your long absence!"

"I want to go home," said Johannes; and he thought of the living-room with the bright lamp-light, where he had so often sat beside his father, listening to the scratching of his pen. It was cozy there, and peaceful.

"Yes, but you ought not to have gone away, and *stayed* away – all for the sake of that madcap who has no existence. It is too late now. And if nothing turns up to prevent it, I will take care of you. Whether I do it, or your father does it, is precisely the same thing. Such a father! That is only imagination, however. Did you make your own selection? Do you think no one else so good – so clever? I am just as good, and much more clever."

Johannes had no heart for an answer; he closed his eyes, and nodded slightly.

"And," continued the mannikin, "you must not look for anything further from that Robinetta."

He laid his hands upon Johannes' shoulders, and chattered close to his ear. "That child thought you just as much a fool as the others did. Did you not see that she stayed in the corner, and said not a word when they all laughed at you? She is no better than the others. She thought you a nice little boy, and she played with you – just as she would have played with a May-bug. She cannot have cared about your going away. And she knows nothing about that book. But I do – I know where it is, and I will help you find it. I know nearly everything."

And Johannes began to believe him.

"Are you going with me? Will you search for it with me?"

"I am so tired," said Johannes. "Let me go to sleep somewhere."

"I care nothing for sleep," said Pluizer. "I am too lively for that. A person ought always to be looking and thinking. But I will leave you in peace for a little while – till morning comes."

Then he put on the friendliest face he could. Johannes looked straight into the glittering little eyes until he could see nothing else. His head grew heavy – he leaned against the mossy slope. The little eyes seemed to get farther and farther away until they were shining stars in the darkening sky. He thought he heard the sound of distant voices, as if the earth were moving away from him – and then he ceased to think at all.

X

Even before he was fully awake he had a vague idea that something unusual had occurred while he slept. Still, he was not curious to know what it was, nor to look about him. He would he were lapped again in the dream which, like a reluctant mist, was slowly drifting away. Robinetta had come to him again in the dream, and stroked his hair in the old way; and he had seen his father once more, and Presto, in the garden with the pond.

"Auch! That hurt. Who did that?" Johannes opened his eyes, and saw, in the grey dawn, close beside him, a small being who had been pulling his hair. He was lying in a bed, and the light was dim and wavering – as in a room.

But the face that bent over him brought back, at once, all the misery and gloom of the day before. It was Pluizer's face – less like a hobgoblin, and more human – but just as ugly and frightful as ever.

"Oh, let me dream!" he murmured.

But Pluizer shook him. "Are you mad, you lazy boy? Dreams are foolish, and keep one from getting on. A human being must work and think and seek. That is what you are human for."

"I do not want to be a human being. I want to dream."

"Whether you wish to or not – you must. You are in my charge now, and you are going to act, and seek, in my company. With me alone can you find what you desire, and I shall not leave you until we have found it."

Johannes felt a vague terror. Yet a superior power seemed to press and coerce him. Unresistingly, he resigned himself.

Gone were fields and flowers and trees. He was in a small, dimly-lighted room. Outside, as far as he could see, were houses and houses – dark and dingy – in long, monotonous rows.

Smoke in thick folds was rising everywhere, and it swept, like a murky fog, through the streets below. And along those streets the people hurried in confusion, like great black busy ants. A dull, confused, continuous roar ascended from this throng.

"Look, Johannes!" said Pluizer. "Now is not that a pretty sight? Those are human beings, and all those houses, as far as you can see – still farther than that belfry in the blue distance – are full of people, from top to bottom. Is not that remarkable? That is rather different from an ant-hill!"

Johannes listened with shrinking curiosity, as if some huge, horrible monster were being shown him. He seemed to be standing on the back of that monster, and to see the black blood streaming through the swollen arteries, and the dark breath ascending from a hundred nostrils. And the ominous growling of that awful voice filled him with fears.

"Look! How fast these people go, Johannes!" continued Pluizer. "You can see, can you not, that they are all in a hurry, and hunting for something? But it is droll that no one knows precisely what it is. After they have been seeking a little while, they come face to face with some one. His name is Hein."

"Who is that?" asked Johannes.

"Oh, a good friend of mine. I will introduce you to him, without fail. Now this Hein asks: 'Are you looking for me?' At that, most of them usually say: 'Oh, no! Not you.' Then Hein remarks: 'But there is nothing to be found save me.' So they have to content themselves with Hein."

Johannes perceived that he spoke of death.

"Is that always the way – always?"

"To be sure it is – always. But yet, day after day, a new crowd gathers, and they begin their search not knowing for what – seeking, seeking, until at last they find Hein. So it has been for a pretty long while, and so it will continue to be."

"Shall I, too, find nothing else, Pluizer? Nothing but..."

"Yes, Hein you will surely find, some day. But that does not matter. Only seek – always be seeking."

"But the little book, Pluizer? You might let me find the book."

"Well, who knows! I have not forbidden it. We must seek – seek. We know, at least, what we are looking for. Wistik taught us that. Others there are who try all their lives to find out what they are really seeking. They are the philosophers, Johannes. But when Hein comes, it is all up with their search as well."

"That is frightful, Pluizer!"

"Oh, no! Indeed it is not. Hein is very good-hearted, but he is misunderstood."

Some one toiled up the stairs outside the chamber door – Clump! clump! on the wooden stairs.

Clump! clump! Nearer and nearer. Then some one rapped at the door, and it sounded like ice tapping on wood.

A tall man entered. He had deep-set eyes, and long, lean hands. A cold draft swept through the little room.

"Well, well!" said Pluizer. "We were just speaking of you. Take a seat. How goes it with you?"

"Busy, busy!" said the tall man, wiping the cold moisture from his white, bony forehead.

Stiff with fright, Johannes gazed into the deep-set eyes which were fixed upon him. They were very deep and dark, but not cruel – not threatening. After a few moments he breathed more freely, and his heart beat less rapidly.

"This is Johannes," said Pluizer. "He has heard of a certain book which tells why everything is as it is; and we are going together to find that book, are we not?" Then Pluizer laughed, significantly.

"Is that so? Well, that is good," said Death kindly, nodding to Johannes.

"He is afraid he will not find it, but I tell him to seek first, diligently."

"Certainly," said Death. "It is best to seek diligently."

"He thought that you were so horrible! You see, do you not, Johannes, that you made a mistake?"

"Ah, yes," said Death, most kindly. "They speak very ill of me. My outward appearance is not prepossessing, but I mean well."

He smiled faintly, like one whose mind was full of more serious matters than those of which he spoke. Then he turned his sombre eyes away from Johannes, and they wandered pensively toward the great town.

It was a long time before Johannes ventured to speak. At last, he said softly:

"Are you going to take me with you, *now*?"

"What do you mean, my child?" said Death, roused from his meditations. "No, not now. You must grow up and become a good man."

"I will not be a man – like the others."

"Come, come!" said Death. "There is no help for it."

It was clear that this was an every-day phrase with him. He continued:

"My friend, Pluizer, can teach you how to become a good man. It can be learned in various ways, but Pluizer teaches it excellently. It is something very fine and admirable to be a good man. You must not scorn it, my little lad."

"Seeking, thinking, looking!" said Pluizer.

"To be sure! To be sure!" said Death; and then, to Pluizer, "To whom are you going to take him?"

"To Doctor Cijfer, my old pupil."

"Ah, yes. He is a good pupil. He is a very fine example of a man – almost perfect in his way."

"Shall I see Robinetta again?" asked Johannes, trembling.

"What does the boy mean?" asked Death.

"Oh, he was love-struck, and yet fancied himself to be an elf! He, he, he!" laughed Pluizer, maliciously.

"No, my dear child, that will never do," said Death. "You will forget such things with Doctor Cijfer. He who seeks what you are seeking must forget all other things. All or nothing."

"I shall make a doughty man of him. I shall just let him see what love really is, and then he will have nothing at all to do with it."

And Pluizer laughed gaily. Death again fixed his black eyes upon poor Johannes, who found it hard to keep from sobbing; for he felt ashamed in the presence of Death.

Suddenly Death stood up, "I must away," said he. "I am wasting my time. There is much to be done. Good-by, Johannes. We are sure to see each other again. You must not be afraid of me."

"I am not afraid of you – I wish you would take me with you. Oh, take me!" But Death gently motioned him back. He was used to such appeals.

"No, Johannes. Go now to your task. Seek and see! Ask me no more. Some day I will ask, and that will be soon enough."

When he had disappeared, Pluizer behaved in a very extraordinary manner. He sprang over chairs, tumbled about the floor, climbed up the wardrobe and the mantelpiece, and performed neck-breaking tricks in the open windows.

"Well, that was Hein – my good friend Hein!" said he. "Do you not think him nice? A bit plain and morose in appearance; but he can be quite cheerful when he finds pleasure in his Work. Sometimes, however, it bores him; for it is rather monotonous."

"Who tells him, Pluizer, where he is to go?"

Pluizer leered at Johannes in a teasing, cunning way.

"Why do you ask that? He goes his own gait – he takes whom he can catch."

Later, Johannes saw that it was otherwise. But he could not yet know whether or not Pluizer always spoke the truth.

They went out to the street, and moved with the swarming throng. The grimy men passed on, pell-mell – laughing and chatting so gaily that Johannes could not help wondering. He noticed that Pluizer nodded to many of them; but no one returned the greeting – all were looking straight forward as if they had seen nothing.

"They are going like fun now," said Pluizer, "as though not a single one of them knew me. But that is only a pretext. They cannot cut me when I am alone with them; and then they are not so jolly." Johannes became conscious that some one was following them. On looking round, he saw the tall, pale figure moving among the people with great, inaudible strides. Hein nodded to Johannes.

"Do the people also see him?" asked Johannes of Pluizer.

"Yes, certainly! all of them; but they do not wish to know him. Well, for the present I overlook this defiance."

The din and stir brought to Johannes a kind of stupor in which he forgot his troubles. The narrow streets and the high houses dividing the blue sky into straight strips – the people passing to and fro beside him – the shuffling of footsteps, and the rattling of wagons, effaced the old visions and the dream of that former night, as a storm disturbs the reflections in mirror-like water. It seemed to him that nothing else existed save walls and windows and people; as if he too must do the same, and run and rush in the restless, breathless tumult.

Then they came to a quiet neighborhood, where stood a large house with grey, gloomy windows. It looked severe and uninviting. It was very quiet within, and there came to Johannes a mingling of strange, pungent odors – a damp, cellar-like smell being the most perceptible. In a room, full of odd-looking instruments, sat a solitary man. He was surrounded with books, and glass and copper articles – all of them unfamiliar to Johannes. A stray sunbeam entered the room, passed on over his head, and sparkled on the flasks filled with pretty, tinted particles. The man was looking intently through a copper tube, and did not look up.

As Johannes came nearer, he heard him murmur, "Wistik! Wistik!"

Beside the man, on a long, black bench, lay something white and downy. What it was Johannes could not clearly see.

"Good morning, doctor!" said Pluizer. But still the doctor did not look up.

Then Johannes was terrified, for the white object at which he was looking so intently, began all at once to struggle convulsively. What he had seen was the downy, white breast of a little rabbit. Its head, with the twitching nostrils, was held backward by pinching clamps of iron, and the four little feet were tightly bound along its body. The hopeless effort to free himself was soon over, and the little creature lay still again; the only sign of life being the rapid movement of the blood-stained throat.

Johannes looked at the round, gentle eyes – so wide open with helpless anguish, and it seemed to him that he recognized them. Was not this the soft little body against which he had rested that first, blissful, elf-land night? Old remembrances came thronging over him. He flew to the little creature.

"Wait, wait! Poor Bunnie, I will help you!" And he hurried to untie the cords which were cutting into the tender little feet.

But his hands were seized in a tight grip, and a shrill laugh rang in his ears.

"What does this mean, Johannes? Are you still so childish? What must the doctor think of you?"

"What does the boy want? Why is he here?" asked the doctor, amazed.

"He wants to be a man, and so I brought him to you; but he is still rather young and childish. This is not the way to find what you are seeking, Johannes!"

"No, this is not the way," said the doctor.

"Doctor, let that rabbit loose!"

But Pluizer clutched both his hands, and squeezed them painfully.

"What was our agreement, Jackanapes?" he hissed in his ear. "We were to seek, were we not? We are not in the dunes here, with Windekind, and with stupid animals. We should be men – men, do you understand? If you wish to remain a child – if you are not strong enough to help me – I will send you out of the way. Then you may seek – all by yourself!"

Johannes believed him and said no more. He determined to be strong. So he shut his eyes, that he might not see the rabbit.

"Good boy!" said the doctor. "You appear somewhat tender-hearted for making a beginning. It truly is rather a sad sight the first time. I never behold it willingly myself, and avoid it as much as possible. Yet it is indispensable; and you must understand that we are men, and not animals – that the welfare of mankind and of science is of more importance than the life of a few rabbits."

"Hear!" said Pluizer. "Science and mankind."

"The man of science," continued the doctor, "stands higher than all other men, and so he should overcome the little tendernesses which the normal man feels, for that great interest – Science. Would you like to be such a man? Was that your vocation, my boy?"

Johannes hesitated. He did not exactly know what a vocation was – no more than did the May-bug.

Said he, "I want to find the book that Wistik spoke of."

The doctor looked surprised and asked, "Wistik?"

Pluizer said quickly, "Indeed he wants to be such a man, Doctor! I know he does. He seeks the highest wisdom. He wishes to grasp the very essence of things."

Johannes nodded a "Yes!" So far as he understood, that was his aim.

"You must be strong, then, Johannes – not weak and softhearted. Then I will help you. But remember; all or nothing."

And with trembling fingers Johannes helped to retie the loosened cords around the little feet of the rabbit.

XI

"Now, we shall see," said Pluizer, "if I cannot show you just as fine sights as Windekind can."

And when they had bidden the doctor good-by – promising to return soon, he guided Johannes into every nook and corner of the great town. He showed him how the great monster lived, breathed, and fed itself; how it consumed, and again renewed itself.

But he was partial to the slums and alleys, where the people were packed together – where everything was gloomy and grimy, and the air black and close.

He took him into one of the large buildings from which Johannes had seen the smoke ascending that first day.

A deafening roar pervaded the place – everywhere a rattling, clanking, pounding, and resounding. Great wheels revolved, and long belts whizzed in rapid undulations. The walls and floors were black, the windows broken or covered with dust. The mighty chimneys rose high above the blackened building, belching great columns of curling smoke. In that turmoil of wheels and machinery Johannes saw numbers of pale-faced men with blackened hands and clothing, silently and ceaselessly working.

"Who are they?" asked Johannes.

"Wheels – more wheels," laughed Pluizer, "or human beings – as you choose. What they are doing there they do, day in – day out. And one can be human in that way, also – after a fashion."

They went on into dirty, narrow streets, where the little strip of blue sky looked only a finger's width; and even then was clouded by the clothes hung out to dry. It swarmed with people there. They jostled one another, shouted, laughed, and sometimes sang. In the houses the rooms were so small, so dark and damp, that Johannes hardly dared to breathe. He saw ragged children creeping over the bare floors; and young girls, with disheveled hair, humming melodies to thin, pale nurslings. He heard quarreling and scolding, and all the faces around him were tired, dull, or indifferent.

Johannes' heart was wrung with pain. It was not akin to his earlier grief – he was ashamed of that.

"Pluizer," he asked, "have these people always lived here – so dreary and so wretched? While I..." He dared not go on.

"Certainly; and that is fortunate. Indeed, their life is not so very dreary and wretched. They are inured to this, and know nothing better. They are dull, careless cattle. Do you see those two women there – sitting in front of their door? They look as contentedly over the foul street as you used to look upon your dunes. There is no need for you to cry over these people. You might as well cry about the moles that never see the daylight."

Johannes did not know what to reply, nor did he know why he felt so sad.

In the midst of the clamorous pushing and rushing he still saw the pale, hollow-eyed man, striding with noiseless steps.

"He is a good man after all. Do you not think so?" said Pluizer, "to take the people away from this? But even here they are afraid of him."

When night fell, and hundreds of lamps flickered in the wind – casting long, wavering lights over the black water, they passed through the silent streets. The tall old houses looked tired – as if leaning against one another in sleep. Most of them had closed their eyes; but here and there a window still sent out a faint, yellow glimmer.

Pluizer told Johannes long stories about those who dwelt behind them – of the pains that were there endured, and of the struggles that took place there between misery and love of life. He did not spare him, but selected the gloomiest, the lowest, and most trying; and grinned with enjoyment when Johannes grew pale and silent at his shocking tales.

"Pluizer," asked Johannes, suddenly, "do you know anything about the Great Light?"

He thought that that question might save him from the darkness which was pressing closer and heavier upon him.

"Chatter! Windekind's chatter!" said Pluizer. "Phantoms – illusions! There are only people – and myself. Do you fancy that any kind of god could take pleasure in anything on this earth – such a medley as there is here to be ruled over? Moreover, such a Great Light would not leave so many here – in the darkness."

"But those stars! Those stars!" cried Johannes; as if expecting that visible splendor to protest for him against this statement.

"The stars! Do you know, little fellow, what you are chattering about? Those lights up there are not like the lanterns you see about you here. They are all worlds – every one of them much larger than this world with its thousands of cities – and in the midst of them we swing like a speck of dust. There is no above nor below. There are worlds on all sides of us – nothing but worlds, and there is no *end* to them."

"No, no!" cried Johannes in terror, "do not say so! I see little lights on a great, dark plain above me."

"Yes, you can see nothing but little lights. If you gazed up all your life, you would see nothing else than little lights upon a dark plain above you. But you can, you *must* know that the universe – in the midst of which this little clod with its pitiful swarm of dotards is as nothing – shall vanish into nothingness. So speak no more of 'the stars' as if they were but a few dozens. It is foolishness."

Johannes was silenced.

"Come on," said Pluizer. "Now we will go to see something cheerful."

At intervals they were greeted by strains of music in lovely, lingering waves of sound. On a dark canal stood a large house, out of whose many tall windows the light was streaming brightly. A long line of carriages stood in front of it. The stamping of the horses rang with a hollow sound in the stillness of the night, and they were throwing "yeses" with their heads. The light sparkled on the silver trappings of the harness, and on the varnish of the vehicles.

Indoors, it was dazzlingly bright. Johannes stood gazing, half-blinded, in the glare of hundreds of varicolored lights, of mirrors and flowers.

Graceful figures glided past the windows, bowing to one another, laughing, and gesturing. Far back in the room moved richly dressed people, with lingering step or with rapid, swaying turns. A confused sound of laughter and of cheerful voices, sliding steps and rustling garments reached the street, borne upon the waves of that soft, entrancing music which Johannes had already heard from afar. In the street, close by the windows, stood a few dark figures, whose faces only – strange and dissimilar – were lighted by the splendor at which they were gazing so intently.

"That is fine! That is splendid!" cried Johannes. He greatly enjoyed the sight of the color and light and the many flowers. "What is going on there? May we go in?"

"Really, do you think this beautiful, too? Or perhaps you would prefer a rabbit-hole! Just look at the people – laughing, bowing, and glittering! See how dignified and spruce the men are, and how gay and smart the ladies. And how devoted they are to the dancing, as though it were the most important matter in the world."

Johannes thought again of the ball in the rabbit-hole, and he saw a great deal that reminded him of it. But here everything was grander and more brilliant. The young ladies in their rich array seemed to him, when they lifted their long white arms, and turned their heads half aside in dancing, as beautiful as the elves. The servants moved around majestically, offering delicious drinks – with respectful bows.

"How splendid! How splendid!" cried Johannes.

"Very pretty, is it not?" said Pluizer. "But you must look a little farther than just to the end of your nose. You see nothing now, do you, but lovely, laughing faces? Well, almost all those smiles are false and affected. Those kindly old ladies at the side there sit like anglers around a pond; their

young girls are the bait, the gentlemen are the fishes. However well they like to chat together, they enviously begrudge one another every catch. If one of those young ladies is pleased, it is because she is dressed more beautifully, or attracts more attention than the others. And the pleasure of the men chiefly consists in those bare arms and necks. Behind all those laughing eyes and friendly lips lurks something quite different. Even those apparently obsequious servants are far from being respectful. If it suddenly became clear what each one really thought, the party would soon break up."

And as Pluizer pointed it out to him, Johannes plainly saw the affectation in faces and gestures; and the vanity, envy, and weariness which peeped from behind the smiling masks, or suddenly appeared as soon as they were laid aside.

"Well," said Pluizer, "they must do as they think best. Such people must amuse themselves, and this is the only way they know."

Johannes felt that some one was standing behind him, and he looked round. It was the well-known, tall figure. The pale face was whimsically lighted by the glare, so that the eyes formed large, dark depressions. He murmured softly to himself, and pointed with a finger into the lighted palace.

"Look!" said Pluizer. "He is making another selection."

Johannes looked where the finger pointed. He saw the old lady, even as she was speaking, shut her eyes and put her hand to her head, and the beautiful young girl stay her slow step, and stare before her with a slight shiver.

"When?" asked Pluizer of Death.

"That is my affair," said the latter.

"I should like to show Johannes this same company still another time," said Pluizer, with a wink and a grin. "May I?"

"To-night?" asked Death.

"Why not?" said Pluizer. "In that place is neither hour nor time. What now is has always been, and what is to be, already is."

"I cannot go with you," said Death. "I have too much to do; but speak the name that we both know, and you can find the way without me."

They went on – some distance – through the lonely streets, where the gas-lights flickered in the night wind, and the dark, cold water rippled along the sides of the canal. The soft music grew fainter and fainter, and then died away in the great calm that rested upon the city.

Suddenly there rang out from on high, with full metallic reverberation, a loud and festive melody.

It dropped straight down from the tall tower upon the sleeping town – into the sad, overshadowed spirit of Little Johannes. Surprised, he looked up. The melody of the clock continued, in calm clear tones which jubilantly rose, and sharply broke the deathly stillness. Those blithe notes – that festal song – seemed strange to him in the midst of still sleep and dark sorrow.

"That is the clock," said Pluizer. "It is always just as jolly – year in, year out. Every hour, it sings the selfsame song, with the same vim and gusto. In the night time, it sounds jollier than it does in the daytime; as if the clock were glad it has no need of sleep – that it can always sing just as happily when thousands are weeping and suffering. But it sings most merrily whenever any one is dead."

Still again the joyful sound rang out.

"One day, Johannes," continued Pluizer, "in a quiet room behind such a window as that, a feeble light will be burning – a dim and flickering light – making the shadows waver on the wall. There will be no sound in the room save now and then a soft, suppressed sob. A bed will be standing there, with white curtains, and long shadows in the folds. In that bed something will be lying – white and still. That will have been Little Johannes. Then joyously will that selfsame song break out and loudly and lustily enter the room to celebrate the hour of his decease."

Separated by long intervals, twelve heavy strokes resounded through the air. Johannes felt at once as if he were in a dream; he no longer walked, but floated a little way above the street, his hand

in Pluizer's. The houses and lamp-posts sped by in rapid flight. The houses stood less close together now. They formed broken rows, with dark mysterious gaps between, where the gas-lamps lighted pits and pools, rubbish and rafters, in a capricious way. At last came a large gateway with heavy columns and a high railing. As quick as a wink they were over it, and down upon some damp grass, near a big heap of sand. Johannes fancied he was in a garden, for he heard around them the rustling of trees.

"Now pay attention, Johannes, and then insist, if you can, that I am not able to do more than Windekind."

Then Pluizer called aloud a short and doleful name which made Johannes shudder. From all sides, the sound re-echoed in the darkness, and the wind bore it up whistling and whirling until it died away in the upper air.

Then Johannes noticed that the grass-blades reached above his head, and that the small pebble which until now lay at his feet was in front of his face.

Near him, Pluizer – just as small as himself – grasped the stone with both hands, and, exerting all his strength, turned it over. Confused cries of shrill, high-pitched little voices rose up from the cleared ground.

"Hey! Who is doing that? What does that mean? Blockhead!" shouted the voices.

Johannes saw black objects running hurriedly past one another. He recognized the brisk black tumble-bug, the shining brown earwig with his fine pinchers, big humpbacked ants, and snake-like millipedes.

In the middle of them a long earth-worm pulled himself, quick as lightning, back into his hole. Pluizer tore impatiently through the raving, scolding crowd up to the worm-hole.

"Hey, there! you long, naked lout! Come to daylight with your pointed red nose," he cried.

"What do you want?" asked the worm, out of the depths.

"You must come out because I want to go in. Do you hear? You bald dirt-eater!"

The worm stretched his pointed head cautiously out of the opening, felt all around with it a number of times, and then slowly dragged his bare, ringed body farther toward the surface.

Pluizer looked round at the other creatures that were crowding about him in their curiosity.

"One of you go before us to light the way. No, Black-beetle, you are too big; and you, with the thousand feet – you would make me dizzy. Hey, there, Earwig, I fancy your looks! Come along, and carry the light in your pinchers. Bundle away, Black-beetle, and look around for a will-o'-the-wisp, or bring a torch of rottenwood."

The creatures, awed by his commanding voice, obeyed him.

Then they went down into the worm-hole – the earwig in front with the shining wood, then Pluizer, then Johannes. It was a very dark and narrow passage. Johannes saw the grains of sand dimly lighted by the faint bluish flicker of the torch. They looked as large as stones – half polished, and rubbed to a smooth, firm wall by the body of the worm, who now followed, full of curiosity. Johannes saw behind him its pointed head – now thrust quickly out in front, and then waiting for the long part behind to pull up to it.

They went in silence a long way down. When the path became too steep for Johannes, Pluizer helped him. It seemed as if there never would be an end; ever new sand-grains, and still the earwig crept on, turning and bending with the winding of the passage. At last the way widened and the walls fell apart. The sand-grains were black and wet, forming a vault above, where the water trickled in glistening streaks, and through which the roots of trees were stretched like stiffened serpents.

Suddenly, a perpendicular wall – high and black – rose up before Johannes' sight, cutting off everything in front of him. The earwig turned round.

"Hey, ho! Now it is a question of getting behind that. The worm knows all about it; he is at home here."

"Come, show us the way!" said Pluizer.

The worm slowly pulled its articulate body up to the black wall, and touched and tested it. Johannes saw that it was of wood. Here and there it was decayed into brownish powder. In one of these places the worm bored through, and with three push-and-pulls the long, supple body slipped within.

"Now you!" said Pluizer, and he shoved Johannes into the little round opening. For an instant, the latter thought he should be stifled in the soft, moist mold; then he felt his head free, and with some trouble he worked his way completely through. A large space appeared to lie beyond. The floor was hard and damp – the air thick, and intolerably close. Johannes dared scarcely to breathe, and waited in mute terror.

He heard Pluizer's voice. It had a hollow ring, as if in a great cellar.

"Here, Johannes, follow me."

He felt the ground rise up before him to a mountain. With the aid of Pluizer's hand he climbed this, in deepest darkness. He seemed to be walking over a garment that gave way under his tread. He stumbled over hollows and hillocks, following Pluizer, who led him to a level spot where he clung in place by some long stems that bent in his hands like reeds.

"Here is a good place to stop. A light!" cried Pluizer.

The dim light showed in the distance, rising and falling with its bearer. The nearer it came and the more its faint glow filled the space, the more terrible was Johannes' distress.

The mountain he had traveled over was long and white. The reeds to which he was clinging were brown, and fell below in lustrous rings and waves.

He recognized the straight form of a human being; and the cold level on which he stood was the forehead.

Before him, like two deep dark caverns, lay the insunken eyes, and the blue light shone over the thin nose, and the ashen lips opened in a rigid, dismal death-grin.

Pluizer gave a shrill laugh, that was immediately stifled by the damp, wooden walls.

"Is not this a surprise, Johannes?"

The long worm came creeping on between the folds of the shroud; it pushed itself cautiously up over the chin, and slipped through the rigid lips into the black mouth-hole.

"This was the beauty of the ball – the one you thought more lovely than an elf. Then, sweet perfume streamed from her clothes and hair; then her eyes sparkled, and her lips laughed. Look *now* at her!"

With all his terror, there was doubt in Johannes' eyes. So soon? Just now so glorious – and already...?

"Do you not believe me?" sneered Pluizer. "A half-century lies between then and now. There is neither hour nor time. What once was shall always be, and what is to be has already been. You cannot conceive of it, but you must believe it. Here all is truth – all that I show you is true – true! Windekind could not say that."

And with a grin Pluizer skipped around on the dead face, performing the most odious antics. He sat on an eyebrow, and lifted up an eyelid by the long lashes. The eye which Johannes had seen sparkle with joy was staring in the dim light – a dull and wrinkled white.

"Now – forward!" cried Pluizer. "There happens to be more to see."

The worm appeared, slowly crawling out of the right corner of the mouth; and the frightful journey was resumed. Not back again, but over new ways equally long and dreary.

"Now we come to an old one," said the earth-worm, as a black wall again shut off the way. "This has been here a long time."

It was less horrible than the former one. Johannes only saw a confused heap, with discolored bones protruding. Hundreds of worms and insects were silently busy with it. The light alarmed them.

"Where do you come from? Who brings a light here? We have no use for it!"

And they sped away into the folds and hollows. Yet they recognized a fellow-being.

"Have you been next door?" the worms inquired. "The wood is hard yet."

The first worm answered, "No!"

"He wants to keep that morsel for himself," said Pluizer softly to Johannes.

They went farther. Pluizer explained things and pointed out to Johannes those whom he had known. They came to a misformed face, with staring, protruding eyes, and thick black lips and cheeks.

"This was a stately gentleman," said he gaily. "You ought to have seen him – so rich, so purse-proud and conceited. He retains his puffed-up appearance."

And so it went on. Besides these there were meagre, emaciated forms with white hair that reflected blue in the feeble light; and little children with large heads and aged, wizened faces.

"Look! These have grown old since they died," said Pluizer.

They came to a man with a full beard, whose white teeth gleamed between the drawn lips. In the middle of his forehead was a little round black hole.

"This one lent Hein a helping hand. Why not a bit more patient? He would have come here just the same."

And there were still more passages – recent ones – and other straight forms with rigid, grinning faces, and motionless, folded hands.

"I am going no farther now," said the earwig. "I do not know the way beyond this."

"Let us turn back," said the worm.

"One more, one more!" cried Pluizer.

So on they marched.

"Everything you see exists," said Pluizer as they proceeded. "It is all real. One thing only is not real. That is yourself, Johannes. You are not here, and you *cannot* be here."

And he burst out laughing as he saw the frightened and vacant look on Johannes' face at this sally.

"This is the last – actually the last."

"The way stops short here. I will go no farther," said the earwig, peevishly.

"Well, *I* mean to go farther," said Pluizer; and where the way ended he began digging with both hands.

"Help me, Johannes!" Without resistance Johannes sadly obeyed, and began scooping up the moist, loose earth.

They drudged on in silence until they came to the black wood.

The worm had drawn in its ringed head, and backed out of sight. The earwig dropped the light and turned away.

"They cannot get in – the wood is too new," said he, retreating.

"I shall!" said Pluizer, and with his crooked fingers he tore long white cracking splinters out of the wood.

A fearful pressure lay on poor Johannes. Yet he had to do it – he could not resist.

At last, the dark space was open. Pluizer snatched the light and scrambled inside.

"Here, here!" he called, and ran toward the other end.

But when Johannes had come as far as the hands, that lay folded upon the breast, he was forced to stop. He stared at the thin, white fingers, dimly lighted on the upper side. He recognized them at once. He knew the form of the fingers and the creases in them, as well as the shape of the long nails now dark and discolored. He recognized a brown spot on the forefinger.

They were his own hands.

"Here, here!" called Pluizer from the head. "Look! do you know him?"

Poor Johannes tried to stand up, and go to the light that beckoned him, but his strength gave way. The little light died into utter darkness, and he fell senseless.

XII

He had sunk into a deep sleep – to depths where no dreams come.

In slowly rising from those shades to the cool grey morning light, he passed through dreams, varied and gentle, of former times. He awoke, and they glided from his spirit like dew-drops from a flower. The expression of his eyes was calm and mild while they still rested upon the throngs of lovely images.

Yet, as if shunning the glare of day, he closed his eyes to the light. He saw again what he had seen the morning before. It seemed to him far away, and long ago; yet hour by hour there came back the remembrance of everything – from the dreary dawn to the awful night. He could not believe that all those horrible things had occurred in a single day; the beginning of his misery seemed so remote – lost in grey mists.

The sweet dreams faded away, leaving no trace behind. Pluizer shook him, and the gloomy day began – dull and colorless – the forerunner of many, many others.

Yet what he had seen the night before on that fearful journey stayed in his mind. Had it been only a frightful vision?

When he asked Pluizer about it, shyly, the latter looked at him queerly and scoffingly.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Johannes did not see the leer in his eye, and asked if it had really happened – he still saw it all so sharp and clear.

"How silly you are, Johannes! Indeed, such things as that can never happen."

Johannes did not know what to think.

"We will soon put you to work; and then you will ask no more such foolish questions."

So they went to Doctor Cijfer, who was to help Johannes find what he was seeking.

While in the crowded street, Pluizer suddenly stood still, and pointed out to Johannes a man in the throng.

"Do you remember him?" asked Pluizer, bursting into a laugh when Johannes grew pale and stared at the man in horror.

He had seen him the night before – deep under the ground.

The doctor received them kindly, and imparted his wisdom to Johannes who listened for hours that day, and for many days thereafter.

The doctor had not yet found what Johannes was seeking; but was very near it, he said. He would take Johannes as far as he himself had gone, and then together they would surely find it.

Johannes listened and learned, diligently and patiently, day after day and month after month. He felt little hope, yet he comprehended that he must go on, now, as far as possible. He thought it strange that, seeking the light, the farther he went the darker it grew. Of all he learned, the beginning was the best; but the deeper he penetrated the duller and darker it became. He began with plants and animals – with everything about him – and if he looked a long while at them, they turned to figures. Everything resolved itself into figures – pages full of them. Doctor Cijfer thought that fine, and he said the figures brought light to him; – but it was darkness to Johannes.

Pluizer never left him, and pressed and urged him on, if he grew disheartened and weary. He spoiled for him every moment of enjoyment or admiration.

Johannes was amazed and delighted as he studied and saw how exquisitely the flowers were constructed; how they formed the fruit, and how the insects unwittingly aided the work.

"That is wonderful," said he. "How exactly everything is calculated, and deftly, delicately formed!"

"Yes, amazingly formed," said Pluizer. "It is a pity that the greater part of that deftness and fineness comes to naught. How many flowers bring forth fruit, and how many seeds grow to be trees?"

"But yet everything seems to be made according to a great plan," said Johannes. "Look! the bees seek honey for their own use, and do not know that they are aiding the flowers; and the flowers allure the bees by their color. It is a plan, and they both unfold it, without knowing it."

"That is fine in sound, but it fails in fact. When the bees get a chance they bite a hole deep down in the flower, and upset the whole intricate arrangement. A cunning craftsman that, to let a bee make sport of him!"

And when he came to the study of men and animals – their wonderful construction – matters went still worse.

In all that looked beautiful to Johannes, or ingenious, Pluizer pointed out the incompleteness and defects. He showed him the great army of ills and sorrows that can assail mankind and animals, with preference for the most loathe-some and most hideous.

"That designer, Johannes, was very cunning, but in everything he made he forgot something, and man has a busy time trying as far as possible to patch up those defects. Just look about you! An umbrella, a pair of spectacles – even clothing and houses – everything is human patchwork. The design is by no means adhered to. But the designer never considered that people could have colds, and read books, and do a thousand other things for which his plan was worthless. He has given his children swaddling-clothes without reflecting that they would outgrow them. By this time nearly all men have outgrown their natural outfits. Now they do everything for themselves, and have absolutely no further concern with the designer and his scheme. Whatever he has not given them they saucily and selfishly take; and when it is obviously his will that they should die, they sometimes, by various devices, evade the end."

"But it is their own fault!" cried Johannes. "Why do they wilfully withdraw from nature?"

"Oh, stupid Johannes! If a nursemaid lets an innocent child play with fire, and the child is burned, who is to blame? The ignorant child, or the maid who knew that the child would burn itself? And who is at fault if men go astray from nature, in pain and misery? Themselves, or the All-wise Designer, to whom they are as ignorant children?"

"But they are not ignorant. They know..."

"Johannes, if you say to a child, 'Do not touch that fire; it will hurt,' and then the child does touch it, because it knows not what pain is, can you claim freedom from blame, and say, 'The child was not ignorant?' You knew when you spoke, that it would not heed your warning. Men are as foolish and stupid as children. Glass is fragile and clay is soft; yet He who made man, and considered not his folly, is like him who makes weapons of glass, careless lest they break – or bolts of clay, not expecting them to bend."

These words fell upon Johannes' soul like drops of liquid fire, and his heart swelled with a great grief that supplanted the former sorrow, and often caused him to weep in the still, sleepless hours of the night.

Ah, sleep! sleep! There came a time after long days when sleep was to him the dearest thing of all. In sleep there was no thinking – no sorrow; and his dreams always carried him back to the old life. It seemed delightful to him, as he dreamed of it; yet, by day he could not remember how things had been. He only knew that the sadness and longing of earlier times were better than the dull, listless feeling of the present. Once he had grievously longed for Windekind – once he had waited, hour after hour, on Robinetta. How delightful that had been!

Robinetta! Was he still longing? The more he learned, the less he longed – because that feeling, also, was dissected, and Pluizer explained to him what love really was. Then he was ashamed, and Doctor Cijfer said that he could not yet reduce it to figures, but that very soon he would be able to. And thus it grew darker and darker about Little Johannes.

He had a faint feeling of gratitude that he had not recognized Robinetta on his awful journey with Pluizer.

When he spoke of it, Pluizer said nothing, but laughed slyly; and Johannes knew that he had not been spared this out of pity.

When Johannes was neither learning nor working, Pluizer made use of the hours in showing him the people. He took him everywhere; into the hospitals where lay the sick – long rows of pale, wasted faces, with dull or suffering expressions. In those great wards a frightful silence reigned, broken only by coughs and groans. And Pluizer pointed out to him those who never again would leave those halls. And when, at a fixed hour, streams of people poured into the place to visit their sick relations, Pluizer said: "Look! These all know that they too will sometime enter this gloomy house, to be borne away from it in a black box."

"How can they ever be cheerful?" thought Johannes.

And Pluizer took him to a tiny upper room, pervaded with a melancholy twilight, where the distant tones of a piano in a neighboring house came, dreamily and ceaselessly. There, among the other patients, Pluizer showed him one who was staring in a stupid way at a narrow sunbeam that slowly crept along the wall.

"Already he has lain there seven long years," said Pluizer. "He was a sailor, and has seen the palms of India, the blue seas of Japan, and the forests of Brazil. During all the long days of those seven long years he has amused himself with that little sunbeam and the piano-playing. He cannot ever go away, and may still be here for seven more years."

After this, Johannes' most dreadful dream was of waking in that little room – in the melancholy twilight – with those far-away sounds, and nothing ever more to see than the waning and waxing light.

Pluizer took him also into the great cathedrals, and let him listen to what was being said there. He took him to festivals, to great ceremonies, and into the heart of many homes. Johannes learned to know men, and sometimes it happened that he was led to think of his former life; of the fairy-tales that Windekind had told him, and of his own adventures. There were men who reminded him of the glow-worm who fancied he saw his deceased companions in the stars – or of the May-bug who was one day older than the other, and who had said so much about a calling. And he heard tales which made him think of Kribblegaw, the hero of the spiders; or of the eel who did nothing, and yet was fed because a fat king was most desired. He likened himself to the young May-bug who did not know what a calling was, and who flew into the light. He felt as if he also were creeping over the carpet, helpless and maimed, with a string around his body – a cutting string that Pluizer was pulling and twitching.

Ah! he would never again find the garden! When would the heavy foot come and crush him?

Pluizer ridiculed him whenever he spoke of Windekind, and, gradually, he began to believe that Windekind had never existed.

"But, Pluizer, is there then no little key? Is there nothing at all?"

"Nothing, nothing. Men and figures. *They* are all real – they exist – no end of figures!"

"Then you have deceived me, Pluizer! Let me leave off – do not make me seek any more – let me alone!"

"Have you forgotten what Death said? You were to become a man – a complete man."

"I will not – it is dreadful!"

"You must – you have made your choice. Just look at Doctor Cijfer. Does he find it dreadful? Grow to be like him."

It was quite true. Doctor Cijfer always seemed calm and happy. Untiring and imperturbable, he went his way – studying and instructing, contented and even-tempered.

"Look at him," said Pluizer. "He sees all, and yet sees nothing. He looks at men as if he himself were another kind of being who had no concern about them. He goes amid disease and misery like one invulnerable, and consorts with Death like one immortal. He longs only to understand what he sees, and he thinks everything equally good that comes to him in the way of knowledge. He is satisfied with everything, as soon as he understands it. You ought to become so, too."

"But I never can."

"That is true, but it is not my fault."

In this hopeless way their discussions always ended. Johannes grew dull and indifferent, seeking and seeking – what for or why, he no longer knew. He had become like the many to whom Wistik had spoken.

The winter came, but he scarcely observed it.

One chilly, misty morning, when the snow lay wet and dirty in the streets, and dripped from trees and roofs, he went with Pluizer to take his daily walk.

In a city square he met a group of young girls carrying school-books. They stopped to throw snow at one another – and they laughed and romped. Their voices rang clearly over the snowy square. Not a footstep was to be heard, nor the sound of a vehicle – only the tinkling bells of the horses, or the rattling of a shop door; and the joyful laughing rang loudly through the stillness.

Johannes saw that one of the girls glanced at him, and then kept looking back. She had on a black hat, and wore a gay little cloak. He knew her face very well, but could not think who she was. She nodded to him – and then again.

"Who is that? I know her."

"That is possible. Her name is Maria. Some call her Robinetta."

"No, that cannot be. She is not like Windekind. She is like any other girl."

"Ha, ha, ha! She cannot be like *nobody*. But she is what she is. You have been longing to see her, and now I will take you to her."

"No! I do not want to go. I would rather have seen her dead, like the others."

And Johannes did not look round again, but hurried on, muttering:

"This is the last! There is nothing – nothing!"

XIII

The clear warm sunlight of an early spring morning streamed over the great city. Bright rays entered the little room where Johannes lived, and on the low ceiling there quivered and wavered a great splash of light, reflected from the water rippling in the moat.

Johannes sat before the window in the sunshine, gazing out over the town. Its aspect was entirely altered. The grey fog had floated away, and a lustrous blue vapor enfolded the end of the long street and the distant towers. The slopes of the slate roofs glistened – silver-white. All the houses showed clear lines and bright surfaces in the sunlight, and there was a warm pulsing in the pale blue air. The water seemed alive. The brown buds of the elm trees were big and glossy, and clamorous sparrows were fluttering among the branches.

As he gazed at all this, Johannes fell into a strange mood. The sunshine brought to him a sweet stupor – a blending of real luxury and oblivion. Dreamily he gazed at the glittering ripples – the swelling elm-tree buds, and he listened to the chirping of the sparrows. There was gladness in their notes.

Not in a long time had he felt so susceptible to subtle impressions – nor so really happy.

This was the old sunshine that he remembered. This was the sun that used to call him out-of-doors to the garden, where he would lie down on the warm ground, looking at the grasses and green things in front of him. There, nestled in the lee of an old wall, he could enjoy at his ease the light and heat.

It was just right in that light! It gave that safe-at-home feeling – such as he remembered long ago, in his mother's arms. His mind was full of memories of former times, but he neither wept for nor desired them. He sat still and dreamed – wishing only that the sun would continue to shine.

"What are you moping about there, Johannes?" cried Pluizer. "You know I do not approve of dreaming."

Johannes raised his pensive eyes, imploringly.

"Let me stay a little longer," said he. "The sun is so good."

"What do you find in the sun?" asked Pluizer. "It is nothing but a big candle; it does not make a bit of difference whether you are in candle-light or sunlight. Look! see those shadows and dashes of light on the street. They are nothing but the varied effect of one little light that burns steadily – without a flicker. And that light is really a tiny flame, which shines upon a mere speck of the earth. There, beyond that blue – above and beneath us – it is dark – cold and dark! It is night there – now and ever."

But his words had no effect on Johannes. The still warm sunshine penetrated him, and filled his whole being with light and peace.

Pluizer led him away to the chilly house of Doctor Cijfer. For a little while the image of the sun hovered before his vision, then slowly faded away; and by the middle of the day all was dark again.

When the evening came and he passed through the town once more, the air was sultry and full of the stuffy smells of spring. Everything was reeking, and he felt oppressed in the narrow streets. But in the open squares he smelled the grass and the buds of the country beyond; and he saw the spring in the tranquil little clouds above it all – in the tender flush of the western sky.

The twilight spread a soft grey mist, full of delicate tints, over the town. It was quiet everywhere – only a street-organ in the distance was playing a mournful tune. The buildings seemed black spectres against the crimson sky – their fantastic pinnacles and chimneys reaching up like countless arms.

When the sun threw its last rays out over the great town, it seemed to Johannes that it gave him a kind smile – kind as the smile that forgives a folly. And the sweet warmth stroked his cheeks, caressingly.

Then a great sadness came into Johannes' heart – so great that he could go no farther. He took a deep breath, and lifted up his face to the wide heavens. The spring was calling him, and he heard it. He would answer – he would go. He was all contrition and love and forgiveness.

He looked up longingly, and tears fell from his sorrowful eyes.

"Come, Johannes! Do not act so oddly – people are looking at you," said Pluizer.

Long, monotonous rows of houses stretched out on both sides – dark and gloomy – offensive in the soft spring air, discordant in the springtime melody.

People sat at their doors and on the stoops to enjoy the season. To Johannes it was a mockery. The dirty doors stood open, and the musty rooms within awaited their occupants. In the distance the organ still prolonged its melancholy tones.

"Oh, if I could only fly away – far away to the dunes and to the sea!"

But he had to return to the high-up little room; and that night he lay awake.

He could not help thinking of his father and the long walks he had taken with him, when he followed a dozen steps behind, and his father wrote letters for him in the sand. He thought of the places under the bushes where the violets grew, and of the days when he and his father had searched for them. All night he saw the face of his father – as it was when he sat beside him evenings by the still lamp-light – watching him, and listening to the scratching of his pen.

Every morning after this he asked Pluizer to be allowed to go once more to his home and to his father – to see once again his garden and the dunes. He noticed now that he had had more love for his father than for Presto and for his little room, since it was of him that he asked.

"Only tell me how he is, and if he is still angry with me for staying away so long."

Pluizer shrugged his shoulders. "Even if you knew, how would it help you?"

Still the spring kept calling him – louder and louder. Every night he dreamed of the dark green moss on the hillslopes, and of sunbeams shining through the young and tender, verdure.

"It cannot long stay this way," thought Johannes. "I cannot bear it."

And often when he could not sleep he rose up softly, went to the window, and looked out at the night. He saw the sleepy, feathery little clouds drifting slowly over the disk of the moon to float peacefully in a sea of soft, lustrous light. He thought of the distant dunes – asleep, now, in the sultry night – how wonderful it must be in the low woods where not a leaf would be stirring, and where it was full of the fragrance of moist moss and young birch-sprouts. He fancied he could hear, in the distance the swelling chorus of the frogs, which hovered so mystically over the plains; and the song of the only bird which can accompany the solemn stillness – whose lay begins so soft and plaintive and breaks off so suddenly, making the silence seem yet deeper. And it all was calling – calling him. He dropped his head upon his arms on the window-sill, and sobbed.

"I cannot bear it. I shall die soon if I cannot go."

When Pluizer roused him the following morning, he was still sitting by the window, where he had fallen asleep with his head on his arm.

The days passed by – grew long and warm – and there came no change. Yet Johannes did not die, and had to bear his sorrow.

One morning Doctor Cijfer said to him:

"Come with me, Johannes. I have to visit a patient."

Doctor Cijfer was known to be a learned man, and many appealed to him to ward off sickness and death. Johannes had already accompanied him many times.

Pluizer was unusually frolicsome this morning. Again and again he stood on his head, danced and tumbled, and perpetrated all kinds of reckless tricks. His face wore a constant, mysterious grin, as if he had a surprise all ready for the springing. Johannes was very much afraid of him in this humor.

But Doctor Cijfer was as serious as ever.

They went a long way this morning – in a railway train and afoot. They went farther than at other times, for Johannes had never yet been taken outside the town.

It was a warm, sunny day. Looking out of the train, Johannes saw the great green meadows go by, with their long-plumed grass, and grazing cows. He saw white butterflies fluttering above the flower-decked ground, where the air was quivering with the heat of the sun.

And, suddenly, he felt a thrill. There lay, outspread, the long and undulating dunes!

"Now, Johannes!" said Pluizer, with a grin, "now you have your wish, you see."

Only half believing, Johannes continued to gaze at the dunes. They came nearer and nearer. The long ditches on both sides seemed to be whirling around their centre, and the lonely dwellings along the road sped swiftly past.

Then came some trees – thick-foliaged chestnut trees, bearing great clusters of red or white flowers – dark, blue-green pines – tall, stately linden trees.

It was true, then; he was going to see his dunes once more.

The train stopped and then the three went afoot, under the shady foliage.

Here was the dark-green moss – here were the round spots of sunshine on the ground – this was the odor of birch-sprouts and pine-needles.

"Is it true? Is it really true?" thought Johannes. "Am I going to be happy?"

His eyes sparkled, and his heart bounded. He began to believe in his happiness. He knew these trees, this ground; he had often walked over this wood-path.

They were alone on the way, yet Johannes felt forced to look round, as though some one were following them; and he thought he saw between the oak leaves the dark figure of a man who again and again remained hidden by the last turn in the path.

Pluizer gave him a cunning, uncanny look. Doctor Cijfer walked with long strides, looking down at the ground.

The way grew more and more familiar to him – he knew every bush, every stone. Then suddenly he felt a sharp pang, for he stood before his own house.

The chestnut tree in front of it spread out its large, hand-shaped leaves. Up to the very top the glorious white flowers stood out from the full round masses of foliage.

He heard the sound he knew so well of the opening of the door, and he breathed the air of his own home. He recognized the hall, the doors, everything – bit by bit – with a painful feeling of lost familiarity. It was all a part of his life – his lonely, musing child-life.

He had talked with all these things – with them he had lived in his own world of thought that he suffered no one to enter. But now he felt himself cut off from the old house, and dead to it all – its chambers, halls, and doorways. He felt that this separation was past recall, and as if he were visiting a churchyard – it was so sad and melancholy.

If only Presto had sprung to meet him it would have been less dismal – but Presto was certainly away or dead.

Yet where was his father?

He looked back to the open door and the sunny garden outside, and saw the man who had seemed to be following him, now striding up to the house. He came nearer and nearer, and seemed to grow larger as he approached. When he reached the door, a great chill shadow filled the entrance. Then Johannes recognized the man.

It was deathly still in the house, and they went up the stairs without speaking. There was one stair that always creaked when stepped upon – Johannes knew it. And now he heard it creak three times. It sounded like painful groanings, but under the fourth footstep it was like a faint sob.

Upstairs Johannes heard a moaning – low and regular as the ticking of a clock. It was a dismal, torturing sound.

The door of Johannes' room stood open. He threw a frightened glance into it. The marvelous flower-forms of the hangings looked at him in stupid surprise. The clock had run down.

They went to the room from which the sounds came. It was his father's bedroom. The sun shone gaily in upon the closed, green curtains of the bed. Simon, the cat, sat on the window-sill in

the sunshine. An oppressive smell of wine and camphor pervaded the place, and the low moaning sounded close at hand.

Johannes heard whispering voices, and carefully guarded footfalls. Then the green curtains were drawn aside.

He saw his father's face that had so often been in his mind of late. But it was very different now. The grave, kindly expression was gone and it looked strained and distressed. It was ashy pale, with deep brown shadows. The teeth were visible between the parted lips, and the whites of the eyes under the half-closed eyelids. His head lay sunken in the pillow, and was lifted a little with the regularity of the moans, falling each time wearily back again.

Johannes stood by the bed, motionless, and looked with wide, fixed eyes upon the well-known face. He did not know what he thought – he dared not move a finger; he dared not clasp those worn old hands lying limp on the white linen.

Everything around him grew black – the sun and the bright room, the verdure outdoors, and the blue sky as well – everything that lay behind him – it grew black, black, dense and impenetrable. And in that night he could see only the pale face before him, and could think only of the poor tired head – wearily lifted again and again, with the groan of anguish.

Directly, there came a change in this regular movement. The moaning ceased, the eyelids opened feebly, the eyes looked inquiringly around, and the lips tried to say something.

"Father!" whispered Johannes, trembling, while he looked anxiously into the seeking eyes. The weary glance rested upon him, and a faint, faint smile furrowed the hollow cheeks. The thin closed hand was lifted from the sheet, and made an uncertain movement toward Johannes – then fell again, powerless.

"Come, come!" said Pluizer. "No scenes here!"

"Step aside, Johannes," said Doctor Cijfer, "we must see what can be done."

The doctor began his examination, and Johannes left the bed and went to stand by the window. He looked at the sunny grass and the clear sky, and at the broad chestnut leaves where the big flies sat – shining blue in the sunlight. The moaning began again with the same regularity.

A blackbird hopped through the tall grass in the garden – great red and black butterflies were hovering over the flower-beds, and there reached Johannes from out the foliage of the tallest trees the soft, coaxing coo of the wood-doves.

In the room the moaning continued – never ceasing. He had to listen to it – and it came regularly – as unpreventable as the falling drop that causes madness. In suspense he waited through each interval, and it always came again – frightful as the footstep of approaching death.

All out-of-doors was wrapped in warm, mellow sunlight. Everything was happy and basking in it. The grass-blades thrilled and the leaves sighed in the sweet warmth. Above the highest tree tops, deep in the abounding blue, a heron was soaring in peaceful flight.

Johannes could not understand – it was an enigma to him. All was so confused and dark in his soul. "How can all this be in me at the same time?" he thought.

"Is this really I? Is that my father – my own father? Mine – Johannes'?"

It was as if he spoke of a stranger. It was all a tale that he had heard. Some one had told him of Johannes, and of the house where he lived, and of the father whom he had forsaken, and who was now dying. He himself was not that one – he had heard about him. It was a sad, sad story. But it did not concern himself.

But yes – yes – he was that same Johannes!

"I do not understand the case," said Doctor Cijfer, standing up. "It is a very obscure malady."

Pluizer stepped up to Johannes.

"Are you not going to give it a look, Johannes? It is an interesting case. The doctor does not know it."

"Leave me alone," said Johannes, without turning round. "I cannot think."

But Pluizer went behind him and whispered sharply in his ear, according to his wont:

"Cannot think! Did you fancy you could not think? There you are wrong. You must think. You need not be gazing into the green trees nor the blue sky. That will not help. Windekind is not coming. And the sick man there is going to die. You must have seen that as well as we. But what do you think his trouble is?"

"I do not know – I will not know!"

Johannes said nothing more, but listened to the moaning that had a plaintive and reproachful sound. Doctor Cijfer was writing notes in a little book. At the head of the bed sat the dark figure that had followed them. His head was bowed, his long hand extended toward the sufferer, and his deep-set eyes were fixed upon the clock.

The sharp whispering in his ear began again.

"What makes you look so sad, Johannes? You have your heart's desire now. There are the dunes, there the sunbeams through the verdure, there the flitting butterflies and the singing birds. What more do you want? Are you waiting for Windekind? If he be anywhere, he must be there. Why does he not come? Would he be afraid of this dark friend at the bedside? Yet always he was there!"

"Do you not see, Johannes, that it has all been imagination?"

"Do you hear that moaning? It sounds lighter than it did a while ago. You can know that it will soon cease altogether. But what of that? There must have been a great many such groans while you were running around outside in the garden among the wild-roses. Why do you stay here crying, instead of going to the dunes as you used to? Look outside! Flowers and fragrance and singing everywhere just as if nothing had happened. Why do you not take part in all that life and gladness?"

"First, you complained, and longed to be here; and after I have brought you where you wished to be, you still are not content. See! I will let you go. Stroll through the high grass – lie in the cool shade – let the flies buzz about you – inhale the fragrance of the fresh young herbs. I release you. Go, now! Find Windekind again!"

"You will not? Then do you now believe in me alone? Is what I have told you true? Do I lie, or does Windekind?"

"Listen to the moans! – so short and weak! They will soon cease."

"Do not look so agonized, Johannes. The sooner it is over the better. There could be no more long walks now; you will never again look for violets with him. With whom do you think he has taken his walks, during the past two years – while you were away? You cannot ask him now. You never will know. After this you will have to content yourself with me. If you had made my acquaintance a little earlier, you would not look so pitiful now. You are a long way yet from being what you ought to be. Do you think Doctor Cijfer in your place would look as you do? It would make him about as sad as that cat is – purring there in the sunshine. And it is well. What is the use of being so wretched? Did the flowers teach you that? They do not grieve when one of them is plucked. Is not that lucky? They know nothing, therefore they are happy. You have only begun to know things; and now you must know everything, in order to be happy. I alone can teach you. All or nothing."

"Listen to me. What is the difference whether that is your father or not? He is a man who is dying; that is a common occurrence."

"Do you hear the moaning still? Very feeble, is it not? He is near his end."

Johannes looked toward the bed in fearful distress.

Simon, the cat, dropped from the window-seat, stretched himself, and curled up purring on the bed close beside the dying man.

The poor, tired head moved no more. It lay still, pressed into the pillow; yet from the half-open mouth there still came, at intervals, short, exhausted sounds.

They grew softer – softer – scarcely audible.

Then Death turned his dark eyes from the clock to rest them upon the down-sunken head. He raised his hand – and all was still.

An ashen shadow crept over the stiffening face.

Silence – dreary, lonely silence!

Johannes waited – waited.

But the recurring groans had ceased. All was still – utterly, awfully still.

The strain of the long hours of listening was suspended, and it seemed to Johannes as if his soul were released, and falling into black and bottomless depths.

He fell deeper and deeper. It grew stiller and darker around him.

Then he heard Pluizer's voice, as if from far away. "Hey, ho! Another story told."

"That is good," said Doctor Cijfer. "Now you can find out what the trouble was. I leave that to you. I must away."

While still half in a dream, Johannes saw the gleam of burnished knives.

The cat ruffed up his back. It was cold next the body, and he sought the sunshine again.

Johannes saw Pluizer take a knife, examine it carefully, and approach the bed with it.

Then Johannes shook off his stupor. Before Pluizer could reach the bed he was standing in front of him.

"What are you going to do?" he asked. His eyes were wide open with horror.

"We are going to find out what it was," said Pluizer.

"No!" said Johannes; and his voice was as deep as a man's.

"What does that mean?" asked Pluizer, with a grim glare. "Can you prevent me? Do you not know how strong I am?"

"You shall not!" said Johannes. He set his teeth and drew in a deep breath, looked steadily at Pluizer, and tried to stay his hand.

But Pluizer persisted. Then Johannes seized his wrists, and wrestled with him.

Pluizer was strong, he knew. He never yet had opposed him; but he struggled on with a fixed purpose.

The knife gleamed before his eyes. He saw sparks and red flames; yet he did not give in, but wrestled on.

He knew what would happen if he succumbed. He knew, for he had seen before. But it was his father that lay behind him, and he would not let it happen now.

And while they wrestled, panting, the dead body behind them lay rigid and motionless – just as it was the instant when silence fell – the whites of the eyes visible in a narrow strip, the corners of the mouth drawn up in a stiffened grin. The head, only, shook gently back and forth, as they both pushed against the bed in their struggle.

Still Johannes held firm, though his breath failed and he could see nothing. A veil of blood-red mist was before his eyes; yet he stood firm.

Then, gradually, the resistance of the two wrists in his grasp grew weaker. His muscles relaxed, his arms dropped limp beside his body, and his closed hands were empty.

When he looked up Pluizer had vanished. Death sat, alone, by the bed and nodded to him.

"You have done well, Johannes," said he.

"Will he come back?" whispered Johannes. Death shook his head.

"Never. He who once dares him will see him no more."

"And Windekind? Shall I not see Windekind again?"

The solemn man looked long and earnestly at Johannes. His regard was not now alarming, but gentle and serious, and attracted Johannes like a profound depth.

"I alone can take you to Windekind. Through me alone can you find the book."

"Then take me with you. There is no one left – take me, too! I want nothing more."

Again Death shook his head.

"You love men, Johannes. You do not know it, but you have always loved them. You must become a good man. It is a fine thing to be a good man."

"I do not want that – take me with you!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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