

GEORG EBERS

THE ELIXIR

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Every Leipziger knows well the tall gabled house in the Katherinenstrasse which I have in mind. It stands not far from the Market Place, and is particularly dear to the writer of this true story because it has been in the possession of his family for a long time. Many curious things have happened there worthy of being rescued from oblivion, and though my relatives would now like to relieve me of this task, because I have found it necessary to point out to certain ingenuous ones among them the truth which they were endeavoring to conceal, I rejoice that I have sufficient leisure to chronicle for future generations of Ueberhells the wonderful life and doings of their progenitor as I learned them from my grandmother and other good people.

So here, then, begins my story.

Of old, the aforementioned house was known as "The Three Kings," but in no other way was it distinguished from its neighbours in the street save through the sign of the Court apothecary on the ground floor; this hung over the arched doorway, and gay with bright colour and gilding represented the three patron Saints of the craft: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

This house in the Katherinenstrasse continued to be called "The Three Kings," although, soon after the death of old Caspar Ueberhell, the sign was removed, and the shop closed. And many things happened to it and the house which ran counter to the usual course of events and the wishes of the worthy burghers.

Gossip there had been in plenty even during the lifetime of the old Court apothecary whose only son Melchior had left his father's house and Leipsic not merely to spend a few years in Prague, or Paris or Italy like any other son of well-to-do parents who wished to perfect himself in his studies, but, as it would seem, for good and all.

Both as school-boy and student Melchior had been one of the most gifted and most brilliant, and many a father, whose son took a wicked delight in wanton and graceless escapades, had with secret envy congratulated old Ueberhell on having such an exceptionally talented, industrious and obedient treasure of a son and heir. But later not one of these men would have exchanged his heedless scrapegrace of a boy for the much bepraised paragon of the Court apothecary, since, after all, a bad son is better than none at all.

Melchior, in fact, came not home, and that this weighed on the mind of the old man and hastened his death was beyond doubt; for although the stately Court apothecary's rotund countenance remained as round and beaming as the sun for three years after the departure of his boy, it began gradually to lose its plumpness and radiance until at length it was as faded and yellow as the pale half moon, and the cheeks that had once been so full hung down on his ruff like little empty sacks. He also withdrew more and more from the weighing house and the Rathskeller where he had once so loved to pass his evenings in the company of other worthy burghers, and he was heard to speak of himself now and then as a "lonely man." Finally he stayed at home altogether, perhaps because his face and the whites of his eyes had turned as yellow as the saffron in his shop. There he left Schimmel, the dispenser, and the apprentice entirely in charge, so that if any one wished to avoid the Court apothecary that was the surest place. When, in the end, he died at the age of fifty-six, the physicians stated that it was his liver—the seat of sorrow as well as of anger—which had been overtaxed and abused.

It is true that no one ever heard a word of complaint against his son pass his lips, indeed it was certain that to the very last he was well acquainted with his son's whereabouts; for when he was asked for news, he answered at first: "He is finishing his studies in Paris," later: —"He seems to have found in Padua what he is seeking," and towards the end: "I think that he will be returning very soon now from Bologna."

It was also noticeable that instead of taking advantage of such questioning to give vent to his displeasure he would smile contentedly and stroke his chin, once so round, but then so peaked, and those who thought that the Court apothecary would diminish his legacy to his truant son, learned to know better, for the old man bequeathed in an elaborate will, the whole of his valuable possessions to Melchior, leaving only to the widow Vorkel, who had served him faithfully as housekeeper after the death of his wife, and to Schimmel, the dispenser, in the event of the shop being closed, a yearly stipend to be paid to the end of their days. To his beloved daughter-in-law, the estimable daughter of the learned Dr. Vitali, of Bologna, the old man left his deceased wife's jewels, together with the plate and linen of the house, mentioning her in the most affectionate terms.

All of which surprised the legal gentlemen and the relatives and connections and their wives and feminine following not a little, and what put the finishing stroke to the disgust of these good folk, especially to such of them as were mothers, was that this son and heir of an honoured and wealthy house had married a foreigner, a frivolous Italian, and that too without so much as an intimation of his intention.

With the will there was a letter from the dead man to his son and one to the worthy lawyer. In the latter he requested his counsellor to notify his son, Melchior Ueberhell, of his death, and, in case of his son's return home, to see him well and fairly established in the position which belonged to him as the heir of a Leipsic burgher and as Doctor of the University of Padua.

These letters were sent by the first messenger going south over the Alps, and that they reached Melchior will be seen from the fresh surprises contained in his answer.

He commissioned Anselmus Winckler, an excellent notary, and formerly his most intimate school friend, to close the apothecary shop and to sell privately whatever it contained. But a small quantity of every drug was to be reserved for his own personal use. He also, in his carefully chosen diction begged the honourable notary to allow the Italian architect Olivetti, who would soon present himself, to rebuild the old house of "The Three Kings" throughout, according to the plan which they had agreed upon in Bologna. The side of the house that faced the street would not, be hoped, prove unpleasing, as for the arrangement of the interior, that was to be made in accordance with his own taste and needs, and to please himself alone.

These wishes seemed reasonable enough to the lawyer, and as the Italian architect, who arrived a few weeks later in Leipsic, laid before him a plan showing the facade of a burgher's house finished with a stately gable which rose by five successive steps to its peak crowned by a statue of the armed goddess Minerva with the owl at her feet, no objection could be made to such an addition to the city, although some of the clergy did not hesitate to express their displeasure at the banishment of the Three Saints in favor of a heathen goddess, and at the height of the middle chimney which seemed to have entered the lists against the church towers. However, the rebuilding was put in hand, and, of course, the business had to be wound up and the shop closed before the old front was torn down.

Schimmel, the gray-haired dispenser, married the widow Vorkel, who had kept house for the late Herr Ueberhell. These two might have related many strange occurrences to the cousins and kin had they chosen, but he was a reserved man, and she had been so sworn to silence, and had lived through such an agitating experience before the death of the old man that she repulsed all questioners so sharply that they dared not return to the charge.

The old housekeeper as she watched the deserted father grow indifferent to what he had to eat and drink—though he had once been so quick to appreciate the dishes which she prepared so deftly—and neglectful of the attentions which he had been wont to pay to the outside world, became embittered towards Melchior whom she had carried in her arms and loved like her own child. In former times Herr Ueberhell had been accustomed now and then to invite certain friends to dine with him, and these guests had praised her cooking, but later, and more especially after the death of his cousin and colleague, Blumentrost, who had also been his master, he had asked no one into his well-appointed house.

This retirement of the dignified and hospitable burgher was undoubtedly caused by the absence of his son, but in a very different way to what people supposed; for although the old man longed for his only child, he was very far from resenting his absence; indeed the widow Vorkel herself knew that it was the father who had dissuaded the son from returning from Italy until he had reached the goal for which he was striving with unwearied energy.

She also knew that Melchior gave the old man precise information of his progress in every letter, and that when her master turned over the care of the shop to Schimmel, the dispenser, it was only because he had arranged a laboratory for himself on the first floor, where, following the directions received in his son's letters, he worked with his crucibles and retorts, pots and tubes, early and late before the fire. Yet despite this, the housekeeper saw that the longing for his son was gnawing at the old man's heart, and had she been able to write she would have let Melchior know how things stood and begged him to return to Leipsic. "But there ought to be no need to tell him," she would reflect in her leisure moments, "he must know it himself," and for this reason she would force herself as well as she could to be angry with him.

Thus the years passed. Nevertheless, her anger flew to the winds when one day a messenger arrived bringing a little package from Italy and the master called her into the laboratory. Then the old withered love suddenly came to life once more and put forth new leaves and buds, for what she saw was indeed something wonderful; the Court apothecary held out to her in his carefully washed hands a sheet of gray paper on which in red crayon was an exquisite drawing of a beautiful young woman with a lovely child on her lap. Then, having charged her not to speak of it to any one, he confided to her that this beautiful woman was Melchior's young wife, and the little boy their first-born and his grandchild who would carry on the name of Ueberhell. He had given his consent to his son's marriage with the daughter of his master in Bologna and now he—old Caspar Ueberhell—was the happiest of men, and when the doctor returned to him with wife and child and the thing for which he was so earnestly searching, why, he would not envy the emperor on his throne. When the widow Vorkel noticed the tears that were streaming down the old man's sunken cheeks, her eyes too began to overflow, and after that she often crept to the chest where the portrait was kept to gaze on the little one and to press her lips on the same spot whence the grandfather's had already worn away some of the red crayon.

Herr Ueberhell's joy had been so great that now the longing for his son took deeper hold of him, and he lost strength day by day, yet Frau Vorkel could not persuade him to see a physician. He often, however, inhaled deep draughts of a concoction that he had made in the laboratory with his son's letter before him, and as he seemed to derive no benefit from it he would distil it again and mix with it new drugs.

One evening—after having spent the whole day in the laboratory—he retired unusually early, and when Frau Vorkel went into his room to carry him his "nightcap" he forgot his usual amiable and suave manner and growled out at her angrily: "After all these years, can't you prepare my bed for the night without making me burn myself? Must you be inattentive as well as stupid?"

Never had she heard such a speech as this from her kindly master, and when from fright she tipped the tray which she was carrying and spilled some of the mulled wine over her gown, he cried sharply: "Where are your wits! First you forget to take the red hot warming-pan out of the bed and now you old goose you spill my good drink onto the floor."

He stopped, for Frau Vorkel had set down the tray on the table in order to wipe her eyes with her apron; then he thrust his feet out of the bed— which was entirely contrary to his usual decorous behavior—and demanded with flashing eyes: "Did you hear what I just said?"

The widow, greatly shocked, retreated and answered sobbing: "How could I help hearing, and how can you bring yourself to insult an unprotected widow who has served you long and faithfully. . . ."

"I have done it, I have done it," the old man cried, his eyes glistening with joy and pride as if he had just accomplished an heroic undertaking. "I am sorry I called you a goose, and as for your lack

of brains, well you might have a few more, but, and this I can assure you, you are honest and true and understand your business, and if you will only be as good to me as I have always been to you. . . ."

"Oh, Herr. . . ." Widow Vorkel interrupted him, and covered her face with her apron; but he would not let her finish her sentence, so great was his excitement and continued in a hoarse voice: "You must grant what I ask, Vorkel, after all these years, and if you will, you must take that little phial there and inhale its contents, and when you have done so you must let me ask you some questions."

After much persuasion, the housekeeper yielded to the wishes of her master, and while she still held the little bottle from which the ether escaped, to her nose, the Court apothecary questioned her hastily: "Do you think that I have always acted like a man, diligently striving for the good of himself and his house?"

Some strange change seemed to take place in Frau Vorkel; she planted her hands on her hips most disrespectfully—a thing she never did except perhaps when she was scolding the maid or the butcher boy—and laughed loud and scornfully: "My, what a question! You may, perhaps, have a larger stock of useless information than an old woman like me,—though strictly speaking I cannot be called an old woman yet—but despite my being stupid and a 'goose,' I have always been wiser than you, and I know which side one's bread is buttered on. Bless me! And is there anything more idiotic than that you, the father of the best son in the world, should sit here alone, fretting yourself yellow and lean until from a stately looking man you grow to be a scarecrow, when one word from you would bring your only child back again and with him the wife and sweet grandchild, that you might all enjoy life together! If that isn't sheer folly and a sin and a shame. . . ."

Here she checked herself, for her habitually decorous master stood before her in his night shirt, barefooted, and laughed loud and merrily, clapping himself boisterously on his wasted ribs and on the shrunken thighs that carried his thin body. The precise widow was very much upset, she was also horrified at the insolent answer which,—she knew not how,—had just passed her lips. She endeavored to find some words of excuse but they were not necessary, for the Court apothecary called out, "Magnificent! Glorious! May all the saints be praised, we have found it." And before the worthy woman knew what he was about the gray-haired invalid had caught her in his arms and kissed her heartily on both cheeks. But the happy excitement had been too much for him and with a low groan he sank down on the edge of the bed and sobbed bitterly.

Frau Vorkel was greatly disturbed for she guessed—and it would seem with reason—that her good master had gone out of his mind. But she presently changed her opinion, for after he had cried unrestrainedly until he was exhausted, Herr Ueberhell gave her a prompt proof of his sanity and returning health. In his kindly and polite manner of former times, he begged her to set out in the kitchen a bottle of the oldest and best Bacharach. There he bade her bring a second glass and invited her to drink, and clink glasses with him because the greatest piece of good luck had happened to him that day that it was in the power of the blessed saints to grant to mortal man. He, the father, had discovered in Leipsic what his son had sought in vain at all the most famous Universities of Italy, and if he should succeed in one remaining step, the fame of the Ueberhells, like that of the Roman Horatii, would reach to the skies.

Then he became more serious and confessed that he was very weak and broken, and that when he had gone to bed earlier in the evening he had felt that his last hour was not far distant. Death itself sometimes floats 'twixt cup and lip, as has been remarked by a heathen philosopher, and if he should be called away before he had seen Melchior again, then must she be his messenger and tell his son that he had found that part of the White Lion, of the white tincture of argentum potabile or potable silver, which his letter had put him on the track of. His son would know what he meant, and to-morrow he would write down the particulars if he should succeed that night in finding again the substance through which he had attained to the greatest wonder that science had achieved since the days of Adam.

He emptied bumper after bumper and clinked glasses at least a dozen times with Frau Vorkel, who was immensely tickled with the unwonted honour.

After that he drew his chair closer to hers that he might better impress upon her what she was to say to Melchior. He began by telling her that she could never understand the full meaning of what had happened but that she must take his word for it, he had discovered an elixir whose effect was most wonderful and would change the whole course of events. From now onwards, lying would be impossible, the reign of truth was at hand and deceit had been routed from its last stronghold.

As she, however, shrank back from him, still somewhat fearful, he demanded loftily if she ever would have dared to announce to him, her old master, so candidly what she thought of him, as she had done an hour ago, if she had not inhaled the contents of the phial. And Frau Vorkel had to admit that she had been forced by some occult power to utter those disrespectful speeches. She looked with awed wonder, first at her master, then at the little bottle, and suddenly broke out with: "My! My What will be left for the judges to do when everyone can be forced to speak out boldly and disclose his smallest sin. My! My! But then we shall hear pretty tales! From the Burgomaster down, everyone in Leipsic will have to get a new pair of ears, for what one hears will be as outrageous and unseemly as among the savages."

These observations showed the Court apothecary that Frau Vorkel had, despite her want of intelligence, grasped to a certain extent the importance of his discovery; while this pleased him in a way, it also made him uneasy, therefore he made her swear on the crucifix that so long as she lived she would never impart to any living soul, his son excepted, what she had that evening experienced.

Then Herr Ueberhell went back to his search for the unknown element which had given to his son's elixir the power that had been exhibited in such wonderful fashion. But he did not succeed in finding the right ingredient, for as often as he called Frau Vorkel to come and inhale the new mixture, she gave such plausible and politic answers to his dangerous questions that he could be by no means sure of her absolute truthfulness. Then too the operations progressed slowly because that day at noon his finger had been badly cut by the bursting of a glass retort. So presently he ceased work for a while and insisted that Frau Vorkel should take the phial in her own hand and inhale its contents once more, because it pleased him to try the power of the elixir.

With an amused smile he asked her if she used the great quantities of wool, which she so constantly demanded, for no other purpose than to knit socks for him.

The phial trembled in the hand of the housekeeper, and before she could help it her response had passed her lips:

"You have all the socks that you need and it is surely no great crime for me to knit a few pairs to warm the feet of your assistant, that poor, silent worm who stands downstairs the livelong day in the cold shop."

Despite this reply Herr Ueberhell only laughed and continued the inquisition gaily. He next wished to know who was dearer to the heart of the housekeeper, the assistant or her late husband, to which she rejoined "Why should I lament Vorkel? He was a bully, who never could learn how to cut out a coat, and always stole his customers' cloth." At that moment there was an ominous crash on the floor, and a powerful odour filled the laboratory; the phial had slipped from the hands of the frightened woman.

What happened after that Frau Vorkel even in her old age shuddered to recall. How it could have been possible for the amiable and pious Court apothecary to give utterance to such oburgations and invectives, such sacrilegious curses and anathemas, and how she, a respectable and proper woman, of good Leipsic people, ever could have allowed herself to attack any one, least of all her excellent master, in such abusive language were problems she could never solve.

Yet they must not be censured for their use of Billingsgate, for the strong aroma of the elixir forced them to tear aside the veil which in Leipsic, as elsewhere, clothes the ugly truth as with a pleasing garment, and to lay bare all the rancour that filled their hearts.

Later when she thought about the breaking of the phial, the conviction grew upon her limited intelligence that this accident would perhaps prove in the end to be the best thing that could have happened, not only for her but for all mankind. To her excellent master, at least, the Elixir of Truth proved fatal all too soon; the intense excitement of that night had shaken him so cruelly that before the day dawned the feeble flame of his life had flickered out.

Frau Vorkel found him dead the next morning in his laboratory. He must have gone thither to seek once more for the lost substance after she had helped him to bed. Before he had begun his work he must have wished to encourage himself by a glance at the portrait of his grandchild, for as she opened the door the sheet of paper with the red crayon drawing was wafted from the open chest, beside which her master had fallen, and like a butterfly, fluttered down upon the heart that had ceased to beat several hours before.

Six months after the death of the Court apothecary, Melchior Ueberhell returned home and Frau Vorkel or, as she must now be called, Frau Schimmel, was the only person to whom he wrote to announce the hour of his arrival in Leipsic.

In his letter the young doctor begged her to undertake the responsibility of engaging a man servant and a kitchen maid for him, and of seeing that there was a fire laid on his hearth to welcome him. He also asked "his faithful old friend" to nail up before the furnace of the laboratory on the first floor the brass triangle which the messenger, who brought the letter, would give to her. It was to be hung with the face, bearing the numerals and the figures of animals, towards the outside.

This news threw Frau Schimmel into a great state of excitement and at the appointed hour everything stood ready for the reception of the future occupants of the Ueberhell house.

Doctor Melchior and his family waited in Connewitz for the sun to set that he might enter his native town after it was dark and yet before the city gates were closed; for it was characteristic of his retiring nature to wish to avoid exposing himself and his beautiful wife and child to the vulgar curiosity of the people. These two had made the journey in a litter carried by mules.

As it was just the time for the Easter fair and many strangers were arriving in Leipsic the travellers passed through the Peterstrasse, across the market-place and entered their newly built house without attracting any attention.

It was too dark for them to see the statue of Minerva on the peak of the high gable and the sun-dial on its face with the circle of animals, but the lighted windows on the ground-floor and in the first story gave the house a hospitable air.

Frau Schimmel who had long been awaiting their arrival went out to meet them and the new man servant held the lantern so that they could see her curtsies.

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