

TANTE FRITZCHEN'S LAST HOUR.

A SKETCH BY HANS HOFFMANN.

[A portion of the first and all of the last of a series of sketches entitled "Tante Fritzchen," in Nos. 4-7 of *Deutsche Rundschau* for 1899.]¹

I KNEW Tante Fritzchen in my boyhood, and again later when I was a grown man and she was in her last years. But I must say, the two pictures in my memory harmonise but poorly, coincide in only a few points; the picture from my youth is severe and bitter and really terror-inspiring; the later one is that of a whimsical old lady with a heart of gold. So it seems that the instinct of the child, which is usually so reliable, may in exceptional cases be entirely at fault. To be sure, Tante Fritzchen herself was an exception to all reasonable rules.

And so it came about that other people of the little seaport village, depending on their individual experiences, judged her so differently that it was a wonder to hear them talk; she was credited with absolutely all the possible human qualities, from exquisite malice to the most unselfish and angelic kindness. But the sum and substance of all these opinions amounted to about this: After all she is not so bad as she seems to be.

The explanation of this contradiction, simple as it was, occurred to me only after some time, only after I had zealously collected a number of tales about her that were current gossip, and compared them with my own experiences and observations. And the explanation was this: that she was by nature of such a tender and amiable spirit, so sentimental, in the good sense of the word as used in the last century, that it amounted to helplessness. And since it was inevitable that such kindness should be abused over and over again, she had gradually equipped herself with artificial spines and thorns for her own protection, and these had grown

¹ Translated by W. H. Carruth.

longer and sharper in the course of time so that they often hid almost entirely from superficial eyes the true nature of her soul.

But in the nature of things superficial eyes are in a majority, and as the many who had shared her benefactions did not always feel moved to proclaim this fact in the market-place, there was no proper counter-balance laid upon the scales of public opinion. Tante Fritzchen was always more feared than loved by the good villagers.

And it must be admitted that she had a way of wrinkling up her face which seemed to give abundant justification for such fear, and the lightnings which she shot forth in pretended or genuine wrath from behind her great horn spectacles were calculated to terrify even the most courageous. That she was physically a slight and delicate figure was entirely forgotten in the presence of such wrinkles and such lightnings; indeed, this rather added to the dread of her a certain supernatural smack, just as a wicked dwarf is apt to seem to us more uncanny than a threatening giant.

As to station and business Tante Fritzchen was the childless widow of a sea-captain who by his capacity and fortunate voyages had accumulated a considerable fortune, but had early died a genuine seaman's death in the faraway ocean. He had invested all his savings in ships, and the widow continued to manage with great prudence and vigor the difficult details of this extensive shipping-business, so that her income increased constantly despite her almost extravagant but unobtrusive charities.

THE LAST HOUR.

Several days before the incidents happened which I am now about to tell, a rumor had floated about the city that Tante Fritzchen was dead, and the rumor held its own persistently despite the declaration of the portly doctor that she was still alive. True, he must be supposed to know; but on the other hand, others knew that the coffin had been carried into her house, for they had seen it with their own eyes. And where there is a coffin there is also a corpse; that is as certain as to infer fire from smoke.

But nevertheless the doctor had been right until now. To-day, at last, he hastened with a very grave face and with quickened pace to the house of old pastor Rathke and told him that she was now really approaching her end; medical skill had done all in its power and could now surrender the field to the consolations of the clergy. He warned the pastor not to be deceived if he found her

perhaps cheerful and even animated, for the familiar fact of a last revival of vitality was to be seen in a very intense form in the case of this wiry nature.

Old Rathke put on his clerical robe, drew his official cap over his white hair and set out as rapidly as his seventy-eight years permitted; he and Tante Fritzchen were almost exactly of an age.

As he approached her bed he was astonished at her appearance; all at once her pale and sunken features had apparently lost all their sharpness, keenness and fierceness, the mocking and malicious aspect which so many people had been afraid of, and were transfigured with amiability and serenity, save for a faint touch of melancholy that came over them now and then like a veil.

The nurse left the room in silence as soon as the pastor entered; it was evident that she had been directed to do so.

"The end is coming," said the sick woman positively and with a firm voice, "we must make haste to consider what I still have to talk over with you. True, it isn't much, but after all something. I thank you, pastor, for coming so promptly. It is strange, after having had nearly a century in which to live one's life, that the hours seem too few at the close."

Affected and almost confused by her calmness, the pastor mumbled some words as to its being reserved for the grace of God to say whether her days might not yet be extended, and that human knowledge and prognostication was very deceitful; for himself he considered her looks to-day very vigorous and natural.

But Tante Fritzchen shook her head placidly and said, pointing to the door of the adjoining room:

"Just look in there, then you will know; you need not practise any deceptions upon me. I am ready to go; my baggage is in order."

Old Rathke opened the door and could scarcely suppress a cry of horror: what he saw was a neatly trimmed coffin ready for occupancy.

"Now you will believe me, won't you?" said Tante Fritzchen, as he came back to her side deeply shocked. "I am in earnest about dying, and should be so even in case the good Lord asked after my wishes in the matter. I had the thing in there made recently in order to have all my accounts in order. I never liked to burden others with my personal affairs if I could attend to them myself. Every man should look out for himself, and so must every woman, especially if she is a widow. And then, I like to supervise the workmen; otherwise they are seldom to be relied on, and one

likes to see what he is getting for his money. Now my mind is at rest on this subject; Master Klemm has done a thorough job. And now, dear pastor, now there is really only one thing more that I would like to see, or rather to hear, and that is your funeral sermon. For of course *you* must give it; for God's sake don't allow young Mr. Hülsbach to do it; I never could endure him, not even his wedding addresses, and then, to think of a funeral! Promise me that, dear Rathke; I tell you, if you don't I will knock on the lid of my coffin, and the people shall have one more good fright on my account. You know how I can act. But I suppose I cannot expect to hear you give it; one cannot order a funeral sermon in advance, since it is no mechanical job, at least not in your case, though it might be in Hülsbach's. But just for that reason I do not wish to hear anything clerical from you now,—so please do me the small favor to lay off your robe, dear pastor. In church I always liked to see you in it, and with the bands, too, as you well know; but here in my chamber,—it would seem as though I were already laid out and you were delivering the sermon. And that is just what I don't want. For the few hours that may yet be allotted to me I want to feel really alive."

And when the old man had obeyed her wish in silence and laid off his black official robe she continued her requests with something like a roguish smile:

"Now one thing more: you have said A, say B too; put on my dear departed husband's dressing-gown. It is in the clothespress yonder; it has been hanging there unused for forty-five years.—I have saved it from the moths all that time.—Do you see, it fits you very well, although my husband had somewhat broader shoulders.—And now light one of his pipes,—you know them well, and know that I keep them in order for an agreeable visitor.—So; now I am satisfied, now you look comfortable."

In fact the pastor had followed her directions almost mechanically, and now sat facing her as he had sat so many a time on his pleasant Sunday visits. But yet his heart was not entirely at ease, for he could not adapt himself right away to the circumstances. The pastoral consolations which he had had ready prepared seemed to get lost in the dressing-gown or to float aimlessly away into the air on the mighty clouds of smoke.

So there was a long silence, during which Tante Fritzchen looked at him at first rather curiously and then quite mournfully.

"Well, think of it, Rathke," she said at last; "just this way my husband ought to have been sitting beside me,—at least, until

within a few years,—but that happiness was not allotted to me ; he has been dead so long, so fearfully long—”

Here the tears came to her eyes and there was a gentle convulsion of the waxen pale features.

“Be of good cheer, dear friend,” the pastor quickly interrupted her, “the time of waiting and longing will soon be over. You will live for ever united with him in Abraham’s bosom.”

Suddenly Tante Fritschen half shut her eyes in a curious way, and said with an almost comical contortion of her mouth :

“Oh please don’t put your official robe on again, dear pastor ! You know well enough that I am no free-thinker, or whatever you call them ; I have always attended church steadily, as long as I was able, and always listened to your sermons gladly and devoutly, and believed the most of them,—but precisely with Abraham, it’s like this : I never could get up any real confidence in him. I admit that it is sinful to talk so, but it would be more sinful still to begin lying now just before the closing of the gate. In the first place, the very name,—I can’t help it, I keep thinking of that infamous scoundrel of an Abraham in the Wiesenstrasse, who paid such a ridiculously low price for my departed husband’s old trousers and afterwards worked them off on the poor people at such a scandalously high figure. To be sure, the old patriarch is not to blame for that, and it is stupid to think of him in this connexion ; but I can’t get rid of the thought. And then, after all, you see this old patriarch is really to blame, at least for my being unable to get very enthusiastic about him. The affair with Isaac is altogether incomprehensible to me : that he was willing to sacrifice him. No ! And even if God commanded it ten times, it was his place to say : Take my head, my life and my soul, but I shall not commit such an atrocity upon the innocent child ! Not even a god has a right to command me to commit such cruelty, or at least I have no right to obey !—But there’s the trouble. Abraham seems to me like one of these fawning tuft-hunters ; we have them too, always looking up to those in authority, and saying and doing everything that those in authority wish, and afterwards getting for it their decoration or their title, just as Abraham was made patriarch for it. Our former mayor was just such a contemptible creature ;—well, he may very likely be resting now in Abraham’s bosom. But I have little desire to meet him there ; our quarrels would begin again right away. True, it would be a satisfaction to me to go on harrying him there.”

“Beloved friend,” the pastor interrupted her here, after several vain attempts, “you surely should direct your thoughts to

other things in this solemn hour. At least, let those old quarrels rest. Remember the petition: And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

"All the world, if you will," said Tante Fritzchen vigorously, "but not the mayor. The fellow was a blackguard and a liar; I have not forgotten what my husband always said of him: He lies even when he has no need to. No, actually, I can't forgive him; and I think the Lord will excuse me in his case. I don't intend to set up for a saint before Him. I wish simply to go quietly along with the rest as average-good."

The pastor drew a deep sigh.

"The Lord will not lay up your impenitence against you too severely," he said in a troubled tone; "He will consider that your heart has always been gentler than your tongue. But yet, think of the solemnity of this hour, dear friend! Turn your thoughts to love and peace! Try to soften your heart by thinking of the reunion with your husband, that excellent man who was taken from us, alas, so soon. But God surely must have raised him to Himself in glory."

"He has! He must!" exclaimed Tante Fritzchen with ardent conviction. But then her face assumed suddenly an expression of sadder reflexion, even of melancholy.

"And I shall not see him again!" she said softly yet positively.

"What talk!" said the pastor with feeling; "dear friend, why will you not put your faith in the mercy of God, who has promised eternal bliss even to sinners if they believe and repent?"

Tante Fritzchen looked up at him with a strange, firm, clear and resigned expression.

"But I do not wish to live on after my death," she said quietly, "and God will not compel me to against my wish."

"Gracious heaven!" exclaimed the pastor in dismay, "is it possible that you do not believe in eternal bliss? And if you believe in it, how can you help desiring it?"

"I believe in it," she answered calmly; "every one will receive eternal bliss whose heart longs for it. But God cannot force any one to it. And I do not wish it. I do not care to live longer. I am weary and I want to sleep."

"The Lord will refresh your soul and make it rejoice unto life," said the pastor, not without silent horror. But she shook her head emphatically.

"He must not do that," she replied hastily, and as though in

secret anxiety, "and He will not do it either ; for He knows that I have nothing to seek and nothing to find in His heaven."

"And your husband?" exclaimed the old man, confused and shocked, "whom you loved so much and mourned so deeply ; is it possible that you do not wish to see him again? Dear friend, what talk is this?"

"No, especially not him," she said sharply and quickly, her eyes growing strangely troubled ; "I don't want it to come about that I shall have to meet him again."

"Inconceivable ! Impossible !" cried the pastor, quite overcome with amazement ; "then did you really not love him? Was your heart really not attached to him? But how can I believe this, after all that I have seen in you in the olden times and then on throughout your long and faithful widowhood?"

"I loved him with all my soul and with all my strength," said the dying woman solemnly, "and when he was taken from me I should never have survived my grief but for the sure hope of meeting in heaven. This belief, and this alone, supported me. But that is such a long, long time ago. Forty-five years, what an immeasurably long time that is ! People become total strangers in forty-five years if they are not living together. He was a young, joyous man when he passed away, and I was a very young woman. And now I have come to be a shrivelled old woman, and have entirely different notions, different hates and different loves, from those we shared together. And he knows nothing of all that has come to me since. How shall I get on in heaven with such a young person? There is no help for it, we have grown apart in the many, many years. I can no longer understand such young people, nor they me. Why should he have to go about in heaven with such a wrinkled rag? If he should look at me there with wide, strange, frightened eyes—I couldn't bear that. And he would seem to me like a good and foolish boy ; why, I was old enough long ago to be his grandmother. No, dear Rathke, you see that would not do. He has eternal bliss, and I want him to keep it ; and therefore I must lie down and sleep for eternity ; I don't want to be in his way there. And I am perfectly sure that the dear God will grant me my desire. He cannot give one any other bliss than what he wants ; and mine is sleep. I am tired of life and do not care to wake again. God will hear my prayer."

She ceased and closed her eyes and looked so weary that it seemed as if she were really on the point of sleeping over into eternal rest.

The old pastor had long since let his pipe go out ; he was torturing the long stem with his nervous fingers, and sighed and sighed, but almost inaudibly.

“Strange ! Strange ! Strange !” he kept murmuring to himself, shaking his head.

Finally Tante Fritzchen opened her eyes again and asked in a clear voice : “What is there so strange in this ?”

He stroked softly the shrunken hand that lay on the coverlet, and said :

“You surely ought to know that in heaven there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage ; we shall lay off the earthly and go thither in transfigured bodies. The Lord will make us like His holy angels.”

“Yes,” replied the old woman, smiling, “I know all that. I always gave good heed to your sermons, especially at funerals. And that may fit others, but not me. You see, dear Rathke, it is a good deal of a job to transfigure such a person as I am into an angel. To be sure, there is no doubt, that our God can do it, for He is omnipotent ; but if it were done I should be something entirely different from what I have been on earth in youth or age ; I should no longer be the wilful, foolish person whom my husband loved ; I should be in his eyes an entirely different creature. And so would he be to me. Here on earth he was an excellent fellow, but by no means an angel. I can tell you, dear Rathke, that he could be as rough as a hedge fence, even to me, when I occasionally got too silly. And do you know when I liked the man best ? Just when he got so downright rough. Then was when he seemed to me so strong, and I wanted to kiss his hands as those of my faithful protector. And now consider : As a transfigured angel he cannot of course be rough,—that will not do in heaven,—and so I should never see him any more as I liked him best. And I am afraid that I wouldn't really like him any longer in that case ; for this is my way once for all : you see there are people here on earth who have already something of the transfigured angel about them, especially pastors and pastors' wives, and many others too ; and just such people I could never take to in my life. I always thought to myself : They may be good angels, but probably not useful men. And must I meet my husband again and find him that sort of a person ? Why, I cannot ; that would not be my husband as I knew him.—Don't take offence, dear Rathke, at my talking thus ; you don't need to apply it to yourself, you were never of the transfigured sort ; that is the reason I always got along well with you.

—And so I think we will not quarrel now at the close over things about which each of us will stick to his own opinion after all. Many things one can take on faith from others, especially from pastors, but other things again one can only work out for himself. What is in the Scripture we all believe, but each one must in the end settle for himself how it is to be interpreted. For my part, I am weary and want to sleep. . . . My goodness gracious, dearest Rathke, your pipe has gone out! Light it again, and then sit a while longer and puff away vigorously. But don't talk any more of hard matters; I have said my say and don't want to think any more; I am already beginning to feel distress."

The old man lighted his pipe again obediently and smoked in silence, occasionally stroking her hand gently. She was lying quite still now and looking at him with pleased eyes.

"Why, it really seems to me now," she resumed after a long silence, "almost as if my dear husband were sitting here beside me and puffing away. Ah, just think, if I could see him so in heaven with his pipe and dressing-gown! But of course that would not do; it isn't transfigured enough.—And in any case, if he could have grown old along with me, and we could go over together, or nearly together! It is awful, when two grow apart so and one of the two has to realise and know it. O God, I am tired, and want to sleep, just to sleep."

She closed her eyes again and relapsed into slumber or silence.

The sun shone through the window upon the curling clouds of smoke, for the old man was smoking very hard; but it was probably not the smoke that caused him to draw his hand across his eyes every now and then.

All at once she exclaimed with animation:

"But dear Rathke, when you get to heaven,—you can't last very much longer either,—greet him from me, and tell him what I said to day. He will surely understand me; he always understood me best just when I had my own peculiar notions which other people thought foolish or queer. And he cannot have forgotten me so far that he would be different in this.

"And then tell him to remember sometimes how we met that day at pike-fishing on the Haff, sixty years ago now, he in his boat and I in mine. And how the boats gradually got nearer together, we didn't know how, and how we kept getting redder in the face, both of us, until suddenly he was sitting in my boat, we didn't know how again; and then all at once we were saying 'Du' to each other, quite as though it came of itself, as though it had always

been so ; and yet we hadn't been acquainted so very long. And it seemed to us as though there were no sweeter word in the whole language than that. And then again—well, you see, dear Rathke, you only need to remind my husband of that hour, and then watch and see what eyes he will make ! And really it was very beautiful on the wide water all alone together. I am very sure such things will not be forgotten even in heaven, for they still warm me on earth despite my seventy-eight years.

“So, dear pastor, now I am through with my confessions. And now you will be so kind, won't you, as to leave me alone a little. Before I die I would like to dream a little of those old times ; and one can do that only when one is all alone with himself. But there is one who will be with me,—you know well, who. And afterwards give him my greetings and tell him all about it.

“And meantime you can smoke out your pipe in the next room, and be thinking out a new and vigorous lecture to give this old sinner. So, farewell, old friend, dear Rathke, dread homilist !”

The old pastor obeyed, and left after a gentle pressure of her hand. As Tante Fritzchen watched his back, she murmured quite delighted : “The old dressing-gown ! The old dressing-gown !” And then she closed her eyes with a cheerful smile.

When Pastor Rathke looked in softly a half hour later, she had fallen asleep forever. But the smile was still upon her lips.