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On the banks of the Hafel, about the middle of the sixteenth century, lived a horse-dealer, named Michael Kohlhaas. He was the son of a schoolmaster, and was one of the most honest, while at the same time he was one of the most terrible persons of his period. Till his thirtieth year this extraordinary man might have passed as a pattern of a good citizen. In a village, which still bears his name, he held a farm, on which, by means of his business, he was enabled to live quietly. The children whom his wife bore him, he brought up in the fear of God to honesty and industry; and there was not one among his neighbours who had not felt the benefit of his kindness or his sense of justice. In short, the world might have blessed his memory had he not carried one virtue to too great an extreme. The feeling of justice made him a robber and a murderer.

He was once riding abroad, with a string of young horses, all sleek and well-fed, and was calculating how he should expend the profit which he hoped to make in the markets—apportioning part, like a good manager, to gain further profit, and part to present enjoyment—when he came to the Elbe, and found, by a stately castle in the Saxon dominion, a toll-bar, which he had never seen on this road. He at once stopped with his horses, while the rain was pouring down, and called to the toll-taker, who soon, with a very cross face, peeped out of window. The horse-dealer asked him to open the road. “What new fashion is this?” said he, when, after a considerable time, the collector came out of his house. “A sovereign privilege,” was his reply, as he unlocked the bar, “granted to the Squire[2] Wenzel von Tronka.” “So,”

said Kohlhaas, “Wenzel’s the squire’s name, is it?”—and he looked at the castle, which, with its glittering battlements, peered over the field. “Is the old master dead?” “Of an apoplexy,” answered the collector, as he lifted up the bar. “That’s a pity!” said Kohlhaas. “He was a worthy old gentleman, who took delight in the intercourse of men, and helped business when he could. Aye, once he had a dam built of stone, because a mare of mine broke her leg yonder, where the way leads to the village. Now, how much?” he asked, and with difficulty drew out from his mantle, which fluttered in the wind, the *groschen* required by the collector. “Aye, old man,” said he, as the other muttered, “make haste,” and cursed the weather.—“If the tree from which this bar was fashioned had remained in the wood, it would have been better for both of us.” Having paid the money, he would have pursued his journey, but scarcely had he passed the bar than he heard behind him a new voice calling from the tower:

“Ho, there, horse-dealer!” and saw the castellan shut the window, and hasten down to him. “Now, something else new!” said Kohlhaas to himself, stopping with his horses. The castellan, buttoning a waistcoat over his spacious stomach, came, and standing aslant against the rain, asked for his passport. “Passport!” cried Kohlhaas; adding, a little puzzled, that he had not one about him, to his knowledge; but that he should like to be told what sort of a thing it was as he might perchance be provided with one, notwithstanding. The castellan, eyeing him askance, remarked, that without a written permission no horse-dealer, with horses, would be allowed to pass the border.

The horse-dealer asserted that he had crossed the border seventeen times in the course of his life without any such paper; that he knew perfectly all the seignorial privileges which belonged to his business; that this would only prove a mistake, and that he, therefore, hoped he might be allowed to think it over; and, as his journey was long, not be detained thus uselessly any further. The castellan answered that he would not escape the eighteenth time; that the regulation had but lately appeared, and that he must either take a passport here or return whence he had come. The horse-dealer, who began to be nettled at these illegal exactions, dismounted from his horse, after reflecting for a while, and said he would speak to the Squire von Tronka himself. He accordingly went up to the castle, followed by the castellan, who muttered something about stingy money-scrapers, and the utility of bleeding them, and both, measuring each other with their looks, entered the hall.

The squire, as it happened, was drinking with some boon companions, and they all burst out into a ceaseless fit of laughter at some jest, when Kohlhaas approached to state his grievance. The squire asked him what he wanted, while the knights, eyeing the stranger, remained still; yet hardly had he begun his request concerning the horses, than the whole company cried out—“Horses! where are they?” and ran to the window to see them. No sooner had they set eyes on the sleek lot than, on the motion of the squire, down they flew into the court-yard. The rain had ceased; castellan, bailiff and servants, were collected around, and all surveyed the animals. One praised the sorrel with the white spot on his forehead, another liked the chesnut, a third patted the

dappled one with tawney spots, and agreed that the horses were like so many stags, and that none better could be reared in the country. Kohlhaas, in high spirits, replied that the horses were no better than the knights who should ride them, and asked them to make a purchase. The squire, who was greatly taken with the strong sorrel stallion, asked the price, while the bailiff pressed him to buy a pair of blacks which he thought might be usefully employed on the estate; but when the horse-dealer named his terms, the knights found them too high, and the squire said that he might ride to the round table and find King Arthur if he fixed such prices as these. Kohlhaas, who saw the castellan and the bailiff whisper together, as they cast most significant glances on the blacks, left nothing undone, actuated as he was by some dark foreboding, to make them take the horses.

“See sir,” he said to the squire, “I bought the blacks for five-and-twenty gold crowns, six months ago. Give me thirty and they are yours.”

Two of the knights, who stood near the squire, said plainly enough that the horses were well worth the money; but the squire thought that he might buy the sorrel, while he objected to take the blacks, and made preparations to depart, when Kohlhaas, saying that they would conclude a bargain the next time he went that way with his horses, bade farewell to the squire, and took his horse’s bridle to ride off. At this moment the castellan stepped forward from the rest, and said that he had told him he could not travel without a passport. Kohlhaas, turning round, asked the squire whether this really was the case, adding that it would

prove the utter destruction of his business. The squire, somewhat confused, answered as he withdrew,

“Yes, Kohlhaas, you must have a pass; speak about it with the castellan, and go your way.” Kohlhaas assured him that he had no notion of evading such regulations as might be made respecting the conveyance of horses, promised, in his way through Dresden, to get a pass from the secretary’s office, and begged that he might, on this occasion, be allowed to go on, as he knew nothing of the requisition.

“Well,” said the squire, while the storm broke out anew and rattled against his thin limbs, “Let the fellow go. Come,” said he to his knights, and moving round, he was proceeding to the castle. The castellan, however, turning to him said that Kohlhaas must at least leave some pledge that he would get the passport. The squire, upon this, remained standing at the castle-gate, while Kohlhaas asked what security in money or in kind he should leave on account of the black horses. The bailiff mumbled out that he thought the horses themselves might as well be left. “Certainly,” said the castellan, “That is the best plan. When he has got the pass he can take them away at any time.”

Kohlhaas, astounded at so impudent a proposition, told the squire, who was shivering and holding his waistcoat tight to his body, that he should like to sell him the blacks; but the latter, as a gust of wind drove a world of rain through the gate, cried out, to cut the matter short, “If he won’t leave his horses pitch him over the bar back again!” and so saying, left the spot. The horse-dealer, who saw that he must give way to force, resolved, as he could not do otherwise, to comply with the request, so he unfastened the

blacks, and conducted them to a stable which the castellan showed him, left a servant behind, gave him money, told him to take care of the blacks till his return, and doubting whether, on account of the advances made in breeding, there might not be such a law in Saxony, he continued his journey with the rest of his horses to Leipzig, where he wished to attend the fair.

As soon as he reached Dresden, where, in one of the suburbs he had a house with stables, being in the habit of carrying on his trade from thence with the lesser markets of the country, he went to the secretary’s office, and there learned from the councillors, some of whom he knew, what he had expected at first—namely, that the story about the passport was a mere fable. The displeased councillors having, at the request of Kohlhaas, given him a certificate as to the nullity of the requisition, he laughed at the thin squire’s jest, though he did not exactly see the purport of it; and, having in a few weeks sold his horses to his satisfaction, he returned to the Tronkenburg without any bitter feeling beyond that at the general troubles of the world. The castellan, to whom he showed the certificate, gave no sort of explanation, but merely said, in answer to the question of the horse-dealer, whether he might have the horses back again, that he might go and fetch them. Already, as he crossed the court-yard, Kohlhaas heard the unpleasant news that his servant, on account of improper conduct, as they said, had been beaten and sent off a few days after he had been left at the Tronkenburg. He asked the young man who gave him this intelligence, what the servant had done, and who had attended the horses in the

meanwhile. He replied that he did not know, and opened the stall in which they were kept to the horse-dealer, whose heart already swelled with dark misgivings. How great was his astonishment when, instead of his sleek, well-fed blacks, he saw a couple of skinny, jaded creatures, with bones on which things might have been hung, as on hooks, and manes entangled from want of care; in a word, a true picture of animal misery. Kohlhaas, to whom the horses neighed with a slight movement, was indignant in the highest degree, and asked what had befallen the creatures? The servant answered, that no particular misfortune had befallen them, but that, as there had been a want of draught-cattle, they had been used a little in the fields. Kohlhaas cursed this shameful and preconcerted act of arbitrary power; but, feeling his own weakness, suppressed his rage, and, as there was nothing else to be done, prepared to leave the robber's nest with his horses, when the castellan, attracted by the conversation, made his appearance, and asked what was the matter.

"Matter!" said Kohlhaas, "who allowed Squire Von Tronka and his people to work in the fields the horses that I left?" He asked if this was humanity, tried to rouse the exhausted beasts by a stroke with a switch, and showed him that they could not move. The castellan, after he had looked at him for awhile, insolently enough said, "Now, there's an ill-mannered clown! Why does not the fellow thank his God that his beasts are still living?" He asked whose business it was to take care of them when the boy had run away, and whether it was not fair that the horses should earn in the fields the food that was given them, and concluded by

telling him to cease jabbering, or he would call out the dogs, and get some quiet that way at any rate.

The horse-dealer’s heart beat strongly against his waistcoat, he felt strongly inclined to fling the good-for-nothing mass of fat into the mud, and set his foot on his brazen countenance. Yet his feeling of right, which was accurate as a gold balance, still wavered; before the tribunal of his own heart, he was still uncertain whether his adversary was in the wrong; and, while pocketing the affronts, he went to his horses and smoothed down their manes. Silently weighing the circumstances, he asked, in a subdued voice, on what account the servant had been sent away from the castle. The castellan answered that it was because the rascal had been impudent. He had resisted a necessary change of stables, and had desired that the horses of two young noblemen, who had come to Tronkenburg, should remain out all night in the high road. Kohlhaas would have given the value of the horses to have had the servant by him, and to have compared his statement with that of the thick-lipped castellan. He stood awhile and smoothed the tangles out of the manes, bethinking himself what was to be done in his situation, when suddenly the scene changed, and the Squire Von Tronka, with a host of knights, servants, and dogs, returning from a hare-hunt galloped into the castle-court. The castellan, when the squire asked what had happened, took care to speak first; and, while the dogs at the sight of the stranger were barking at him on one side, with the utmost fury, and the knights on the other side were trying to silence them, he set forth, distorting the matter as much as

possible, the disturbance that the horse-dealer had created, because his horses had been used a little. Laughing scornfully, he added that he had refused to acknowledge them as his own. “They are not my horses, your worship!” cried Kohlhaas; “these are not the horses that were worth thirty golden crowns! I will have my sound and well-fed horses.” The squire, whose face became pale for a moment, alighted and said, “If the rascal will not take his horses, why let him leave them. Come Gunther, come Hans,” cried he, as he brushed the dust from his breeches with his hand. “And, ho! wine there!” he called, as he crossed the threshold with the knights and entered his dwelling. Kohlhaas said that he would rather send for the knacker and have the horses knocked on the head, than he would take them in such a condition to his stable at Kohlhaasenbrück. He left them standing where they were, without troubling himself further about them, and vowing that he would have justice, flung himself on his brown horse, and rode off.

He was just setting off full speed for Dresden, when, at the thought of the servant, and at the complaint that had been made against him at the castle, he began to walk slowly, turned his horse’s head before he had gone a thousand paces, and took the road to Kohlhaasenbrück, that, in accordance with his notions of prudence and justice, he might first hear the servant’s account of the matter. For a correct feeling, well inured to the defective ways of the world, inclined him, in spite of the affronts he had received, to pass over the loss of his horses, as an equitable result; if, indeed, as the castellan had maintained, it could be proved that his servant was in the wrong. On the other hand, a