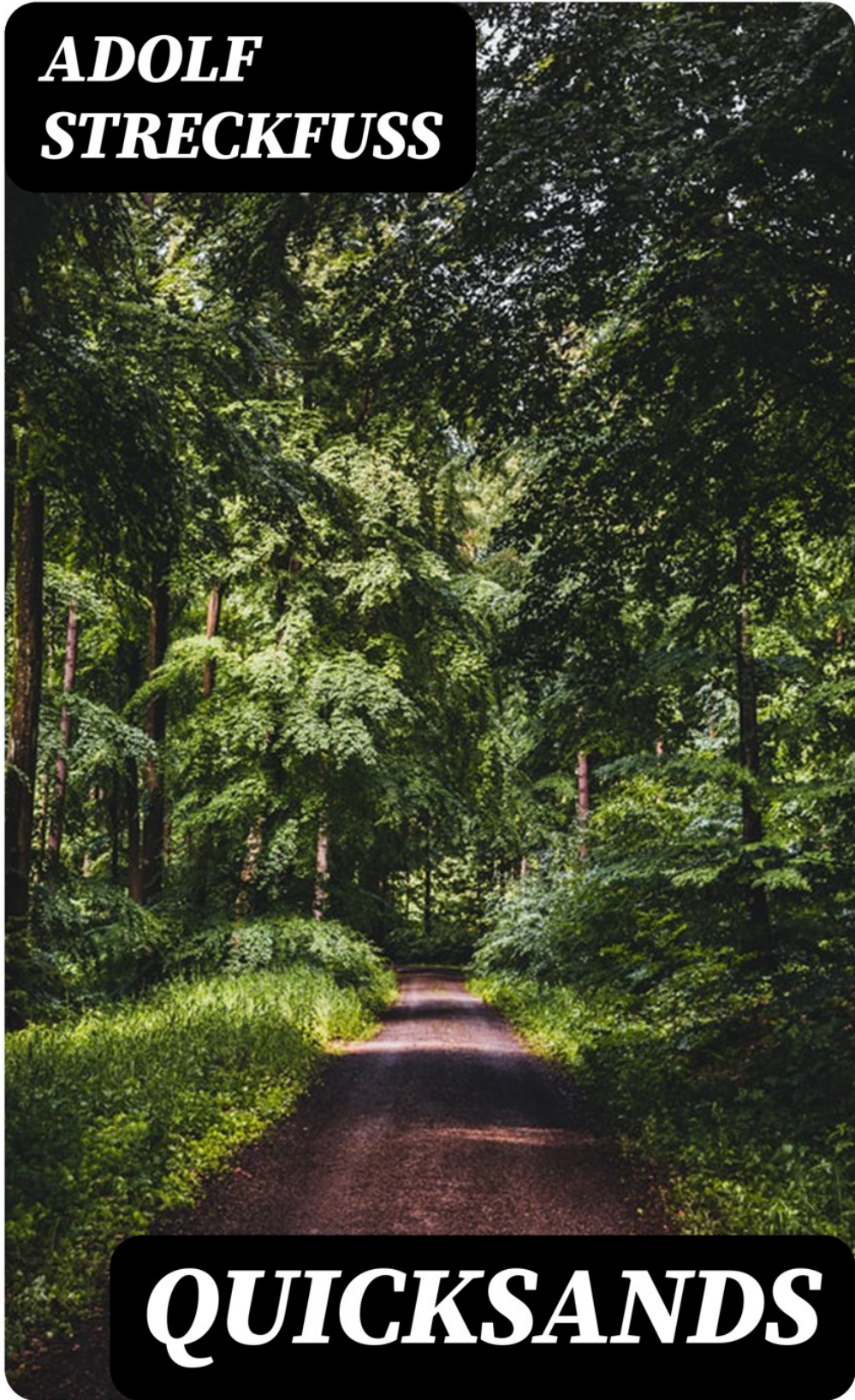


***ADOLF
STRECKFUSS***

QUICKSANDS

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Quicksands

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CHAPTER I.

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AN EXCHANGE.

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Upon the short, thick grass of a small, secluded opening in a magnificent forest of firs and beeches a young man lay, his hands clasped under his head, buried in waking dreams. He had chosen himself a charming retreat, where he was safe from all intrusion from wayfarers passing through the forest by any of the roads or paths that intersected it at a sufficient distance from this spot. The soft, grassy sod was a delightful couch, and the interlacing boughs of a huge beech-tree formed above the head of the dreamer a canopy that entirely protected him from the burning rays of the mid-day sun.

Profound quiet reigned in the forest, intensified, rather than disturbed, by the humming of insects; the very birds which had twittered and sung in the early morning seemed silenced by the heat; all creatures sought repose and refreshment at high noon on this glowing July day.

If the young fellow who lay thus luxuriously bedded were seeking mental as well as bodily repose, it was evident that he had not found it. He was not asleep; his dark eyes were wide open, gazing restlessly and discontentedly into the spaces of sky among the beech boughs until pained by their brilliancy. "How tiresome! how unutterably stupid!" he muttered, altering his comfortable position so as to rest his

head upon his hand as he leaned upon his elbow. "That deadly-tiresome, monotonous stretch of brilliant blue sky is the very image of my own weary existence. Nothing but light and splendour; it is intolerable. If the sky were only covered with clouds,--if there could be a flash here and there of lightning, with thunder crashing and winds howling, one might have some satisfaction in sending a bullet through one's brains with the thunder for a dirge. But no, even that is not to be. I am to die as I have lived, surrounded by weary, soul-destroying sunshine. Ah, well, it is a fitting end to an insignificant and utterly useless life. Come, little friend, it is high time we were done with it."

He took from his breast-pocket a small, richly-inlaid revolver, and looked at it with a degree of affection. "You have helped me through many a long, weary hour. This moment would have come for me long ago but for you and my piano. It certainly was interesting to learn to shoot one spot after another out of the six of hearts. It was irritating not to succeed in hitting each with the same precision. A useless and silly enough aim in life, to be sure; still it was an aim, and now that it is attained it is just as tiresome as everything else. To-day you are to find my heart as surely as the hearts on the card. Or suppose we try the head; it would be easier; an involuntary quiver of a muscle, and the ball might miss the heart, but if this barrel lightly touch the temple the effect must be sure. Three or four balls in the brain must produce death instantaneously. It is the better plan."

He examined the revolver and made sure that it was loaded; his hand did not tremble, his look was clear and

steadfast; there was even a smile of satisfaction on his lips as he contemplated the little weapon. "You will do your duty as you have always done it. You never were to blame if every spot on the card was not exactly hit, although the clumsy marksman would gladly have declared the fault yours. As soon as hand and aim were true, each heart was pierced precisely in the centre."

He raised the pistol, and once more took in at a glance the scene around him, while his thoughts ran on: "Really, a lovely spot for my last act! Beneath these spreading boughs the body will lie comfortably on the soft grass,--for how long before it is found? For days, perhaps for weeks, the place is so secluded. I should like to know what they will say in Berlin when the newspapers announce, 'At last the body has been discovered of Egon von Ernau, who disappeared so many days or weeks ago,' etc., and there will, of course, follow a long description of the place where it was found, and of the condition and clothes of the corpse. The more there is to tell, the better for some poor devil of a reporter. I do not grudge it him. I can at least serve one man in the world by my death. And the news will fly like wildfire. It would be almost worth living for,--the hearing of all that heartless gossip. How busy all those empty heads will be with wondering what could have driven a fellow so favoured by fortune to suicide! 'An unfortunate love-affair,' the sentimentally disposed will declare. 'His father wished to force him into a marriage with a person of high rank, and in his despair he took his own life.' Of course they must invent some reason for a man's escaping from this wretched, wearisome existence. Fools! If life were worth living, why

should I not comply with my respected parent's wishes? All women are alike. It is all the same tiresome sham."

He still held the revolver in his raised hand, when suddenly the hand sank by his side, and he sat up and listened.

A clear note broke upon the woodland quiet,--the sound of a man's tenor voice singing the hymn 'Rock of Ages' at no great distance from where Egon von Ernau lay.

He frowned angrily. "Confoundedly annoying!" he muttered. "If I shoot now, that stupid psalm-singer will hear it,--and then? Then all the delightful Berlin gossip will be spoiled, the body will be found immediately, and everything will be known to-morrow. No, no, those good people must puzzle their brains for a while to discover what has become of me. My Herr Papa must have some chance to show the world what a tender, anxious parent he is. We must choose a still more retired spot. But first let us see where the psalm-singer really is. He seems to have established himself in the forest here, for the sound continues to come from the same direction and from somewhere not very far off."

He uncocked his revolver, put the little weapon again into the breast-pocket of a very well made summer coat, and, rising to his feet, walked slowly through the wood in the direction whence came the sound of singing.

It was no easy task to make his way through the thick underbrush, particularly as he took great pains to make no noise. He wished to see the singer without being seen himself, and therefore he walked very slowly, and it was some minutes before he attained his purpose.

Still following the sound, he had reached the edge of the forest, and only a thick fringe of hazel-bushes obstructed his view beyond. Cautiously parting these he saw before him a landscape of extraordinary beauty. Beyond the velvet sward of a small meadow the land sloped down some eight or ten feet to a charming little lake, on the opposite shore of which green, smiling fields, stretched far away to the mountain-slopes of the distant highlands.

The young man gave but a fleeting glance to this lovely picture; he was far more interested in the singer, whom he now saw at no great distance.

On the brink of the lake the psalm-singer was kneeling, his head held stiffly erect, his bony hands clasped and extended to the skies, while, quite unaware of his listener, he continued his hymn in loud, resonant tones. He was a young man hardly older than twenty-six, although the sallow, flabby features of his beardless face, showing no trace of youthful freshness, might well have caused him to be thought older than he really was. His face was turned to the heavens, and he was staring into the deep, cloudless blue with prominent, lacklustre eyes. The large, thick-lipped mouth was wide open as he shouted out the last verse of his hymn.

He certainly was not handsome, and he was made far more repulsive in appearance than he might have been by the ill-fitting, unsuitable black clothes that he wore. An old-fashioned dress-coat, the long pointed swallowtail of which lay like a train behind him on the grass, hung in disorderly fashion about his bony frame; black, wrinkled trousers, a black waistcoat sufficiently open to display linen of doubtful

cleanliness, a high, rusty, black silk cravat, from which projected the huge points of his shirt-collar on each side of his beardless chin, formed this extraordinary being's attire, which was, moreover, completed by a very tall and very shabby stove-pipe hat.

The hymn came to an end, but the singer did not change his attitude; he still held up his clasped hands to the skies. For a few moments he was silent; then, in a loud voice, he uttered an extemporaneous prayer.

"God of heaven," he cried, "a repentant wretch casts himself upon Thy mercy! Pardon my betrayal of my trust, my having again yielded to temptation. Pardon what I have done and what I am about to do. Receive me into Thy kingdom. Amen!"

With these words he suddenly sprang up; his clumsy black hat fell off upon the grass as he did so, but he paid it no attention. Clasping his hands above his head, he leaned forward, gazed for an instant into the deep green water of the lake, exclaimed, "God forgive me!" and plunged in head-foremost.

Thus far the listener had watched without stirring a limb or giving the slightest sign of his presence; but at this sudden termination of the prayer he broke through the thick underbrush, and in a moment had reached the spot whence the singer had taken the fatal plunge. Here he threw off his coat and hat, keenly scanning the while the lake where the man had disappeared, and where the water was still troubled and sending forth huge rippling circles, while a dark body was visible beneath the surface.

The young man looked about him for some piece of shelving shore where a swimmer could easily clamber upon land; scarcely ten steps to the left he saw what he desired, and in another moment the ripples of the lake broke over his head also.

He was an expert swimmer; when but a mere lad he had saved the life of a drowning comrade at the risk of his own, so tightly had the sinking boy clasped him in his despairing grasp. He remembered this as he now rose to the surface, and seeing a dark form directly before him he merely gave it a powerful push in the direction of the shelving shore, taking good care to avoid the grasp of the wildly struggling man. Keeping clear of this, he contrived to push him before him as he swam to the landing-place. As soon as he felt the ground beneath him, however, he seized the half-suffocated singer by the arm and dragged him ashore. The rescue had been easy, and had occupied but a very few moments of time.

For a while the rescued man lay gasping on the bank; then he started up and gazed wildly at his preserver, who stood quietly looking at him. The unfortunate man presented a still odder and uglier appearance than before; his long black hair hung in dripping locks over his pale face, and his wrinkled coat clinging to his spare figure was more ridiculous than ever.

"Why did you not let me die?" he cried, wringing his hands.

The young man half smiled. "You are right," he replied; "it was very stupid of me. It always is so when I act upon the impulse of the moment. Had I taken time to consider I

should have said to myself, 'This gentleman is tired of life and voluntarily puts an end to it; you have no right to interfere with so reasonable a proceeding.' I should then have seated myself up there on the bank, and have looked on as you came two or three times, to the surface gasping for breath, sinking to rise again, and hastening your death, perhaps, by the frantic efforts you made to retain a detested existence. Finally, you would have sunk to rise no more, and at this moment you would be lying quiet and comfortable, with only a slight quiver of the limbs, at the bottom of the lake. My impetuosity has deprived me of an interesting spectacle and prevented your fulfilment of a sensible and laudable intention. I pray your pardon, and would suggest that you can repair the wrong I have done. We are but a few steps away from the high bank whence you took your plunge into the lake. The spot was admirably selected, for the water here is too shallow for your purpose. I promise you that you shall not be disturbed again; I will look on with the greatest interest."

The young man's quiet words filled his hearer with horror; his arms dropped by his sides, and his prominent eyes opened wider and protruded still farther from his head. He shuddered at the description of his death-agony; he looked in fear at his preserver, who could talk so calmly of such horrors, and when the latter proposed that he should try another plunge into the lake he was seized with a nameless dread. Involuntarily he recoiled a step, and with a gesture of abhorrence cried, "No, no, I cannot! It was too horrible! When the dark water closed over me, and I sank deeper and

deeper, the suffocation, the dreadful noises in my ears, the throbbing in my temples--no, I cannot do it again!"

"Indeed? True, death by drowning cannot be agreeable; I have heard so before from one of my acquaintances who very nearly lost his life in the water. The death-struggle is too long; it must be most unpleasant. Now, a bullet through the head is instantaneous. I will make you another suggestion; I owe it to you since I have interfered with your plans in so uncalled-for a manner. My coat lies on the bank yonder; in its breast-pocket there is a six-barrelled revolver. I was just putting it to my temple when I was arrested by your song. I only need two or three balls for my purpose. Come up on the bank with me, wait until my work is done, and my revolver is at your service. How people will wonder when the two bodies are found after a while lying peacefully side by side! What odd stories will be told of a duel without witnesses, or some such stupid nonsense! It is a pity one cannot be by to hear them. Come, we will soon make an end of the tiresome affair."

"I cannot! I cannot do it a second time! Good God! I can neither live nor die! Help me, I implore you! Shoot me down with your revolver; I cannot do it myself! Kill me! I will bless you with my dying breath!"

He flung himself upon his knees, wringing his hands, as he implored his preserver to kill him, but the young man shook his head decidedly, as he replied, "Very sorry, but the part of an executioner does not suit me; one must conclude such matters one's self, or let them alone. If you will not comply with my suggestion, there is nothing for you but to go on living. I wish you joy of it."

"Good God! what shall I do? I implore you to help me, to advise me!"

"How can I possibly advise you, when I have no knowledge of you or of the circumstances that have driven you to despair?"

"I will tell you about it. I am the most miserable man in the world! You have saved my life, and I will confide my wretchedness, my disgrace, to you."

The young man looked down thoughtfully for a moment before he said, "Very well, tell me. An hour more or less makes no difference. Let us sit down in the shade on the grass; you shall pour out your woes to me, and if I can give you help or counsel, I will do so."

"Will not the shade be rather too cool for us in our wet clothes? We might catch cold."

The young fellow laughed aloud at this strange mixture of despair and dread of taking cold.

"Well, then, sit in the sun," he said, still laughing. "I prefer the shade, since a cold is of no consequence to me. And now, since we find ourselves comrades after this odd fashion, here at our ease, you can initiate me in the dark mysteries of your life. I promise you an attentive listener."

He had thrown himself down beneath a huge beech-tree, while his companion was looking for a seat on some stone in the blazing sunshine.

"My wet clothes will soon dry here," said the singer. "When they are dried on the body they do not lose their shape." And as he spoke he looked down sadly at the long wet tails of his coat as they dragged dripping behind him. There was no trace to be seen in him of the contrition and

despair which had possessed him a few moments since, his whole mind was given to the choosing of a spot in the sunshine. At last he found a fragment of rock which suited him, he sat down upon it, and leaning forward propped his elbows upon his knees and his chin upon his hands. In this attitude he looked, as his companion could not but inwardly observe, like a strange caricature of incredible ugliness. He paused a while to reflect, and then began, in a whining, lachrymose tone,--

"I have always been a child of misfortune. The Lord has punished me with the greatest severity for my sins, although I have tried to lead a pious, resigned life, however heavily His hand might be laid upon me. Wherefore, O Lord, shouldst Thou thus visit Thy most devoted servant----"

He could not go on, for his listener had stopped his ears, and exclaimed angrily, "Stop, stop! nothing in the world is quite so detestable and tiresome as circumlocution. If I am to listen, you must be brief, simple, and unaffected. Let us have no whining sentimentality. I hate it! Give me a clear, simple statement of facts."

"Out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh," was the reply to this blunt interruption of the man's flow of eloquence. "I will command my emotion, if I can, out of regard for you, my preserver. I have always been unlucky; my very name was a misfortune,--not my first name, Gottlieb, which I received in holy baptism, but my surname, Piggleswitch. I always see a smile of derision upon the lips of those who hear it for the first time, when a boy I was always laughed at for my name, and this trial has never left me. But I will not murmur; it is the Lord's will that I inherit such a

title, and His ways are always right. How can we, weak mortals that we are----"

"Hold, friend Piggleswitch! You are forgetting again. No preaching!"

"I have done," Gottlieb Piggleswitch replied, instantly subsiding into an ordinary narrative style. "My father was pastor of Wilhelmshagen. I scarcely remember him, he died when I was not quite six years old; my mother had died at my birth, and her brother now took me home, or rather kept me in my home, for he succeeded to my father's position. He said he befriended the orphan for the love of God, but he never showed me any affection, even as a little child I had to work hard for my daily food, he employed me to tend first his geese and afterwards his sheep. I was sent with the other village children to the village school, but as soon as I came home I had to work for my uncle, and the dread of a beating often made me perform tasks that were far beyond my strength. I was given many a blow, with very little to eat, and never a kind word; my uncle declared that I was a good-for-nothing, lazy young hypocrite and liar, who could not be treated too severely, I was fit for nothing but a stupid tiller of the ground. As such he meant to bring me up, but Herr Brandes, the Schulze of Wilhelmshagen, befriended me. He had been a friend of my father's, and would have taken me into his house and brought me up with his daughter Annemarie, who is two years younger than I, only he did not wish to interfere with my uncle.

"Nevertheless he stood my friend, and often when I was very hungry I got a good meal at his house; little Annemarie, too, would sometimes bring a piece of bread out

to me in the fields and stay a while and play with me. Those were the only happy hours I can remember as a child. It was a time of sore trial, and I, unworthy sinful man----"

"Friend Piggleswitch!"

"Ah, to be sure! Well, the Schulze befriended me. 'After all, he is a pastor's son,' he said to my uncle, 'and every one is saying that he is being brought up like the son of a day-labourer.' My father had left me a small patrimony amounting to about a thousand thalers, and Herr Brandes told my uncle that he ought to demand a portion of this from the Guardians' Court, to be spent in sending me to town to school, where I might be suitably educated. At first my uncle refused to do this, he found me too useful on the farm, but he yielded at last to the Schulze's representations, seeing clearly that he should lose credit by refusing any longer to do so. So I was sent to town to board with one of the teachers of the public school. I nearly starved there, and I often wished myself back in Wilhelmshagen, where I could always get something to eat at the Schulze's, for Annemarie was sure to put by a morsel for me. From the public school I went to college, and I have passed my examination as a Candidate for the ministry. The Lord was gracious to me. My mind moves slowly, and when I went up for examination I was conscious of ignorance with regard to various branches of secular knowledge. I was afraid of being plucked, but the Herr Director encouraged me. He told me to trust in the Lord, who would not forsake the most faithful of His servants. So I went up for examination, and passed, although all my fellow-students predicted my failure. Immediately afterwards, through the influence of the Herr

Director, I obtained a position as private teacher in Wilhelmshagen. I was delighted to receive my first employment in my old home. My uncle had left the place for a better parish in Wengersdorf, in Silesia, and I was quite free. Never have I felt so happy as then. I never dreamed that the Lord was about to try me beyond my strength,--poor, sinful man that I am. I had hitherto lived with the greatest economy. I had never had a penny in my pocket. My comrades at the public school and in college cared nothing for me,--they called me a hypocrite, laughed at me when I failed in my lessons, and would have nothing to do with me. Now I suddenly found myself freed from all restraint. I had a position, and moreover, as I was of age, the rest of my patrimony amounting to five hundred thalers was paid over to me. I had money and friends. The sons of the wealthiest peasants made much of me; formerly they took no notice of me, now they felt it an honour to have me join them at the village inn and drink a glass or play a game of cards with them, which last I was only too glad to do. I never could resist the sight of a card. Often, when I returned home at night after having lost my money at play, I repented with tears and vowed never again to touch a card. I prayed to the Lord for strength to keep my vow, and resolved never to go near the inn again; but the next Saturday evening the temptation was sure to be too strong for me. I could not resist it.

"The Schulze had received me with great cordiality upon my return to Wilhelmshagen, and Annemarie had fallen upon my neck and given me an honest kiss. I was always

welcome at the Schulzenhof. I loved my dear Annemarie, and she returned my love."

The young man, who lying stretched upon the grass had hitherto listened quietly, only interrupting the narrative now and then with a word of warning when Gottlieb Piggleswitch's discourse grew too unctious, started and sat upright when the speaker uttered the word love. He stared in amazement at the forlorn, bedraggled figure perched on the stone before him. Could it be? That caricature of humanity was talking of love, and there was a girl in the world who returned the affection of a Gottlieb Piggleswitch!

The young man's surprise was so evident that Gottlieb became embarrassed. "What is the matter?" he asked timidly.

"My worthy Piggleswitch, you have converted me to a belief in miracles. Seriously I begin to have faith in them. In fact is it not a miracle that I am actually interested in you and your history? I thought that nothing in this tedious world could entertain me; you have shown me that I was mistaken. Go on with your story. You had just come to where you loved and were loved in return."

"Yes, so it was. It was a brief period of bliss," Gottlieb Piggleswitch went on, with a deep-drawn sigh. "I trifled away my happiness by my own folly. The Schulze, who had received me so kindly, altered his treatment of me after a while. He remonstrated with me once or twice, telling me that it was not the thing for a teacher to sit until midnight of a Saturday drinking and playing cards with the young fellows of the village, such conduct was, at all events, quite beneath the son of a pastor, who, as such, ought to stand

upon his dignity. I promised him then to shun the inn, but when Saturday came I could not withstand the burning desire for play. I dreamed of the cards and of the gains they might bring me, I had to go whether I would or not. Then, when I went the next evening to the Schulzenhof, Annemarie would receive me with tearful eyes, and her father with hard words. I was no longer welcome there, and I knew why. A hundred times I vowed improvement, but in vain. In short, I went on playing,--I could not help it,--and because I almost always lost, I drank too much in my despair. Several times my companions had to take me home drunk. I was most unfortunate. After living three years in Wilhelmshagen, I had to leave it. I had lost my entire patrimony at play, and with only twenty thalers in my pocket I had to look for another situation. When I bade farewell to Annemarie, I thought I should have died, only the hope of seeing her again sustained me. I knew that the Herr Director in town would befriend me and procure me another situation. I told the Schulze this, and since I was on the subject of my hopes, I confessed my love for Annemarie, and declared my intention of returning to ask for her hand so soon as I had found another situation. I should not have had the courage to say this to him had I not just bidden good-by to my comrades in the inn parlor, where I had taken a glass more than was good for me. The Schulze did not let me finish my sentence, he called me a vagabond, a gambler, and a drunkard, who had squandered his patrimony, and who never should marry his child. If I ever became a respectable man once more, and could save up from my earnings the five hundred thalers I had lost, I might

come to see them again, but not until then. And he thrust me from his door without even letting me give my Annemarie a farewell kiss. With despair in my heart I left Wilhelmshagen. My patron, the Herr Director, to whom I first applied, received me with a severe reproof; but when I had described with many tears my struggles, my agony, and my firm resolve to do better, he took pity upon me, and got me a situation in Berlin with a salary of twenty thalers a month."

"You could not possibly live in Berlin upon twenty thalers a month!" his hearer exclaimed.

"But I did do so. Of course I had to practise strict economy, and I could not lay by anything; but, as I had no acquaintances there to tempt me to drink or play, I got along. I had been more than a year in Berlin, when just three weeks ago to-day I received a letter from my patron, the Herr Director. He wrote me that he had heard with pleasure from my principal that I had become a respectable, industrious man. As there is more joy in heaven over one sinner----"

"Pigglewitch!"

"Well, the Herr Director wrote me that he had recommended me for a very advantageous situation to a Frau von Osternau, of Osternau, in Silesia, who had applied to him for a tutor for her son, a boy six years of age. I was to reside with the family and receive three hundred thalers yearly. I could enter upon my duties immediately. He enclosed a letter of introduction to Frau von Osternau, and another to my Principal requesting him to put no obstacle in the way of my good fortune, but to release me immediately

from my engagement to him. I was supremely happy. Three hundred thalers and my board! I could save up two hundred thalers a year, and in two years and a half at the latest I should have my five hundred thalers again. I went instantly to my Principal, who, however, declared that he could not possibly spare me before the 3d of July. This I wrote to the Herr Director, and in a few days heard from him in reply that Frau von Osternau was willing to wait, and that she would expect me on the 6th of July."

"The 6th of July? Why, that is the day after tomorrow."

"Precisely. The day after to-morrow. I left my situation yesterday,--a day of misery which has ruined my life forever. So soon as I received from the Herr Director the letter which confirmed my hopes of the situation at Osternau I wrote to my Annemarie and told her of my good luck, in three years at the furthest, I wrote her, we should be married. I had written several letters to her during the year, and had received no reply from her; now I had an answer by return of mail. Her father had forbidden her, she told me, to reply before, but now that he had hopes of my becoming a respectable man once more, he had permitted her to write. She would be true to me, and surely wait the three years for me, but she was nevertheless afraid that we never should be man and wife, for she was forced to go with her father across the sea to America. They had been very unfortunate,--their farm-house had been burned down just after harvest, before the crops had been insured, and her father had therefore resolved to dispose of his farm and to try his fortune in America. Everything was prepared for their departure. Her father was to bring her to Berlin on the 1st of

July, that he might receive the last payment of the purchase-money of his estate, and on the 3d they were to leave for Bremen, whence their passage to America was taken. I might expect them at the railway-station on the evening of the 1st, and we could at least spend a few hours together. It was a dear, good letter, as good and kind as my Annemarie herself. I wept as I read it, so transported was I with delight. She would be true to me. In three years I should have enough to follow her to America. Perhaps I could buy a small farm there with my five hundred thalers, and become a farmer. The world lies open to the man who has money, he can purchase every conceivable delight."

"Do you think so?" the listener drawled, contemptuously. "But go on; I beg pardon for interrupting you."

"On the evening of the 1st I received the Schulze and Annemarie at the railway-station, and went with them to the little inn where they were to lodge. Annemarie was unchanged, and the Schulze was as cordial to me as he had been formerly. He read my patron's letter carefully, as also the testimonial which my Principal had given me. He expressed his satisfaction with my plans for the future, and promised that he would give me Annemarie so soon as I could show him five hundred thalers of my own. His confidence in me was entirely restored, as was shown me the next day, when, after he had received all the purchase-money for his estate, he intrusted to me twelve hundred and seventy-two marks to hand over to my uncle in Wenersdorf. Many years ago my uncle had loaned this money upon interest to the Schulze, and had always objected to its repayment, but now, upon the eve of his

departure for America, the Schulze as an honest man insisted upon returning it. On my way to Osternau in Silesia, it would be very easy for me to turn a little aside and visit my uncle Widman, at Wengersdorf. The Schulze impressed it upon me to get a receipt for the money and transmit it to him. I had a delightful day with my Annemarie and her father, and yesterday morning I accompanied them to the railway-station, where I took leave of them. At noon I was to leave for Wengersdorf, whence, after leaving the money with my uncle Widman, I could continue my journey to Osternau. Everything was ready for my departure.

"When Annemarie and her father had left me, and I turned away from the railway-station, my heart was so heavy that I could hardly bear it. I felt so weak, so forlorn, that I needed something to strengthen me, and I turned into a small restaurant to get a glass of beer. I seated myself at a table, and I had hardly done so before three men, who had entered the house just after me, took their places at my elbow. In the early morning we four were the only people in the room. The men talked for a while, and then began to play cards,--lansquenet,--taking no notice of me. I looked on, not thinking of playing; but when I saw the thalers passing from hand to hand, as the game grew more absorbing, my interest grew keen, and the wretched passion for play was again aroused within me. I was seized with an uncontrollable desire to join the game. The Evil One had me in his clutches once more----"

"Go on, Piggleswitch, go on!"

"Forgive me; I could not help it. I was, indeed, possessed by a demon. I asked the gentlemen if I might take part in

the game, they assented, and in an instant I had joined them. I had not played for more than a year, but the passion for gambling had got hold of me. I lost, doubled the stakes, lost again, and went on increasing the stakes in hopes of winning back my money. Still I went on losing, in my desperation I drank glass after glass, everything reeled before my eyes, and when at the end of an hour I had staked my last piece of money, I suddenly became conscious that I had gambled away my life. I was a thief condemned to jail, for I had lost not only my own money, but the sum intrusted to me for my uncle. I sat alone at the table, the gentlemen had left me, finding I had nothing more to lose, and I had not noticed their departure. The last hour seemed to me like an evil dream. I laid my head upon the table and wept. After a while a waiter roused me and requested me to leave, my score had been paid by my friends. I staggered out of the place. How I reached my lodgings I do not know. I lay in a feverish stupor all day long, in the evening I came to myself. How terrible was my awaking! I now saw clearly what I had done. I knew that I was lost. My uncle would demand his money of me. I should be handed over to the authorities as a thief. I should be sent to jail. I was lost,--lost past rescue. But I would die sooner than be sent to jail.

"Suddenly there arose in my memory the picture of the lake of Wandelitz. How often in my boyhood had I wandered away from Wilhelmshagen to this quiet lake in the forest, and, seated upon the bank yonder, passed hours in dreaming and gazing down into the green depths of water! The thought of it came to me like an inspiration. I gathered

myself together. On the chair beside my bed lay my travelling-bag, I packed it early in the morning for my noon-day departure, and it contained, as I now remembered, ten silver thalers, every penny I possessed in the world. It was enough to purchase a ticket for Wilhelmshagen, whither I might go by the night train. I scarcely know what followed,--how I set out, how I arrived here. I only remember that I sang a hymn, and then--well, you know the rest. I am an unfortunate, miserable wretch!"

"You're a very queer fellow, friend Piggleswitch," the other declared, in answer to Gottlieb's last desperate exclamation. "You are a compound of contradictions. I do not understand you, and least of all can I comprehend how a fellow can be so overwhelmed by despair at losing a paltry twelve hundred marks at cards. Such a trifle!"

"I was horrified at the prison which awaited me," Piggleswitch declared. "Oh, I am lost,--lost beyond all hope!"

For a while his companion made no reply, but sat looking dreamily across the lake, while he mechanically plucked to pieces a tiny wild-flower. His face, rather handsome than otherwise, suddenly lost its habitual expression of weary indifference, a smile played about the lips, the dreamy eyes sparkled.

"Friend Piggleswitch," he said, scrutinizing keenly the odd figure before him, "an idea has suddenly occurred to me,--an original, some sensible people might call it an insane, idea! You, friend Piggleswitch, play an important part in the development of this idea. You please me, you interest me, and that is saying a great deal, for I assure you that it is years since I have taken any interest in anything, or any

pleasure in a living creature with the exception of my Bello, an abominable mongrel pug, whose intense ugliness pleased me. But, as I said, you too please me. It would be no end of a pity if so magnificent a sample of humanity should be early snatched from this world by despicable suicide. I now rejoice that I pulled you out of the water. You must live!"

"Why do you jeer at me?" Piggleswitch asked, in a doleful tone of reproach. "I have done you no harm, and have told you all my story."

"In return for which you shall have mine, with but some trifling reservations. It is but reasonable that you, in return for this recital of your life and its woes, should listen to mine. It will be much shorter than yours, for I really have had no experiences. My name is--but why need you know my name? you cannot care for it, and I am quite sure you will find it easier not to mention it if you do not know it. Since from my earliest infancy Fortune has showered upon me her choicest gifts, I will call myself Fritz Fortune. Yes, Fritz Fortune had from his birth everything that mankind considers a means of happiness. His health was perfect, they say he was a very handsome boy, he had quick powers of mind, a lively intelligence which enabled him to learn without trouble; he was the only son of an immensely wealthy father, his every desire was fulfilled before it was expressed. He had everything, everything, except one mere trifle of no real consequence in life,--affection. The stupid fellow, however, thought he wanted it. He loved his kind, and longed for love in return, but he did not find it. His mother had no time to bestow upon him. She was

wonderfully lovely, and always surrounded by a crowd of adorers. There was not a moment of her day not given to society or to dressing for some grand entertainment, how could she possibly find a moment to devote to the boy, who was, besides, admirably cared for by a most expensive tutor and an excellent housekeeper? When Fritz Fortune was ten years old his mother died suddenly of disease of the heart. He did not miss her, for he scarcely knew her. His father was a model parent, he was willing to make any sacrifice for the child, upon whom he lavished enormous sums of money, save one,--the sacrifice of his time, which was devoted partly to business, but mostly to pleasure. Weeks passed continually without the boy's even seeing his father, but then no toy was too expensive to be purchased for him so soon as he expressed a wish for it to the housekeeper, there was no delicacy upon which he might not feed until it disgusted him. Everything, everything save affection was lavished upon him. Was he not the silliest of lads in that so far from being contented he sometimes shed bitter tears over his lot? He had soon done with tears, however. His tutor did just as the boy told him to, and the housekeeper and all the servants followed his example. Fritz Fortune's will was never gainsaid, if he had not chosen of his own accord to go to school, he never would have been sent there, but he was tired of his home, and hoped to be better entertained at school, consequently to school he went. There too luck pursued him. As he was clever enough and studied diligently, not from love of books but to beguile the time, he learned readily. He outstripped his school-fellows, and they consequently hated him, but as his pockets were