Out there in the Moorland Village

It was one evening in autumn. I had spent the afternoon in my office interrogating a couple of timber thieves who had been brought before me as magistrate, and I was now walking slowly homewards. At that time gas-lighting had not yet been introduced into our town; there were only small hand-lanterns which went flickering down the dark streets like will o' the wisps. But my attention was drawn to and then held by a lantern which stayed rooted to a single spot.

As I came nearer, I made out a farmer's trap, harnessed up, waiting outside an inn. In those days the people from the villages over to the east would leave their horses and carriages here on their way into town. The old manservant from the inn was standing nearby, holding a stable lamp, while some folk made ready to set off.

'Get on with it, Hinrich', came a voice from the trap, 'you've messed about for far too long already. Carsten Krüger's wife, and Carsten Decker's too, are both very close to their time, and I'm getting in a right state about them.' The rather elderly voice belonged to a large, evidently female figure swathed in cloths and coats and sitting motionless on the back seat.

Without thinking I had paused at the corner of the little street which turns off at this point. When you have been working for hours at a stretch, the sight of other people acting out a scene for you is something you welcome, and the manservant was conveniently holding the lantern high enough for me to be able to watch everything.

Beside the trap was a youthful woman whose figure was strikingly different from the thickset build of most of the country girls in these parts. Standing next to her was a young farmer whose curly blond hair frothed out from under his cloth cap. In one hand he was holding the reins and a whip; with the other he was gripping the back of a wooden chair which had been moved up beside the trap to aid the women in mounting. There was a brooding expression about his features, his forehead protruded so far forward that it almost covered his eyes. 'Come on, Margret, get up now!' he said, trying to snatch the girl's hand.

But she pushed him away. 'I don't need your help', she cried, 'you just see to your bays.'

'Oh, do give over all these silly games, Margret!'

At these words, spoken with barely concealed impatience, she turned her head. I could only see the lower part of her face in the lamplight, but I could tell that those soft pale cheeks had never been exposed to the winds and rain of seed-time and harvest out in the country. What struck me particularly were her sharp white teeth, now bared by the laughing lips.

She made no reply to the young man's words, but I could guess from the set of her head that her eyes were providing him with an answer. At the same time she put one foot

delicately on the wooden chair and, as he put his arms round her, sank softly on to his shoulder. I observed their cheeks resting against each other for a while. I could also see that he was trying to squeeze her on to the seat at the front of the trap; but she slipped out of his grasp and the next moment had settled herself down on the rear seat beside the portly woman, who from somewhere inside all her wrappings was calling out once more: 'Get on with it, Hinrich, get on with it!'

The young farmer was still standing by the trap, seemingly at a loss. Then he tugged at the girl's clothing. 'Margret!' he muttered, in a hollow tone, 'Sit in front, Margret!'

'Thank you kindly, Hinrich', she replied very distinctly, "I'm comfortable enough where I am.'

The young man pulled more violently at her clothes. 'I'll not set off, Margret, unless you sit beside me.'

At this she leaned down to him over the side of the seat. I saw a pair of black eyes flash in her pale face, and her white teeth showed once again between her full lips. 'Will you leave it be, Hinrich!' she said quietly, with something like a promise of tenderness in her voice. 'Or ought Mother and me to ask Hans Ottsen to drive us into town next time? He's plagued me often enough to travel in with him.'

The young man muttered something I could not catch, then impetuously he leapt up between the two horses on to the front seat, gave a furious crack of the whip and jerked the reins so sharply that the bays reared vertically upwards. And the next moment, to the accompaniment of screams from the women, the vehicle rattled off into the night at such speed that the wooden chair, caught by one of the wheels, collapsed in pieces on the cobbles. The old manservant staggered back, exclaiming 'God save our souls!' before he disappeared grumbling through the door of the inn, taking his lamp with him.

It seemed as though my magic-lantern show had come to an end, and pensively I continued my homeward road.

This is the opening (set in fact in a large town) of Storm's Novelle 'Out there in the moorland Village'. The second phase of the story introduces us to the beadle of an outlying moorland village. He has come into town to see the magistrate, and get him to witness an agreement whereby a young man from the village takes over the farm of his recently deceased father. The magistrate examines the papers and objects that, because of outstanding debts, there is not enough money in the family for the young man to do that. However, the beadle (who, as we gather, runs all the affairs in the village) says that a wealthy marriage has been arranged for the young man. Suddenly the magistrate recognises the young man, Hinrich, from the evening described at the start of the story, and asks whether Hinrich isn't rather interested in the beautiful daughter of the local midwife. The beadle explains that the beautiful young girl Margret is an outsider; even though her mother performs a useful task in the community, the midwife's father was an alien gipsy sort of person, a Slovak immigrant from the lower

Danube. That young Hinrich was interested in her, as were others, the beadle knows, but he has now successfully packed her off to find work in another town, so she is out of the way. We then see Hinrich signing all the legal papers, but seeming uninterested in the whole business.

Time passes; Hinrich's wealthy but sickly wife has a baby, but the magistrate hears that Hinrich's farm has been doing badly. He has sold off a pair of excellent horses and bought two cheap inferior ones in their place. We learn that Margret came back to the village six months ago and has been showing off clothes and jewellery presumed to have been gifts from Hinrich. The beadle is now advising that Hinrich be made a ward of the court. Then one day news comes in that Hinrich has disappeared. The magistrate decides to drive out to the moorland village and investigate this disappearance. Here he is on his journey:

So as to be unencumbered in my task, I decided to do without a registrar to keep a record and took only the usher with me. We drove out in an open carriage, since it was a mild autumn day.

As we drove through the countryside in sunshine which still had some warmth to it, I took in the gentle but melancholy spectacle of yellow leaves constantly breaking free and drifting to earth, especially when, uttering its little cry of fear, a late thrush fluttered away through the bushes, startled by the snorting of our horses.

But then the landscape changed, and the overgrown embankments with cultivated fields beyond them came to an end. Instead we travelled close along the edge of the so-called 'wild moor', which in those days stretched northwards as far as the eye could see. Here it seemed as though the last sunlight existing on earth had been abruptly swallowed up by the gloomy wilderness. Isolated piles of peat stood up, often by the side of large or small pools of water, amid the barren waste of dark brown heather. From time to time we heard the forlorn cry of a plover on its solitary flight. That was all there was to see and hear.

There came to my mind something I had once read, concerning I believe the steppes along the lower Danube which are still inhabited by primitive Slavonic peoples. There at dusk something resembling a white filament rises up from the moorland (*?,?*) which the local people call the 'white goblin'. It roams through the villages, steals into the houses and, when night falls, it settles by the open mouths of sleeping people, and then this thin thread swells up and grows to the size of a ponderous monster. The next morning there is no sign of it; but during the night the sleeper has gone out of his mind: the white goblin has drained the spirit out of him. Nor does his spirit ever return to him, for the monster has dragged it off over the moors into the damp ravines between heathland and peat bogs.

The white goblin itself was not native to these parts, but I knew that the mists on these moors could take on no less uncanny forms, which several of the villagers, especially those of an older generation, claimed to have encountered in the dark and at twilight.

When he gets to the village, the magistrate goes to the beadle's house and finds him busy piling up manure (a sign of his wealth); the beadle's wife entertains the magistrate with coffee and with elaborate tales about Hinrich's pursuit of 'the Slovak lass' when he was a

young lad, notably on one occasion when he felt rejected by her, and disappeared, spending a night out on the moors by the Black Tarn. As a result he had to take to his bed for week or two, and when the doctor's prescriptions didn't work they turned to old-fashioned remedies instead. 'And so with three cups of camomile tea and a few handfuls of earth from the churchyard everything was put to rights again.'

The magistrate then goes on to Hinrich's farmhouse and establishes himself there to cross-question various witnesses. Since Hinrich's wife and his widowed mother are not there (they are with the mayor, who has heard a rumour that Hinrich has been seen out on the wild moor), he summons Margarete Glansky.

So as to lose no time, I sent the usher off to summon the midwife's daughter, who lived quite close, while the old woman undertook to fetch the Fehse women from the mayor's house, which lay rather further off. I found myself alone in the house. From the wall came the ticking of a Black Forest clock. As I waited for what the next moments might bring I walked over to the window and looked out into the yellow autumn sunlight. The sun was already low in the sky on the far side of the moor.

The rustling of a woman's dress aroused me from the reverie into which I was beginning to sink. When I turned round, I saw a young woman in town clothes, with a slim but well-rounded figure. With one dainty hand, which seemed to me to be trembling, she was just untying a black kerchief from her neck.

There could be no mistaking who it was that stood before me; for the first time I saw the seductive young woman full-face.

'You are Margarete Glansky!' I said.

A scarcely audible 'Yes' was the only reply.

I sat down on the other side of the table and picked up my pen.

'You know Hinrich Fehse the younger?' I continued.

An equally quiet 'Yes' was my answer.

'What I mean is, you have been closely acquainted with him?'

The girl gave no reply. When I looked up, I saw that she had turned deathly pale, and I heard her little white teeth chattering. I guessed that she was in the grip of fear: the fear of bearing official responsibility for a guilt that up till now might only have felt in herself.

'Why are you fearful?'

'I'm not afraid. But the local women all hate me so.'

'We are not concerned with you, Margarete Glansky, but with the young man who has been missing for some days.'

'I know nothing about it, I'm not to blame', she burst out; she was still struggling for breath.

'But we have to try to find him', I went on. 'Shortly before his marriage you moved to the town and then you came back about six months ago?'

'I didn't like it there. There was no need for me to be in service. I'm still sorry I was so stupid as to let myself be packed off in the first place!' And the girl knitted her thick eyebrows in a frown.

'And after that,' I said, 'Hinrich Fehse would often come round to your house of an evening?'

'Well, what were we supposed to do? Chase him away from our door?'

'In the end, according to reports, he used to come by every evening and would often stay till after midnight.'

'If those women are saying that, they're lying!'

'But you accepted gifts from him?'

Her face flushed a bright red. 'Who says I did?'

'It's all over the village, you know. And it caused bad blood between husband and wife.'

'Well, and what if it did? Whose idea was it that she should marry him, anyway?'

'And would *you* have married him?'

Before she could produce an answer, the door of the room was flung open, and the two Fehse women, the young one carrying her child in her arms, came in. I saw unconcealed mutual hatred flash in the eyes of the farmer's widow and the midwife's daughter as they caught sight of each other, then the old woman planted herself in front of me and said in a trembling voice:

'Mr Magistrate, what is that person doing in our house? To my mind that's something I don't have to put up with.'

'That person', I replied, gently ushering the two women back out of the door again without their realising it, 'is being interrogated officially and was summoned here by me.'

By now we were all three standing out in the hallway. The gaunt old woman was wringing her hands. 'Oh, the misery of it!' she cried out. 'The misery of it!' The younger woman continually had to dry off her tears which were dropping on to the cheeks of the sleeping baby.

'Everything was going so well, that first year', she said. 'If only *she* hadn't come back again! None of it makes any sense to ordinary folk like us - but she must have put a spell on him somehow! And all that money he got the other day, for the horses - we've looked in the bureau, but there's no trace of any of it.'

Through the front door, which the women had left open, I caught sight of a man going past outside. He was carrying a long pole and was taking the path leading off into the moor. The old woman had gone out for a moment and now came back weeping and wailing. Suddenly she dabbed her eyes with her apron. 'The good Lord above will know where he is', she said. 'He wasn't a godless person, my Hinrich. He fell down on his knees and buried his poor head in my lap, for after all he was still my child. "Mother", he said then, "you saw me riding off on the bay, and I told you I had to go over to North Mill to see the miller there about the interest on overdue payments - but that was a lie. All I did was gallop around wildly for five hours on end, I don't even know where I got to. You saw the bay yourself when I came home, you brushed the foam off his flanks. The one thing I didn't want to do was to go back to her place again, but something stronger than me kept tugging me back there. It'll be the death of me, but I just can't help myself, Mother."

['']And he was such a good boy, my Hinrich', the old woman went on, as though speaking to herself. 'Right down to the time his child was born! It was out there in the yard, he was sitting on his horse, so I had to lift the boy up to him, the sun was shining, it was so warm, and yonder in the field the summer corn was a lovely green. "What do you say, Mother", he said, "I think I might take him out into the fields with me for a while." He was so pleased about the child, and I had a job to get the little one back from him again, and the mite was scarcely six weeks old!'

I managed to get away from the women, telling them that they were not to leave the farmstead until I had interrogated them as well. When I went back into the living-room, the rays of the evening sun were already falling obliquely through the windows. The girl was still standing exactly where I had left her, but she seemed to have grown calmer and even to have developed some confidence in me, perhaps simply because I had justified her presence in the house to the other women. 'I'll be straight with you, Mr Magistrate', she began, smoothing her shiny black hair back with both hands. 'Suppose he hadn't needed to get hold of the money the other woman could provide for him, would I have married him myself? I honestly don't know, and there's probably no point in asking me now. We were good friends, we danced together, certainly; but - and this is the truth, Mr Magistrate - I never thought he would take it all so seriously.'

'But you did know that he had been pursuing you since he was a young lad', I said. 'And I'm bound to say he never looked the sort of man who would take things like that lightly.'

She had turned her head and taken a quick glance in the little mirror which hung on the wall, decorated with peacocks' feathers, and just for a moment a sparkle of jaunty *joie de vivre* seemed to flash in her black eyes. 'Well, of course', she said, 'in the end I was bound to notice that, but by then I just couldn't get rid of him at all. It wasn't for want of trying, for his funny moods were irritating me so much, especially if, in the usual way, some other young people came round to the house. Sometimes he would even grind his teeth if I so much as accompanied one of them as far as the front door, and then once when Hans Ottsen tried to undo my plaits, just as a joke. And all the time he had his wife waiting for him back at home.'

I looked at her closely. 'So Ottsen, too, has been coming round to see you lately? I suppose you know that his father handed the farm over to him last midsummer?'

She hesitated for a moment and seemed confused, but then she went on, as though she had not heard my remark: 'Many an evening, when the night-watchman had sounded his horn for nine o'clock, my mother implored him to go home. But he wouldn't go. "Neighbour", he would say, "I'm sure you won't begrudge me a chair in your house, and that's all I'm asking for, after all." And so we just sat there and sat there, me with my sewing in front of me at one end of the table, and him at the other. "Hinrich", I would often say to him, "don't be so down in the dumps. You can dance with me next Sunday, down at the inn. Why don't you bring your wife along too and we can all have a good time together?' But he just gave a scornful laugh and looked at me with those little eyes of his, as though he were trying to do me some injury with them.

[']Only once did he stay away for a time', she went on after a pause, 'and that was when his child was born, and so I thought he'd come to his senses. But then about four weeks later his wife fell seriously ill, everyone thought she was at death's door, even my mother, who'd had to look after her when the child was delivered. And that's when, Mr Magistrate, that's when he came round again.'

Margret tells how Hinrich uses her mother's fortune-telling book, which seems to produce the solution that Hinrich's wife will die, at which Hinrich turns quiet and gentle.

'But this time the numbers lied; his wife recovered shortly afterwards, and after that he was worse than ever. Believe me, Mr Magistrate, if I ever did him any wrong, I've paid for it with my fears and anxieties.'

Since she broke out into sobs as she said this, I let her sit down on a chair; she buried her head in her hands. But soon she raised her eyes again and looked at me. The room was lit now only by the last glow of sunset, and in that light the red lips of the girl stood out strikingly against her pale face and dark eyes.

But I had to press my questions. 'Last week', I said, 'Hinrich Fehse traded some horses, as a result of which he should have brought home a good deal of money; but the Fehse women maintain that they have been unable to find it anywhere.'

'We don't have the money, Mr Magistrate', she said darkly.

'And you don’t have any idea, either, what became of it?'

She nodded. 'Oh yes, I know what became of it.'

'Some people’, I continued, ‘are of the opinion that he went off to Hamburg with the aim of boarding a ship taking settlers to America.'

'No, Mr Magistrate. Where he’s got to, I don’t know, but he certainly didn’t use the money to get to America. I’ll tell you about all that, too, the truth, as God is my witness! It was last Sunday evening, going on for eight o’clock. My mother, who had been called out in the night, was in her armchair, nodding off over her knitting. We were quite on our own, and I was surprised that Hinrich Fehse hadn’t called round, for that morning in church he had been staring at me again so strangely that all the women there turned round to look at me. There was a storm blowing outside, but between the gusts I kept thinking I could hear someone walking up and down outside our house. I found that so eerie, I went to the front door to see what was up. There was no moon, Mr Magistrate, but the night was light enough to see by; through the bare lilac hedge I could very plainly make out the crosses in the churchyard which lies next to our garden, and so I could also see someone standing just beyond the hedge. I walked over, and it was Hinrich Fehse. "What are you doing out here, catching your death of cold?" I asked. "Why don’t you come inside?" - "I have to talk to you on your own, Margret", he replied. - "Very well then, there’s no-one else here and no-one is likely to come by in this storm." But he said nothing, until I said: "I’m freezing, I’m going in to get a shawl." Then he clutched my hand and said thickly: "We can’t go on like this, Margret, I’m going to have to put an end to it." He seemed so strange, I didn’t know what to say to him. "Hinrich", I replied, "the best thing would be for me to go away again, then everything will turn out all right." - "We must both go away, Margret, go away together!" he replied. We were standing right next to our well at that moment, and he pulled out a purse and bounced it on the edge, making the money inside jingle. "D’you hear that?" he said. "There’s gold in there. The day before yesterday I sold my bays. I’m off to join my cousin in the New World across the ocean, it’s easy to earn a living over there." - "But you can’t do that to your wife!" I said. "Can’t do that to her, Margret? It’s no kindness to her if I stay here, the few thousand dollars she brought into the business will soon be exhausted. I’m not a farmer any more, I can’t think of anything but you!” He tried to give me a hug, but I jumped back.

"I can just see myself doing such a thing", I said, "running off to the ends of the earth as your mistress!" - "Now listen to me", he went on, "we’ll slip away secretly, then my wife will sue for a divorce, and we can get married over there." - "No, Hinrich, I won’t do it, I won’t run off like that." When I said that he became like a madman, throwing himself down on to the ground. I can’t remember all the things he said, what’s more there was a gale whistling round the church so loudly I could scarcely hear him; my clothes were flapping about in the wind, and I was frozen stiff. "Go back home, Hinrich", I begged him, "you’re not in your right mind tonight. Let’s talk all this over tomorrow." At that moment I caught the sound of people coming up the church path behind us; Hans Ottsen was one of them, and I listened for the sound of our gate, since he’d been dropping in on us once or twice during the past few weeks. But they must have gone on past; I heard the turnstile creaking in the big churchyard gate, and then the voices going away down the road to the village. When I

turned back again, Hinrich was standing there facing me. "Margret", he said, choking on every word he spoke, "are you going to come with me?" But before I could reply, he put his hand over my mouth. "Wait before you answer!" he cried. "For I'm not going to ask you again, not ever!" I didn't reply, I felt as though I were being strangled; and indeed, what could I possibly have said to him? "So that's your answer!" he said. "I knew it all along, you're fickle, you're just waiting for that other fellow." I saw his arm move, and the next moment there was a splash deep down in the well. "Hinrich, your gold!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing, Hinrich?" - "Let it be", he said. "I don't need it any longer. But now" - and he took hold of both my hands and held me in front of him, as though he were wanting to observe me from a distance, "just kiss me once more, Margret!"'

'And then?' I asked, as the girl hesitated.

'I won't lie to you, Mr Magistrate, I wouldn't have denied him a kiss. But he suddenly pushed me away. I wanted to run to our door, but he called my name angrily and when I didn't take any notice he leapt after me and seized me from behind in a grip like iron. My hair had become unpinned, he wound one of my plaits round his hand and wrenched my head back with it. "Just one more minute, Margret", he said - and even in the darkness I could see his little eyes flashing above me; then, while the gale was almost tearing the clothes off my body, he yelled in my ear. "I've got a secret for you, Margret, but you mustn't tell anyone else! There's no place for the two of us on this earth, you're accursed, Margret!" I let out a scream, I thought he was about to throttle me. But then he let me go and ran off, I just heard him slamming the gate to the churchyard behind him, and in the next moment I heard my mother at our front door, calling for me. "He'll think better of it tomorrow", she said, after I had told her the whole story as best I could, "and then he can fish his gold up again himself." Then she went to fetch a padlock and fastened it to the lid of the well – it was the lid my grandfather made once upon a time when he was getting unwelcome visitors; for after all anyone could just have pulled the purse back up in the bucket. When we got indoors again, my mother took herself off to bed, and I settled back to my work once more. Outside the wind was still blowing a gale, but from time to time I could hear the night watchman blowing his horn down in the village and the big clock tolling from the church tower. Everything felt very strange, and I just couldn't get the thought out of my mind that he might have done himself some injury. When I saw that my mother had fallen asleep, I took my shawl and slipped out. I met no-one, most of the houses were already dark, but at the Fehse farmstead I could see from the road that there was still a light shining through the hole in the shutters. I took my courage in both hands and went up the embankment and in through the garden gate. When I reached the window, I could hear the spinning wheels whirring inside, and from time to time old Mrs Fehse saying something. "What can they be talking about?" I thought to myself, and put my ear against the shutters, but I couldn't make it out. Then I saw an upturned wheelbarrow under the next window and when I climbed up on it and stood on tiptoe, my eye just reached up to the heart-shaped opening in the shutter. Now I could see the wall-bed, and I could make out that there was someone lying on it; as the head thrashed about on the pillow, I saw that it was Hinrich. But then all at once he sat bolt upright in bed and stared wildly in my direction. That made me frightened, so I jumped down from the barrow and ran off along the road, across the churchyard. The wind was whistling and howling round the tower, making that noise that old Joachim the gipsy says is the dead people screaming in their graves. I was shaking with fear, I don't know

how I got back home and into my bed. And next morning they said that Hinrich had gone missing in the night and I've not seen any sign of him since.'

She fell silent. In the meantime the twilight had advanced further. When I took a look through the little panes of the window into the open country beyond, there was only a pale ember of sunset left on the horizon; the trees in the garden were black shapes, and beyond them the mists were rising across the moor like white veils. I had two tallow candles lighted and placed on the table in front of me; then I summoned the Fehse women into the room.

'Is she going to be here as well?' asked the old widow, throwing a glance, half of fear and half of hatred, at the girl who, as I had instructed her, had found a place to sit in one of the window-seats.

'She won't trouble you, Frau Fehse!' I replied.

'Well, if you say so. What I have to tell you I'd say before God and the whole world, but – ' and here she wagged a bony finger menacingly, 'sinners will get their just deserts!'

The girl in the window did not seem to have heard these words. She was looking exhausted, and leaning her head so far back against the wall that her black hair tumbled away from her temples.

'Don't carry on like that, Frau Fehse', I said. 'Just tell me exactly what happened.'

The woman seemed to be roused from faraway thoughts.

'Yes', she said. 'That evening he was over there again, yes, at *her* house. But that night he came home early, for Ann-Marieken was in such a bad way, the doctor had just prescribed a new medicine for her, and Hinrich sat the whole night by her bed, indeed he did, and stroked her hand. "Ann-Marieken", he said, "you're not to blame, please don't accuse me too harshly when you are up there, you'll be much better off up there than down here with me."'

At this the young woman, who was just putting her child down in his cradle, started weeping bitterly.

'No, Frau Fehse', I intervened, trying to make it clear what I wanted to hear, 'what was it happened on that last evening, when your son disappeared from the house?'

'Yes, what did happen?' she repeated. 'It was last Sunday evening, we had cleared the table after the meal and the maid had gone to her bedroom - no, it must have been nearer to ten o'clock. Ann-Marieken and I were still sat at our spinning-wheels. My Hinrich had come home just before, in a state of great bewilderment, and he'd been lying for quite a while in the wall-bed over there. But he can't have been sleeping, for he kept tossing and turning, and groaning to himself - but we were used to him doing that, Mr Magistrate. Outside there was a storm such as we often get in November, a north-westerly was blowing,

tearing the leaves off the trees. I was always afraid it would uproot the pear-tree by the barn that my dear departed father planted with his own hands at my Hinrich's christening. Then I heard a soft sound of pattering feet outside the window, and I pricked up my ears, for you see, Mr Magistrate, I couldn't tell whether it was the footsteps of a person or of an animal. So I say, "Ann-Marieken? Can you hear that noise?" I ask her. But she just spins her wheel and says "No, Mother, I can't hear anything." So then I move a chair over to the window and I peep through the opening in the shutter - we had screwed down the shutters, because of the storm. There was the pear-tree still standing against the grey of the night sky, groaning away and trying to withstand the storm, it was pitiful to watch. And I could see across the fields too and all along the pastures and I could make out the pools glinting over yonder on the moor, for the night was quite light. But there was no living creature to be seen. And then I catch sight of something cowering immediately beneath the window and hear a sliding noise as though a shaggy coat were brushing along the wall. When I get down from my chair, the thing starts scratching from outside at the next shutter and at the same time I can hear the rope creaking, the rope you pull yourself up in bed with, and there's my Hinrich sitting bolt upright in his bed and staring with completely dead eyes at the window. When I shout, "Dear God, Hinrich, what's the matter?" I hear all the animals back there in the shed becoming restless, and through the noise of the storm I can hear our bull roaring and tearing violently at his chain. But my Hinrich keeps sitting there deathly still, with glazed eyes, so that it makes me quite terrified, and when I turn round again myself - the good Lord Jesus Christ defend us! - there's an animal peering through the shutters: I can see its sharp white teeth and black eyes quite plainly!'

The old woman wiped the sweat from her brow with her apron and began muttering softly to herself.

'An animal, Frau Fehse?' I asked. 'Have you dogs as big as that in the village, then?'

She shook her head. 'That was no dog, Mr Magistrate.'

'But there are no wolves in these parts any more!'

The old woman slowly turned her head towards the girl and then said in a harsh voice: 'It may not have been a proper wolf at all!'

'Mother, Mother', the young wife cried out. 'You've always told me it was the midwife's Margret you saw looking in through the window that night.'

'Well now, Ann-Marieken, I'm not saying that it wasn't her, am I.' And the old woman relapsed into her incomprehensible lamenting and muttering.

'What are you rambling on about, Frau Fehse?' I exclaimed. And yet, when I saw the girl sitting there in the window with her chalk-white face and red lips – I remembered the white goblin from her grandfather's homeland, and I was almost tempted to add: 'You're wrong, Mother Fehse, I know what's really happened, she has sucked out his soul. Maybe he's gone off to search for it!' But all I said was: 'Tell me, sensibly now, what happened next with your Hinrich.'

'With my Hinrich?' she repeated. 'He seized the bed-rope and with one bound he vaulted down on to the floor. "No, let *me* go, Hinrich!" I said. But he hastily threw on his clothes: "No, no, Mother, you're not strong enough to control the bull!", and while he spoke he kept his eyes fixed on the shutters. Then as he was on his way out he bumped into the cradle which was standing beside the bed, just where it is now, and the baby stretched out one little arm in his sleep and made clutching movements in the air with his tiny fingers. My Hinrich stood still, just once more, and bent over the cradle, and I heard him saying to himself: "The child! The child!" And he was just reaching out to take the little hand in his when another great gust of wind pounded against the shutters and out there in the bull's pen the roaring started up again. At that he gave a deep sigh and staggered out of the door as if in a daze.'

For some while now, I had observed, Margret had had her head cocked against the window as though listening; now I too could hear the muffled rumbling of a cart which seemed to be coming up the road from the moor.

'And since then', I asked the old woman again, 'you haven't seen your son at all?'

I was vouchsafed no reply. The living-room door creaked on its hinges and in through the crack there squeezed a little grey dog, wet and dirty; it ran to the old farmer's widow and looked at her questioningly for a moment, then whined as it sniffed round the bed before slipping out of the door again as quickly as it had come in. The two women, who had followed the animal's movements breathlessly with their eyes, broke out into vociferous wailings. From their lamentations I was able to work out that it was the missing man's dog, one he had trained himself and who went everywhere with him. Since that Sunday evening the beast had also been missing.

Meanwhile the sound of heavy cartwheels had come closer, and then I saw the girl at the window crane her neck and stare out with wide eyes. The light from the tallow candle did not reach that far, but a shaft of moonlight was shining through the panes. With the sinuous movement of a serpent uncoiling itself she quickly drew herself erect and stood there with her mouth open. As she did so, the cart rumbled on to the paved threshing-floor just outside the house.

For a moment there was complete silence, then men's voices could be heard in the hallway, the door of the living-room was thrown wide open and a broad-shouldered man appeared in the doorway. 'We've come with the body', he said. 'Out there on the moor it was, lying in the Black Tarn.'

He was interrupted by the loud sorrowings of the women. The young wife had thrown herself, with both arms outstretched, across the cradle of her infant who, rudely roused from sleep, added his shrill little voice to the hubbub.

But the old woman suddenly recovered herself. Wagging a bony finger again, she went up to the girl, who was still standing, as if turned to stone, staring out into the empty blackness. 'D'you hear that?' she shouted. 'He's dead! Now get out! You've no business here

any more!' The girl turned her head as though none of the words made any sense to her, but despite the clothes wrapped round her body I could see a shudder run through her limbs as she moved silently out of the door. Through the window I saw her cross the courtyard, her head thrown back as though some force had wrenched it round permanently, and her eyes fixed on the barn where the dead man's body was lying. All of a sudden, as she reached the road, she began to run, her arms stretched up over her head as though there were something behind her and she were trying to shake off its pursuit. But soon she disappeared from view in the white mists which came rolling up from the moor and billowed over the road.

I ordered my carriage to be made ready, my business for the day being concluded. As I drove through the village, the beadle came out from his farm to meet me and put a restraining hand on my carriage. 'I'm sorry about young Hinrich, Mr Magistrate', he said, 'but after all who can say whether it wasn't all for the best that way. Now we must ensure that we find a hard-working tenant farmer who'll marry the widow and farm the place on behalf of the infant Hinrich Fehse. Never you fear, Mr Magistrate, I'll take care of all that.' And showing all his old imperturbability he gave me a solemn farewell wave of the hand as, with these consoling words ringing in my ear, I drove out of the village along the edge of the moor, which was lit by misty moonlight.

To round off this report, let me record that the well belonging to the midwife's family was emptied out the very next day, and the treasure that had been dropped into it did indeed come to light. The other important thing that needed to be discovered was a husband for the young widow, but before it happened her little child succumbed to an attack of angina and followed his father into that undiscovered country. Instead of taking the midwife's daughter, the notorious Margret, to wife, Hans Ottsen preferred to add the Fehse holdings to his father's farm through the simple expedient of marriage. In this way the prescription cited by the beadle's wife was carried out: a few handfuls of churchyard earth had put everything to rights again. But if you ask me what became of the Slovak girl, I fear I am unable to provide an answer. She is said to have moved to some large city or other, I don't know which, and all trace of her having been submerged in the great flood of people there, she was never heard of again.