

“The Eighth Job”
by Hermann Heiberg
1893
Translated by C.R. Friedrichs *

“Die achte Stelle,” from: Hermann Heiberg, *Am Kamin: Erzählungen*
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Note: Hermann Heiberg (1840-1910) was a minor north German author who wrote numerous novels, novellas and short stories on social themes.

“You will only have to instruct one young child, who is slightly backward in learning, for a few hours a day, and the rest of the time will remain entirely at your disposal,” wrote a certain lady, Frau von Dollrott of Trockhausen. I was pleasantly surprised and without any second thoughts I not only accepted the position which she offered but let her know that I could be there in just a few days.

But first I had to attend to a few personal matters and make some changes in my wardrobe, which was certainly in need of some improvement.

Among the personal matters that needed attention was a lengthy letter to my brother, to whom – in order to spare him any worry or anxiety – I had not written a single letter while I was in Breslau. After all, why should I have disturbed him with a description of all the agonies which I had suffered during the last eight months?

When people do nothing but complain in the end nobody believes them anymore – they end up like the perpetual liars who are not taken seriously when for once they tell the truth. Would Karl really have believed me if I had told him how the Zenkers had treated me? But just like the last time, he would have insisted that I must immediately give up the position. Yet I am determined never again to be a burden to this decent man who can scarcely look after his own immediate family on the modest wages he receives.

I am writing these sad memoirs as if I had finally reached some goal which, since the beginning of my work as a governess, I had hoped to achieve – but I never have.

When I compare my present situation with what I gave up, I almost wish myself back in my previous circumstances. I am quite unable to suppress the outrage that overcame me during my first days here and which continues to evoke a feeling of disgust and revulsion that I can hardly describe.

I currently find myself at the manor house of Trockhausen, which belongs to Baron von Dollrott, who lives there with his wife and their three daughters.

God in his righteousness gave Frau von Dollrott an appearance that might have served as a warning to rest of the world. She has the personality of a cat, the smile of a devil, and the appearance of a badly made up actress in a second-rate theater.

The two older daughters, who care for nothing other than their appearance, are at the age when young women yearn for a suitable bachelor in much the same way that a farmer wishes for rain after a long drought. In fact things are getting pretty tense in that regard.

Elise, the older one, has pale blue eyes and a large, unattractive chin, which – no matter how long she gazes in the mirror – is not going to get any smaller. If this alone would not scare someone off, then – in addition to her remarkably ungracious hands and feet – her small, unhealthy looking bosom will surely frighten off any potential admirer.

She always talks without thinking first, and what she says sounds blunt and awkward. None of the Muses seem to have been willing to grant her any of the graces attributed to them, nor does she realize that she could at least make up for or even conceal her personal deficiencies with a becoming modesty.

Klara is small, soft and dainty, but she has a sharp, impertinent expression and as years go by her face will certainly acquire more and more pronounced lines, for simply by looking at her mother one can predict how Claire (as she is called) will eventually look.

In addition, Claire is so haughty that one could get her listed in the registers of the Patent Office – for where other people have a heart she has nothing but a bundle of self-love, lack of feeling, bad temper and spite.

Herr von Dollrott is a silent, miserly man, proud of his ancestry but occupied with one thing only – trying to increase his fortune. There is something about his appearance that hardly reminds one of a saint. In fact he is so ugly that I am always reminded of the carved caricature of a head on the handle of a walking-stick which one of my cousins used to own.

But enough of these pictures from the distinguished portrait gallery. Now I must describe Ernestine.

This Ernestine, the ten-year-old girl for whose education I was summoned and whom I am supposed to instruct and supervise, is in fact completely simple-minded – yet this obvious fact is never allowed to be mentioned.

But the most outrageous thing of all – and even as I write this down, I can hardly believe that this is really true – is that it turns out I have been given to this child as a doll, and she treats me completely as if I am her newest toy.

Right during the first days I wondered if I could stay in a household where people made such a mockery of human dignity. My sympathy for this poor creature triumphed, and since this absurd comedy takes place only three times a day – after all, there could be no serious thought of actual instruction – I decided to adjust to these circumstances and once again postpone any hope of any human happiness, as I have been doing ever since the first time I took on a position thirteen years ago.

Obviously at the beginning I hoped that there would be some compensation for the disappointment I had experienced. But nothing was offered. For weeks I waited for somebody at least to openly admit that little Ernestine was in fact a cretin, and that I had simply been given to her as a doll “because” (as the child herself said to me, since this was the one subject about which she could express herself) “the last doll was sent away by Mama since she was not very new or pretty

any more and she could not be fixed.”

The only thing that people said was that the child had to be treated gently and that one had to be a little careful about how quickly she could learn things.

The only teaching materials at my disposal are some picture books which Ernestine looks at the way a three-year-old child would, and about which she constantly repeats the same remarks.

And that is about as much as she can do. Every attempt I make to help her advance intellectually comes to nothing. She eats, drinks, sleeps and three times a day she goes out for an walk during which, on account of her physical weakness, she is pulled in a little wagon. The rest of the day she either plays with her “doll” – that is to say, with me – or is engaged in some other meaningless activity while I keep an eye on her.

I have succeeded to some extent in limiting the demands she makes on me, because I only allow her to put my hat on me and tie the ribbons and--when I’m in a particularly good mood-- I take off my shoes or my gloves and let her busy herself with them. At the beginning she insisted that I should take off my dress and lie down and go to sleep. She wanted to wash me and in particular she wanted to comb my hair every day, which I permitted her to do a few times. From some indistinct words or phrases I gather that Cecilie, “the last doll, who couldn’t be fixed any more,” had allowed her to do all these things and I had to dry a lot of her tears before I got across to her that the new doll was not a “dress-up” doll like the last one.

If only the lady of the house had just once taken me aside and admitted that this was the situation and apologized for the outrageous fact that she had kept this secret from me, or even if without really explaining things she had at least appealed to my sense of sympathy for the child — but there is no hope of anything like that. In the eyes of these people I am just “she,” the one who is paid to be with Ernestine.

Not once has it occurred to these people that I might be a person who is capable of making her own choices, who certainly fulfills her duties but hopes to find some satisfaction in doing so and whose heart and mind and education lead her to expect something more than only interacting with a child whom nature has neglected to develop and whose only form of expressing her deeper feelings is an inarticulate yowling. And of course it would never occur to these people to offer me anything to compensate for what they expect of me.

Yet every Sunday they go to church to supplicate their merciful Creator and murmur their humble prayers.

I never participate in their social events and hardly ever even join them at their regular meals. These times are always cleverly set up as the times for Ernestine to play with her “doll.” Not once has anyone asked anything about me or my family, nor has anyone taken any interest in my accomplishments or abilities. I am just an upper-level servant, and the young ladies want to make sure I am never to be seen in the parlour because of the simple fact that, although I am older than they are, nature has bestowed a more attractive appearance on me than on them.

Often I am beset with ideas that begin to consume me. I can’t live without any stimulation or contact or love. My tiny room looks out onto a little courtyard in which there is a linden tree. My only pleasure is to look at this tree and to listen to the twittering birds or occasionally to try to refresh

my spirits by going outdoors and trying to get rid of my tormented thoughts.

Dear God in Heaven, what a life, what an existence! Today is my thirty-second birthday. My brother Karl has not written to me. And he is the last person I have on earth – aside from him there is nobody. In my sad path through life I have hardly ever met anyone to whom I became close. Those people to whom I felt somewhat drawn sensed a certain reserve in me, because I am never regarded and treated as an equal. So how would they ever be able to know my true worth? And those who were beneath me lacked the education that would make it possible for us to get any closer.

There is nobody – not a single person –

Four weeks later

So, it is settled. I am leaving. Today I gave notice. I will try to recall and describe just as precisely as possible the scene that led to this decision.

The time: one o'clock in the morning. Just now the last guests have departed. They had been invited to Trockhausen for tea and dancing. For some reasons that have never been fully explained, on this occasion I was included in the party.

“Low-cut, Fräulein?” That is all the old lady had said to me, and I nodded my head. Yes, I had one dress with a low-cut front suitable for evening events. I accepted the invitation not because I expected any pleasure from it – after all, what role could I play at such a party? – but because I could see Claire’s visible irritation about the decision the others had made, and I am not such an utter saint that I can’t sometimes be a little bit mean-spirited.

Presumably the only reason I was invited was because a particular dance, the française, was being planned. One of the young ladies had suddenly had to decline the invitation, and this had created a gap in the numbers. I offered to serve the tea, and I was graciously allowed to do so.

Among the twenty-four people at the party was a Herr Grützkopf, who looked about as ugly as his name sounds, but was known to be one of the richest landowners in the whole district.

This gentleman noticed me when he entered the little green room where I was serving tea. Not only did he introduce himself to me but before he returned to the party he even engaged me in conversation. I hardly know how such a thing could come about.

And as a result of this casual interaction, for the rest of the evening he proceeded to pay me some courteous attention.

Due to some unintentional arrangements when I sat down at the table I found myself next to him, with Claire sitting on his other side. He proceeded to chat with me in the most lively manner, and when we rose from the table he repeatedly invited me to dance with him. As a result of this, all evening I could observe every color of the rainbow in the faces of the ladies of the Dollrott family. The old lady exuded a grey anger and her eyes were feline yellow; her daughter with the double chin displayed red cheeks and blue lips, and Claire’s cheekbones changed from pale white to jealous pink while her eyes were blazing green.

The Dollrotts held a mortgage from Herr Grützkopf. But he was in fact the last hope for the next generation of the family!

No doubt if the inhabitants of the manor house could have looked into the secret chambers of

the soul of this man, they would have realized that it was much more likely that old Field Marshal Blücher would rise from his grave to propose to one of them than that this Herr Grützkopf would have even contemplated such a connection with one of the daughters of the Dollrott family. Hope makes people blind, and that is what happened here. Yet with remarkable openness this straightforward and intelligent man told me what he thought about the family and it was all too clear from what he said that he and I had exactly the same opinion about them.

Eventually everybody said their farewells, including Herr Grützkopf: “My great pleasure, Fräulein!” “The pleasure was mine, sir.” And that was that.

“Ahem, Fräulein,” said Frau von Dollrott, who had just finished snuffing out the last candles with her handkerchief and was now seated on a sofa in the salon. “A moment of your time, please.”

“Madam?”

“Sit down, please. I would like to exchange a few words with you.”

I sat down, somewhat surprised.

“It is my custom to speak quite openly,” she said. “That is the kind of person I am. So you must allow me to speak quite directly about this evening. Until now it has never been my custom to admit the young ladies to whom I entrust the education of my Ernestine into my social circle. This is not because of any prejudices on my part, but simply to insure that certain irregularities which can take place should be avoided. Do you understand what I mean?”

“No, madam, I do not.”

The woman looked at me with an expression on her face which I shall never forget.

“Well, then,” she continued haughtily. “I will make myself understood. I thought I would make an exception today, because I have been quite satisfied with the results of your instruction and the progress being made by my daughter. I wanted to express my appreciation by inviting you to participate in this evening’s festivities.”

I made not the slightest change in my expression. But this shamelessly hypocritical explanation for what should have been a routine courtesy brought the blood to my cheeks.

“But, but – surely I could have expected of you that in light of the situation which you occupy in this household you would have understood that you, that you – ”

She paused, and I looked at her so coldly that even a polar bear would have noticed the atmosphere getting frosty.

“Well,” she continued with her unabated insolence, “that you would know that certain rules of tact and delicacy – ”

Just at that moment the two excellent daughters of this fine lady came to the door and called with one voice, “Mama? Are you in here, Mama?” But they immediately left again with an expression on their faces that clearly said “Ah, she has not quite finished her lecture – and the more the better.” I looked once again with a cold expression at the woman who dared to speak to me in this manner.

For a second she reacted to this by dropping her gaze. But then she got a fresh wind, which was not difficult for someone of her haughty temperament, and continued:

“– as I say, of tact and delicacy are not to be ignored. And another thing. You conducted

yourself at this evening's gathering in a way that we are not accustomed to and we do not wish to become accustomed to, and since you, my dear, are presumably unacquainted with the rules and customs of refined society, it is for your sake as well as ours that I must explain to you that conversation with respectable gentlemen requires a certain amount of reserve, and that the kind of free mannerisms which you displayed this evening could lead to misunderstandings of a kind that could cast a poor reflection on us. In good society, my dear – ”

“Madam,” I said, interrupting her flow of words since I was bursting to reply, “in the first place, allow me to point out that I am just as well acquainted with the rules and customs and manners of good society as you are, since I was raised in a home in which refinement and honesty were as well represented as anywhere. Furthermore, madam, I am not ‘your dear,’ I am Fräulein Anna Henriette. And finally, I propose to depart just as soon as possible from a household whose members lack even the most basic acquaintance with what you refer to as refinement, decent morals and good social form, the absence of which were apparent to me from the very moment I was received into this household – and where people now allow themselves to claim without the faintest justification that *I* lack those qualities!”

“And one last thing,” I continued, “if you want to give your daughter another doll, buy one at the market or at the toy store, and you can regard it as due only to my compassion for that poor child that I was willing to participate in this unworthy play-acting as long as I did.”

“I won't even go into the deception of which you were guilty in engaging me for the education of a ‘small child, slightly backward in learning.’ So there, madam! I bid you a good night and if you have anything further to say to me, you may do so in writing.”

Today I arrived back in Berlin. After some terrible final days I left Trockhausen. Yes, terrible days – for the humiliations to which I was subjected after my open declaration would defy any description.

The wind and cold are beating against the window of my tiny rented room. But raw as it is outside, I feel even worse within. What now? Where can I go? I am afraid – afraid of the future. A new position – the ninth one? I shudder at the thought. But if not, how can I live?

Dear God, be merciful to me, help me, support me so that I do not become desperate. Yes, truly desperate –