The Poor Boy in the Grave

Once upon a time there was a poor shepherd boy whose father and mother had died, and he had been given by the authorities into the house of a rich man, who was to feed and raise him. But the man and his wife had wicked hearts; for all their wealth they were greedy and envious, and it vexed them whenever anyone put a bite of their bread into their mouth. The poor boy might do whatever he liked, he got little to eat, but all the more blows.

One day he was supposed to tend the brooding hen with her chicks. But she strayed with her young through a hedge fence: immediately the hawk swooped down and carried them off through the air. The boy cried with all his might, "Thief, thief, scoundrel!" But what good did that do? The hawk did not bring its prey back. The man heard the noise, ran over, and when he learned that his hen was gone, he flew into a rage and gave the boy such a beating that he could not move for a couple of days. Now he had to tend the chicks without the hen, but then the trouble was even greater: one ran here, another there. So he thought he was being clever if he tied them all together on a string, because then the hawk could not steal any of them. But he was far wrong. After a couple of days, when he had fallen asleep, worn out from running about and from hunger, the bird of prey came and seized one of the chicks, and since the others hung fast to it, he carried them all off,
[392] perched on a tree and swallowed them down. The farmer came home just then, and when he saw the misfortune, he grew furious and beat the boy so mercilessly that he had to lie in bed for several days.

When he was back on his feet, the farmer said to him, "You are too stupid for me, I cannot use you as a herder, you shall go as a messenger." Then he sent him to the judge, to whom he was to bring a basket full of grapes, and gave him a letter besides. On the way hunger and thirst tormented the poor boy so severely that he ate two of the grapes. He brought the judge the basket, but when the latter had read the letter and counted the grapes, he said, "Two pieces are missing." The boy confessed quite honestly that, driven by hunger and thirst, he had eaten the missing ones. The judge wrote a letter to the farmer and demanded twice as many grapes again. These too the boy had to carry with a letter. When he was again so terribly hungry and thirsty, he could not help himself, and he ate two grapes again. But beforehand he took the letter out of the basket, laid it under a stone, and sat down on it, so that the letter could not see and betray him. Yet the judge still questioned him about the missing pieces. "Oh," said the boy, "how did you find that

out? The letter could not know it, for I had laid it under a stone beforehand." The judge had to laugh at the simplicity, and sent the man a letter in which he admonished him to treat the poor boy better and not let him lack food and drink; he should also teach him what was right and what was wrong.

"I will show you the difference soon enough," said the hard man; "but if you want to eat, you must also work, and if you do something wrong, you shall be sufficiently instructed
[393] by blows." The following day he set him to a hard task. He was to cut a few bundles of straw for the horses' fodder; and the man threatened him, "In five hours," he said, "I will be back again; if the straw is not chopped into chaff by then, I will beat you until you cannot move a limb." The farmer went with his wife, the farmhand, and the maid to the fair and left the boy nothing but a small piece of bread. The boy took his place at the straw chair and began to work with all his might. As he grew hot doing it, he took off his little coat and threw it onto the straw. In his anxiety not to finish in time he kept cutting away, and in his zeal he unknowingly cut up his little coat along with the straw. Too late he realized the misfortune, which could not be undone. "Oh," he cried, "now I am done for. The wicked man did not threaten me for nothing; if he comes back and sees what I have done, he will beat me to death. I would rather take my own life."

The boy had once heard the farmer's wife say, "Under the bed I have a pot of poison." But she had only said it to keep the nibblers away, for there was honey in it. The boy crawled under the bed, fetched out the pot, and ate it all up. "I don't know," he said, "people say death is bitter; to me it tastes sweet. No wonder the farmer's wife so often wishes for death." He sat down on a little stool and was ready to die. But instead of growing weaker, he felt himself strengthened by the nourishing food. "It cannot have been poison," he said, "but the farmer once said that in his clothes chest there was a little bottle of fly poison; that will surely be the real poison and bring me death." But it was no fly poison, but Hungarian wine. The boy fetched out the bottle and drank it up. "This
[394] death also tastes sweet," he said, but when soon afterward the wine began to rise into his brain and stupefy him, he thought his end was drawing near. "I feel that I must die," he said, "I will go out to the churchyard and look for a grave." He staggered off, reached the churchyard, and lay down in a freshly opened grave. His senses left him more and more. Nearby stood an inn where a wedding was being celebrated: when he heard the music, he fancied he was already in paradise, until at last he lost all consciousness. The poor boy never woke again; the glow of the hot wine and the cold dew of the night took his life, and he remained in the grave into which he had laid himself.

When the farmer received the news of the boy's death, he was frightened and feared being brought before the court: indeed, such terror seized him that he sank fainting to the ground. The woman, who was standing at the hearth with a pan full of lard, ran over to help him. But the fire leapt into the pan, seized the whole house, and within a few hours it lay in ashes. The years they still had to live they spent, tormented by pangs of conscience, in poverty and misery.