

Fritz Extract

She found Fritz standing in the light of a smoky lamp, throwing paper after paper into a leather bag which was bulging with this clothes and books and other bits and pieces. A glass of plum brandy stood on the table beside him. He had already drunk quite a lot, by the look of him, for his eyes were wild, his cheeks were flushed and his hair was standing on end.

‘What is it?’ he said. ‘What do you want?’

‘That story you told us,’ Gretl began, but she got no further, for the young man put his hands over his ears and shook his head violently.

‘Don’t speak of it! I wish I’d never begun it! I wish I’d never told a story in my life!’

[...]

He groaned, and put his face in his hands.

‘Groaning won’t help,’ she said. ‘You’ve got to finish the story properly. What happens next?’

‘I don’t know!’ he cried. ‘I dreamed the first part of it, and it was so strange and horrible that I couldn’t resist writing it down and pretending it was mind... But I couldn’t think of any more.’

‘But what were you going to do when you got to that part?’ she said.

‘Make it up, of course!’ he said. ‘I’ve done that before. I often do it. I enjoy the risk, you see. I start telling a story with no idea what’s going to happen at the end, and I make it up when I get there.

Sometimes it’s even better than writing it down first. I was sure I could do it with this one. But when the door opened and the old man came in, I must have panicked... Oh, I wish I’d never begun! I’ll never tell a story again!’

‘You must tell the end of this one, though,’ said Gretl, ‘or something bad will happen. You’ve got to.’

‘I can’t!’

‘You must.’

‘I couldn’t!’

‘You have to.’

‘Impossible,’ he said. ‘I can’t control it any more. I wound it up and set it going, and it’ll just have to work itself out. I was my hands of it. I’m off!’

‘But you can’t! Where are you going?’

‘Anywhere! Belin, Vienna, Prague – as far away as I can get!’.

And he poured himself another glass of plum brandy and swallowed it all in one go.