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# **Ilka on the Hill-Top and Other Stories**

Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen

# Imprint

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## ILKA ON THE HILL-TOP

Mr. Julius Hahn and his son Fritz were on a summer journey in the Tyrol. They had started from Mayrhofen early in the afternoon, on two meek-eyed, spiritless farm horses, and they intended to reach Ginzling before night-fall.

There was a great blaze of splendor hidden somewhere behind the western mountain-tops; broad bars of fiery light were climbing the sky, and the châteaux and the Alpine meadows shone in a soft crimson illumination. The Zemmbach, which is of a choleric temperament, was seething and brawling in its rocky bed, and now and then sent up a fierce gust of spray, which blew like an icy shower-bath, into the faces of the travellers.

"*Ach, welch verfluchtes Wetter!*" cried Mr. Hahn fretfully, wiping off the streaming perspiration. "I'll be blasted if you catch me going to the Tyrol again for the sake of being fashionable!"

"But the scenery, father, the scenery!" exclaimed Fritz, pointing toward a great, sun-flushed peak, which rose in majestic isolation toward the north.

"The scenery—bah!" growled the senior Hahn. "For scenery, recommend me to Saxon Switzerland, where you may sit in an easy cushioned carriage without blistering your legs, as I have been doing to-day in this blasted saddle."

"Father, you are too fat," remarked the son, with a mischievous chuckle.

"And you promise fair to tread in my footsteps, son," retorted the elder, relaxing somewhat in his ill-humor.

This allusion to Mr. Fritz's prospective corpulence was not well received by the latter. He gave his horse a smart cut of the whip, which made the jaded animal start off at a sort of pathetic mazurka gait up the side of the mountain.

Mr. Julius Hahn was a person of no small consequence in Berlin. He was the proprietor of the "Haute Noblesse" Concert garden, a highly respectable place of amusement, which enjoyed the especial

patronage of the officers of the Royal Guard. Weissbeer, Bairisch, Seidel, Pilsner, in fact all varieties of beer, and as connoisseurs asserted, of exceptional excellence, could be procured at the "Haute Noblesse;" and the most ingenious novelties in the way of gas illumination, besides two military bands, tended greatly to heighten the flavor of the beer, and to put the guests in a festive humor. Mr. Hahn had begun life in a small way with a swallow-tail coat, a white choker, and a napkin on his arm; his stock in trade, which he utilized to good purpose, was a peculiarly elastic smile and bow, both of which he accommodated with extreme nicety to the social rank of the person to whom they were addressed. He could listen to a conversation in which he was vitally interested, never losing even the shadow of an intonation, with a blank neutrality of countenance which could only be the result of a long transmission of ancestral inanity. He read the depths of your character, divined your little foibles and vanities, and very likely passed his supercilious judgment upon you, seeming all the while the personification of uncritical humility.

It is needless to say that Mr. Hahn picked up a good deal of valuable information in the course of his career as a waiter; and to him information meant money, and money meant power and a recognized place in society. The diplomatic shrewdness which enabled him to estimate the moral calibre of a patron served him equally well in estimating the value of an investment. He had a hundred subterranean channels of information, and his judgment as to the soundness or unsoundness of a financial enterprise was almost unerring. His little secret transactions on the Bourse, where he had his *commissionaires*, always yielded him ample returns; and when an opportunity presented itself, which he had long foreseen, of buying a suburban garden at a bankrupt sale, he found himself, at least preliminarily, at the goal of his ambition. From this time forth, Mr. Hahn rose rapidly in wealth and power. He kept his thumb, so to speak, constantly on the public pulse, and prescribed amusements as unerringly as a physician prescribes medicine, and usually, it must be admitted, with better results. The "Haute Noblesse" became the favorite resort of fashionable idlers, among whom the military element usually pre-ponderated, and the flash of gilt buttons and

the rattle of swords and scabbards could always be counted on as the unvarying accompaniment to the music.

With all his prosperity, however, Mr. Hahn could not be called a happy man. He had one secret sorrow, which, until within a year of his departure for the Tyrol, had been a source of constant annoyance: Mrs. Hahn, whom he had had the indiscretion to marry before he had arrived at a proper recognition of his own worth, was not his equal in intellect; in fact, she was conspicuously his inferior. She had been chamber-maid in a noble family, and had succeeded in marrying Mr. Hahn simply by the fact that she had made up her mind not to marry him. Mr. Hahn, however, was not a man to be baffled by opposition. When the pert Mariana had cut him three times at a dancing-hall, he became convinced that she was the one thing in the world which he needed to make his existence complete. After presenting him with a son, Fritz, and three rather unlovely daughters, she had gradually lost all her pertness (which had been her great charm) and had developed into a stout, dropsical matron, with an abundance of domestic virtues. Her principal trait of character had been a dogged, desperate loyalty. She was loyal to her king, and wore golden imitations of his favorite flowers as jewelry. She was loyal to Mr. Hahn, too; and no amount of maltreatment could convince her that he was not the best of husbands. She adored her former mistress and would insist upon paying respectful little visits to her kitchen, taking her children with her. This latter habit nearly drove her husband to distraction. He stamped his feet, he tore his hair, he swore at her, and I believe, he even struck her; but when the next child was born,—a particularly wonderful one,—Mrs. Hahn had not the strength to resist the temptation of knowing how the new-born wonder would impress the Countess von Markenstein. Another terrible scene followed. The poor woman could never understand that she was no longer the wife of a waiter, and that she must not be paying visits to the great folks in their kitchens.

Another source of disturbance in Mr. Hahn's matrimonial relations was his wife's absolute refusal to appear in the parquet or the proscenium boxes in the theatre. In this matter her resistance bordered on the heroic; neither threats nor entreaties could move her.

"Law, Julius," she would say, while the tears streamed down over her plump cheeks, "the parquet and the big boxes are for the gentle-folks, and not for humble people like you and me. I know my place, Julius, and I don't want to be the laughing-stock of the town, as I should be, if I went to the opera and sat where my lady the Countess, and the other fine ladies sit. I should feel like a fool, too, Julius, and I should cry my eyes out when I got home."

It may easily be conjectured that Mr. Hahn's mourning covered a very light heart when the dropsy finally carried off this loving but troublesome spouse. Nor did he make any secret of the fact that her death was rather a relief to him, while on the other hand he gave her full credit for all her excellent qualities. Fritz, who was in cordial sympathy with his father's ambition for social eminence, had also learned from him to be ashamed of his mother, and was rather inclined to make light of the sorrow which he actually felt, when he saw the cold earth closing over her.

At the time when he made his summer excursion in the Tyrol, Fritz was a stout blond youth of two and twenty. His round, sleek face was not badly modelled, but it had neither the rough openness, characteristic of a peasant, nor yet that indefinable finish which only culture can give. In spite of his jaunty, fashionable attire, you would have put him down at once as belonging to what in the Old World is called "the middle class." His blue eyes indicated shrewdness, and his red cheeks habitual devotion to the national beverage. He was apparently a youth of the sort that Nature is constantly turning out by the thousand—mere weaker copies of progenitors, who by an unpropitious marriage have enfeebled instead of strengthening the type. Circumstances might have made anything of him in a small way; for, as his countenance indicated, he had no very pronounced proclivities, either good or bad. He had spent his boyhood in a gymnasium, where he had had greater success in trading jack-knives than in grappling with Cicero. He had made two futile attempts to enter the Berlin University, and had settled down to the conviction that he had mistaken his calling, as his tastes were military rather than scholarly; but, as he was too old to rectify this mistake, he had chosen to go to the Tyrol in search of pleasure rather than to the Military Academy in search of distinction.

At the mouth of the great ravine of Dornauberg the travellers paused and dismounted. Mr. Hahn called the guide, who was following behind with a horse laden with baggage, and with his assistance a choice repast, consisting of all manner of cold curiosities, was served on a large flat rock. The senior Hahn fell to work with a will and made no pretence of being interested in the sombre magnificence of the Dornauberg, while Fritz found time for an occasional exclamation of rapture, flavored with caviar, Rhine wine, and *paté de foie gras*.

"*Ach, Gott, Fritz, what stuff you can talk!*" grumbled his father, sipping his Johannisberger with the air of a connoisseur. "When I was of your age, Fritz, I had— hush, what is that?"

Mr. Hahn put down his glass with such an energy that half of the precious contents was spilled.

"*Ach, du lieber Gott,*" he cried a moment later. "*Wie wunderschön!*"

From a mighty cliff overhanging the road, about a hundred feet distant, came a long yodling call, peculiar to the Tyrol, sung in a superb ringing baritone. It soared over the mountain peaks and died away somewhere among the Ingent glaciers. And just as the last faint note was expiring, a girl's voice, fresh and clear as a dew-drop, took it up and swelled it and carolled it until, from sheer excess of delight, it broke into a hundred leaping, rolling, and warbling tones, which floated and gambolled away over the highlands, while soft-winged echoes bore them away into the wide distance.

"Father," said Fritz, who was now lying outstretched on a soft Scotch plaid smoking the most fragrant of weeds; "if you can get those two voices to the 'Haute Noblesse,' for the next season it is ten thousand thalers in your pocket; and I shall only charge you ten per cent. for the suggestion."

"Suggestion, you blockhead! Why, the thought flashed through my head the very moment I heard the first note. But hush—there they are again."

From the cliff, sung to the air of a Tyrolese folk-song, came this stanza:

Tell me, Ilka on the hill-top,  
While the Alpine breezes blow,  
Are thy golden locks as golden  
As they were a year ago?  
(Yodle) Hohli-ohli-ohli-ho!  
Hohli-ohli-ohli-ho! Hohlio-oh!

The effect of the yodle, in which both the baritone of the cliff and the Alpine soprano united, was so melodious that Mr. Hahn sprang to his feet and swore an ecstatic oath, while Fritz, from sheer admiring abstraction, almost stuck the lighted end of his cigar into his mouth. The soprano answered:

Tell me, Hänsel in the valley,  
While the merry cuckoos crow,  
Is thy bristly beard as bristly  
As it was a year ago?  
Hohli-ohli-ohli-ho!  
Hohli-ohli-ohli-ho! Hohli-oh!

The yodling refrain this time was arch, gay—full of mocking laughter and mirth. Then the responsive singing continued:

*Hänsel:* Tell me, Ilka on the hill-top,  
While the crimson glaciers glow,  
Are thine eyes as blue and beaming  
As they were a year ago?  
*Both:* Hohli-ohli, etc.

*Ilka:* Hänsel, Hänsel in the valley  
I will tell you true;  
If mine eyes are blue and beaming,  
What is that, I pray, to you?  
*Both:* Hohli-ohli, etc.

*Hänsel:* Tell me, Ilka on the hill-top,  
While the blushing roses blow,  
Are thy lips as sweet for kissing  
As they were a year ago?  
*Both:* Hohli-ohli, etc.

*Ilka:* Naughty Hänsel in the valley,  
Naughty Hänsel, tell me true,  
If my lips are sweet for kissing,  
What is that, I pray, to you?  
*Both:* Hohli-ohli, etc.

*Hänsel:* Tell me, Ilka on the hill-top,  
While the rivers seaward flow,  
Is thy heart as true and loving  
As it was a year ago?  
*Both:* Hohli-ohli, etc.

*Ilka:* Dearest Hänsel in the valley,  
I will tell you, tell you true.  
Yes, my heart is ever loving,  
True and loving unto you!  
*Both:* Hohli-ohli-ohli-ho!  
Hohli-ohli-ohli-ho! Hohli-oh!

For a few moments their united voices seemed still to be quivering in the air, then to be borne softly away by the echoes into the cool distance of the glaciers. A solitary thrush began to warble on a low branch of a stunted fir-tree, and a grasshopper raised its shrill voice in emulation. The sun was near its setting; the bluish evening shadows crept up the sides of the ice-peaks, whose summits were still flushed with expiring tints of purple and red.

Mr. Hahn rose, yawned and stretched his limbs. Fritz threw the burning stump of his cigar into the depths of the ravine, and stood watching it with lazy interest while it fell. The guide cleared away the remnants of the repast and began to resaddle the horses.

"Who was that girl we heard singing up on the Alp?" said Mr. Hahn, with well-feigned indifference, as he put his foot in the stirrup and made a futile effort to mount. "Curse the mare, why don't you make her stand still?"

"Pardon, your honor," answered the guide stolidly; "but she isn't used to the saddle. The girl's name is Ilka on the Hill-top. She is the best singer in all the valley."

"Ilka on the Hill-top! How – where does she live?"

"She lives on a farm called the Hill-top, a mile and a half from Mayrhofen."

"And the man who answered — is he her sweetheart?"

"Yes, your honor. They have grown up together, and they mean to marry some time, when they get money enough to buy out the old woman."

"And what did you say his name was?"

"Hänsel the Hunter. He is a garnet polisher by trade, because his father was that before him; but he is a good shot and likes roving in the woods better than polishing stones."

"Hm," grumbled Mr. Hahn, mounting with a prodigious effort.

## II.

It was in the autumn of 1863, only a few weeks after Mr. Hahn's visit to Ginzling and Dornauberg. There were war and rumors of war in the air. The Austrians and the Prussians were both mobilizing army-corps after army-corps, and all the Tyrolese youth, liable to service, were ordered to join their regiments. The Schleswig-Holstein question was being violently debated in the German and the English press, the former clamoring for blood, the latter counseling moderation. The Danish press was as loud-mouthed as any, and, if the battles could have been fought with words, would no doubt have come out victorious.

It had been a sad day at the Hill-top. Early in the morning Hänsel, with a dozen other young fellows of the neighborhood, had marched away to the music of fife and drum, and there was no knowing when they would come back again. A dismal whitish fog had been hovering about the fields all day long, but had changed toward evening into a fine drizzling rain, — one of those slow, hopeless rains that seem to have no beginning and no end. Old Mother Uberta, who, although she pretended to be greatly displeased at Ilka's matrimonial choice, persisted in holding her responsible for all her lover's follies, had been going about the house grumbling and scolding since the early dawn.

"Humph," said Mother Uberta, as she lighted a pine-knot and stuck it into a crack in the wall (for it was already dark, and candles were expensive), "it is a great sin and shame—the lad is neither crooked nor misshapen—the Lord has done well enough by him, Heaven knows; and yet never a stroke of work has he done since his poor father went out of the world as naked as he came into it. A shiftless, fiddling, and galavanting set they have always been, and me then as has only this one lass, givin' her away, with my eyes wide open, into misery."

Ilka, who was sitting before the open fire-place mingling her furtive tears with the wool she was carding, here broke into a loud sob, and hid her face in her hands.

"You always say mean things to me, mother, when Hänsel is away," sobbed she, "but when he is here, you let on as if you liked him ever so much."

The mother recognized this as a home-thrust, and wisely kept silent. She wet her finger-tips, twirled the thread, stopped the wheel, inspected some point in its mechanism with a scowl of intense pre-occupation, and then spun on again with a severe concentration of interest as if lovers were of small consequence compared to spinning-wheels. Mother Uberta was a tall, stately woman of fifty, with a comely wrinkled face, and large, well-modelled features. You saw at once that life was a serious business to her, and that she gave herself no quarter.

"Humph!" she began after awhile with that indefinable interjection of displeasure which defies all spelling. "You talk like the witless creature that you are. Didn't I tell the lad, two years ago, Michaelmas was, that the day he could pay off the mortgage on the farm, he should have you and the farm too? And eight hundred and fifty florins oughtn't to frighten a man as has got the right spirit in him. And there was Ruodi of Gänzelstein, as has got a big farm of his own, and Casper Thinglen with fifteen hundred a-comin' to him when his grandfather dies; and you sendin' them both off with worse grace than if they had been beggars askin' you for a shillin'. Now, stop your snivellin' there, I tell you. You are like your poor sainted father,—God bless him where he lies,—he too used to cry, likely enough, if a flea bit him."

At this moment Mother Uberta's monologue was interrupted by a loud rapping on the door; she bent down to attach the unfinished thread properly, but before she had completed this delicate operation, the door was opened, and two men entered. Seeing that they were strangers she sent them a startled glance, which presently changed into one of defiance. The fire was low, and the two men stood but dimly defined in the dusky light; but their city attire showed at once that they were not Tyrolese. And Mother Uberta, having heard many awful tales of what city-dressed men were capable of doing, had a natural distrust of the species.

"And pray, sir, what may your errand be?" she asked sternly, taking the burning pine-knot from its crack and holding it close to the face of the tallest stranger.

"My name is Hahn, madam," answered the person whose broad expanse of countenance was thus suddenly illuminated, "and this is my son, Mr. Fritz Hahn. Allow me to assure you, madam, that our errand here is a most peaceful and friendly one, and that we deeply regret it, if our presence incommodes you."

"Ilka, light the candles," said Mother Uberta, sullenly. "And you," she continued, turning again to Mr. Hahn, "find yourself a seat, until we can see what you look like."

"What a vixen of an old woman!" whispered the proprietor of the "Haute Noblesse" to his son, as they seated themselves on the hard wooden bench near the window.

"Small chance for the 'Haute Noblesse,' I fear," responded Fritz, flinging his travelling cap on the clean-scoured deal table.

Ilka, who in the meanwhile had obeyed her mother's injunction, now came forward with two lighted tallow dips, stuck in shining brass candle-sticks, and placed them on the table before the travellers. She made a neat little courtesy before each of them, to which they responded with patronizing nods.

"*Parbleu! Elle est charmante!*" exclaimed Fritz, fixing a bold stare on the girl's blushing face.

"*Bien charmante*," replied Mr. Hahn, who took a great pride in the little French he had picked up when he carried a napkin over his shoulder.

And indeed, Ilka was *charmante* as she stood there in the dim candle-light, her great innocent eyes dilated with child-like wonder, her thick blond braids hanging over her shoulders, and the picturesque Tyrolese costume—a black embroidered velvet waist, blue apron, and short black skirt—setting off her fine figure to admirable advantage. She was a tall, fresh-looking girl, of stately build, without being stout, with a healthy blooming countenance and an open, guileless expression. Most people would have pronounced her beautiful, but her beauty was of that rudimentary, unindividualized kind which is found so frequently among the peasantry of all nations. To Fritz Hahn, however who was not a philosophical observer, she seemed the most transcendent phenomenon his eyes had ever beheld.

"To make a long story short, madam," began Mr. Hahn after a pause, during which Mother Uberta had been bristling silently while firing defiant glances at the two strangers, "I am the proprietor of a great establishment in Berlin—the 'Haute Noblesse'—you may have heard of it."

"No, I never heard of it," responded Mother Uberta, emphatically, as if anxious to express her disapproval, on general principles, of whatever statements Mr. Hahn might choose to make.

"Well, well, madam," resumed the latter, a trifle disconcerted, "it makes very little difference whether you have heard of it or not. I see, however, that you are a woman of excellent common sense, and I will therefore be as brief as possible—avoid circumlocutions, so to speak."

"Yes, exactly," said Mother Uberta, nodding impatiently, as if eager to help him on.

"Madame Uberta,—for that, as I understand, is your honored name,—would you like to get one thousand florins?"

"That depends upon how I should get 'em," answered the old woman sharply. "I shouldn't like to get 'em by stealin'."

"I mean, of course, if you had honestly earned them," said Hahn.

"I am afeard honesty with you and with me ain't exactly the same thing."

Mr. Hahn was about to swear, but mindful of his cherished enterprise, he wisely refrained.

"I beg leave to inform you, Madame Uberta," he observed, "that it is gentlemen of honor you have to deal with, and that whatever proposals they may make you will be of an honorable character."

"And I am very glad to hear that, I am sure," responded the undaunted Uberta.

"Three weeks ago, when we were travelling in this region," continued Hahn, determined not to allow his temper to be ruffled, "we heard a most wonderful voice yodling in the mountains. We went away, but have now returned, and having learned that the voice was your daughter's, we have come here to offer her a thousand florins if she will sing her native Tyrolese airs for eight weeks at our Concert Garden, the 'Haute Noblesse.'"

"One thousand florins for eight weeks, mother!" exclaimed Ilka, who had been listening to Hahn's speech with breathless interest. "Then I could pay off the mortgage and we should not have to pay interest any more, and I should have one hundred and fifty florins left for my dowry."

"Hush, child, hush! You don't know what you are talkin' about," said the mother severely. Then turning to Hahn: "I should like to put one question to both of you, and when you have answered that, I'll give my answer, which there is no wrigglin' out of. If the old woman went along, would ye *then* care so much about the singin' of the daughter?"

"Certainly, by all means," responded Hahn promptly; but Fritz was so absorbed in polishing his finger-nails with a little instrument designed especially for that purpose, that he forgot to answer.

A long consultation now followed, and the end of it was that Ilka agreed to go to Berlin and sing for eight weeks, in her national costume, on condition that her travelling expenses and those of her mother should be defrayed by the manager. Mr. Hahn also agreed

to pay for the board and lodgings of the two women during their sojourn in the capital and to pay Ilka the one thousand florins (and this was a point upon which Mother Uberta strenuously insisted) in weekly instalments.

The next day the contract was drawn up in legal form, properly stamped and signed; whereupon Mother Uberta and Ilka started with Hahn and Fritz for Berlin.

### III.

The restaurant of the "Haute Noblesse" was a splendid specimen of artistic decoration. The walls were frescoed with all sorts of marvellous hunting scenes, which Fritz had gradually incorporated in his own autobiography. Here stags were fleeing at a furious speed before a stout young gentleman on horseback, who was levelling his deadly aim at them; there the same stout young gentleman, with whiskers and general appearance slightly altered, was standing behind a big tree, firing at a hare who was coming straight toward him, pursued by a pack of terrible hounds; again, on a third wall, the stout young gentleman had undergone a further metamorphosis which almost endangered his identity; he was standing at the edge of a swamp, and a couple of ducks were making somersaults in the air, as they fluttered with bruised wings down to where the dogs stood expecting them; on wall number four, which contained the *chef-d'oeuvre* of the collection, the young Nimrod, who everywhere bore a more or less remote resemblance to Fritz Hahn, was engaged in a mortal combat with a wild boar, and was performing miraculous feats of strength and prowess. The next room,—to which it was, for some unknown reason, deemed a high privilege to be admitted,—was ornamented with a variety of trophies of the chase, which were intended, no doubt, as incontestable proofs of the veracity of the frescoed narrative. There were stuffed stags' heads crowned with enormous antlers (of a species, as a naturalist asserted, which is not found outside of North America), heads of bears, the insides of whose mouths were painted in the bloodiest of colors, and boars, whose upward-pointed tusks gave evidence of incredible blood-thirstiness. Even the old clock in the corner (a piece of furni-

ture which every customer took pains to assure Mr. Hahn that he envied him) had a frame of curiously carved and intertwined antlers, the ingenious workmanship of which deserved all the admiration which it received. Mr. Hahn had got it for a song at an auction somewhere in the provinces; but the history of the clock which Fritz told omitted mentioning this incident.

In this inner room on the 19th of April, 1864, Mr. Hahn and his son were holding a solemn consultation. The news of the fall of Düppel, and the consequent conquest of all Schleswig, had just been received, and the capital was in a fever of warlike enthusiasm. That two great nations like the Prussians and the Austrians, counting together more than fifty millions, could conquer poor little Denmark, with its two millions, seemed at that time a great and glorious feat, and the conquerors have never ceased to be proud of it. Mr. Hahn, of course, was overflowing with loyalty and patriotism, which, like all his other sentiments, he was anxious to convert into cash. He had therefore made arrangements for a *Siegesfest*, on a magnificent scale, which was to take place on the second of May, when the first regiments of the victorious army were expected in Berlin. It was the details of this festival which he and Fritz had been plotting in the back room at the restaurant, and they were both in a state of agreeable agitation at the thought of the tremendous success which would, no doubt, result from their combined efforts. It was decided that Ilka, whom by various pretexts Mr. Hahn had managed to detain in Berlin through the whole winter, should appear in a highly fantastic costume as Germania, and sing "Die Wacht am Rhein" and "Heil dir im Siegeskranz," as a greeting to the returning warriors. If the weather proved favorable, the garden was to be brilliantly illuminated, and the likenesses of King Wilhelm, Bismarck, and von Moltke were to appear in gas-jets, each surmounting a triumphal arch, which was to be erected in front of the stage and at the two entrances to the garden.

"As regards that Tyrolese wench," said Fritz, as he lighted a fresh cigar, "are you sure we can persuade her to don the Germania costume? She seems to have some pretty crooked notions on some points, and the old woman, you know, is as balky as a stage horse."