

Read a Sample

Konrad Falkenberg

Empire of Tread

A Sweeping Historical Saga of Ambition, Slavery, and
the American Dream

A Novel



CHRONICON
— VERLAG —

Author's Note

Felix Hasler's story is a work of fiction. The world he lives in is not.

When we look at Appenzell and eastern Switzerland today, we see a landscape of rare beauty: gentle hills, well-tended villages, houses steeped in tradition, and a region known around the world for its industriousness, craftsmanship, and economic success. Yet what's often hidden are the people whose hard lives helped build that prosperity.

At the dawn of the 19th century, home embroidery in Appenzell wasn't a sign of comfort for most families—it was a matter of survival. In countless living rooms, men, women, and children bent over their frames late into the night. They worked for city merchants and agents, who sold their goods at a profit, reaping the rewards of the embroidery trade. But those who did the actual work often lived on the edge of destitution.

Home workers rarely owned the fabrics they embroidered. They set neither the prices nor the terms of their labor. Mistakes meant penalties, deadlines were imposed, wages were cut. Anyone who protested risked losing future work. For many families, this meant hunger, mounting debts, and the constant fear of illness or harsh winters.

Women and children bore the brunt of this struggle. While the official records of the time speak of businessmen, politicians, and clergy, the work of women mostly went unseen. They ran households, raised children, cared for the sick—and still spent hours at their embroidery or sewing. Many children had to help out long before they were grown.

Life back then was marked by stark contrasts. On one side, the successful merchants who thrived on international trade; on the other, families whose weekly earnings barely covered bread, milk, firewood, and clothes. This economic dependency created an imbalance of power that reached far beyond the workplace. Those who handed out work often held sway over the fate of entire families.

Of course, this novel isn't a history book. The characters are invented, their fates condensed, some events dramatized. But the poverty, the insecurity, the dependency, and the social tensions that form the backdrop of this story were a harsh reality for many at the time.

What struck me most was the sheer courage it took to ask questions back then. Not just the big political ones, but everyday questions: Why does a person work all day and still remain poor? Why do some people have power over the lives of others? Why is injustice so often accepted as the natural order of things?

These aren't just Felix Hasler's questions—they belong to every society.

»Empire of Tread« tells the story of people living in a world where your background, your possessions, and your influence shape your chances. It's about a family who, despite loss, poverty, and dependence, never stop searching for dignity. And it's about a region whose economic rise would have been unthinkable without the labor of countless nameless home workers.

This book is dedicated to them.

Konrad Falkenberg

Part I

Chapter 1

The Mother's Death Oberegg 1823

Oberegg perched high in the Appenzell hills—a village of dark wooden houses, steep meadows, and narrow lanes that turned to mud in the rain and disappeared under snow and frozen muck in winter. In 1823, it was a harsh place: rich in beauty, but poor in nearly everything else that makes life easier. People scraped by on what they could do with their hands—raising cows and goats, tending small patches of field, chopping wood from the forest, and working the delicate threads that ran through embroidery frames late into the night, so that somewhere in St. Gallen a merchant could sell their fabric as a prized commodity.

If you were born in Oberegg, you learned early that bread didn't fall from the sky, and pity held no value. You worked because you had to. You prayed because the priest demanded it. You hoped because there was nothing else left. On some days, when the fog hung low between the mountains and the fir trees loomed as dark shadows, it felt as if the land itself wanted to hide the village from the world. But nothing here stayed hidden—not the poverty, not the hunger, and not the misery, once it came knocking at someone's door.

The houses were built of weathered dark timber, their walls stained by years of rain, with low ceilings, tiny windows, and roofs pinned down by heavy stones against the wind. In one of these homes, on the southern slope between two old apple trees, lived the Hasler family. The house was small, but always tidy. Firewood was stacked by the door, bundles of dried herbs hung beneath the eaves, and in the low-ceilinged living room stood the embroidery frame where Jakob Hasler spent more hours than any person should have to endure.

On the morning of April 14, 1823, a storm swept up the valley. Even before dawn, the wind rattled the shutters, as if demanding to be let in, and by noon the rain slanted hard across the hillside, seeping through the cracks in the window. Inside, it was dusky despite the daylight. The fire in the stove burned weakly, and the air was thick with the smell of smoke, wet wool, and fear.

In the bedroom, Maria Hasler was in labor.

The birth had dragged on for hours. The midwife—a broad, taciturn woman from the upper part of the village—had long since stopped offering soothing words. She just wiped her brow with her sleeve, muttered prayers under her breath, and from time to time placed a hand on Maria’s belly, as if she could feel with her fingers whether God would be merciful that day.

Jakob Hasler sat beside the bed, holding his wife’s hand. He was a strong man, but just then he seemed smaller than usual. Again and again, he leaned over Maria, whispered her name, promised her it would soon be over—even if he no longer believed it himself. His hands, calloused and rough from embroidery, held hers with a gentleness that suggested even the slightest pressure might break her.

Elisabeth stood against the wall, barely a step from the door. She was fifteen, thin, serious, with eyes too old for her age. Clinging to her apron was little Anna, who didn’t understand why no one would tell her what was happening. Each time a new sound came from the bed, Anna shrank back, and Elisabeth placed a hand on her shoulder, her gaze never leaving their mother.

Then came the final scream.

It sliced through the room, sharper and higher than any before, and for a moment even the storm outside seemed to pause. The midwife leaned in, moving with practiced urgency, and suddenly the room was filled with the thin, angry cry of a newborn.

»A boy,« she said, her voice hoarse.

Jakob exhaled, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his chest. He bent over Maria.

»Do you hear? A boy. Maria, can you hear me?«

But Maria heard him no more.

Her head had fallen to the side, lips slightly parted, her face weary and strangely peaceful. Jakob didn’t shake her. He didn’t shout. He just looked at her, and in his eyes was a bewilderment deeper than any outburst. The midwife pressed two fingers to Maria’s neck, waited, then bowed her head.

Silence settled over the room.

Only the baby cried.

Elisabeth gently pried Anna's fingers from her apron, stepped to the bed, and took the child from the midwife. He was warm, damp, and barely heavier than a bundle of laundry. For a heartbeat she looked down at the red, wrinkled face, the tiny fists raised at the world, and something inside her hardened. Not cold—just resolute.

»He'll be called Felix,« she said.

Jakob slowly lifted his head.

»Felix,« Elisabeth repeated, as if she could name him into life and away from death. »The lucky one.«

The midwife looked at her as if she wanted to say something, but stayed silent. Jakob's gaze dropped back to his wife, and Anna began to cry softly—for now she, too, understood that something irreversible had happened.

Spring remained cold. The days after Maria's death blurred together: crying, wet cloths, a weak fire, and unspoken questions. The neighbors came on the first day, bringing soup, a piece of bread, a jug of milk. They stood in the living room, said the things people say in such moments, and left. The second day, fewer came. By the third, the Hasler house was left alone with its grief.

Felix cried often. He didn't wail like a fussy baby—he cried as if fighting for his life. Elisabeth paced the floor with him, holding him to her chest even though there was no milk. She rocked him, sang half-remembered lullabies, and felt more keenly each day that comfort alone would not keep a child alive.

Jakob was back at his embroidery frame.

Not because he was strong, but because it was all he knew to do. His hands moved automatically over the fabric, as if his body remembered the work while the rest of him was still back in that room, at that bed, with that final touch. Sometimes he'd stop mid-stitch, staring at the thread, as if he no longer knew how it got there. When Felix cried, he flinched, but didn't get up. He never told Elisabeth to sit, never asked if she'd eaten.

Elisabeth saw it. She didn't fully understand, but she saw it. Her father was there, and yet not there. He breathed, worked, ate if food was put in front of him—but now the decisions fell to her, and every decision was too heavy for a girl who still needed guidance herself.

The question of milk quickly became the only one that mattered.

One neighbor was nursing her own child, but didn't have enough for another. Another handed over a small bowl of goat's milk, already warning that she might not have more to spare tomorrow. The priest, whom Elisabeth stopped on the path after the funeral, laid his hand on her head and said the Lord tests His faithful in mysterious ways. When she asked if the Lord would also send milk, he drew his hand away and looked past her.

That's when Elisabeth thought of Widow Mettler's goat.

Widow Mettler lived just above the village, in a low hut on the edge of a wind-battered meadow. She was known for being tough—maybe not unfair, but certainly not the type to give away what she could sell. Her goat had kidded in the spring, and Elisabeth knew there must be milk there. At least a little.

That afternoon, as the storm picked up and rain streamed down the windows, Elisabeth gathered the last of their coins. Three small, thin, worn pieces—the emergency money her mother had hidden in a box under the bed. Elisabeth held them in her hand for a moment. It was almost nothing. But it was all she had.

She wrapped the coins in a cloth, tucked it under her blouse, tied a kerchief over her hair, put on Jakob's old coat, and took a small jug from the shelf. Anna stood in the kitchen doorway, watching her.

»Are you leaving?«

»Just going to the widow's.«

»Will Mother come back then?«

Elisabeth paused. For a moment, she didn't have the strength to lie, and the truth was too heavy.

»No,« she whispered. »But Felix will stay.«

Then she stepped outside.

The path to the widow's hut led over the soaked hillside. After only a few steps, Elisabeth's feet sank ankle-deep in mud. The wind whipped rain into her face, yanked at her coat, pressed the kerchief against her mouth until she could barely breathe. She clutched the jug under her arm and pushed forward. Twice she slipped, once falling to her knees. Mud crept under her fingernails, icy water ran down her sleeves, but she got up each time and kept going.

By the time she reached Widow Mettler's door, she was soaked to the bone. She knocked.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then the door creaked open just a crack, and a narrow face peered out of the gloom.

»You're late,« the widow said.

»I need milk,« Elisabeth managed. »For Felix. Mother's dead.«

»I know.«

Elisabeth swallowed. »He's crying from hunger.«

»Babies cry.« The widow looked her up and down. »And milk's scarce.«

Elisabeth pulled out the cloth from under her blouse and, with numb fingers, unwrapped it. The three coins lay inside, wet from the rain and warm from her skin.

»It's all I have.«

The widow glanced at the money, then at Elisabeth. Her gaze stayed steady for a long time. At last, she took the coins.

»That'll get you two days.«

She took the jug, disappeared inside, and left Elisabeth standing in the rain. The smell of smoke, old straw, and sour milk drifted through the crack in the door. Elisabeth heard the goat's low bleat, the clang of a pail, a gruff cough. Then the widow returned and handed her the jug.

»Don't spill it.«

Elisabeth took it with both hands. »Thank you.«

»No need to thank me. Paid is paid.«

On the way back, Elisabeth hugged the jug to her chest as if she were carrying not milk, but her brother's life. The wind now came from the side, and at one point she had to lean against a fence post to keep from falling. When she finally reached home, her face was numb with cold.

Felix drank greedily—too greedily. Elisabeth had to water the milk down, feed him drop by drop, lift him up, calm him, then feed him again. Anna stood by, watching as if witnessing a small miracle. Jakob glanced up from his embroidery frame, but said nothing.

The next evening, the jug was empty.

Felix began to cry again.

Elisabeth sat at the table, the empty cloth before her, staring at the spot where the three coins had been. Two days, the widow had said. But two days was nothing. Two days was a single breath. Two days was only a brief reprieve from the next bout of hunger.

She waited until Felix fell asleep from exhaustion, then returned to the widow. This time, she brought no money—only a decision.

The widow opened the door even less than before.

»Back again?«

»I can work,« Elisabeth said.

»So can we all.«

»I can sew for you. Mend underclothes. Fetch wood. Clean the stable. Carry water. Whatever you need.«

The widow said nothing.

»As long as you give me milk,« Elisabeth added. »For him.«

»You want to trade?«

»Yes.«

The widow stepped out, the wind lifting the hem of her dark skirt. She looked at Elisabeth—this thin girl with tired eyes and a jug in her hand—and perhaps, for a moment, saw not just a suppliant, but something she recognized: the drive to keep going, no matter what.

»Tomorrow morning,« she said. »The stable needs cleaning. And there are two shirts to mend. If you slack off, you get nothing.«

Elisabeth nodded. »I don't slack off.«

So began a long, stubborn struggle, week after week. Elisabeth sewed by poor light until her eyes burned, cleaned the widow's stable, hauled firewood up the hill, washed rags in icy water, and came home each evening to more work in her own house. The milk came in old beer bottles—sometimes lukewarm, sometimes watered down, often not enough. But she got it. And Felix survived.

He didn't grow strong overnight. He stayed small, cried often, and slept badly. But slowly, the gray tint left his skin, his fingers began to grip Elisabeth's dress more firmly, and when she spoke to him, his eyes would shift to her voice—as if recognizing in it the one anchor this world could offer.

With every trip to Widow Mettler's, not only did Felix grow stronger—but so did Elisabeth's resolve. She stopped asking whether she could manage. She just did. If no one cooked, she cooked. If Anna cried, she comforted her. If Jakob forgot the firewood, she fetched it. If Felix cried, she got up. Night after night.

Jakob withdrew deeper into his silence.

It wasn't that he didn't love his children. Sometimes, when he thought no one was looking, he'd lean over Felix's cradle and touch his cheek with two fingers. Once, he took Anna onto his lap when she fell asleep by the stove and sat there for a long time, staring into the fire. But whenever Elisabeth looked at him, he'd turn away, as if ashamed of any feeling that still lingered inside.

Maria's death had broken something in him that no one could see and no one could fix. He never spoke of the morning of the birth, never spoke of her final glance, never spoke of holding her hand when she no longer squeezed back. Instead of seeking comfort, he clung to his work, to the small, steady stitches, to the patterns that still obeyed him when nothing else did.

His grief turned to silence. The silence became a burden. And that burden fell on Elisabeth.

Late that spring, when only patches of gray snow remained in the hollows and the meadows below the house were just turning green, unexpected help arrived. Josef, the old war veteran from the upper village, had often watched Elisabeth go by with the milk bottle under her arm, her back too straight for a girl her age. He usually sat outside his house on a bench, one leg stretched out, the other wrapped in a blanket, smoking his pipe and saying little.

One morning, he beckoned her over.

Elisabeth stopped. She was on her way back from the widow's, tired and red-handed.

»You're working yourself hard,« Josef said.

She wasn't sure if it was a question, so she stayed silent.

»I see you every other day, up and down, up and down. Like a pack mule.«

»Felix needs milk.«

Josef nodded slowly. »I have a goat.«

Elisabeth looked up.

»Old one,« he added. »Not worth much anymore. But she still gives. Not the same every day, but enough if you take care of her.«

»You want to sell her?«

»No.«

She dropped her gaze. »Then I can't take her.«

»I didn't say sell.« Josef puffed on his pipe and looked out over the hillside. »Lend. For now. If she does well with you, we'll talk more.«

Elisabeth stared at him, as if she hadn't heard right.

»Why?« she asked.

Josef shrugged. »Because a child needs milk. And because your father looks like he'd lose his way to the well if you didn't remind him where it was.«

It was harsh—but true.

Two days later, Elisabeth led the scruffy, gray-brown goat home. Anna ran alongside, laughing as if this animal was a small miracle in their hard lives. Felix lay in his cradle and reached out as the goat poked its head through the door, bleating. Even Jakob glanced up from his embroidery frame. For a moment, his face showed something like surprise.

»Where from?« he asked.

»From Josef. On loan.«

Jakob nodded. He didn't say anything more. But that evening, he got up and drove two stakes into the ground behind the house so the goat would have a safe place to stay. It wasn't much. Almost nothing at all. Yet as Elisabeth watched him, it felt like the smallest sign that he wasn't entirely lost.

The first time she set the little bucket under the goat's shaky udder, her hands began to tremble. The milk came in thin, warm streams—just a little, but enough to coat the bottom of the pail in white. Elisabeth pressed her lips together. Then tears slipped down her face, silent and without sobs.

For the first time, she didn't have to beg. Didn't have to pay. Didn't have to trade. Didn't have to stand in the rain at a stranger's door. For the first time, there was something in the house that meant more than just hardship—it was a chance.

She carried the milk inside, brought it carefully to a boil, let it cool, and fed Felix. He drank more calmly than usual, as if he too sensed that, this time, the milk in the pitcher wasn't someone else's leftover, but something that might finally last.

Outside, evening settled over Oberegg. The storm had moved on, and between the clouds, a thin band of light appeared. In the front room, Jakob was back at his embroidery frame, Anna slept on the bench, and Felix lay full and exhausted in Elisabeth's arms.

She was fifteen years old.

That night, she didn't put it into words, but she understood with the hard clarity that life gives to the poor sooner than the rich: her childhood had been buried alongside her mother.

From now on, she would be sister, daughter, maid, seamstress, cook, and mother all at once. Not because anyone had asked her. Not because she wanted to be strong. But because there was simply no one else.

Chapter 2

The House Without a Mother

The first winter without Maria Hasler came early. By November, snow lay heavy over the slopes of Oberegg, and when the wind blew down from the ridge at night, it didn't just howl around the house—it found its way through every crack, under every door, between the loosely fitted boards. In the front room, the cold crept down the walls, pooled on the floor, and seeped into the children's bones. The fire in the stove had to be watched like a sick animal; if it went out, it took wood, kindling, and patience to bring warmth back into the room.

That winter, Elisabeth learned just how many things a person had to do just to keep a single day from falling apart. She got up before dawn, coaxed the embers back to life, put water on to boil, sliced bread so thin you could almost see through it, warmed goat's milk for Felix, woke Anna, mended socks, swept snow from the doorstep, carried in firewood, and only after everyone else had what they needed did she sit down at the embroidery frame herself.

Sometimes by midday, it felt as if the day should be almost over, but when she looked outside, the sun had barely climbed above the hill.

Jakob was working again. At least he sat at the frame, pulled threads, checked patterns, let the needle glide through fabric as if nothing else existed in the world except stitch, space, thread, and mistake. But his work no longer had its old strength. He used to whistle softly when a job went well, or tease Anna when she leaned too close over the cloth. Now he was silent. He ate whatever Elisabeth set in front of him, nodded when she spoke, went out for firewood when it was needed, returned without a word, and sat back down at the frame.

For the neighbors, that was enough. A man working was not a broken man. But Elisabeth knew better.

She saw him lying awake at night. She heard him sometimes whisper her mother's name—not loudly, more like someone reaching in sleep for something that's no longer there. She saw, too, how his eyes avoided Felix whenever the baby started to cry. Not out of hardness. Out of guilt. As if every sound from the child was a reminder that Maria had died so this boy could live.

Elisabeth stayed silent for a long time. Maybe too long. She told herself her father needed time, and time was the one thing poor people never had. Winter didn't wait. Hunger didn't wait. A baby didn't wait. And Anna certainly didn't wait, not when she woke up crying for her mother in the night.

One evening, when the wind howled so fiercely around the house that the smoke was pushed back down the chimney, Anna and Felix were finally asleep in their room. Elisabeth stood by the hearth, arms folded across her chest, and looked over at Jakob. He sat at the table, his forehead resting in his hand, a piece of bread untouched in front of him.

That was when she knew she couldn't stay silent any longer.

»Father,« she began.

He didn't lift his head.

»Father.«

Now he looked up. His face was tired, hollowed out, and for a moment, he didn't look like her father at all, but like an old man who had somehow ended up in their house by mistake.

»What is it?«

Elisabeth took a deep breath. »I know you're grieving.«

Jakob closed his eyes.

»So am I,« she said. »Anna, too, even if she doesn't understand it. And Felix—one day he won't even know what he's lost. But we're still here. Anna. Felix. Me. And you, too.«

He placed both hands on the table. »What do you want me to do, Elisabeth? The work barely keeps us afloat. The pay is worse every time, the goat doesn't give enough milk every day, and if winter keeps on like this, we'll run out of firewood by February. Everything's falling apart.«

»Then help me keep it together.«

He looked at her.

»I'm fifteen,« she said. »I can't be mother, maid, sister, cook, and stitcher all at once while you sit there like someone who's already in the grave.«

That hit home. She saw it in the way his mouth opened and closed again.

»Don't talk like that.«

»How else should I talk?« Her voice trembled now, but she didn't back down. »Should I wait until Felix gets sick? Until Anna sits silent in a corner all day? Until I ruin the fabric out of sheer exhaustion and Mr. Kunz cuts our pay? I need you. The children need you. You can't just hide from life because it's gotten hard.«

Jakob rubbed his hand over his face. For a long moment, he said nothing. Outside, a branch creaked under its weight of snow.

»I never meant to leave you all alone,« he murmured at last.

»But that's exactly what you're doing.« Elisabeth's voice softened. »Not by leaving. By staying and not being here at all.«

He looked at her for a long time, and for the first time since Maria's death, his eyes showed not just emptiness, but shame. There was no great transformation that night, no miracle, no sudden comfort that fixed everything. Jakob didn't spring up and become the man he'd once been. But something in him shifted, as if Elisabeth had knocked hard on a door he'd locked from the inside.

The next morning, he was up before her.

When Elisabeth came into the front room, the stove was already burning. Firewood was stacked by the door, the kettle sat on the stove, and Jakob wasn't at the embroidery frame—he was holding Felix in his arms, awkward and unsure. The boy scrunched up his face, not quite trusting this unfamiliar place, and Jakob looked as if he had no idea how to hold something so small without breaking it.

»He was crying,« Jakob said.

Elisabeth just nodded.

»So I took him.« He didn't say anything more. That was enough for one morning.

From then on, Jakob tried—slowly, uncertainly, often too late. He helped with the goat without Elisabeth reminding him. Sometimes in the evenings, he took Felix on his lap and let the boy play with his big, rough fingers. He carved Anna a little wooden cow since she couldn't always pet the real goat. And when Mr. Kunz, the inspector, came to the village, Jakob stood a bit straighter in front of him, even if his eyes still carried the old pain.

Winter was still hard. Supplies ran low, and sometimes Elisabeth stretched the soup with so much water it barely tasted like anything. But Felix survived. More than that—he grew.

Felix was not an easy child. He slept poorly from the start, woke at every sound, and looked at the world with eyes that always wanted to know more. When he learned to walk, he didn't go where he was told, but wherever something was forbidden or mysterious. He grabbed tools,

opened drawers, tugged at threads, examined the goat's tail, and wanted to know why the moon was sometimes round and sometimes looked like a slice of bread in the sky.

Anna, six years older, often followed him—not because she was reckless like Felix, but because he had a way of making everything interesting. If he claimed there was a dwarf living under the woodpile, she didn't quite believe him, but she went with him anyway. If he wanted to see if you could spot Lake Constance from the top fence, she climbed after him, even though she was scared. Elisabeth scolded them both regularly, but sometimes she had to turn away so the children wouldn't see her smile.

As Felix grew, his questions became more difficult.

At first, they were harmless. Why was snow white? Why did goats always look like they knew more than people? Why did Father need to count while embroidering when the pattern was right there? But then he asked things Elisabeth didn't have safe answers for.

»Why does the priest shake Mr. Luchsinger's hand, but only gives the old beggar a piece of bread without even looking at him?«

Elisabeth was sitting at the table, darning Anna's stocking. Felix, about six, sat on the bench, running a piece of thread between his fingers.

»Because Mr. Luchsinger has money,« Anna said without looking up.

»But the priest says everyone is equal before God.«

Elisabeth pulled the thread through the fabric and paused.

»That's what he says.«

»So is it true?«

»It might be true before God,« Elisabeth answered slowly. »But people have a special talent for turning even God's truth into a pecking order.«

Felix frowned. »I don't get it.«

»Then hold on to the question. Maybe you'll understand later.«

She almost regretted saying it, because Felix didn't keep questions the way other kids pocketed pebbles—he carried them with him, turned them over, tested them, and asked them again. Sometimes in the front room. Sometimes outside. And sometimes in places where it would have been better to keep quiet.

In Oberegg, the church was more than just a place to pray. It meant order, supervision, habit, and warning all at once. The village was a Catholic enclave in a region where religious boundaries mattered more than Sunday rituals. The priest didn't rule over everything, but he controlled enough to be feared. He knew the families, their debts, their illegitimate children, their drinking, their quarrels, their illnesses, and their weaknesses. His sermons were about humility, sin, and obedience, and when he spoke of God's ordained order, the poor always knew he meant them most of all.

He was a tall, quiet man with a thin mouth and a piercing gaze. When he walked through the village, the men tipped their hats and the women lowered their eyes. Elisabeth had never heard him raise his voice. That didn't make him kinder. If anything, his calm was final.

Once, the priest came to the Hasler house while Elisabeth was embroidering at the window. Jakob was outside chopping wood, Anna fetching water, Felix playing with wood shavings under the table. The priest entered without much knocking and stopped in the middle of the front room.

»You work hard, Elisabeth.«

»We have to, Father.«

His gaze swept over the embroidery frame, the stove, the children's clothes on the hooks, little Felix under the table.

»And do you also pray enough?«

Elisabeth lowered her head. »As much as we can.«

»Sometimes poverty is a test. One shouldn't answer it with bitterness.«

Felix stopped playing with the wood shavings under the table.

»Is wealth a test too?« he asked.

Elisabeth froze.

The priest looked down slowly. Felix crawled partway out from under the table, serious, curious, without a hint of malice.

»What do you mean, child?«

»If poverty tests whether you turn bitter, does wealth test whether you become greedy?«

For a moment, the silence was so deep Elisabeth could hear the fire crackle. Then the priest leaned forward slightly.

»You're too young to understand such things.«

»But not too young to be poor,« Felix said.

Elisabeth reached for him, but the words were already out.

The priest straightened. His face didn't change, but his eyes grew colder.

»Watch the boy,« he said to Elisabeth. »A sharp mind is a gift. A disobedient tongue is a danger.«

After he was gone, Elisabeth grabbed Felix by the shoulders.

»You don't ask questions like that in front of him.«

»Why not?«

»Because some men prefer to preach downwards. And a child who asks upwards gets noticed faster than is good for them.«

Felix didn't understand everything. But he understood enough to sense that truth alone wasn't enough if the wrong person heard it.

He didn't make many friends at school, either. The teacher was a gaunt man with a rigid stare, thin lips, and a cane that was never far from his hand. He liked neat notebooks, straight backs, and answers that sounded exactly like the ones he'd given the day before. But Felix never

stopped asking why things were the way they were. Why memorize Latin prayers if God understood every language? Why did the mayor get to decide when the whole village paid the price? Why was a mistake in the catechism punished more harshly than an unfair day's wage?

»You think too much, Hasler,« the teacher growled one day, after Felix asked whether obedience was still a virtue if the order was wrong.

Felix stood in front of the class, his fingers dusty with chalk.

»I just wanted to know—«

»Leave the thinking to those who are called to it.«

Some children snickered. Anna, passing by the door on an errand that day, peeked through the crack and saw Felix close his mouth. He said nothing more. But his eyes didn't drop.

Later, on the way home, Anna asked, »Why can't you just keep quiet?«

Felix kicked a stone, sending it skittering down the path.

»Because if I don't ask, the answer's still wrong.«

»But you'll get in trouble.«

»At least that way, I know they heard me.«

Anna shook her head. She didn't always understand him. But she loved him for saying things others only thought—or didn't even dare to think.

Like nearly every family around them, the Haslers worked for the embroidery merchants from St. Gallen. What counted as commerce, taste, and entrepreneurial spirit in the city meant long evenings at the frame in Oberegg, aching fingers, bent backs, and the constant fear that a job wouldn't be paid for—or that the next one wouldn't come at all. The work wasn't a gift. It came with strings attached.

Inspectors came to the village regularly—usually in pairs, sometimes alone—with tape measures, pencils, crisp coats, and that particular look that searched for mistakes first and

only saw the person behind them as a cost. One of them was named Kunz. He never spoke more than necessary. If a stitch was off, there was a deduction. If a pattern was late, there was no new order. If a family complained, another household would be found next time—one more grateful.

People danced to his tune, not out of loyalty, but out of fear.

But even Kunz was less feared than Ignaz Luchsinger.

He came from an old St. Gallen family with sway in the embroidery trade, and when he visited Oberegg, he never behaved like an ordinary inspector. He arrived with a starched collar, a silver-tipped cane, and a coat that never seemed to get dirty, even in the mud. Officially, he checked quality, deadlines, and designs. Unofficially, he reminded people just who held the power over their lives.

Luchsinger knew how to play the benefactor. He'd donated a new vestment to the priest and sat in the first pew on Sunday, hands piously folded, as the priest spoke about humility. After Mass, he nodded to the men, barely glanced at the women, and tossed coins to the children as if they were chickens in a yard. The fact that the families working for him barely earned enough to make it through winter never disturbed the pious order. If anything, it seemed part of it.

One afternoon, he appeared at the Haslers' door.

Elisabeth was at the frame. By now, she had grown into a young woman—slender, serious-eyed, with a quiet resolve that didn't need to be loud to be noticed. Jakob stood beside her, wiping his hands on his apron, uneasy because Luchsinger hadn't sent word he was coming. Felix, still a boy, hovered near the door. Anna was outside with the goat.

Luchsinger entered as if the room belonged to him.

»Hasler,« he said curtly.

Jakob nodded. »Mr. Luchsinger.«

»Word is you deliver on time.«

»We do our best.«

»Doing your best isn't a standard.«

He didn't remove his hat or cane, but stepped over to the frame, bent over the fabric, and ran two fingers across the work. Elisabeth pulled her hands back—not quite startled, but quickly enough that Felix noticed.

»Who worked on this?«

»I did,« Elisabeth said.

Now Luchsinger really looked at her. At first, his gaze seemed to weigh her hands, the neatness of her stitches, her posture at the frame. But then it lingered—on her face, her neck, the slim line of her shoulders—too long, too openly, with that kind of possessive hunger that doesn't care who sees it.

Elisabeth felt a chill, though the stove was blazing.

She lifted her chin.

»The chain's uneven,« Luchsinger said quietly.

»It's even,« Elisabeth replied.

Jakob shifted from foot to foot. »Mr. Luchsinger, the pattern was—«

Luchsinger raised a hand, not even glancing at him. Jakob fell silent.

»For now,« Luchsinger told Elisabeth, »for now it's even. But tired women make mistakes.«

Elisabeth met his gaze. »Then it's good I'm wide awake.«

For a moment, something dangerous hung in the air. Luchsinger smiled. Not kindly. More like he was intrigued.

»Awake,« he echoed. »Yes. I can see that.«

Felix's fingernails dug into the wood of the doorframe. He didn't understand everything happening between these two adults, but he understood the way Luchsinger looked at his sister. He understood that this man bent not just over fabric, but over people. Over Jakob, who

fell silent. Over Elisabeth, who couldn't move. Over the whole house, which depended on jobs that men like him handed out—or took away.

Why did this man talk to his sister as if she were something to be inspected, scolded, or taken? Why was his father silent? How could a silver cane make a room heavier than any hammer?

At last, Luchsinger straightened up.

»I'll let the work pass,« he said. »This time.«

»It's flawless,« Elisabeth said.

»Then you should be grateful for my generosity.«

He tapped his cane on the floor, took his hat, and turned to the door. As he left, his eyes lingered on Elisabeth one more time.

»We'll meet again.«

When the door closed behind him, Jakob let out a long breath. Elisabeth sat back down at the frame and picked up the thread. Her hands barely trembled. Only Felix saw it.

»Why didn't you say anything?« he asked his father.

Jakob shot him a sharp look. »Quiet.«

»But he—«

»Quiet.«

Felix fell silent. But something kept turning inside him. It wasn't a thought yet, not even a decision. Just a hot, dark sense that the world he lived in wasn't just hard—it was made that way. Made by men who gave orders. By men who preached. By men who stayed silent. And by everyone who obeyed because they had no other choice.

Elisabeth could sense his restlessness. That evening, while Jakob was out, she said to Felix, »You can't fight every battle just because you see it needs fighting.«

»But what if no one else will?«

She paused, needle in midair. »Then maybe one day you'll be strong enough. But today, you're still a child.«

»And you're not?«

The question caught her off guard. She looked at him for a long moment, then dropped her gaze back to the fabric.

»No,« she said softly. »Not for a long time now.«

It was late autumn of that same year when the accident happened at the well.

The day had been stormy—clouds racing across the sky, and a wind that flattened the brittle grass behind the house. Elisabeth was sitting in the parlor, working on a rush order. Jakob had gone to a neighbor's to return some tools. Anna and Felix played outside, even though Elisabeth had told them twice to stay close to the house.

Behind the house stood an old village well, barely used for years. A wooden grate covered it, but the wood was rotting, swollen from rain, in places as soft as peat. Elisabeth had forbidden Felix countless times to go near it. Maybe that was why the dark opening drew him in all the more.

»Maybe there's a dragon down there,« he whispered.

Anna crossed her arms. »Dragons don't live in wells.«

»How do you know?«

»They have wings.«

»Maybe this one fell in.«

Anna laughed. Felix edged closer to the rim—careful at first, then bolder. The wind tugged at his jacket. He leaned over, trying to peer through a gap in the grate down into the darkness.

»Felix, stop it,« Anna said.

»I can't see anything.«

»Then just leave it alone.«

He put one foot on the wood.

It creaked.

For a split second, everything froze: Anna's terrified face, Felix's arms reaching for something to hold onto, the black gap beneath him. Then the rotten board gave way, and Felix vanished with a scream into the darkness below.

The heavy thud of his body hitting the water echoed through the yard.

Anna screamed.

Not like a child startled, but like someone who'd just seen the world crack open. She ran for the house, stumbled, caught herself, and burst into the parlor.

»Elisabeth! Felix! The well!«

Elisabeth dropped everything—thread, needle, bowl—and ran outside so fast her boots nearly slid out from under her on the wet grass. When she saw the gaping hole, her face turned ashen.

»Felix!«

No answer. Only the distant gurgling of water far below.

She dropped to her knees, leaning over the edge. The smell rising up was damp and cold—mold, stone, old leaves. She could barely make anything out in the darkness.

»Felix! Say something!«

A faint cough came from below, then a wet, choking gasp.

Elisabeth jumped to her feet. »Anna, run to the neighbors! Now! Tell them to bring ropes!«

Anna ran off.

Elisabeth grabbed the rope hanging by the shed, yanked it loose, tied it around her waist so tightly it took her breath away. Then she picked up a rusty iron rod lying next to the well and began to lower herself down. The stones were slick, the walls icy, and within a few feet her fingers were scraped raw. The wind above faded the deeper she went, until all she could hear was her own breathing echoing back.

»Felix! I'm coming. Hold on!«

Something moved below.

She felt around with her foot, searching for footing, slipped, banged her shoulder against the wall, and clenched her teeth to keep from crying out. The water quickly rose—ankle-deep, then up to her calves—so cold it felt like fire shooting through her legs.

Her fingers brushed against fabric.

»Felix!«

She grabbed him—a sleeve, then a small, limp, wet arm. He was half in the water, head tilted to the side, coughing but still alive. Elisabeth pulled him close, pressing him to her, fumbling for a hold on the stones with her free hand. The rope bit into her waist.

She heard voices above. Footsteps. Men shouting over each other.

»Don't pull!« Elisabeth yelled. »Not yet! I've got him! Slowly!«

A neighbor leaned over the edge. Another lowered a second rope. Someone cursed, someone prayed. Elisabeth tied the rope around Felix as best she could and held him tight while the men above began to haul them up.

The way up was worse than the way down. Felix coughed, water dribbling from his mouth, his body slipping from her grasp again and again, and Elisabeth felt as if her arms would be pulled from their sockets. The stones scraped her shins, her dress soaked up water, the rope cut into her waist. But she never let go.

When they were finally hauled over the edge, Elisabeth collapsed on the wet grass. Felix lay beside her—pale, shaking, lips blue. For a moment, he didn't move.

Then he spat out water and started to sob.

Elisabeth sat up, grabbed him, and hugged him so tightly to her chest he could barely breathe. She didn't cry right away. At first, she shook him—not roughly, but with a desperate fear she didn't know how else to handle.

»What were you thinking?«

Felix sobbed.

»You know the well is dangerous! I told you—more than once. You could have died. Do you understand? Died. Just for a game.«

»I just wanted to see—«

»You don't always have to see for yourself!«

Her words came out sharper than she intended. Felix fell silent, lips quivering, his face streaked with water, dirt, and fear. Elisabeth looked at him, and only now did the terror she'd forced down finally break through.

She pulled him close again.

»You're not a foolish boy,« she whispered, her voice rough. »So don't act like one. If you ever put yourself in danger, let it be for something that matters—not because of a hole in the ground. Not for a dragon that doesn't exist.«

Felix clung to her.

»I was so scared,« she said. »Don't ever do that to me again.«

Jakob didn't come home until later. When he saw Elisabeth and Felix, both soaked, sitting by the stove, Anna with tear-streaked cheeks beside them, and the neighbors standing silently in the room, he didn't understand at first. Then he heard the story. His eyes went to the well, then to Felix, then to Elisabeth's bleeding hands.

He said nothing.

But that evening, he took up his axe and hammer, went outside, and smashed the old wooden grate to pieces. Before nightfall, he nailed thick beams over the opening, tight enough that no child would ever pry them loose again. Elisabeth stood in the doorway and watched him.

After that, she hardly let Felix out of her sight.

But she knew it wouldn't be enough. You could board up a well. You could hold a child's hand. You could warn them, scold them, save them, and hold them close.

But you could never stop Felix Hasler from wanting to look into the depths.