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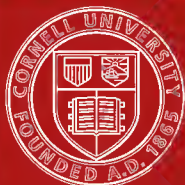
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THE GRISLEY SUITOR

MODERN AUTHORS' SERIES

THE GRISLEY SUITOR

A Story

BY

FRANK WEDEKIND

Author of "The Awakening of Spring," "Such is
Life," etc.

Translated from the German

BY

FRANCIS J. ZIEGLER



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THE GRISLEY SUITOR

BY

FRANK WEDEKIND

THE GRISLEY SUITOR

Leonie Fischer had a fine disposition. Her features would be called sweet rather than beautiful. Her charm lay in the expression of her eyes and in the somewhat uplifted corners of her mouth. Seeing her, a connoisseur of human nature would be forced to admit that these charms were not transitory, but that she would be as attractive as an old woman with white hair as she was as a young girl. The shape of her head, with its crown of tightly coiled, glistening black hair, was 'exquisite. Her bust was small and her hips might have been larger, but she wore number three shoes, and her hands would have been pretty had she not been forced to do housework, cooking, scrubbing and washing, ever since she had left school.

Leonie Fischer had one of those dispositions which is at ease in all walks of life, among all sorts and conditions of people; which never gives offence, thanks to an innate spiritual tact and an unselfish mind; one of those dispositions which sympathizes with everybody and can be happy only when its associates are happy also.

Leonie Fischer had had no mother since her fifth year and had never traveled outside the little town of Lenzburg. Her father spent his days in his grocery shop and passed his evenings, in company with a few surly greybeards, at a dimly lighted table in one of numerous taverns, never coming home before eleven o'clock. Since the death of her elder sister the maiden had passed nearly every evening at home, alone with her crocheting and a book from the public library, and never felt bored. She might have married well at seventeen. Her father had hammered the table with his fist and called her a fool because she refused the match. But she only laughed at him quietly; she was waiting for the right man to present himself, she was not going to make any experiments. When the right man did come she did not hesitate long, but grabbed hold

of him with both hands. He was of middle height, thirty-five years old, had an elastic step, a profitable business, and, what to his bride seemed almost the most important, he understood how to be in earnest at the right moment, so that she could talk to him quietly about things which had nothing to do with his business nor her father's grocery shop.

The young pair spent their honeymoon on Lake Garda. During the afternoon they sat near each other in the sunshine on the veranda, ashamed a little of their languor, and thankful with all their hearts for the beauty of the moment. The corners of Leonie's mouth shaped themselves to a smile every time her eyes met those of her husband. Then he would cast an ardent glance in her direction, upon which she would blush up to the roots of her hair, and he would look at her beseechingly as if to beg her pardon. It always ended by her slipping her hand into his and by her allowing him to cajole her with glowing sentiments. Each day passed thus until sunset. Leonie enjoyed her new happiness without affectation, with absolute acquiescence, but also without much thought, somewhat impersonally. For the moment she loved only love; it was only

at times that she rejoiced quietly in the thought that she had found such a worthy companion for life. Thus she had dreamed it would be as she sat alone during all those years at home. When she had said yes in the presence of witnesses at the altar she had made a silent promise to herself that she would hold herself alone accountable for her future happiness or unhappiness. Then she had prayed to heaven to spare her and her's from the worst of the unforeseen dangers of the future.

Everything had grown quiet in the big hotel. The room door was bolted fast, the heavy green curtains were drawn, the night-lamp burned on the table; midnight was long since passed, and the pair could not find slumber. That was, perhaps, because they took so little exercise during the day, and because they had taken an extra cup of coffee after supper.

“How comes it,” said the young man in a whisper, “that you, with your twenty years and the passion you have in your body, are always so quiet? When one sees you out in life, the way you speak and the way you act, one might think that you had been on earth before. Other girls of your age grow

excited easily, but you only become stiller and more composed whenever you meet anything unpleasant in your path."

"Perhaps that is on account of what I went through with when I was a child," said the young wife. A ray of light glistened in her eyes. All else was night.

"What did you go through?"

"When my sister died. Did I never tell you?"

"No. At least, I cannot recollect."

"You have seen her photograph. She was nearly a head taller than I am now and much larger in her whole body. She had arms which I could hardly span with my two hands. But she was neither fat nor unwieldy. She was more supple than I am, and when she walked it seemed as if the floor caressed her every step. Perhaps that was because she had such full, broad hips. The most beautiful thing about her was her neck. Whenever I recall her now, I see first her beautiful round neck and the plump shoulders below it. But she was too big for a maiden, as big as some women after they have had two or more children. Nobody would have thought that she had to die. Only she herself, she was a prey to

the most frightful thoughts, as far back as I can remember. One could see them written in her eyes. When one looked into them one believed she was going to cry the next moment. She would tell a long story about a misfortune that had happened or was about to happen; and when one thought it over quietly afterward, it was nothing or could be nothing. She was always uneasy and bashful. From pure terror of misfortune and death she could never summon up courage to be on earth, until the end, when she was quite different. But there was one thing which never left her in peace. She had hardly put on long dresses and been confirmed when she began to think how and when she was to marry. And she had a premonition, I don't know from what, that it would never happen—that she would never live through it, that she would die first. That was the basis of everything which she experienced afterward.

“I remember,” continued Leonie, “I was possibly ten years old, that we slept together in one bed. Near the bed was a cradle in which slept my doll, and in another bed slept Lizzie, our old servant. Lizzie snored so loud that she often woke us up in the

middle of the night. Then we used to talk quietly in the dark, just as you and I are talking now, except that we did not have a four-posted bedstead. And once, Clara asked me if I married, what kind of a man it would have to be. I had never thought of that. I said I didn't know. Then she told me that, for her part, she wanted one who had broad shoulders and was tall. He must have a somewhat short nose, a little blonde mustache and beautiful white teeth. He must wear his hair cut short and must not have big ears, but his legs must be well-turned and he must wear high boots, with big spurs. She talked half the night to me about him. We went over the list of our friends, but none of them was fine enough for her. And in the end she said, putting her head down on my breast and sighing: 'I believe that I shall have to marry an old man of fifty or sixty years, who has lost all his teeth and who grins and coughs at every word he says. O Leonie, Leonie, if you only knew how I fear that, how it makes me shudder!' I felt that she had all the blood in her head and that her fine arms were hot as fire. She had been out of school only a year.

“And then another night, when Lizzie snored so frightfully that it shook the stove, she told me everything about life, why people marry, and why we girls dress differently from you men. I found that all very natural, but she made a great secret out of it. She could scarcely talk, and I could hear her heart beating under the covers. I hadn’t known anything of that before, but I didn’t find anything unnatural in it.

“When she came back from boarding school, three years later—she was a really fine, beautiful girl then, save for her corpulence—an old man, the tottering old actuary, who lived across the street from us, made her an offer of marriage, heaven knows why. She couldn’t get over the fright for four long weeks. She didn’t go out, she didn’t speak, she couldn’t lift her eyes, she wouldn’t look anybody in the face. It was almost as if she were losing her reason. Otherwise, the actuary was a very estimable man; I confess I wouldn’t have wanted him to be in love with me. He told father that he wanted to marry Clara because she never shut her lips tight together; she must be very affectionate. He was right in that. At first she was quite friendly toward him. But

when she found out what he wanted of her she cried herself into convulsions. We had to keep ice bags to her head all day long.

“The next summer Rudolph Eisner came to Lenzburg. That was really as if Heaven had brought together two people who were born especially for each other, and who otherwise would have had to seek half the world over for a fitting mate. She met him first in the suburbs, when she was going bathing, and she flamed up at once like a northern light. She told me, when we were alone together that evening, that she had felt the blood surging all through her body. When she came home to supper she only complained about the water in the brook; it had become so warm and low. It was fifty-two degrees.

“It was frightfully hard for her not to betray herself, but it was just as bad with him. He came at noon the next day and bought cigars. Clara and I stood upstairs at the window. He was a perfect Hercules; his chest was so broad and arched one might have driven over it with a wagon full of stones; his knees trembled; we heard his step echoing back from the rathaus. He had no mustache as yet; he was only twenty-

three years old; one could see his broad, full mouth all the better; lips not too large, but expressive. As he went through the inner door he was forced to stoop; from behind it seemed as if one could see his arms through the sleeves of his coat. He wore his hat on the back of his head; that was the only careless thing about him; under it one saw the white nape of his neck. His head was commanding, but elegant and pliant; he did not carry it down toward the earth, like a steer, but high and proud, like a king. He had finished his military service, I believe, in the officers' school; he was with the artillery, and was acting as a clerk for a hardware merchant near the lower tower. I trembled with alarmed rapture when I saw Clara alongside of me so unnerved and breathing so heavily. I was only a child, but I can say truly that I was as much delighted as she was when they became secretly engaged a fortnight later. They met at the post office: he was writing a post card, she wanted to write one, too; he handed her the pen, and then they became engaged. They hardly spoke a word. He bit his lips and looked into her soul. She was the same toward him; even more passionate, if pos-

sible, and then everything was clear and finished, as firm as heaven over the earth. She came home, knelt down by the sofa, cried and sobbed for joy and beat her feet on the floor.

“They could not be engaged openly at first. They could not be as long as he was a clerk, but he had expectations of becoming a partner in the hardware store. His father was a very rich miller, and Clara herself had a dot; but they had to wait a year at least. And then, every evening, when the hardware store was closed, Clara and I went out into the wood together to the Roman ruins. She had to take me with her, because, otherwise, the other girls would follow her to see where she was going. And then they would kiss each other for an hour at a time until suppertime. I always sat near them. Clara had asked me not to leave her out of my sight alone with him for a moment, and I believe he was thankful to her for that; they wanted to preserve their life’s happiness untarnished. But it wasn’t a little thing for me to watch them, evening after evening, and see how they grew red in the face and trembled and did not speak a word for an hour, looking as grim and stern as

thunder clouds. Whenever Rudolph turned his head he gave me a friendly glance. I took my German reader with me, but often the letters ran together in my sight. When I looked at Clara then she wiped the tears away. Often when we were going home I felt the deepest pity for her, but I was so pious that I didn't dare say anything. So it went on for a whole year, in sunshine, in rain and in snow. In winter I once tore my frock as I rose from the bank, I was frozen fast; while near me the frost thawed on the branches over Rudolph and Clara.

“When the next summer came to an end, some time about September, Rudolph journeyed home one day and arranged everything with his father. In six months his father was to advance him the money so that he could become a partner in the hardware store. That would be in February, then he could marry Clara and make a journey to Italy with her. Announcements were issued at once, all Lenzburg congratulated, and Clara enjoyed a little diversion. It was all so comical to her that she was often as bright as other girls are when they are preparing for their weddings. But now he visited our house every evening. Father

sat in the tavern and I did my school work. They took the utmost care to control themselves; they had given over their kissing; it was no longer as it was in the beginning, they were wiser and the wedding came nearer every day. They only devoured each other with their eyes! I saw them sitting silent opposite each other, she on the sofa, he on a tabouret without a back, uneasy, restless, as if on coals. Many times I looked up from my place at the table, because at first I could not believe that the weather had grown so peaceful, but there was nothing happening. In order to help them pass the time, I used to talk about what I was reading, until I noticed that nobody was listening. Then I kept silent and wrote on my exercises. It was as still as death. One heard only the lamp, my pen and their breathing.

“—On the first of December Clara had a frightful stroke. It was right after dinner. She lost consciousness, her face and her hands became as blue as if she had spilled ink on them; one could not notice her breathing, and her heart beat so hard that one could see it through her dress, it was so strong. All the morning she had been worrying lest war

should break out during her honeymoon, so that Rudolph would have to serve with the artillery. I unbuttoned her waist and undid her corsets, but that did no good. By the time the doctor arrived we had put her to bed. He said that she had had a serious attack of heart failure. He gave her something that brought her to herself. Her first words as she opened her eyes were: 'O Leonie, Leonie, I must die!'

"The doctor came again that evening; Rudolph and I were standing beside her bed; he knew that Clara and Rudolph were engaged. As he left, he told me under no circumstances to allow Rudolph to visit her again, it disturbed her too much, he had seen it; the whole trouble was due to her state of frightful excitement; if I allowed him to come to her bedside again it might mean her death. He told father the same thing down in the shop. I was to communicate it to Rudolph. Naturally, I didn't go to school next day.

"Old Lizzie had left us since Clara had come home from boarding school and was able to help in the store. Since then I had had the bed in which Lizzie had slept after mother's death. The first night I had to

get up every hour and put fresh ice bags to Clara's heart. The next day, as she was no better, we engaged a nurse, who stayed during the day and helped in the store, in order that I might not have to give up school. Rudolph seemed turned to stone when I told him that he could not see her; he didn't answer a syllable; it seemed to me as if he didn't understand me. Early in the morning, at noon and at night, he came to the store and asked how it went with her. It did not go well. All night long Clara had difficulty in breathing and did not sleep a minute. It was only just before noon that she managed to sleep for an hour or so. She had no pain, but as soon as she left the bed she grew dizzy. She did not look different from usual, if anything better, her great limpid eyes glistened so brightly, and her features had something so intense; she was really beautiful. Naturally, she spoke of him all the time, she begged me with tears to bring him to her. I told her it could not be, she would soon be better, and then they could marry at once. But she looked up to the ceiling as if she knew very well that could never be. Then we could hear Rudolph's step in the street outside. Every

night until eleven, twelve o'clock he walked about the house. I felt as if something were choking me. I wanted to throw myself down on the bed with my sister and lament with her. But, I said to myself, you must not notice anything, so that she will not lose all her courage, and I fought it off.

"The next night I dreamed I had an interview with Rudolph. I saw him kneeling before me, lifting his hands to me and holding a knife with which he wanted to kill himself. I only said: 'No, no, no, no, no!' and rejoiced that I was able to pain him so. Once it was all blood. Then I woke up and heard Clara talking to herself. 'Merciful God, have mercy on me,' she stammered. 'Have mercy on me! What have I done to deserve this? O Rudolph, Rudolph!'

"I got up and gave her a powder. Then, in order to quiet her, I stood in my nightgown and allowed her to tell me everything he had told her about his military service and the officers' school.

"The next morning we had arithmetic. I had done my problems, but when I went to the blackboard I didn't know how much twice forty was. The other girls asked me at recess what was the matter with me. I

saw them running about the schoolhouse skipping rope as if they were ghosts, and thought all the time about Clara and Rudolph. I went home with my friend, Marie Hemmann. She had enough tact not to ask me why I didn't speak a word, and when we met Rudolph in front of the house she left us alone at once.

“He was like an oak trembling beneath the axe of the woodman, he shook so as he stood before me. He struck his breast and said that he felt how she must suffer, and that if anything could kill her it was the order the doctor had given; he would like to slay that man for his murderous knowledge. I told him he ought to tell that to the doctor himself; I understood, but I could not help him. Then he took my hand in his and pressed it so hard that it hurt, while with the other he stroked my hair. ‘No,’ he said, ‘you cannot understand me, you are only a schoolgirl, but you can help me. Your father goes to the tavern every evening; you are alone with Clara then, and then——’

“‘Oh, I cannot!’ I said, ‘I cannot!’ and pulled myself away from him and ran into the house. I could not go to Clara. I sat in

the kitchen and cried, and cried, until the soup was on the table.

“Toward evening the doctor came and showed very plainly that she was worse, although we could not notice anything. But he felt Clara’s pulse and sounded her heart for half an hour. ‘No excitement! For God’s sake, no excitement!’ he said. After supper I was with her alone again and she said to me, in the same words, what Rudolph had said to me. It was just as if they had talked together. She scolded me for being unfeeling; I was not her sister. Then she wept so that the pillow was wet through and through. I must bring him to her; he was down below; she didn’t mind dying, she knew she was doomed; but I must let her be alone with him. She raised herself on her elbow, and the pain made her tremble all over. I thought it would never stop. Then when she heard his step in the street she became quieter. In the middle of the night I was awakened suddenly by a cry of pain such as I shall never forget in my life. I sprang up and gave her a drink of water. She drank a whole pitcherful. She said she had been dreaming. It was frightful.

“As soon as she shut her eyes, she told me, she saw an old man. The first time she saw him was while she was unconscious during her stroke. He was bald down to his ears, and the ears themselves were large and stuck out from his head like leaves. He had a close-cropped grey beard and a little, insignificant nose. His chest was that of a child, and his knees seemed to stick out through his thin pantaloons. He always appeared in a frock coat and a tall hat and felt his way with a cane. His face had something so horrible about it that it froze the blood. He introduced himself to her at once as her bridegroom; they were to be married in a fortnight. Each time he kissed her she tried to keep him off with her knees and her elbows, but he held her head so fast between his two hands that she had to suffer his kisses. And the night before he had wanted to take her away with him. Rudolph had protected her, but the old man had hit him over the eye with his cane. Then the old man had leaned over her. She knew that she was in bed well enough. She saw his bleary, red-rimmed eyes coming nearer and nearer to her, and his yellow face with the brown liver spots, and then,

just as she felt his thin hand under her neck, she was able to cry out. 'O Rudolph!' she cried, with clasped hands, 'I shall never see you again, I shall never see you again!'

"When I came downstairs, Rudolph was standing in the shop with father. His head was bowed, but he seemed more manly, more youthful, more spiritual than I had ever seen him. He tried to follow me, but I hastened off to school while I was able.

"During the first two hours my brain was in a whirl. I kept seeing that old monster bending over my sister at home. Then came the German lesson, and the thought obtruded itself more and more. The teacher himself was an old man, but a good-hearted one. The whole fifteen of us used to bring him similar exercises, and he found something different to praise in all of them. The only things he could not bear were for our frocks to be too short, or for us to wear bright-colored ribbons in our hair. Then he called us perfect idiots. Once, when he complained about her dress, Marie Hemmann told him she was not to blame that her legs were so long. He hurried back of his desk, threw up the lid, and kept out of sight for a whole quarter of an hour.

“ ‘It is death,’ I said to myself, ‘it is death who wants to take her.’ And then I concluded to go to the doctor right after school, and ask him if Clara would get better or not. Something seemed to be gnawing within me; I haven’t had the feeling since, but I felt as if the pain might make me ill at any moment. I felt just as if I were in Clara’s place myself. I felt her passionate longing for Rudolph and her fear of the old man. ‘You are a cruel devil without heart or feeling,’ I said to myself; ‘Clara is so frightfully upset because she cannot see him, it could not be worse if he came to see her, and perhaps it might calm her. And suppose she has to die, suppose she really has to die without taking leave of him!’ And then I told myself that the old man had no right to her, that only Rudolph had the right to kiss her. ‘The old man,’ I said to myself, ‘is death and Rudolph is life. When Rudolph is with her the old man will not disturb her. And if the old man is really to get her it doesn’t really matter whether she rejoices herself with a sight of Rudolph before then or not.’

“At twelve o’clock, when school was out, I ran to the doctor; I left my things in school;

I must have looked crazy. He drew me to him, and told me that he had known for a long time that she could not be saved, that his help was useless, and that I must not cry, that she would be up there with God. Then the tears gushed from my eyes. I said I only wanted to ask him. Then he said that she would get better, but with such lack of confidence that I knew the worst.

“I feared the horror might have happened before she could see Rudolph and I ran home, only to find Clara looking as she always looked, beautiful as a full-blown rose, only she spoke very fast. ‘Let him come to me, Leonie, let him come to me,’ she gasped; and I said, ‘Yes, this evening.’ Then she threw her big arms about my neck and kissed me and pressed me to her breast as if I were Rudolph himself. I thought of the doctor then, of what he had said, and of the old monster. Before she let me out of her arms she whispered in my ear: ‘But you must leave me alone with him.’ I said ‘yes,’ and then the nurse came in with some soup and told me to go and eat in the dining room.

“But while we were at the table a thought stabbed me like a dagger. The day before she had already told me that I must leave

them alone together. Although I was still going to school, I knew enough about the world to understand what she wanted. I grew hot and cold. 'No,' I said to myself, 'you dare not do it. Up to now Clara has been a decent girl, and if she does that she won't be so any longer.' And then I thought of the old man who wanted to violate her. And then I thought that she might have to die, to die without being loved as other women, when they are married, are loved all their lives. And then I thought that God must be frightfully cruel. If ever a girl was created for love, it was my sister; I knew that so well.

"That afternoon we had instruction for confirmation. Before it I walked up and down the corridor with Marie Hemmann. The boys, who took lessons with us, stood about and stared at our feet. Marie wore high yellow laced boots and I had on a pair of brand new low shoes. She asked after my sister, and I was tempted to tell her everything that lay on my soul. But, after the first word, I noticed that she did not grasp what it was all about, and so I preferred to keep silent. During our lesson the pastor, with whom all the girls were in love, ex-

plained to us about the Sadducees coming to Christ and asking him if a man had seven wives, which one would be his in heaven; and how he answered that there was no difference between men and women in heaven. A weight seemed to fall from my heart. If there was no difference between men and women in heaven, then it couldn't make any difference whether Clara was with him once or not. My resolution was taken. And then, while the parson went on speaking, I said silently to God: 'If you don't want me to let Rudolph come up to her, then let her be better this evening. You can do that if you will. I will not go home until evening, and then if she is only just a little better I will not allow Rudolph to come up. But if she is not better then I will do it. You, dear God,' I said, 'can hinder it, if you don't want it to happen. You can make a tile fall on my head, or have me arrested for murder. I will stake my life on the matter, young as I am. But, if none of these things happen, then the thing is as you want it, because you can do all that you wish.'

"The whole afternoon I spent outside the town among the snow-covered fields. I went into the woods, too, and when I came

to the Roman ruins I was really afraid that at any minute someone might spring out of the bushes and make an end to me. When it struck six o'clock I turned homeward. Clara lay in bed and complained of palpitation of the heart. She told me she had seen the old man again. There had been a frightful struggle. As he left, he told her that was to be her wedding night, and she had answered: 'Yes, with Rudolph, with Rudolph; but not with you!'

"At seven o'clock father went to the tavern and at eight the nurse went home. Then I slunk downstairs, quietly opened the front door, and let him in. As I came upstairs after him I did not notice anything unusual in his appearance. But when I opened the room door for him and let him in, I saw the strength of his legs vanishing with every step he took toward the bed, so that when he reached it he fell trembling against it. I shut the door quietly and went down to the kitchen, where only a night light was burning. I fell on my knees by the hearth and prayed to God that he might not make Clara suffer for what she was doing; he should not visit it upon her as the doctor had predicted, but he might hold me

accountable, I would endure any pains patiently if Clara might only live, and I would take all the blame for her fault.

“I heard it strike nine o'clock. Right afterward it struck ten. The time passed with me as if it were a moment. At half-past ten I went up with the light. I was within a hair of going in, but I stopped before the door. I knocked lightly and said that it was half-past ten. Then a quarter of an hour passed somewhat slowly. I held my breath; I was afraid of hearing something in front of the house, but I heard only sighs and kisses from inside the room. Then I knocked again. Soon after Rudolph came out wrapped in his coat, with his hat pulled down over his brow. I lighted him out. Going downstairs he pressed my hand without saying anything. Then I let him out.

“I was anxious as to how I should find Clara. It was as if she were enveloped in a mild evening sunshine, and she was more hopeful than I could recollect having seen her, as far back as I could remember. She spoke no word of dying. She spoke only of her wedding and of how they were going to journey to Italy together. The next day

she expected to get up again; then she began to talk of the early days when we played together as children and of how often she had maltreated me. Then she laughed so that I had to cry for very joy on her bed.

“For a long time she could not quiet herself. At last she went to sleep. In the morning, when I got up, she lay so quietly that I thought I would not disturb her. She lay deep in the pillows and I went on tiptoe, kept away from the bed and shut the door quietly behind me. Downstairs I told them that she was asleep. But I had hardly reached school when the nurse came running after me and brought me back. When I entered the room father and the doctor were standing beside her bed. She was dead.”

It was quite still in the big hotel. The newly-made husband had followed his wife's recollections with lively sympathy. He said to himself that a being who had so much understanding at fifteen, whose spiritual life was so much in accord with her surroundings then, must be capable of still greater things as a grown woman. And he counted himself lucky to have by his side such a treasure of quiet consideration, of unselfishness and warm devotion.

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