

"The Wish"

By Hermann Sudermann. Tr. by Lily Henkel. With an introduction by Elizabeth Lee. D. Appleton & Co.

"I COULD GIVE YOU innumerable examples," says the old physician in this story, "where jealousy, covetousness, desire for independence, restlessness, impulse for liberty, amorous longing, have matured this terrible, criminal wish, which suddenly rises up dark and gigantic within the human breast, in which hitherto only love and light have found a place. * * * In olden, more barbarous times, when the passions were permitted to rage unfettered, the deed aided the thought. And if perchance in the family circle anyone happened to be in the other's way, poison and the dagger simply claimed their victims. * * * To-day people have grown calmer, and if a struggle for existence happens nowadays to creep into the holy family circle, one is content to wish the obnoxious one, in a dark hour, six feet under the earth. This wish is the ancient murder restrained by modern civilization. * * * This wish, of which we are speaking, as it is the most hideous spiritual sin of which the human soul can become guilty, so it is also the most secret. No friend confides it to a friend, no husband whispers it in the darkness of the nocturnal couch to his wife, no penitent dares to confess it to his spiritual adviser, even the prayer that struggles upwards to heaven out of the depths of contrition passes it over in hypocritical silence. God may have knowledge of everything, only not of this baseness." The old practitioner has read this terrible wish again and again on the faces at the bedside of his patients: the son's wish for his father's death, the husband's for his wife's, the mother's, even, for the death of her child by an earlier marriage, that her second husband's jealousy may be silenced.

The growth of this wish in the soul of a pure, noble young girl, through her love of her brother-in-law, is the theme of this story. The girl is unconscious of the nature of her affection for the man, until suddenly the wish for her sister's death flames up in her heart, and sears itself into her conscience. We confess that the treatment of the subject is disappointing to us. This secret drama of the soul, which might have filled these many pages, is only disclosed towards the end; in fact, the story is little more than an idyllic tale of love, told with great simplicity, and brought to an end by a sudden, unexpected tragedy. We observe, of course, how insidiously this wish may introduce itself into the heart of even the best of us, through the highest emotions; but it is not that which interests us. Sudermann has thrown a sudden flash of light upon the darkest corner of the human soul, and we could have wished that he had explored for us and with us the recesses in which the criminal thought grows and reaches maturity after it is born. The girl of his story commits suicide: but a study of a passionate woman or a reckless man, who did not commit suicide, but lived with the wish and fostered its growth, would have furnished material for an impressive drama. As it stands, "The Wish" suggests thought and reflection: it merely calls attention to a phenomenon, but does not deal with it. The story is far from being Sudermann's best, but it leaves an impression of horror, an unforgettable remembrance of "one of the darkest spots in human nature, a remnant of bestiality which has managed to find its way into our tamed world."