

"The Painter and the Unnererdschen"

by Helma Heymann

In gentle green arcs, reeds and meadows lined the shore. In the coves, the water lay still and blue. Further out, it rippled and sparkled in the sun. At the edge of one of these coves, a tall sand dune rose steeply, its white surface shining brightly. It stood out sharply against the blue and green of the surrounding. From its height — where it was usually very windy — there was a beautiful view of the water and the land. Only thick clumps of tough, gray-green buckthorn grew there. On the landward side, the hill gradually sloped down and carried wide fields of grain and potatoes on its back. Dreamily, the wind lay there. It had forgotten to blow. But suddenly, he rose and slid down the white sand dune with singing and whistling. In the distance, it had spotted a little boat approaching. Slowly, it drew nearer, and soon one could make out a man with a hat inside. "Aha," said the wind, "that's the painter." They had known each other for a long time.

The painter rowed close to the shore, took off his shoes and socks, rolled up both pant legs, and waded into the water to push his boat ashore. "Good day, Painter!" greeted the wind. "Good day, Wind!" replied the painter, cheerfully tipping his hat. "Lovely weather today! And it's good you're not blowing; I'm back to painting." With that, he pulled a portfolio, painting supplies, and a folding stool from under the seat of the boat. "I'm resting," murmured the wind, "because later, tonight, I plan to give a concert." "A concert?" The painter laughed openly, "For whom? For the moon?" "For the moon and the Unnererdschen," the wind explained calmly. "The moon and the Unnererdschen? What?" The painter, who understood Low German well, thought he must have misheard. "Exactly, for the Unnererdschen (*Underworld beings*)," the wind emphasized each word, "they're going to appear tonight."

The news struck the painter like a bolt of lightning. He grew restless, opening and then closing his little folding stool again. "Wind," he suddenly said, "can you introduce me to them? I want to see the Unnererdschen! I want to paint them! I must paint them!" "Why not? Try it. But be careful, you're never safe from surprises with them," the wind warned. When the evening star shone, the wind was ready. It took a run-up, spun wildly around itself, and then shot straight up above the mountain in a whirl. With creaking and groaning, it pulled out an enormous organ.

The painter stepped back in astonishment. He saw how the wind settled down and began pedaling with great force. A beautiful music filled the air. It seemed to enchant everything around the mountain. The water began to whisper and murmur, the reeds sang in high notes. The mountain swayed under the roar of the organ. From its peak, sand continuously trickled down. The painter, a fearless man, pressed his hat firmly onto his head and his painting supplies tightly under his arm. He stood frozen, listening intently. Suddenly, the ground beneath his feet began to move. Startled, he jumped aside and, to his amazement, saw the bog grass parting. A wooden door appeared, creaking as it swung open.

And he could hardly believe his eyes when he saw three strange beings emerge from the mountain, one after the other. They moved in an odd way. Were they shadows? Were they mermaids? Their appearance confused him. And under the moonlight, no colors could be seen either. Hardly had he had time to take a closer look at the three, when a delicate figure with swift feet climbed out of the mountain. The *Amber Witch*, the painter was sure, and he would have liked to hold her back by the corner of her dress. The figures unsettled him. Still, he did not step aside, but stared transfixed into the yawning opening. And indeed, something stirred

again. Gasping for breath, a little man with a long beard crawled out. The *Klabautermann*. He looked exactly as sailors had described him: knee-high boots, a short coat, and an unusually pointed hat. After him, the wooden door slammed shut, and the back grass closed up again.

"Good evening!", greeted the painter. Nobody greeted him back. Only the *Klabautermann* called in a rasping voice, "Watt hätt hei sächt?" (What did he say?). When there was no answer, he hurriedly stumbled after the *Bernsteinhexe* and the *Nixen*. Silently, they all settled near the organ. They listened intently to the organ music. The painter pulled a sheet of paper from his portfolio and a charcoal pencil and began quickly sketching the outlines of the figures onto his paper. To his surprise, he soon realized that his work here was different from usual. Normally, one paints and ends up with the model and the picture. But here, whatever he drew was disappearing from the model. When he set down his sketch and pencil, the *Klabautermann*, the *Bernsteinhexe*, and the water *Nixen* had vanished, their images only remaining on the paper.

The painter looked around in confusion. He just caught a glimpse of the organ sinking into the mountain. "Wind, your concert was magnificent," the painter praised, "and I was able to sketch the *Unnererdschen* while it was playing. I am happy! Sadly, the colors are missing. But I can already see them in my imagination," he raved, and was about to show his work to the Wind.

But what was that? He could hardly lift the sheet with the drawing. It had suddenly become incredibly heavy. The painter had to use all his strength to hold it up with both arms. "Wind," he said uncertainly, "something has happened to the paper. It's as heavy as a sack of potatoes."

"That was obvious," the Wind explained sleepily, "you've got the *Unnererdschen* on it, they naturally weigh something."

"Hm," the painter mused, carefully sliding the drawing into his portfolio. "Then good night," he said, and climbed down the mountain with all his belongings. There, he stowed them in the boat, pushed it into the water, and rowed home, freezing.

Early the next morning, he was back home, placed the sketch on an easel, stepped back a few paces, and looked at it. "Success!" he rejoiced. Fantastically, these strange figures sat on the mountain under the pale moonlight. Although colorless, everything was in shades of gray. Only then did the painter go to sleep. The Wind, too, slept again in the potato field and dreamed. But at the first ray of sunlight, it shot up, flew over the still *Achterwasser*, and toward the painter's house, heading toward the sea. There, it played with a few black flags the fishermen had set up to mark their nets.

When the painter woke up in his studio, his first glance fell on a painting he had made long ago. It depicted a flooded meadow with patches of snow. Many small footprints had deeply sunk into the picture. *Klabautermann* tracks! The painter was sure of it. He was filled with rage. He jumped up, tore his gray sketch off the easel. It was as light as a feather—no *Unnererdschen* left on it! Only the moon still stood over the mountain. It seemed to shine on a row of neatly cut holes. "Dat givt Storm!" (There's going to be a storm!) the painter shouted angrily, switching to Low German. He walked back and forth excitedly. "Barely on the paper, they take off and ruin my pictures! Who would have thought such a thing?"

He didn't dare to look up, afraid of what he might see. But on the other hand, he had to know where the Unnererdschen were hiding and what damage they had caused. What could he do against them if he didn't know their whereabouts?

Carefully, he looked around—and discovered the Bernsteinhexe in the picture with a vase of meadow flowers in front of a mirror. She had moved the vase aside, some flowers were already hanging out of the picture, and she was combing her hair. "Unbearable!" the painter cried in despair. The Bernsteinhexe smiled at him, looked back in the mirror, adjusted her yellow dress, and started combing her hair again.

The painter had to sit down. As he did, his gaze fell on a large seascape. Immediately, he jumped up again. In this picture, three large, colorful cushions lay on the shore. He had never painted them there! And the Nixen? They were playing in the waves! The water splashed high, and droplets steadily dripped down the frame, running down the wall to the floor, forming a puddle.

Of all pictures, this one was the one the painter had planned to show at an exhibition! Likewise, the one where the three cushions were now missing! It showed a divan with a young woman reading on it. But behind her, the three cushions... were gone.

"If only I had never had the idea of drawing these witch folk!" the painter raged aloud. And while he looked for further damage, a picture of the sand hill came into his hands. Bright and shining, it rose from the water. Its shores were green, reed-bordered at its foot, and there was goatgrass on its height. As he looked at it, an idea came to him. What if he displayed this picture prominently in the studio? Maybe he could outsmart the Unnererdschen and trap them again. The hill was, after all, their home. It was worth a try. He placed the picture on the easel and moved it to the center of the studio. Then he drew back the curtains from all the windows so that the sunlight could flood in. Now the white sand hill glowed brightly and enticingly.

The painter, however, left the studio, looked up at the blue sky, and longingly hoped the Unnererdschen would move into the picture. Restlessly, he paced back and forth. Suddenly, the painter rushed back into the studio, threw open the door, and saw: the Bernsteinhexe was gone. She had even neatly moved the vase back in front of the mirror. Nothing unusual could be seen in the picture. There was no sign of the Nixen. The sea was free, and the beach was empty. The three large cushions were gone, too. Only a damp studio wall, a puddle on the floor, remained. However, the three cushions had not returned to the picture with the reading young woman.

Had they gotten stuck in the sand hill, along with the Nixen, the Hexe, and the Klabautermann? Who could know? The experiment, however, seemed to have succeeded! Now, the picture had to go quickly, or the ghostly folk might get the idea to move again.

"That was a lucky break," the painter whispered, lifting the picture from the easel. It was so heavy now that it almost slipped from his hands. The Unnererdschen weigh something, he heard the Wind's voice in his mind. With great effort, he dragged the load to his boat. He untied the rope and set off. With powerful strokes, he rowed to the sand hill. When he arrived, he struggled to carry the picture ashore and leaned it against the steep cliff. Then he tipped his hat and called out cheerfully, "For the way into the mountain, all the best! Ahoi!" He climbed back into his boat and vigorously rowed back.

The Wind, hearing the rower's strokes, flew out from the potato field. He quickly slid down the sand hill, saw the painter rowing home, and noticed the picture leaning against the steep shore. "Hey, painter!" the Wind called. "You've forgotten something!"

When the painter didn't respond, the Wind hurried after him. "Oh, Wind," said the painter when he noticed him. "If only you had warned me more clearly!" And he told him about his experiences. "Yes, yes," the Wind replied, "who knows what such spirits are up to. I couldn't have told you. Surprises are their way."

"No one will believe me that I had them in my studio," the painter sighed. "People will just laugh at a picture with pale moonlight and many holes in it. Who would want to hang something like that in their house?"

"Wait and see," the Wind comforted him. "Maybe later, people will be clamoring for such a work of art!"

The painter ignored that. "The divan cushions are missing, well, maybe no one will notice. But a picture where the Klabautermann has been trampling around... that's not a real picture anymore!" he sighed.

"Don't talk to anyone about the ruined pictures," advised the Wind. "But if anyone ever talks about the Unnererdschen in your studio, then show them the pictures and tell them what you've experienced."

"Good advice," the painter agreed.

Then, he looked back once more. The white sand hill rose steeply in the distance. The air shimmered around it in the heat, making it seem as if it were moving. Above the hill, exactly in the south, stood the sun. It conjured countless dancing specks of light in the water at the painter's feet. These flowed together into a long, shining path and only stopped at the boat's wake. The painter pulled in an oar. The boat slowed. He squinted slightly and traced the gently curved line of a dike and the soft outlines of a distant forest with his hand. Now a little reed warbler in the nearby marsh began to sing. "Pst," the painter said, "we don't want to disturb him."

"Wind, take me home quietly," he whispered. He carefully drew in the second oar, and silently, the Wind blew the painter and his boat home.