

Kurt Beals's Winning Translation of an excerpt of Nora Bossong's *Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung*

The Tietjen family fortune had grown from a small operation that fired up its machines at the turn of the twentieth century. Weaving frames clattered against each other, fly-shuttles whizzed from left to right. The first employees included two former coal miners who'd fled the dim light of the mine shafts, one worker laid off from the Krupp steel factory, and three women who sorted the threads in silence. Justus Tietjen, the company's founder, strode down the rows like a prince, giving instructions and inspecting his product, rough linen hand towels woven from ash-grey fibers.

Buyers were hard to come by. A shop in Duisburg, two in Dortmund, but the competition from Bielefeld and Münster was too powerful, especially the Schermerhorn company, which seemed to have a tight grip on the market. What's more, even Justus' wife hesitated to use his hand towels. Eleonore explained that she was a daughter of a good house, and was used to better things. And she wasn't about to subject her five-year-old son to that coarse cloth. You're betraying me and our whole future together, Justus yelled. After two weeks of squabbling, Justus traveled to France, visited a number of weaving mills, and solicited the advice of the experts there. In autumn of 1906 he put a fluffy terrycloth towel on the market, available in ten bright colors.

Tietjen's soft terrycloth soon gained a reputation as Parisian chic, as *nouvelle doucerie*. Anyone with any pride at all would treat himself to Tietjen's terrycloth. Soon Justus was able to hire five new workers, then ten, and finally, by the end of 1909, there were sixty people sitting at the machines and the lined-up tables of the new factory building.

Next door, the house where Justus Tietjen lived with his wife was growing more and more magnificent - thanks above all to Eleonore's eagerness. First linen, then satin, then silk billowed in front of the windows. A gramophone was procured, though no one in the house was in the habit of listening to music. It gathered dust, but at least it was there. Parisian fashion magazines and Sotheby's catalogs were scattered all around. Every spring, just before Pentecost, they would order the latest bathroom fashions from all over Europe and replace the bathtub with a newer, even more elegant model. They always ate from plates with gold trim, not just on Sundays. Eleonore ordered fresh flower arrangements every day from the most expensive florist in the entire Ruhr Valley. Even the view from their house seemed to stretch out further and further, as if the slope were rising up under all that extravagance. A fountain was built, and soon its water wasn't just spouting into any old basin, it was spilling over an artificial waterfall chiseled out of bright marble. Down below, their son Karl played at sinking ships. It was 1913, and Eleonore had just gotten pregnant for the second time.

Justus Tietjen had excellent instincts. He knew that the fashions would change, that people wouldn't always swear by Paris, idleness and luxury, and so he took preemptive action. When the heir to the Austrian throne died the next year at the hands of an assassin, and the military wheels began to turn, Justus was prepared. His new recipe for success was: the harder the world, the more urgent the need for soft fabric. When people fell, someone had to catch them. When life was hard, you needed something to balance it out. People longed for softness, even more in war than in peace. And Justus Tietjen was braced for battle.

He ordered all the mechanical looms to stop, those looms where for ten years now the loops of thread had been pulled softer and softer, and he had the workers step back from their machines for a moment's reflection. Over the newly installed loudspeaker system, Justus Tietjen declared war. He declared it with

all its dangers, with all its greed, and he didn't omit the details of the carnage. Therefore, Justus announced in his monotone voice, they, the employees of J. Tietjen & Co., must also do their part, if not for victory then at least for the good of the fatherland. He added that he hadn't the slightest doubt a victory would come, but even a victory could sometimes be lined with rough cloth.

The machines started their whirring again, the weaving frames clattered against each other, the fly-shuttles flew from left to right, sped up, clattered, hissed, sped up again, and the hysterical squeal of the production line revealed that their brief pause for a moment's reflection had been nothing but a chance to catch their breath before plunging in to their new task with all their might.