In the Sunlight

In the topmost branches of the maple tree on the garden side of the house the starlings were fussing about. Otherwise silence reigned, for it was a summer's afternoon between one and two.

Through the garden gate came a young cavalry officer in white dress uniform. On his head, at a rakish angle, was a little three-cornered hat with a plume. He looked down each of the garden paths in turn; then, swinging his cane delicately between his fingers, he listened up at the house. Through an open window on the top floor came intermittently but clearly the chink of little Dutch coffee bowls and the voices of two elderly gentlemen. The young man smiled as he walked slowly down the shallow garden steps, as though in anticipation of some pleasurable experience. At first the seashells which were strewn along the broad path rattled against his broad spurs; then he began walking more carefully, as if wanting to avoid being seen. He did not seem disturbed, however, when a young man in civilian costume, wearing a neatly powdered wig, came towards him along a side-path. Mutual expressions of brotherly, almost tender, amity came over both their faces as they silently shook hands. ‘The councillor is up there, the two old gentlemen are sitting at the toccadillo board’, he said to the officer, pulling out a heavy gold watch. ‘You have at least a couple of hours to yourselves. Off you go, you can help with the accounts.’ As he spoke he pointed along the path leading to a wooden summer-house, which was built out over the river that ran by at the foot of the garden.

‘Thank you, Fritz. But won't you be joining us?’ asked the officer.

The other shook his head. ‘Today is post day’, he said, and turned towards the house. The young officer had removed his hat, and as he continued up the path the sun shone unhindered on his high forehead and his unpowdered black hair. Soon he was in the shadow of the little summer-house which stood on the eastern side of the garden.

One of the double doors stood open; he walked cautiously up to it. All the blinds had been pulled down and inside the summer-house it was so dark that, coming from the bright sunlight, his eyes took a while to get used to the shadow and make out the youthful figure of the girl inside. She was sitting in the middle of the room at a small marble table; with a practised hand she was entering figure after figure into the folio volume lying in front of her. With bated breath the young officer watched her little powdered head hovering over the pages and moving to and fro as though in harmony with the strokes of the pen. After a few moments had passed, he drew his sword a handbreadth from its sheath and thrust it back again, producing a gentle ringing sound. A smile played over the girl's lips and she began to raise her dark eyelashes a little; but then, as though thinking better of it, she merely pushed back the sleeve of her amaranth-coloured quaintise and dipped her pen into the ink once more.

Since she did not look up again, the officer advanced a step into the room and silently drew the pen through her fingers, leaving traces of ink on her nails.

‘Captain, sir!’ she exclaimed, holding out her hand to him. She threw back her head, and two deep grey eyes fixed him with a look of none-too-serious displeasure.

He plucked a vine leaf from the trellis outside and carefully wiped the ink from her fingers. She offered no resistance, but then she picked up the pen and set to work again.

‘You can do your accounts another time, Fränzchen’, pleaded the young man.

She shook her head. ‘Tomorrow is audit day at the hospice. I must get them finished.’ And she continued with her writing.

‘You're a champion quill-driver!’

‘I'm a merchant's daughter!’

He laughed.

‘Don't laugh. You know we can't really be doing with soldiers.’

‘We? Which we is that?’

‘Don’t you know, Konstantin?’ The pen jerked its way down the columns of figures: she was adding up. ‘We, the whole firm.’

‘You too, Fränzchen?’

‘Oh, me –'. And she dropped the pen and flung herself into his arms, so that a little cloud of powder rose into the air above their heads. With one hand she stroked his shiny black hair. ‘How vain you are!’ she said, looking the handsome man up and down with an expression of satisfied pride.

From the direction of the town came the sound of military music. The young captain's eyes lit up. ‘That's my regiment!’ he said, hugging the girl firmly with both arms.

She smiled, leaning back from him a little way. ‘None of that is going to help you one tiny bit.’

‘So what will become of all this?’

She lifted herself up to him on tiptoe and said: ‘A wedding!’

‘But what about the firm, Fränzchen?’

‘I'm my father's daughter.’ And she looked at him with her shrewd eyes.

As she did so, there came a sound, seemingly from very close by, but in fact carrying from the top storey of the house: the sound of a harsh voice. The starlings fluttered through the garden with little cries and the young officer, almost involuntarily, clutched the girl closer to him. ‘What's the matter with you?’ she asked. ‘The old gentlemen have finished the first round of toccadillo. Now they're standing at the window and Papa is arranging the weather for the whole of next week.’

He looked out through the door into the sunlit garden. ‘I have you now’, he said. ‘It must stay like this for ever.’

She wagged her head from side to side a few times without replying. Then she freed herself from his embrace and pushed him towards the door. ‘Off you go now!’ she said. ‘I'll come in a little while; I won't leave you on your own.’

He took her delicate little face in his hands and kissed her. Then he went out of the door and turned down a different path which ran along the privet hedge separating the garden from the high river bank. He kept his eyes fixed on the inexorable movement of the water flowing by as he walked, until he came to an open space with a marble statue of Flora surrounded by box hedges, neatly topiarised into decorative flourishes. Dotted among these arabesques were fragments of porcelain and strings of glass coral beads which shone daintily out of the greenery; a pungent aroma filled the air, blended from time to time with the scent of the cabbage roses which climbed the garden wall at the end of the path. In the angle of the wall and the privet hedge stood an arbour, deeply shaded by a luxuriant growth of honeysuckle. The captain unbuckled his sword and sat down on the small bench inside. With the end of his cane he began to trace letters on the ground in front of him, which he then kept erasing, as though they might betray a secret. He carried on this game for a while, until his eye was caught by the shadow of a spray of honeysuckle, at the tip of which he could clearly make out the delicate trumpet of the flower. As he concentrated his attention on it, he noticed the shadow of some creature slowly creeping up the short stem. He watched its progress for a while, then he stood up and looked above his head into the tangle of stems in an attempt to make out the endangered flower and knock off the offending insect. But the sunbeams breaking through the leaves dazzled him, he had to look down again. – When he sat down on the bench once more, he could see the spray as before, sharply and clearly etched on the sunlit floor at his feet; but now there was a dark lump stuck between the slender cups of the shadow-flowers, which from time to time made jerky movements, indicating some bustling insect activity. He did not know why this affected him so strongly, but he began thrusting with his cane at the busy lump; however, the summer breeze blowing through the shoots above him made the shadows flit to and fro and escape him. He became more intent; planting his knees apart, he was just winding up for a fresh thrust when the toe of a satin shoe obstructed his view.

He looked up. Franziska was standing before him, her pen stuck behind her ear, so that its white feather emerged from her little powdered head like a dove's wing. She laughed for a while, soundlessly, yet it was clear that she was laughing. He leaned back and watched her, full of joy. She laughed so easily, without any effort, it ran across her as a breath of wind might flicker across a lake; no-one else could laugh like that.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ she cried at last.

‘Silly things, Fränzchen; I've been skirmishing with shadows.’

‘You should give up doing things like that.’

He tried to take her hands, but at that moment she turned round to the garden wall, drew a little knife from her pocket and cut from the bushes some roses in full bloom. ‘I'll be making potpourri for this evening’, she said, gathering the roses carefully together into a pile on the ground.

He watched her patiently; he had learned that he must let her have her head.

‘And what now?’ he asked, when she had closed the knife again and slipped it back into the pocket of her gown.

‘What now, Konstantin? Stay together and listen to the clock chiming the hours.’ And so it came to pass. Over in the lemon pear tree in front of them a chaffinch was flying to and fro, and in the depths of the arbour they could hear the squeaking of nestlings. There was also, though they were scarcely aware of hearing it, the sobbing sound of the water flowing past beneath them, and from time to time a caprifoil blossom drifted down at their feet. And every quarter of an hour the chiming clock from Amsterdam sounded from up in the house. Silence fell between them. But then the urge to hear that beloved name spoken out loud overcame the young man. ‘Fränzchen!’ he said in a low voice.

‘Konstantin!’

As though her voice had startled him after the long silence, and as though the secret of its music had only now been revealed to him, he said: ‘You ought to take up singing, Fränzchen.’

She shook her head. ‘You know that's not seemly for a girl of good society.’

He was silent for a while; then he took her hand and said: ‘Don't talk in that way, not even in jest. You had singing lessons from the choirmaster, after all. So why not?’

She looked at him gravely; but soon a merry glint lit up her eyes. ‘Oh, don't look so gloomy!' she exclaimed. ‘I'll tell you why: I'm too good at reckoning.’

He laughed, and she joined in. ‘Are you too clever for me as well, Franziska?’

‘Maybe!’ she said, and all at once her voice took on a deeper, warmer note. ‘But you don't yet know *how* clever I am! When you were first transferred to this town and my brother Fritz first brought you into our home, I was a little girl with two whole years of school still ahead of her. When I came home in the afternoons I often slipped into the drawing-room when you and Fritz were practising your fencing. But you never took any notice of me at all. And even once when your foil caught my apron you only said, “Go and sit by the window, child” – you can't imagine how hateful those words were! Then I began to think up all kinds of stratagems. When the children of our neighbours came to play with me, I tried to get one of the other girls – I wouldn't have dreamed of doing it myself – to persuade you to take part in our games, and once you had agreed to join in –’

‘Well, Fränzchen?’

‘Then I would run very close by you so often, until you absolutely had to catch me by my little white dress.’

She had blushed deeply. He slipped his fingers between hers and squeezed them tightly. After a time she looked up shyly and asked: ‘Didn't you ever notice anything at all?’

‘Oh yes, in the end’, he said. ‘Well, in the end you grew up.’

‘And then? How did it start for you?’

He looked very closely into her face, as though wishing to ascertain whether he might speak frankly. 'Who knows, it might never have happened at all! But then came that occasion when the councillor's wife said...'

'Yes, go on, tell me, Konstantin!'

'Not yet; do me a favour first – just walk up the path there a little way.'

She did as he bid her. After gathering up the cut roses in her apron, she went back to the pavilion without saying another word, and soon came out again empty-handed. She had dainty feet and a quick stride, but almost imperceptibly she nudged her dress with her knees as she walked. The young man watched this movement, unbeautiful though it might seem, with delight in his eyes; he scarcely noticed when his beloved was once again standing in front of him. 'Well', she asked, 'and what did the councillor's wife say? Or was it one of her seven daughters?'

'She said', and he let his eyes glide slowly up her elegant figure, 'she said: "Mademoiselle Fränzchen is a pleasant enough person, but she walks just like a wagtail."'

'Oh, you – '. And Fränzchen put her hands together behind her back and looked down at him, radiant with happiness.

'From that time on', he continued, 'I could not get it out of my mind; I continually saw you in my mind's eye, walking and moving about.'

She was still standing in front of him, silent and motionless now.

'What's the matter?' he asked. 'You look so proud and so refined!'

She said: 'It's only my happiness.'

'Happiness – oh, a whole worldful of it!' And he drew her down to him with both arms.

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It was in a different age, some sixty years later. But it was another summer afternoon, and the roses were blooming just as they had before. In the room at the top of the house, overlooking the garden, an old woman was sitting. On her lap, which she had covered with a white kerchief, she was holding a steaming cup of coffee; but today she seemed to be forgetting her accustomed drink, for only sporadically, and then in absent fashion, did she lift the cup to her lips.

Close by, opposite the sofa, sat her grandson, a young man barely past the flowering of youth. With his head propped on one hand he was looking at the small family portraits

hanging in silver frames above the sofa. Grandfather, his great-grandparents, Great-Aunt Fränzchen his grandfather's sister - all were long dead, and he had never known them. Now his eyes were roaming from one to the other, as they often did when he sat together with his grandmother in the quiet of the afternoon. The colours seemed least faded on the portrait of Great-Aunt Fränzchen, although she had died before her parents and long before her brother. The red rose in her white powdered wig still seemed freshly plucked; the blue medallion hanging down over her breast on its dark ribbon stood out clearly against her amaranth-coloured quaintise. Her great-nephew could not take his eyes off these scanty traces of a life that had come to an end so early; he gazed almost passionately at the delicate pale face. The garden as he had known it as a small boy came into his mind. He imagined her strolling along the strange lines of box-hedge, he heard the grating of her shoe on the shell-strewn steps, the rustling of her dress. But the figure he was able to conjure up in this way remained a solitary one, fixed as if by a magic spell in the little green space which he saw in his mind's eye. The things which might once have happened to her when she was alive, the companions she might have had, daughters of gloomy old patrician houses, or a beloved who might have gone searching for her among the bushes of the garden – he lacked the power to endow her with any of these things. 'No-one knows about them', he murmured to himself. The little medallion on the breast of this young girl who had died so long ago seemed to him like a seal of secrecy.

His grandmother put her coffee cup down on the window-seat beside her; she had heard him speaking to himself. 'Have you been down to the family vault, Martin?' she asked. 'Will the repairs be completed soon?'

'Yes, Grandmother.'

'I want everything to be left neat and tidy; in our family we have always set great store by good repute.'

'It will all be neat and tidy', said her grandson, 'but one of the coffins has collapsed, that's why there's been a delay.'

'Have the iron bars rusted through?'

'No, it's not that. It was standing right at the back beside the grille, and water had been dripping on it.'

'Ah, that must be Aunt Fränzchen's', said Grandmother after a few moments' reflection. 'Was there a wreath lying on it?'

Martin stared at her. 'A wreath? - I don't know about that. I dare say it would have disintegrated by now.'

The old lady nodded slowly and stared into space for a while. 'Yes, yes', she said, and then added almost with embarrassment: 'To be sure, it's over fifty years ago since she was buried. Her fan, the one with sequins and enamel, is still in the sitting-room over there in the chest of drawers with the mirror – though I couldn't find it when I looked yesterday.'

Her grandson could not repress a smile. Noticing it, the old lady said: ‘That hoyden of a fiancée of yours has been meddling with my things again, I'll be bound. You're not to use things like that for your larking about.’

‘But Grandmother, the way she promenaded through the garden the other evening in your hooped skirt - you'd all have been jealous of her back in 1790 if she'd turned up in your arbour looking like that!’

‘What a vain young man you are, Martin!’

‘Of course’, he went on, ‘she's got those foreign-looking brown eyes; they're going to come into our family now, for better or worse!’

‘Ah well’, said Grandmother, ‘there's nothing amiss with brown eyes, provided that they're windows onto a good heart. - But I do insist that she respect that fan! It was the one Aunt Fränzchen carried at your grandfather's wedding, and I think I can still picture her just as she was then, with the dark rose in her hair. After that she didn't live for very long. There was such a great love between brother and sister, it was at that time that she presented her brother with her portrait, and he kept it by him, for as long as he lived, in his bureau. Afterwards we had it hung up here, alongside his own portrait and those of their parents.’

‘I imagine she must have been very beautiful, Grandmother?’ asked the young man, looking over at the portrait as he spoke.

Grandmother seemed not quite to have caught what he said. ‘She was a clever young thing’, she said, ‘and very skilled at writing. When your grandfather was in Marseilles, and, I think, even after he came back, it was she who drafted the accounts every year, for her father, who was the superintendent of the hospice and a senator before he became deputy mayor. She had a slender, well-proportioned figure, and your grandfather used to tease her sometimes about her elegant hands. But she never wanted to get married.’

‘Were there no young men in the town then, or did she not like those who paid court to her?’

‘That, my dear child’, Grandmother said as she stroked her lap with her hands, ‘that is a secret she took with her to the grave. People did say that she had once lost her heart to someone, but only God can know the truth of that. He was a friend of your grandfather’s and a reputable person. But he was an officer and a nobleman, and your great-grandfather was always prejudiced against the military. At your grandfather’s wedding they danced together, and I remember well that they made a handsome couple. People used to call him simply the Frenchman, because he had raven-black hair which he only occasionally powdered, except for the times when he was on duty. But that must have been the last time they were together, for shortly after he took his discharge and bought himself a small estate a long way away from here. He was still living there a while after your grandfather’s death, with an unmarried sister.’

Her grandson interrupted her. ‘Affairs of the heart must have been very different matters in those days’, he said pensively.

'Very different matters?' Grandmother echoed, trying just for a moment to urge her old body into a youthful pose. 'We had hearts just the same as you have, and we had to suffer their pangs in our own way. But', she went on more composedly, 'how can you young folk be expected to understand what things were like then? You have never felt the hard hand of discipline controlling you, you can't imagine how mousy-quiet we had to be when we were playing, if we even so much as heard our father's malacca cane striking the stone path in the distance.'

Martin sprang up and seized his grandmother's hands.

'Ah well', she said, 'I dare say it is better the way things are now. You are happy children, but your grandfather's sister lived in the olden days. When we moved into the lower storey of the house here, after our wedding, she often liked to come down to visit us, and many a time she sat for hours beside your grandfather in the counting-house and helped him with all his writing work. In that last year, after her strength had begun to fail, I sometimes found her fallen asleep over her account books. Your grandfather would be sitting opposite her in silence on the other side of the desk, still working away, and I can remember very clearly the mournful smile he gave me whenever I came in, as he pointed out his sleeping sister to me.'

The old lady paused here for a while, staring in front of her with wide-open eyes while she swung her coffee-cup to and fro mechanically, before, with great circumspection, she drained the last dregs. Then, after placing the cup on the window-seat, she went on slowly: 'Our old Anne never tired of telling us how jolly and sociable her Mamsell had been in her younger days; and how she was the only one among the children who on occasion dared to have things out with her father. But for as long as I knew her, she was always quiet and withdrawn, especially if he were in the room, and she only said as much as was absolutely necessary or in reply to a direct question. I don't know what may have happened between her and her father - your grandfather never spoke about it. And now they are all dead and buried, long ago.'

The young man looked at his great-grandfather's picture, and his eyes focussed on the severe lines separating the mouth from the cheeks. 'He must have been a hard man', he said.

His grandmother nodded.

'He carried on educating his sons until their thirtieth year', she said. 'And for that reason, no matter how long they lived, they never really had any will-power of their own. Your grandfather complained about it often enough. He would have liked to become a scholar, just as you are, but the firm needed a successor. Times were simply different then.'

Martin took his grandfather's portrait down from the wall. 'Those are gentle eyes', he said.

His grandmother stretched out her hands, as though she were about to get up from her armchair, but then she let them fall back together again. 'Yes, indeed, my child', she said, 'they were gentle eyes! He had no enemies, or only one sometimes, and that was himself.'

The old housekeeper came in. 'One of the builders is outside, he wants to speak to the master.'

‘Go and see to it, Martin!’, said Grandmother. ‘What’s the matter, then, Anne?’

‘They've found something in the vault’, answered the old woman, ‘a piece of jewellery or something of the sort. Those old family coffins are not going to hold together much longer.’

The grandmother bowed her head a little, then she looked about her in the room and said: ‘Close the window, Anne! The scent is too strong for me; it’s the sun shining on the box-hedge borders out there!’

‘The old lady's having her fancies again!’ murmured the maidservant to herself, for the box-hedge had been taken out over twenty years before, and the local boys had played at horses with the strings threaded with glass beads. But aloud she said nothing of the kind; instead she closed the window as she had been bidden. After that she stood for a while looking through the branches of the tall maple tree, across to the old summer-house, where years and years ago it had so often been her task to carry out the coffee service to the young people of the house, and where on many an afternoon Mamsell Fränzchen, by then a frail invalid, had been wont to sit.

Then the door opened, and Martin came hurrying in. ‘You were quite right!’ he said, taking Aunt Fränzchen’s portrait from the wall and holding it in front of his grandmother’s eyes by its silver chain. ‘The painter was only allowed to paint the back of the locket, the open glass side lay upon her heart. I have often wondered what that locket contained. Now I know, for I have the power to turn it round.’ And with that he laid on the window-seat a dusty piece of jewellery which, despite the verdigris that now covered it, was unmistakeably the original of the one in the painting of Aunt Fränzchen. The sunlight, penetrating its cloudy glass, lit up a lock of black hair within.

The grandmother put on her spectacles without saying anything; then with trembling hands she picked up the little medallion and bent her head low over it. Finally, after a long while had passed, in which nothing but the uneven breathing of the old woman could be heard in the quiet room, she laid it carefully aside and said: ‘Have it put back in its place, Martin; it does not belong in the sunlight. – Now’, she added, carefully folding her shawl on her lap, ‘this evening I want you to bring your fiancée to me! There must surely be a wedding necklace lying around somewhere in the old drawers; let us see how well it will go with those brown eyes.’