

## Description of a Struggle

*translated by Tania & James Stern*

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**A**t about midnight A few people rose, bowed, shook hands, said it had been a pleasant evening, and then passed through the wide doorway into the vestibule, to put on their coats. The hostess stood in the middle of the room and made graceful bowing movements, causing the dainty folds in her skirt to move up and down. I sat at a tiny table — it had three curved, thin legs — sipping my third glass of benedictine, and while I drank I surveyed my little store of pastry which I myself had picked out and arranged in a pile.

Then I saw my new acquaintance, somewhat dishevelled and out of shape, appear at the doorpost of an adjoining room; but I tried to look away for it was no concern of mine. He, however, came toward me and, smiling absent-mindedly at my occupation, said: "Excuse me for disturbing you, but until this very moment I've been sitting alone with my girl in the room next door. Ever since half-past ten. Lord, what an evening! I know it isn't right for me to be telling you this, for we hardly know one another. We only met on the stairs this evening and exchanged a few words as guests of the same house. And now — but you must forgive me, please — my happiness just cannot be contained, I can't help it. And since I have no other acquaintance here whom I can trust —"

I looked at him sadly — the piece of fruitcake which I had in my mouth did not taste particularly good — and said into his rather flushed face: "I'm glad of course that you consider me trustworthy, but displeased that you have confided in me. And you yourself, if you weren't in such a state, would know how improper it is to talk about an amorous girl to a man sitting alone drinking schnapps."

When I said this, he sat down with a jolt, leaned back in his chair, and let his arms hang down. Then he pressed them back, his elbows pointed, and began talking in rather a loud voice: "Only a little while ago we were alone in that room, Annie and I. And I kissed her, I kissed her — her mouth, her ears, her shoulders. Oh, my Lord and Savior!"

A few guests, suspecting ours to be a rather more animated conversation, approached us closer, yawning. Whereupon I stood up and said so that all could hear: "All right then, if you insist, I'll go with you, but I repeat: it's ridiculous to climb up the Laurenziberg now, in winter and in the middle of the night. Besides, it's freezing, and as it has been snowing the roads out there are like skating rinks. Well, as you like —"

At first he gazed at me in astonishment and parted his wet lips; but then, noticing the guests who had approached quite close, he laughed, stood up, and said: "I think the cold will do us good; our clothes are full of heat and smoke; what's more, I'm slightly tipsy without having drunk very much; yes, let's say goodbye and go." So we went to the hostess, and as he kissed her hand she said: "I am glad to see you looking so happy today."

Touched by the kindness of these words, he kissed her hand again; whereupon she smiled. I had to drag him away. In the vestibule stood a housemaid, whom we hadn't seen before. She helped us into our coats and then took a small lantern to light us down the stairs. Her neck was bare save for a black velvet ribbon around her throat; her loosely clothed body was stooped and kept stretching as she went down the stairs before us, holding the lantern low. Her cheeks were flushed, for she had drunk some wine, and in the weak lamplight which filled the whole stairwell, I could see her lips trembling.

At the foot of the stairs she put down the lantern, took a step toward my acquaintance, embraced him, kissed him, and remained in the embrace. Only when I pressed a coin into her hand did she drowsily detach her arms from him, slowly open the front door, and let us out into the night.

Over the deserted, evenly lit street stood a large moon in a slightly clouded, and therefore unusually extended, sky. On the frozen snow one had to take short steps. Hardly were we outside when I evidently began to feel very gay. I raised my legs, let my joints crack, I shouted a name down the street as though a friend of mine had just vanished around the corner; leaping, I threw my hat in the air and caught it boastfully. My acquaintance, however, walked on beside me, unconcerned. He held his head bent. He didn't even speak.

This surprised me, for I had calculated that he, once I had got him away from the party, would give vent to his joy. Now I too could calm down. No sooner had I given him an encouraging slap on the back than I suddenly no longer understood his mood, and withdrew my hand. Since I had no use for it, I stuck it in the pocket of my coat.



So we walked on in silence. Listening to the sound of our steps, I couldn't understand why I was incapable of keeping step with my acquaintance — especially since the air was clear and I could see his legs quite plainly. Here and there someone leaned out of a window and watched us.

On turning into the Ferdinandstrasse I realized that my acquaintance had begun to hum a melody from the *Dollar Princess*. It was low, but I could hear it distinctly. What did this mean? Was he trying to insult me? As for me, I was ready to do without not only this music, but the walk as well. Why wasn't he speaking to me, anyway? And if he didn't need me, why hadn't he left me in peace in the warm room with the benedictine and the pastry? It certainly wasn't I who had insisted on this walk. Besides, I could have gone for a walk on my own. I had merely been at a party, had saved an ungrateful young man from disgrace, and was now wandering about in the moonlight. That was all right, too. All day in the office, evenings at a party, at night in the streets, and nothing to excess. A way of life so natural that it borders on the excessive!

My legs were growing tired and I had already decided to go home and lie down, when I began to wonder if, before going away, I ought to say good night to my acquaintance. But I was too timid to go away without a word and too weak to call to him out loud. So I stood still, leaned against the moonlit wall of a house, and waited.

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My acquaintance came sailing along the pavement toward me as fast as though he expected me to catch him. He winked at me, suggesting some agreement which I had apparently forgotten.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "I only wanted to ask your opinion about that housemaid who kissed me on the staircase. Who is the girl? Have you ever seen her before? No? Nor have I. Was she a housemaid at all? I had meant to ask you this before, while she was walking down the stairs in front of us."

"I saw at once by her red hands that she's a housemaid, and not even the first housemaid, and when I gave her the money I felt her hard skin."

"But that merely proves that she has been some time in service, which no doubt is the case."

"You may be right about that. In that light one couldn't distinguish everything, but her face reminded me of the elder daughter of an officer I happen to know."

"Not me," he said.

"That won't stop me going home; it's late and I have to be in the office early. One sleeps badly there." Whereupon I put out my hand to say goodbye to him.

"Whew, what a cold hand!" he cried. "I wouldn't like to go home with a hand like that. You should have let yourself be kissed, too, my friend. That was an omission. Still, you can make up for it. But sleep? On a night like this? What an idea! Just think how many thoughts a blanket smother while one lies alone in bed, and how many unhappy dreams it keeps warm."

"I neither smother anything nor warm anything," I said.

"Oh, go on!" he concluded, "you're a humorist!"

At the same time he began walking again and I followed without realizing it, for I was busy thinking of what he had said.

From these words I imagined that my acquaintance suspected in me something which, although it wasn't there, made me nevertheless rise in his estimation by his suspecting it. So it was just as well I hadn't gone home. Who knows, this man — thinking of housemaid affairs while walking beside me, his mouth steaming with cold — might be capable of bestowing on me in the eyes of the world a value without my having to work for it. Let's pray the girls won't spoil him! By all means let them kiss and hug him, that's their duty and his right, but they mustn't carry him off. After all, when they kiss him they also kiss me a little — with the corners of their mouths, so to speak. But if they carry him off, then they steal him from me. And he must always remain with me, always. Who is to protect him, if not I? And he's so stupid. Someone says to him in February: Come up the Laurenziberg — and off he goes. And supposing he falls down now, or catches cold? Suppose some jealous man appears from the Postgasse and attacks him? What will happen to me? Am I to be just kicked out of the world? I'll believe that when I see it! No, he won't get rid of me.

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