

## THE JUDGMENT

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*For Fräulein Felice B.*

IT WAS A Sunday morning at the very height of spring. Georg Bendemann, a young merchant, was sitting in his own room on the second floor of one of a long row of low, graceful houses stretching along the bank of the river, distinguishable from one another only in height and color. He had just finished a letter to an old friend who was now living abroad, had sealed it in its envelope with slow and dreamy deliberateness, and with one elbow propped on his desk was looking out the window at the river, the bridge, and the hills on the farther bank with their tender green.

He was thinking about this friend, who years before had simply run off to Russia, dissatisfied with his prospects at home. Now he was running a business in St. Petersburg, which at first had flourished but more recently seemed to be going downhill, as the friend always complained on his increasingly rare visits. So there he was, wearing himself out to no purpose in a foreign country; the exotic-looking beard he wore did not quite conceal the face Georg had known so well since childhood, and the jaundice color his skin had begun to take on seemed to signal the onset of some disease. By his own account he had no real contact with the colony of his fellow countrymen there and almost no social connection with Russian families, so that he was resigning himself to life as a confirmed bachelor.

What could one write to such a man, who had obviously gone badly astray, a man one could be sorry for but not help? Should one perhaps advise him to come home, to reestablish

himself here and take up his old friendships again—there was certainly nothing to stand in the way of that—and in general to rely on the help of his friends? But that was as good as telling him—and the more kindly it was done the more he would take offense—that all his previous efforts had miscarried, that he should finally give up, come back home, and be gaped at by everyone as a returned prodigal, that only his friends knew what was what, and that he himself was nothing more than a big child and should follow the example of his friends who had stayed at home and become successful. And besides, was it certain that all the pain they would necessarily inflict on him would serve any purpose? Perhaps it would not even be possible to get him to come home at all—he said himself that he was now out of touch with business conditions in his native country—and then he would still be left an alien in an alien land, embittered by his friends' advice and more than ever estranged from them. But if he did follow their advice and even then didn't fit in at home—not because of the malice of others, of course, but through sheer force of circumstances—if he couldn't get on with his friends or without them, felt humiliated, couldn't really be said to have either friends or a country of his own any longer, wouldn't it be better for him to go on living abroad just as he was? Taking all this into account, how could one expect that he would make a success of life back here?

For such reasons, assuming one wanted to keep up any correspondence with him at all, one could not send him the sort of real news one could frankly tell the most casual acquaintances. It had been more than three years since his last visit, and for this he offered the lame excuse that the political situation in Russia was too uncertain and apparently would not permit even the briefest absence of a small businessman, though it allowed hundreds of thousands of Russians to travel the globe in perfect safety. But during

these same three years Georg's own position in life had changed considerably. Two years ago his mother had died and since then he and his father had shared the household together; and his friend had, of course, been informed of that and had expressed his sympathy in a letter phrased so dryly that the grief normally caused by such an event, one had to conclude, could not be comprehended so far away from home. Since that time, however, Georg had applied himself with greater determination to his business as well as to everything else. Perhaps it was his father's insistence on having everything his own way in the business that had prevented him, during his mother's lifetime, from pursuing any real projects of his own; perhaps since her death his father had become less aggressive, although he was still active in the business; perhaps it was mostly due to an accidental run of good fortune—that was very probable indeed—but, at any rate, during those two years the business had prospered most unexpectedly, the staff had to be doubled, the volume was five times as great; no doubt about it, further progress lay just ahead.

But Georg's friend had no inkling of these changes. In earlier years, perhaps for the last time in that letter of condolence, he had tried to persuade Georg to emigrate to Russia and had enlarged upon the prospects of success in St. Petersburg for precisely Georg's line of business. The figures quoted were microscopic by comparison with Georg's present operations. Yet he shrank from letting his friend know about his business success, and if he were to do so now—retrospectively—that certainly would look peculiar.

So Georg confined himself to giving his friend unimportant items of gossip such as rise at random in the memory when one is idly thinking things over on a quiet Sunday. All he desired was to leave undisturbed the image of the hometown which his friend had most likely built up and accepted during his long absence. And thus it happened that three

times in three fairly widely separated letters Georg had told his friend about the engagement of some insignificant man to an equally insignificant girl, until, quite contrary to Georg's intentions, his friend actually began to show some interest in this notable event.

Yet Georg much preferred to write about things like these rather than to confess that he himself had become engaged a month ago to a Fräulein Frieda Brandenfeld, a girl from a well-to-do family. He often spoke to his fiancée about this friend of his and the peculiar relationship that had developed between them in their correspondence. "Then he won't be coming to our wedding," she said, "and yet I have a right to get to know all your friends." "I don't want to trouble him," answered Georg, "don't misunderstand, he would probably come, at least I think so, but he would feel that his hand had been forced and he would be hurt, perhaps he would even envy me and certainly he'd be discontented, and without ever being able to do anything about his discontent he'd have to go away again alone. Alone—do you know what that means?" "Yes, but what if he hears about our marriage from some other source?" "I can't prevent that, of course, but it's unlikely, considering the way he lives." "If you have friends like that, Georg, you shouldn't ever have gotten engaged at all." "Well, we're both to blame for that; but I wouldn't have it any other way now." And when, breathing heavily under his kisses, she was still able to add, "All the same, it does upset me," he thought it would not really do any harm if he were to send the news to his friend. "That's the kind of man I am and he'll just have to accept me or not," he said to himself, "I can't cut myself to another pattern that might make a more suitable friend for him."

And, in fact, he did inform his friend about his engagement, in the long letter he had been writing that Sunday morning, with the following words: "I have saved up my

best news for last. I am now engaged to a Fräulein Frieda Brandenfeld, a girl from a well-to-do family that settled here a long time after you went away, so that it's very unlikely you'll know her. There will be ample opportunity to tell you more about my fiancée later, but for today let me just say that I am quite happy, and as far as our relationship is concerned, the only change will be that instead of a quite ordinary friend you will now have in me a happy friend. Besides that, you will acquire in my fiancée, who sends you her warm regards and who will soon be writing you herself, a genuine friend of the opposite sex, which is not without importance to a bachelor. I know that there are many reasons why you can't come to pay us a visit, but wouldn't my wedding be just the perfect occasion to put aside everything that might stand in the way? Still, however that may be, do just as seems good to you without regarding any interests but your own."

With this letter in his hand, Georg had been sitting a long time at his desk, his face turned toward the window. He had barely acknowledged, with an absent smile, a greeting waved to him from the street below by a passing acquaintance.

At last he put the letter in his pocket and went out of his room across a small hallway into his father's room, which he had not entered for months. There was, in fact, no particular need for him to enter it, since he saw his father daily at work and they took their midday meal together at a restaurant; in the evening, it was true, each did as he pleased, yet even then, unless Georg—as was usually the case—went out with friends or, more recently, visited his fiancée, they always sat for a while, each with his newspaper, in their common sitting room.

Georg was startled at how dark his father's room was, even on this sunny morning. He had not remembered that it was so overshadowed by the high wall on the other side

of the narrow courtyard. His father was sitting by the window in a corner decorated with various mementos of Georg's late mother, reading a newspaper which he held tilted to one side before his eyes in an attempt to compensate for some defect in his vision. On the table stood the remains of his breakfast, little of which seemed to have been consumed.

"Ah, Georg," said his father, rising at once to meet him. His heavy dressing gown swung open as he walked, and its skirts fluttered around him.—My father is still a giant of a man, Georg said to himself.

"It's unbearably dark in here," he said aloud.

"Yes, it is dark," answered his father.

"And you've shut the window, too?"

"I prefer it like that."

"Well, it's quite warm outside," said Georg, as if continuing his previous remark, and sat down.

His father cleared away the breakfast dishes and set them on a chest.

"I really only wanted to tell you," Georg went on, following the old man's movements as if transfixed, "that I have just announced the news of my engagement to St. Petersburg." He drew the letter a little way from his pocket and let it drop back again.

"To St. Petersburg?" asked his father.

"To my friend, of course," said Georg, trying to meet his father's eye.—In business hours he's quite different, he was thinking, how solidly he sits here and folds his arms over his chest.

"Ah, yes. To your friend," said his father emphatically.

"Well, you know, Father, that I didn't want to tell him about my engagement at first. Out of consideration for him—that was the only reason. You yourself know how difficult a man he is. I said to myself that someone else might tell him about my engagement, although he's such a solitary

creature that that was hardly likely, but I wasn't ever going to tell him myself."

"And now you've changed your mind, have you?" asked his father, laying his enormous newspaper on the window sill and on top of it his eyeglasses, which he covered with one hand.

"Yes, now I've changed my mind. If he's a good friend of mine, I said to myself, then my being happily engaged should make him happy too. And that's why I haven't put off telling him any longer. But before I mailed the letter I wanted to let you know."

"Georg," said his father, stretching his toothless mouth wide, "listen to me! You've come to me about this business, to talk it over and get my advice. No doubt that does you honor. But it's nothing, it's worse than nothing, if you don't tell me the whole truth. I don't want to stir up matters that shouldn't be mentioned here. Since the death of our dear mother certain things have happened that aren't very pretty. Maybe the time will come for mentioning them, and maybe sooner than we think. There are a number of things at the shop that escape my notice, maybe they're not done behind my back—I'm not going to say that they're done behind my back—I'm not strong enough any more, my memory's slipping, I haven't an eye for all those details any longer. In the first place that's in the nature of things, and in the second place the death of our dear little mother hit me harder than it did you.—But since we're talking about it, about this letter, I beg you, Georg, don't deceive me. It's a trivial thing, it's hardly worth mentioning, so don't deceive me. Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?"

Georg rose in embarrassment. "Never mind my friends. A thousand friends could never replace my father for me. Do you know what I think? You're not taking enough care of yourself. But old age has its own rightful demands. I can't do without you in the business, you know

that very well, but if the business is going to undermine your health, I'm ready to close it down tomorrow for good. This won't do. We'll have to make a change in the way you live; a radical change. You sit here in the dark, and in the sitting room you would have plenty of light. You just take a bite of breakfast instead of keeping up your strength properly. You sit by a closed window, and the air would be so good for you. No, Father! I'll get the doctor to come, and we'll follow his orders. We'll change rooms, you can move into the front room and I'll move in here. You won't notice the change, all your things will be moved across the hall with you. But there's time for all that later, go to bed now for a little, you must have some rest. Come, I'll help you to take off your things, you'll see I can do it. Or if you would rather go into the front room at once, you can lie down in my bed for the present. That would actually be the most sensible thing."

Georg stood close beside his father, who had let his head with its shaggy white hair sink to his chest.

"Georg," said his father in a low voice, without moving. Georg knelt down at once beside his father. In the old man's weary face he saw the abnormally large pupils staring at him fixedly from the corners of the eyes.

"You have no friend in St. Petersburg. You've always been one for pulling people's legs and you haven't hesitated even when it comes to me. How could you have a friend there, of all places! I can't believe it."

"Just think back a bit, Father," said Georg, lifting his father from the chair and slipping off his dressing gown as he stood there, now quite feebly, "soon it'll be three years since my friend came to see us last. I remember you didn't like him very much. At least twice I even told you he wasn't there when he was actually sitting with me in my room. I could quite well understand your dislike of him, my friend does have his peculiarities. But then later you had a good talk

with him after all. I was so proud because you listened to him and nodded and asked him questions. If you think back you're bound to remember. He told us the most incredible stories of the Russian Revolution. For instance, the time he was on a business trip to Kiev and ran into a riot, and saw a priest on a balcony who cut a broad cross in blood into the palm of his hand and held the hand up and appealed to the crowd. You've told that very story yourself once or twice since."

Meanwhile Georg had succeeded in lowering his father into the chair again and carefully taking off the knitted drawers he wore over his linen undershorts and his socks. The not particularly clean appearance of his underwear made Georg reproach himself for having been so neglectful. It should certainly have been his duty to see that his father had clean changes of underwear. He had not yet explicitly discussed with his fiancée what arrangements should be made for his father in the future, for they had both silently taken it for granted that he would remain alone in the old apartment. But now he made a quick, firm decision to take him into his own future home. It almost looked, on closer inspection, as if the care he meant to devote to his father there might come too late.

He carried his father over to the bed in his arms. It gave him a dreadful feeling to observe that while he was taking the few steps toward the bed, the old man cradled against his chest was playing with his watch chain. For a moment he could not put him down on the bed, so firmly did he hang on to the watch chain.

But as soon as he was laid in bed, all seemed well. He covered himself up and even drew the blanket higher than usual over his shoulders. He looked up at Georg with a not unfriendly expression.

"You're beginning to remember my friend, aren't you?" asked Georg, giving him an encouraging nod.

"Am I well covered up now?" asked his father, as if he couldn't see whether his feet were properly tucked in or not.

"So you like it in bed, don't you?" said Georg, and tucked the blanket more closely around him.

"Am I well covered up?" the father asked once more, seeming to be peculiarly intent upon the answer.

"Don't worry, you're well covered up."

"No!" cried his father, so that the answer collided with the question, and flinging the blanket back so violently that for a moment it hovered unfolded in the air, he stood upright in bed. With one hand he lightly touched the ceiling to steady himself. "You wanted to cover me up, I know, my little puppy, but I'm far from being covered up yet. And even if this is the last bit of strength I have, it's enough for you, more than enough. Of course I know your friend. He would have been a son after my own heart. That's why you've been betraying him all these years. Why else? Do you think I haven't wept for him? And that's why you've had to lock yourself up in the office—the boss is busy, mustn't be disturbed—just so that you could write your lying little letters to Russia. But fortunately a father doesn't need to be taught how to see through his own son. And now that you thought you'd pinned him down, so far down that you could plant your rear end on him so he couldn't move, then my fine son decides to up and get married!"

Georg looked up at the terrifying image of his father. His friend in St. Petersburg, whom his father suddenly knew so well, seized hold of his imagination as never before. He saw him lost in the vastness of Russia; at the door of his empty, plundered warehouse he saw him. Amid the wreckage of his storage shelves, the slashed remnants of his wares, the falling gas brackets, he barely stood upright. Why did he have to go so far away!

"Pay attention to me!" cried his father, and Georg, al-

most absentmindedly, ran toward the bed to take everything in, but froze halfway there.

"Because she lifted up her skirts," his father began to flute, "because she lifted her skirts like this, the revolting creature"—and mimicking her, he lifted his shirt so high that one could see the scar on his thigh from his war wound—"because she lifted her skirts like this and this and this you went after her, and in order to have your way with her undisturbed you have disgraced our mother's memory, betrayed your friend, and stuck your father into bed so that he can't move. But can he move, or can't he?"

And he stood up quite unsupported and kicked his legs about. He shone with insight.

Georg shrank into a corner, as far away from his father as possible. A long time ago he had firmly made up his mind to watch everything with the greatest attention so that he would not be surprised by any indirect attack, a pounce from behind or above. At this moment he recalled this long-forgotten resolve and then forgot it again, like someone drawing a short thread through the eye of a needle.

"But your friend hasn't been betrayed after all!" cried his father, emphasizing the point with stabs of his forefinger. "I've been representing him here on the spot."

"You comedian!" Georg could not resist shouting, realized at once the harm done, and, his eyes bulging in his head, bit his tongue—though too late—until the pain made his knees buckle.

"Yes, of course I've been playing a comedy! A comedy! That's the perfect word for it! What other consolation was left for your poor old widowed father? Tell me—and while you're answering me may you still be my loving son—what else was left to me, in my back room, plagued by a disloyal staff, old to the very marrow of my bones? And my son strutting through the world, closing deals that I had pre-

pared for him, turning somersaults in his glee, and striding away from his father with the composed face of a man of honor! Do you think I didn't love you, I, from whose loins you sprang?"

Now he's going to lean forward, thought Georg; if only he would topple over and smash to pieces! These words went hissing through his brain.

His father leaned forward but did not topple. Since Georg didn't come any closer, as he had expected, he straightened himself up again.

"Stay where you are, then, I don't need you! You think you have the strength to get yourself over here and that you're only hanging back because you want to? Don't be too sure! I am still much the stronger. All by myself I might have had to give in, but your mother has given me her strength, I have established a fine connection with your friend, and I have your customers in my pocket!"

"He has pockets even in his undershirt!" said Georg to himself, and thought that with this observation he could expose him for a fool for all the world to see. He was able to cling to that thought for no more than a moment, for in his distraction he kept on forgetting everything.

"Just try linking arms with your bride and getting in my way! I'll sweep her from your side, you don't know how!"

Georg grimaced in disbelief. His father only nodded in the direction of Georg's corner, affirming the truth of his words.

"How you amused me today, coming in here to ask if you should tell your friend about your engagement. He knows all about it already, you stupid boy, he knows it all! I've been writing to him, for you forgot to take my writing things from me. That's why he hasn't been here for years, he knows everything a hundred times better than you do yourself, with his left hand he crumples up your letters

unopened while with his right he holds mine and reads them through!"

In his exhilaration he waved his arm over his head. "He knows everything a thousand times better!" he cried.

"Ten thousand times!" said Georg, to make fun of his father, but in his very mouth the words turned deadly earnest.

"For years I've been waiting for you to come with this question! Do you think I've concerned myself with anything else? Do you think I've been reading my newspapers? Look!" and he threw Georg a page from a newspaper that had somehow found its way into the bed with him. An old newspaper, with a name entirely unknown to Georg.

"How long it's taken you to grow up! Your mother had to die—she couldn't live to see the happy day—your friend is going to pieces in Russia, even three years ago he was yellow enough to be thrown away, and as for me, you can see what condition I'm in. You have eyes in your head for that!"

"So you've been lying in wait for me!" cried Georg.

His father said pityingly, in an offhand manner: "I suppose you wanted to say that earlier. But now it is no longer appropriate."

And in a louder voice: "So now you know there is more in the world than just you. Till now you've known only about yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being!—And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!"

Georg felt himself driven from the room, the crash with which his father collapsed onto the bed behind him still rang in his ears as he fled. On the staircase, which he rushed down as if its steps were an inclined plane, he ran into the cleaning woman on her way up to do the morning tidying of the

apartment. "Jesus!" she cried, and covered her face with her apron, but he was already gone. Out the front door he bolted, across the roadway, driven toward the water. Already he was clutching at the railing as a starving man clutches for food. He swung himself over, like the accomplished gymnast he had been in his youth, to his parents' pride. With weakening grip he was still holding on when he spied between the railings an approaching bus that would easily cover the sound of his fall, called out in a faint voice, "Dear parents, I have always loved you," and let himself drop.

At that moment an almost endless line of traffic streamed over the bridge.