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Stefan Zweig Six Stories



Six Stories

Stefan Zweig was born in 1881 in Vienna to a wealthy Austrian-Jewish family. Recognition as a writer came early; by the age of forty he had already won literary fame. In 1934, with Nazism entrenched, Zweig left Austria for England, and he became a British citizen in 1940. In 1941 he and his second wife went to Brazil, where they committed suicide the following year. Zweig's best-known works of fiction are *Beware of Pity* (1939) and *Chess* (1942), but among his other outstanding achievements were his many historical biographies, which were characteristically based on psychological interpretations of his subjects.

Jonathan Katz is a Fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford, and the University's Public Orator. He is the translator of Stefan Zweig's *Beware of Pity* (originally published in this translation as *Impatience of the Heart*) as well as works by Goethe, Theodor Storm and Joseph Roth.

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STEFAN ZWEIG

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Translated by Jonathan Katz



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Translator's Foreword

In the years following the end of the First World War Stefan Zweig, already a widely known writer of biographies and literary criticism as well as poetry, drama and prose fiction, turned his attention with renewed confidence to the short story, or *Novelle*, a form perhaps most famously illustrated in his later *Chess* (*Schachnovelle*), also known in English translation as *The Royal Game*. Zweig's earlier attempts in this genre had met with some success, but one especially – *Burning Secret* (*Brennendes Geheimnis*) – first published in 1911, had been printed separately and continued to sell in large print runs to considerable acclaim throughout the succeeding years and decades. As a portrayal of the anxieties and insecurities of childhood and early adolescence (doubtless partly autobiographical) and of the ambiguous relations of child to adult, and as one of Zweig's several penetrating attempts to explore the psychology of feminine desire, this story has enjoyed great appeal among those generally sympathetic to the author's strengths.

Already prominent in *Burning Secret* are the acute psychological insights which the *Novelle* form above all allowed Zweig to explore, and which may be seen similarly at play in the most vivid sections of the only full-scale novel he completed to his satisfaction, the 1939 *Impatience of the Heart* (*Ungehduld des Herzens*), also known in English versions as *Beware of Pity*. In that novel, sharply developed character sketches and studies of individual

human complexities form almost self-sufficient episodes of noteworthy narrative power and economy, if often complicated by an extravagance of vocabulary and prose style that has divided Zweig's readers despite his – at times – otherwise enormous popularity. In his 1972 biography of Zweig, Donald Prater compared the best of the short stories with those of Somerset Maugham; like those, he wrote, Zweig's *Novellen*, though not written in Maugham's 'flat, spare style, and lacking his realism', are 'convincing in their depiction of the dark passions lying just beneath the surface of our daily life'.¹

The first four stories in this selection, first published separately at various times over those ten years, were brought together in 1929 in a single volume entitled *Little Chronicle* (*Kleine Chronik*).² Much social comment, indeed, one might say a contemporary 'chronicled' portrait of some of society's fault-lines, is presented in this collection, including the author's hatred of war and its consequences, the tragedies of economic decline and the German Inflation period, and the unthinking brutality in the treatment of 'have-nots' in those turbulent post-war times. For Zweig's contemporary readers, in bringing together such personal and societal traumas the title of the collection may also have intentionally, or ironically, called to mind the type of news digest found in newspapers such as the influential Vienna *Neue Freie Presse*, for which Zweig himself was for a time a correspondent in Switzerland, and in which, almost from its earliest numbers, a regular miscellaneous *Kleine Chronik* column summarized social, political, cultural and institutional events of the preceding few days.³

The Invisible Collection (*Die unsichtbare Sammlung*), is a 'frame story' in which the main action is related to the first-person narrator by a fellow passenger on a train journey. The story first appeared in the *Neue Freie Presse*, on 31 May 1925.⁴ The explanatory subtitle, *An Episode from the German Inflation*, was

in the original publication , perhaps suggesting that the tale could stand as merely one minor example of the economic devastation wrought in this period on countless individual victims of no great importance in the general scheme of things. The period itself was remembered, and later vividly described in more general terms, by Zweig in *The World of Yesterday*, the memoir written in his last years of exile and finally delivered to his Stockholm publisher shortly before his suicide in 1942.⁵ But we may also see a personal connection with Zweig's own, at the time admittedly much more comfortable, position as a highly successful collector of manuscripts, prints and autographs. The personal interest allowed some exactitude of detail concerning the elderly blind man's treasured, though now non-existent, collection, as well as some level of empathy with the irony of the principal character's passionate, and ultimately tragic, devotion to his imagined possessions.

It has been observed that, for all their narrative and emotional power, Zweig's depictions of this and other sorry victims of circumstances in the ethnic, economic and class hierarchies of the times betray some detachment, and even condescension.⁶ On the other hand we also find in these stories a forensically focused approach, not only to the outer characteristics and habits of such persons, but also to their feelings and motivations; if there is on some level a failure on the author's part to identify fully with his characters, still he shows no lack of compassion or depth of feeling. It remains true that such moral judgements as the stories contain are made, or suggested, more through objective observation than sentimentality, and in this way Zweig seems easily capable of casting blame where it belongs.

So it is with the maidservant Crescenz in the third story, *Leporella*, starting her life as an impoverished and unprepossessing orphan, and after a supposed change of fortune employed, exploited and ultimately abandoned by a feckless

minor aristocrat. The character of the woman evinces in readers an uncomfortable mixture of revulsion and sympathy, while the moral message is presented as an almost inevitable result of the callous self-centredness and unthinking agency of the Baron who brings about her downfall. 'No fierce moral indignation here, only the sadness of plain statement of fact,' says the Zweig biographer Elizabeth Allday, who at the same time notes the author's call to consider well the plight of the 'outcast' in this and in other stories.⁷ *Leporella* was written between 1924 and 1925, but did not appear until 1928 in the second part of a two-volume collection, *Present-day German Storytellers (Deutsche Erzähler der Gegenwart)*.⁸

Another outcast figure is the wartime peasant deserter Boris, rescued in 1918 from Lake Geneva, though to no ultimately good purpose, in the second story. *Episode on Lake Geneva* first appeared in July 1919 under the title *Episode vom Genfer See* in the Vienna periodical *Modern World (Moderne Welt)*. Several times republished in Leipzig and Vienna between 1921 and 1928 as *The Runaway (Der Flüchtling)*, or under its original title, the story was eventually included in *Kleine Chronik* as *Episode am Genfer See*, and again after that in further collected editions printed in Vienna, Leipzig and Zürich. The theme of the despairing exile was possibly suggested to the author by an account he had heard in Switzerland of a perilous journey across the lake, and a possible link has also been found between this story, especially in its touching on Russian themes, and Zweig's reading of Tolstoy's 1857 short story *Lucerne: From the Recollections of Prince Nekhliudof*. Set in the final year of the war, and thus carrying a direct and contemporary pacifist message, the *Episode* has been among the most translated of all Zweig's stories. The hopelessness, and eventual suicide, of the runaway are clearly placed in the context of the 'neutrality', political and human, with which he is met at the Swiss lakeside despite the initial expressions of sympathy shown by some of the onlookers.

The shameful indifference of the comfortably secure, particularly when in crowds, towards the disadvantaged rouses Tolstoy's burning outrage in his *Lucerne*, while Zweig's observations are quieter and more depressingly resigned. The moral message of the *Episode* is bleak, once again conveyed in stark objective terms in the final words of the story. It is a 'summarizing' technique seen also in the closing paragraphs of yet another 'outsider' tale, that of the uprooted Galician Jewish bibliophile Jacob Mendel in *Buchmendel*. This best-known among Zweig's treatments of Jewish themes, published in three parts in three separate numbers of the *Neue Freie Presse* at the beginning of November 1929, and then included in *Kleine Chronik* in the same year, is at once a touching account of an extraordinary personality and at the same time an essay on the strange peculiarities of memory, both that of the first-person narrator and that of Mendel himself. It is only through an immense initial effort of recall that the narrator manages to recapture his earlier encounters with the uniquely impressive book dealer's feats of memory and erudition.

As in *The Invisible Collection*, in *Buchmendel* Zweig can depict the subject of his major character's obsessive passion with the insight of his own more privileged, but perhaps relatively superficial, personal expertise. Mendel has, through force of circumstances, transferred the all-absorbing, intense devotion of his early Talmudic training to the world of more secular scholarship and bibliography. But in the process he has not become any more worldly, or any more able to protect himself from the brutal realities of life, once he loses contact with those who have tolerated him and given him respect and refuge. Here, though, a more positive human note, even perhaps some limited optimism, tempers the narrator's sadness on hearing the tragedy of Mendel's downfall, for the account of Mendel's more recent life and misfortunes has to be given by an unlikely second

narrator, the former 'toilet-lady' Frau Sporschil. Naive and uneducated as she is, but gifted with unprejudiced compassion towards one who has earned her instinctive respect and affection, hers becomes the unpretentious voice of humanity and understanding which inspires the narrator's closing moral reasoning.⁹

The longer story, or short novel, *The Buried Candelabrum* (*Der begrabener Leuchter*), termed by Zweig himself a Jewish 'legend', was written in exile from Austria. It was completed in Ostend, where Zweig was able to take advice on both style and content from his friend Joseph Roth,¹⁰ and first published in 1936 (as were further printings of the *Episode on Lake Geneva*, *Buchmendel* and *The Invisible Collection*) in a collection called *Kaleidoskop* by Zweig's Vienna publisher Herbert Reichner. The following year it was reissued separately as a single volume. The language is deliberately archaic and rhetorical, the subject matter historical and rabbinical, but also clear is the author's emotional engagement with the oppression and sufferings of the Jewish diaspora, in which he was now of course compelled to regard himself a fellow participant.¹¹ In the touching dialogue between Rabbi Eliezer and the young Benjamin, as they wander in hope of rescuing their sacred Menorah from the barbarian plunderers, the child asks the Elder why the Jewish people have been uniquely chosen for such a fate. The little boy's question, says the Rabbi, is simply the oldest that their people's hearts have asked since time immemorial: 'why has God so treated us, among all the nations, with such harshness, despite our serving Him as no other people ever served Him? Why us? Why hurl us beneath the feet of others, to be trodden upon? Were we not the first to know Him, to praise Him in the unfathomable mystery of His being? Why destroy what we build, shatter our hopes, deny us any lasting rest in our

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wanderings and rouse nation after nation against us in ever renewed hatred?’

The Rabbi can inform Benjamin expertly enough about Jewish history and custom and lore, but here can do no more than acknowledge, and endorse, the child's question. ‘Everything that man has’, he says, ‘is given to him but on loan, and his moments of happiness are fleeting as the wind.’ Benjamin is destined to find his own purpose in life, and to explain himself and his mission to his people and to posterity, but in all likelihood their suffering will continue: ‘perhaps precisely this is the meaning of our unending wanderings in exile, that what is sacred becomes all the more so the further [the] distance, and that our hearts are simply made more humble at times of great need.’

Like the biographer Elizabeth Allday, but a few years after her book appeared, I first became interested in Stefan Zweig and his writings while I was in India in 1979, having previously heard his name in England without properly appreciating the impact he had once made on readers throughout the world, and indeed was still making in many countries outside the English-speaking world.¹² I remember with much gratitude and affection my introduction to *Beware of Pity*. My father-in-law Shri N.G. Katti, a Sanskrit scholar as well as a science teacher, had taught himself German in order to read this and other books in their original language. I also came to know that many other Indian readers of the English translations shared his love of both Zweig's and Somerset Maugham's work, and were used to drawing comparisons with some of the best of India's own leading writers of fiction, especially in the short story form, in many of their own rich vernacular traditions.

Jonathan Katz

July 2023

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Notes

1. Donald Prater, *European of Yesterday: a Biography of Stefan Zweig* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 135, fn2.
2. Stefan Zweig, *Kleine Chronik* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1929). The best bibliographical notes, and brief but lucid commentary on content and reception of the stories, are available in German in the excellent *Stefan-Zweig-Handbuch* edited by Arturo Larcari et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2018).
3. The first issue of this originally liberal newspaper was printed on 1 September 1864. Publication continued through the inter-war years, and even after the *Anschluss*, until 1939. The *Kleine Chronik* column first appeared in the issue of 27 February 1865, apparently replacing or absorbing the previous regular information notices of Viennese social and economic events.
4. The contents page of *Kleine Chronik* gives the year 1924, meaning no doubt the year in which Zweig wrote the story.
5. The memoir (*Die Welt von Gestern*), in the words of its most recent English translator, Anthea Bell, was ‘a quintessentially humane document and a record of European culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, [and] stands as a sane, civilized counterblast to the horror of war as [Zweig] already knew it, and as a well-informed and sometimes quirkily individual account of the cultural life of his time.’ (*The World of Yesterday*, London: Pushkin Press, 2009, p. 11). The social consequences of the German Inflation period are described in the chapter ‘Out into the world again’, pp. 336ff.
6. See, for example, David Turner, ‘The Human Ideal in Stefan Zweig’s *Novelle*: Some Complications and Limitations’, in *The World of Yesterday’s Humanist Today*, ed. Marion Sonnenfeld (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 157–67.

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7. Elizabeth Allday, *Stefan Zweig: A Critical Biography* (London: W. H. Allen, 1972).
8. *Deutscher Erzähler der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Wegweiser, 1928).
9. See the introduction by Ritchie Robertson to his translation of the story in *The German–Jewish Dialogue: An Anthology of Literary Texts, 1749–1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 233–4.
10. A moving account of this phase of the two authors' often tortured friendship may be read in Volker Weidemann's *Summer Before the Dark*, translated by Carol Brown Janeway (London: Pushkin Press, 2016).
11. See Prater, *European of Yesterday*, p. 259.
12. Zweig's importance and current legacy are examined in a valuable collection of critical scholarly articles under the title *Stefan Zweig and World Literature: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. Birger Vanwesenbeeck and Mark Gelber (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015).

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The Invisible Collection: An Episode from the German Inflation

At the second station beyond Dresden an elderly gentleman entered our compartment. He greeted everyone courteously, and then nodded in my direction as if acknowledging a close acquaintance. For a moment I could not recall who this man was. Then, with a gentle smile, he gave me his name, and of course I recognized him immediately; this was one of Berlin's most renowned art and book dealers. In peacetime I had often visited his premises to inspect, or indeed purchase, autographs and books. So on this occasion we chatted for a little while, if somewhat inconsequentially; then suddenly he began to explain what had brought him to these parts, and where he had just been:

'I have to tell you – you see, this is just about the strangest experience I have been through in all my thirty-seven years in the business. You won't need me to explain how things have been in this line of work since the value of money pretty well evaporated overnight. All of a sudden, our friends of the newly rich class seem to have discovered a passion for old Madonnas, not to mention incunabula, paintings, engravings and what have you. You simply can't conjure up enough of these things to satisfy them; in fact, you really have to be on your guard, or they'll completely clean out your premises. Give them half a chance and they'll have the cufflinks off your shirt and the lamp from your desk. Really, it's getting tougher and tougher finding

any merchandise at all to sell – you’ll pardon me for using such a vulgar word for things you and I truly value and revere – but these types of client I’m talking about have accustomed even me to regarding, say, a wonderful early Venetian printed book rather in the same light as an overcoat costing so-and-so many dollars, or seeing an original Guercino drawing as just another embodiment of a few hundred francs. There’s no defence against the unremitting persistence of these purchase-mad people. Anyway, it happened once again recently; I was completely emptied out overnight, and to be honest I was on the point of pulling down the shutters, so ashamed was I to see our old family business – we’re now in our third generation – with nothing in stock but bits of worthless trash that a little while ago wouldn’t even have burdened a local street-trader’s cart.

‘Well, that was the predicament I was in, and it made me go back to our old ledgers, hoping to track down one or two former clients from whom I might extract a few duplicates, if they had any. That kind of customer list is something of a graveyard at the best of times, and all the more so these days. Not much in the way of gleanings; the majority of our former clients had long since been forced to auction off whatever they had, or else they’d died. Those still in the land of the living didn’t exactly promise much. But then, to my surprise, I stumbled on a whole bundle of letters from a person who was very likely our oldest client of all. This man had completely escaped my memory, simply because, since 1914 and the outbreak of the war, he had never once come back to us with any order or even inquiry. The correspondence we did have with him – and I am not exaggerating here – went back close on sixty years. He had made purchases from both my father and my grandfather, but as far as I could remember he hadn’t once darkened our doors in all of my own thirty-seven years in the trade. From all I could see I surmised that he must have been a fairly unusual, old-fashioned eccentric

type, one of those now almost extinct bookworm individuals out of a Biedermeier painting, specimens that very occasionally survived here and there, in minute numbers, in smaller provincial towns until shortly before our time. He wrote in a neat calligraphic hand, with the due amounts underlined in red ink, and the figures each time repeated in words to avoid any risk of error. This, and the fact that he used only torn-out flyleaves and old envelopes for these communications, pointed to the niggardliness and obsessive frugality of a hopelessly provincial character. The signing of these peculiar documents included not only his name but also the full formal title: 'Councillor for Forestry and Economy, Retired; Lieutenant, Retired; Iron Cross, First Class'. As a veteran hero of the 1870s, I deduced, if indeed still alive, he couldn't have been a day under eighty years of age. Still, for all this oddity and absurd thriftiness, he showed a quite singular astuteness when it came to collecting old prints, and on top of it exceptionally fine taste and connoisseurship. So, as I slowly assembled the orders he had made over the best part of sixty years, the earliest of which still referred to the now obsolete old silver groschen, it gradually dawned on me that, at the time when a single taler could buy you a whole sheaf of the finest German woodcuts, this little provincial gentleman must have been quietly putting together a whole stash of engravings that would more than hold its own next to the most vaunted of the collections amassed by the new rich class. What this man had acquired from us alone in the course of half a century, paying each time only a small sum – a few marks and pfennigs – represented an astonishing worth today; and apart from this, it was a reasonable assumption that he had picked more things up just as advantageously at auctions, and no doubt also from other dealers. True enough, no orders had been received from him since 1914. But I was too familiar with what's been going in this business to have missed any news of such a hoard being auctioned or

sold off privately; either this curious gentleman was still with us, or the collection itself was now in the hands of his heirs.

‘My interest thus roused, the very next day – by which I mean yesterday evening – I set off right away for one of the most unlikely provincial towns in Saxony. As I made my way from the little station down the main street, it seemed to me scarcely possible that here of all places, among these very ordinary small-town houses with their correspondingly petit-bourgeois contents, there could be living an owner of the most glorious Rembrandt engravings, and Dürers and Mantegnas, in unimpeachable, complete sets. Imagine my astonishment at discovering from the post office, when I inquired there whether there was a certain Forestry and Economic Councillor of this name in town, that the elderly gentleman was indeed still alive. By late morning I was on my way to see him; I’ll confess my heart was somewhat aflutter!

‘I found the dwelling with no difficulty. It was on the second floor of one of those cheaply constructed residential buildings no doubt knocked together by some journeyman speculator half a century ago. The downstairs floor was occupied by a worthy local master tailor. On the upper floor I saw to the left the name plate of a post office official, and yes, there on the right was the name of my Forestry and Economic Councillor. I knocked, a little apprehensively, and an elderly, white-haired lady with a neat little black lace cap came to the door. I handed her my card and inquired whether the Councillor might be at home. Clearly taken aback, she looked with discernible suspicion first at me, and then at the card. In an old building in this little backwater of a town a visit from the outside world was apparently a genuine event. Nevertheless, she asked me courteously to wait, took my card, and went back into the front room. I heard her whisper quietly, and then suddenly a booming male voice broke through: “Ah, Herr R., from Berlin – from the famous antiquarian dealers! But of course, of course, show him

in! It will be such a pleasure!” And the little old lady came scurrying back to invite me into their worthy little parlour.

‘I took off my coat and followed her in. It was a modest room; in the middle, standing quite upright, was an elderly but still sturdy gentleman with a bushy moustache, wearing a semi-military style corded jacket. He extended both hands warmly towards me, but despite this unmistakable gesture of joyous, spontaneous greeting there was a peculiar stiffness in his bearing; he didn’t come even a single step towards me. Slightly disconcerted, I had to make the approach myself in order to take his hand. But just as I was about to do so I noticed, from the way he held his hands motionless straight out in front of him, that rather than meeting my hand he was actually waiting for the contact. That was when I realized: the man was blind.

‘From my earliest days I have always felt uncomfortable when confronted by a blind person; I’ve never managed to fend off a certain shame and embarrassment at sensing that this person was fully alive and at the same time knowing that his sense of me was different from mine of him. And so this time too I had to overcome my initial alarm at the sight of those inert, glassy eyes staring into the void beneath the bristling white brows. But their owner soon put me out of my misery; the moment my hand met his he shook it vigorously, loudly repeating his words of welcome with the utmost affability: “A special visitor indeed!” he exclaimed with a broad smile, “a miracle, no less, one of the greats from Berlin ending up here in our little backwater . . . but caution’s the word when you have one of the top antiquarians on your trail! As we say in my part of the world, guard your doors and pockets when the gypsies are about! Yes, I suspect I do know what made you track me down . . . business is at a low ebb these days in our poor, run-down Germany – no buyers any more, so the great dealers’ thoughts turn once more to their old customers, and they’re wanting to gather in their flocks . . . But

I'm afraid with me you're out of luck, sir – we poor old pensioners are happy enough if we have a crust of bread to put on the table. Today's insane prices in your line of business have left us far behind . . . people like us are *hors de combat* once and for all!"

I was quick to explain that he had misunderstood me, that I had not come with any thought of selling him anything; I just happened to be passing through the neighbourhood and hadn't wanted to lose an opportunity to pay my respects to a customer of so many years, who also happened to be one of the country's truly great collectors. The last words were hardly out of my mouth when a strange transformation appeared in the old man's face. He still stood, stiffly upright, in the middle of the room, but now his expression suddenly brightened, betokening a sense of the deepest pride; he turned to where he supposed his wife to be, as if to say, "You hear that?" Then, turning back to me, in a voice brimming with joy – not a trace of that military brusqueness that he had adopted just now, but a gentle, indeed tender tone:

"That really is so kind of you . . . but I cannot allow you to have come here in vain. No, you must see something you won't meet with every day, even in your splendid Berlin . . . a few pieces the like of which you won't find in Vienna, let alone that godforsaken Paris. Yes, in sixty years of collecting you come across all kinds of things that certainly don't turn up on the average street stall. Louise, let me have the key to the cupboard."

At this point something unexpected happened. The old lady, who had been standing next to him and listening politely to our conversation with a friendly smile on her face, suddenly raised both hands towards me, apparently pleading, and at the same time shaking her head assertively to signal something I couldn't immediately understand. Only then did she go up to her husband and lay both hands gently on his shoulder: "But, Herwarth," she chided him, "you haven't asked the gentleman whether he has time now to view the collection – it's nearly midday already, and after you've

eaten you have to take your hour's rest, remember that's what the doctor expressly ordered. Wouldn't it be better to show the gentleman all your treasures after lunch, and then we can have coffee together? And Annemarie will be here then too, and she knows everything much better than I do, and will be able help you."

'And then once again, just as she finished speaking, she made the same urgently pleading gesture, of course without his noticing anything. This time I understood her. She obviously wanted me to decline the offer of a viewing there and then, so I quickly made up a prior lunch appointment, saying it would be a pleasure, an honour, to see his collection later; I could not do so before three o'clock, but would very happily return after that hour.

'The man turned round again, displaying the kind of pique one expects of a child deprived of his favourite toy. "Ah yes, of course," he muttered, "these Berlin experts, they never have time for anything. But on this occasion you will have to *find* the time, sir; we are not just talking of a few odd pieces – there are twenty-seven portfolios, each one for a different old master, and there isn't one that isn't full. Very well, three o'clock – but please be punctual, or we'll never get through it all!"

'Again, he stretched out his hand in front of him. "Be warned, sir, you may be delighted by what you see; on the other hand you may be vexed! If the latter, your envy will double my pleasure! That's the way among us collectors, isn't it – we want everything for ourselves, nothing for the others!" This was followed by another mighty handshake.

'His wife went to the door with me. Throughout the whole meeting I had noticed a distinct unease about her, a sign of anxiety and embarrassment. But just at the door she stuttered some words, keeping her voice low: "Do you think . . . might my daughter . . . well, could she come to see you before you return to us? It would be better . . . better for various reasons . . . I suppose you'll be taking lunch at the hotel!"

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“Yes, that’s right, and I would be delighted – it will be a pleasure,” I replied.

And, good as the old lady’s word, one hour later, when I had just finished my meal in the dining room of the little hotel on the market place, in came a woman past her first youth, plainly dressed and with a diffident expression in her eyes. I went over to her, introduced myself and declared I was ready to go back with her at once to see the collection. But this was met with a sudden blushing, and that same bewildered embarrassment that I had seen in her mother, and she asked whether she could have a few words with me before we set off. She was clearly in difficulty; each time she braced herself to say something, that volatile flush reappeared all the way up to her forehead, and her fingers played restlessly with her dress. At last she began, hesitantly, constantly struggling to find the words: “My mother sent me to see you . . . she told me everything, and . . . well, we want to ask a big favour of you . . . you see, we would like to explain to you before you see Father . . . Father will of course be wanting to show you his collection, and it’s the collection . . . you see . . . it’s no longer quite complete . . . there are quite a few things missing from it . . . actually, I’m sorry to say it’s a rather large number . . .”

‘She had to catch her breath again, and then looked at me and said hastily: “I must be honest with you. You know what times we’re living in, you’ll be the first to understand . . . After the war broke out, Father went completely blind. His eyesight had been up and down even before that, but it was the mental strain in the end that robbed him of it completely. You see, despite his seventy-six years of age he was absolutely intent on joining the forces going to France, and when the army failed to advance the way it had in 1870, he became terribly upset; his eyes deteriorated with alarming speed from then on. Otherwise he is still in fine fettle. Just a little while ago he was still walking for hours on end and, believe it or not, even going out on his beloved hunting

expeditions. But now his walks are a thing of the past. Now his sole remaining pleasure is his collection; he looks at it every day . . . I mean, of course, he doesn't actually *see* it – he can't see anything any more – but he takes out all the folders every afternoon so that he can at least touch and *feel* the contents, one piece after another, always in the same order he has known them in for decades. He has no other interests these days; I have to read him all the auction reports from the newspaper, and the higher the prices he hears, the happier he is . . . because . . . well, this is the awful part of it, Father doesn't understand anything any more about prices, or about these times . . . he has no idea that we've lost everything and couldn't survive now even a couple of days a month on his pension . . . added to which, my sister's husband died in action and left her with four small children . . . but Father knows nothing about all our material difficulties. To begin with, we saved, that is, we saved more than before, but that didn't help at all. Then we started to sell – of course we weren't going to touch his beloved collection . . . I mean we sold the small amount of jewellery we had, but heaven help us, how much was that? Every pfennig Father had to spare over the last sixty years went on his prints. And then the day came when there was nothing left . . . and what could we do? Then . . . then . . . well, Mother and I sold one of them. Father would never have allowed it; he hasn't the least idea how bad things are, how hard it is to root out the odd scrap of food on the black market, and he doesn't know either that we lost the war, and Alsace and Lorraine with it. These are things we always avoid reading to him from the newspaper, just to preserve his peace of mind.

“It was a really valuable piece, the one we sold, a Rembrandt etching. The dealer offered many thousands of marks for it, and the hope was that that would see us through for years. But you know how money just melts away . . . we had deposited all of what we didn't need immediately in the bank, and in two

months it was gone. So we had to sell another print, and then another, and the dealer always sent the money so late that it had already lost its value when we got it. Then we tried the auctions, but there too we were cheated despite the prices being in the millions – by the time the millions reached us they were nothing but waste paper. That’s how all the gems in the collection gradually disappeared, right down to a few remaining good pieces – merely in order for us to eke out the most meagre existence; and Father has no inkling of any of this.

“You can see now why my mother was so alarmed when you came today . . . because when he opens the folders for you, the secret will be out. The point is, we have filled the old mounts – and he knows every single one of them by the feel alone – with reprints or leaves of the same size and type to replace the ones we sold, so that he won’t notice anything when he touches them. But just so long as he can feel them and count them for you (he knows their exact order perfectly well by heart) he’ll experience the same pleasure he had before, when he could see them himself. There’s no one else in this little town of ours that Father would consider worthy to be shown his treasures, and I really think he loves every one of the folios with such a passion that it would break his heart if he suspected that everything had disappeared long ago. You are the first person in all these years, ever since the director of the Dresden Prints Department passed away, that he has wanted to show his portfolios to. So this is why I beg you . . .”

‘Suddenly the middle-aged lady raised her hand to her eyes, and I could see the tears welling there.

“... we are begging you ... please don’t destroy his happiness . . . and don’t make *us* unhappy . . . don’t take away this last illusion he has! Help us keep him in the belief that all the leaves he describes to you are still there in front of him . . . it would kill him if he had the slightest suspicion. Yes, perhaps we have wronged

him in a way, but what else could we do? One has to live, and human lives, four orphaned children like my sister's, are surely more important than printed sheets of paper? Up till now we have done nothing in all of this to ruin his contentment; he delights in leafing through all the folders for three hours every afternoon, talking to each and every print as if to a personal friend. And today . . . well, today could be his happiest day of all, the one he's been longing for for years, because he can show the things he loves most in the world to a genuine connoisseur. Sir, I beg you most earnestly, do not shatter his pleasure!"

'Nothing I have just told you can express the emotional effect of what she said to me. God knows, as a dealer these days you see a good many of these shamefully ruined people, outrageously cheated and ravaged by the Inflation, people who've seen their most precious ancestral heirlooms extorted from them for no more than a bread roll – but here I was now, faced with an extraordinary stroke of fate, and one that struck me with particular vehemence. As you can imagine, I promised to do my best, and to say nothing.

'We went back together – on the way, to add to my already considerable sense of outrage, I learned about the ridiculously paltry payments with which these two poor, innocent women had been hoodwinked, and this merely strengthened my resolve; I would do my utmost to help them. We went up the stairs, and we'd hardly opened the door before we heard the old man's voice calling merrily to us from the inner room: "Come in! Come in!" With that heightened sensitivity of the blind, he must have taken in our footsteps on the staircase.

"Herwarth was quite unable to sleep today, he was so impatient to show you his treasures," said the old lady with a smile. A single glance from her daughter was enough to reassure her that I was already on their side. Spread out on the table lay the stack of portfolios, and as soon as the blind man felt my hand he