

THE JUDGMENT

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It was a Sunday morning in the loveliest of spring weather. Georg Bendemann, a young businessman, sat in his private room on the second floor of one of the low, flimsily built houses that stretched along the river in a long row, differing from one another hardly at all except in height and color. He had just finished a letter to a childhood friend now living abroad, sealed it with a playful slowness, and then, his elbow propped on the desk, looked out the window at the river, the bridge, and the hills on the far bank with their faint green.

He was thinking about how this friend, dissatisfied with his prospects at home, had years before all but fled to Russia. He now ran a business in St. Petersburg that had gotten off to a very good start but for a long time now had seemed to be stalling, as the friend complained on his increasingly rare visits. So he wore himself out to no purpose in a foreign land; his unfamiliar full beard poorly concealed a face known well since childhood, whose sallow complexion seemed to point to some developing illness. By his own account, he had no real connection with the local colony of his countrymen there, but also almost no social contact with native families, and was settling in for a permanent bachelorhood.

What was one to write to such a man, who had evidently run himself into a dead end—a man one could pity but not help? Should one perhaps advise him to come home again, to move his existence back here, to take up all the old friendly ties once more—there was, after all, no obstacle to that—and for the rest to trust in the help of his friends? But that would mean nothing other than telling him, in the same breath, the gentler the phrasing the more

wounding it would be, that his efforts so far had failed, that he ought finally to give them up, that he must come back and let himself be gawked at by everyone as a man who had returned for good, that only his friends understood anything, and that he was an old child who simply had to follow the successful friends who had stayed at home. And was it even certain, besides, that all the anguish one would have to inflict on him would serve any purpose? Perhaps it would not even succeed in bringing him home at all—he said himself that he no longer understood conditions back home—and so he would remain in his foreign country in spite of everything, embittered by the advice and estranged from his friends by that much more. But if he really did follow the advice and were, here at home—not, of course, on purpose, but simply through the facts of the case—cast down, unable to find his footing either with his friends or without them, suffering humiliation, truly without a home or friends now, was it not far better for him to stay abroad, just as he was? Could one, under such circumstances, really imagine that he would actually get ahead here?

For these reasons, one could not, if one still wanted to keep up the correspondence at all, tell him anything of real substance—the sort of thing one would tell even the most distant acquaintance without hesitation. The friend had now been away from home for more than three years, and he explained this only feebly, citing the instability of political conditions in Russia, which supposedly would not permit even the briefest absence of a small businessman, while hundreds of thousands of Russians calmly traveled the world. In the course of those three years, however, a great deal had changed, especially for Georg. Of Georg's mother's death, which had occurred about two years before and since which Georg had shared a household with his elderly father, the friend had presumably heard, and had expressed his condolences in a letter with a dryness that could only be explained by the fact that grief over such an event becomes quite unimaginable when one is far away. Since that time, though, Georg had taken hold of his business, like everything else, with greater resolve. Perhaps his father, while the mother was still alive, had kept him from any real activity of his own by insisting that only his opinion should count in the business; perhaps the father had grown more reserved since the mother's death, even though he still worked in the business; perhaps—and this was even quite likely—happy chance had played a far more important part; in any case, the business had developed quite unexpectedly in those two years, the staff had had

to be doubled, turnover had increased fivefold, and further progress was doubtless still to come.

The friend, however, had no idea of this change. Earlier—for the last time, perhaps, in that letter of condolence—he had tried to persuade Georg to emigrate to Russia and had gone on at length about the prospects that existed, precisely in Georg's line of business, in St. Petersburg. The figures were negligible compared with the scale Georg's business had now assumed. But Georg had had no desire to write to his friend about his business successes, and if he were to do so now, belatedly, it would truly have looked rather strange.

So Georg confined himself to writing the friend only about insignificant occurrences, the kind that pile up haphazardly in one's memory when one sits thinking on a quiet Sunday. All he wanted was to leave undisturbed the picture of the hometown that the friend had presumably formed for himself over that long interval and had come to terms with. And so it happened that Georg announced to the friend, in three letters spaced rather far apart, the engagement of some indifferent man to an equally indifferent woman, until the friend, quite against Georg's intention, actually began to take an interest in this curious business.

But Georg much preferred writing such things to him than admitting that he himself had gotten engaged, a month before, to a Miss Frieda Brandenfeld, a young woman from a well-to-do family. He often spoke with his fiancée about this friend and the peculiar terms of correspondence he maintained with him. "So he won't be coming to our wedding at all," she said, "and I do have the right to get to know all your friends." "I don't want to trouble him," Georg answered. "Understand me correctly—he would probably come, at least I think so, but he would feel forced into it and hurt by it, might envy me, and would certainly travel back again alone, dissatisfied and unable ever to get rid of that dissatisfaction. Alone—do you know what that is?" "Well, can't he find out about our marriage some other way?" "I certainly can't prevent that, but given how he lives, it's unlikely." "If you have friends like that, Georg, you shouldn't have gotten engaged at all." "Yes, that's a fault we share; but even now I wouldn't want it any other way." And when she then, breathing quickly under his kisses, still ventured, "It really does hurt my feelings, though," he genuinely felt it was harmless enough to write the friend everything. "This is who I am, and this is how he

has to take me," he said to himself. "I can't cut out of myself a person who might be better suited to friendship with him than I am."

And in fact, in the long letter he was writing that Sunday morning, he did report to his friend the engagement that had taken place, in these words: "I have saved the best news for last. I have become engaged to a Miss Frieda Brandenfeld, a young woman from a well-to-do family who only settled here long after you left, so you can hardly know her. There will be occasion enough to tell you more about my fiancée; for today let it be enough that I am quite happy, and that the only change in our relationship to each other is that instead of a perfectly ordinary friend, you will now have in me a happy one. Besides that, you will gain in my fiancée, who sends you her warmest greetings and who will soon write to you herself, a sincere friend, which is not entirely without significance for a bachelor. I know that any number of things keep you from paying us a visit, but wouldn't my wedding be just the right occasion to finally sweep all obstacles aside? However that may be, act with no regard for anything else, and only as you see fit."

With this letter in his hand, Georg had sat a long while at his desk, his face turned toward the window. To an acquaintance who had greeted him in passing from the street below, he had barely answered with an absent smile.

At last he put the letter in his pocket and walked out of his room, across a short hallway, into his father's room, where he had not set foot in months. There had, in any case, been no particular need to: he was in constant contact with his father at the business, they took lunch together at the same time in an eating house, and in the evenings, though each fended for himself as he liked, they would generally still sit a while afterward, each with his newspaper, in the shared living room—unless Georg, as happened most often, was out with friends or, now, visiting his fiancée.

Georg was struck by how dark his father's room was, even on this sunny morning. So deep was the shadow cast by the tall wall rising beyond the narrow courtyard. His father sat by the window, in a corner decorated with various mementos of his late mother, reading the newspaper, which he held up at an angle before his eyes, trying in this way to compensate for some weakness of sight. On the table stood the remains of breakfast, of which not much seemed to have been eaten.

"Ah, Georg!" said his father, and came toward him at once. His heavy dressing gown fell open as he walked, its skirts fluttering about him. "My father is still a giant of a man," Georg said to himself.

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

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

"You've closed the window, too?"

"I prefer it this way."

"It's quite warm outside," Georg said, as if in afterthought to what he'd said before, and sat down.

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

"Actually, all I wanted to tell you," Georg went on, following the old man's movements quite absently, "is that I have gone ahead and announced my engagement to St. Petersburg after all." He drew the letter a little way out of his pocket and let it drop back in again.

"To St. Petersburg?" his father asked.

"To my friend, of course," Georg said, trying to catch his father's eye. "In the business he's a different man entirely," he thought, "the way he sits there so broadly, his arms crossed over his chest."

"Yes. Your friend," said his father, with emphasis.

"You do know, Father, that at first I meant to keep my engagement from him. Out of consideration, and for no other reason. You know yourself he's a difficult person. I told myself he might well hear of my engagement some other way, unlikely as that is given how solitary his life is—I can't prevent that—but he simply wasn't going to hear it from me."

"And now you've changed your mind again?" his father asked, laying the large newspaper on the windowsill and, on top of the newspaper, his glasses, which he covered with his hand.

"Yes, now I've changed my mind again. If he's truly my good friend, I told myself, then my happy engagement is good fortune for him, too. And so I no longer hesitated to tell him about it. But before I mailed the letter, I wanted to tell you."

"Georg," said his father, stretching his toothless mouth wide, "listen to me! You've come to me about this matter to ask my advice. That does you credit, no doubt. But it is nothing—it's worse than nothing—if you don't tell me the whole truth now. I don't want to stir up things that don't belong here. Since the death of our dear mother, certain unpleasant things have been going on. Perhaps their time will come too, and perhaps it will come sooner than we think. In the business, things escape my notice; maybe it's not that they're being kept from me—I don't want to assume for a moment that they're being kept from me—but I'm no longer strong enough, my memory is failing, I no longer have an eye for all the many things there are to keep track of. That is, in the first place, simply the course of nature, and in the second place, our little mother's death struck me down far harder than it did you. But since we're on this very subject, this letter, I ask you, Georg, don't deceive me. It's a trifle, it's not worth the breath—so don't deceive me. Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?"

Georg rose, embarrassed. "Let's leave my friends out of it. A thousand friends couldn't replace my father to me. Do you know what I think? You don't take enough care of yourself. But old age demands its due. I can't do without you in the business—you know that perfectly well—but if the business is going to threaten your health, I'll close it down for good, tomorrow if need be. This can't go on. We have to establish a different way of life for you—but a thorough one. You sit here in the dark when you could have lovely light in the living room. You barely touch your breakfast instead of building up your strength properly. You sit here with the window shut, when the air would do you so much good. No, Father! I'm going to fetch the doctor, and we'll follow his instructions to the letter. We'll switch rooms—you'll move to the front room, and I'll move in here. It won't be any change for you; everything will be moved along with you. But all that can wait. For now, lie down for a little while, you need rest, absolutely. Come, I'll help you undress—you'll see, I can manage it. Or would you rather go straight to the front room? Then you can lie down in my bed for the time being. That, actually, would be the sensible thing to do."

Georg stood close beside his father, who had let his head, with its shock of unruly white hair, sink onto his chest.

"Georg," said his father quietly, without stirring.

Georg immediately knelt down beside his father; in his father's weary face he saw the pupils, enormously enlarged, fixed on him from the corners of his eyes.

"You have no friend in St. Petersburg. You've always been a joker, and you haven't held back even with me. How could you possibly have a friend of all places there! I simply can't believe it."

"Just try to think back again, Father," Georg said, lifting his father from the armchair and, since he was now standing there really quite weak, drawing off his dressing gown. "It'll soon be three years now since my friend came to visit us. I still remember that you didn't much care for him. At least twice I denied him to your face, even though he was sitting in my room at that very moment. I could understand your dislike of him well enough—my friend has his peculiarities. But then again, you did get along with him quite well after all. I was so proud back then that you listened to him, nodded, and asked him questions. If you think about it, you're bound to remember. He told incredible stories then about the Russian revolution. How, for instance, on a business trip to Kiev, he'd seen a priest on a balcony during some riot, cutting a broad cross of blood into the palm of his hand, raising that hand, and calling out to the crowd. You yourself have told that story again, here and there."

Meanwhile Georg had managed to sit his father back down and to carefully draw off the knitted underdrawers he wore over his linen underclothes, along with his socks. At the sight of underclothes that were none too clean, he reproached himself for having neglected his father. Surely it should have been his duty, too, to keep an eye on his father's change of linen. He had not yet spoken explicitly with his fiancée about how they meant to arrange for his father's future, since they had silently assumed that his father would simply go on living alone in the old apartment. But now he decided, abruptly and with complete resolve, to take his father along into his own future household. It almost seemed, in fact, looking more closely, that the care meant to be given his father there might come too late.

He carried his father to bed in his arms. He was seized by a terrible feeling when, during the few steps to the bed, he noticed that against his chest his father was playing with his watch chain. He could not lay him down in bed right away, so tightly did his father cling to this watch chain.

But no sooner was he in bed than everything seemed fine. He covered himself and then pulled the blanket especially far up over his shoulder. He looked up at Georg, not unkindly.

"You do remember him, don't you?" Georg asked, nodding at him encouragingly.

"Am I well covered now?" the father asked, as though he could not check for himself whether his feet were sufficiently covered.

"So you like it in bed already," said Georg, and tucked the blanket more snugly around him.

"Am I well covered?" the father asked once more, and seemed to be listening especially closely for the answer.

"Just be calm, you are well covered."

"No!" cried the father, so violently that the answer collided with the question, and he threw back the blanket with such force that for an instant it unfurled fully in flight, and he stood upright in the bed. Only one hand he held lightly against the ceiling. "You wanted to cover me up, I know that, my little rascal, but covered up I am not yet. And even if this is my very last strength, it is enough for you, too much for you. I know your friend well enough. He would be a son after my own heart. That is exactly why you have been betraying him all these years. Why else? Do you think I have not wept for him? That is exactly why you lock yourself in your office, no one is to disturb you, the boss is busy—just so you can write your lying little letters to Russia. But luckily nobody needs to teach a father how to see through his son. Just when you thought you had got him down, so thoroughly down that you could sit on him with your backside and he would not stir, that is when my fine son decided to get married!"

Georg looked up at the dreadful figure his father had become. The friend in St. Petersburg, whom his father suddenly knew so well, seized hold of him as never before. He saw him lost in the vastness of Russia. He saw him at the door of the empty, plundered shop. Amid the wreckage of the shelves, the shredded goods, the toppling gas brackets, he was still just barely standing. Why had he had to travel so far away!

"But look at me!" cried the father, and Georg ran, almost distractedly, toward the bed, meaning to take it all in, but stopped short halfway there.

"Because she lifted her skirts," the father began to warble, "because she lifted her skirts like that, the disgusting goose," and to demonstrate, he lifted his nightshirt so high that the scar from his war years showed on his thigh, "because she lifted her skirts this way, and this way, and this way, you went after her, and so that you could satisfy yourself with her undisturbed, you defiled our mother's memory, betrayed your friend, and put your father to bed so that he could not move. But can he move, or can he not?"

And he stood there completely unsupported, kicking his legs about. He was radiant with insight.

Georg stood in a corner, as far from his father as possible. Long before, he had firmly resolved to watch everything with complete precision, so that he could not be taken by surprise by some roundabout means, from behind, from above. Now he remembered that long-forgotten resolve again, and forgot it once more, the way one draws a short thread through the eye of a needle.

"But the friend has not been betrayed after all!" cried the father, his forefinger wagging back and forth to underscore it. "I was his representative right here in town."

"Play-actor!" Georg could not stop himself from shouting; he saw at once the damage this had done, and bit his tongue—too late, his eyes frozen wide—so that he doubled up in pain.

"Yes, of course I have been play-acting! Play-acting! Good word! What other comfort was left to the old, widowed father? Tell me—and for the moment it takes to answer, you are still my living son—what was left to me, in my back room, hounded by disloyal staff, old to the very bone? And my son went rejoicing through the world, closing deals that I had prepared, tumbling over himself with pleasure, and walked away from his father with the sealed face of a man of honor! Do you think I did not love you, I, from whom you sprang?"

"Now he will lean forward," Georg thought, "if only he would fall and shatter!" This thought hissed through his head.

The father leaned forward but did not fall. Since Georg did not come closer, as he had expected, he straightened up again.

"Stay where you are, I do not need you! You think you still have the strength to come over here, and that you are only holding back because you choose to. Do not fool yourself! I am still by far the stronger one. Alone, I might have had to give ground, but your mother has passed her strength on to me, I have allied myself splendidly with your friend, and I have got your customers right here in my pocket!"

"Even in his nightshirt he has pockets!" Georg said to himself, and believed that with this remark he could make his father impossible in the eyes of the whole world. He thought this only for an instant, for he kept forgetting everything.

"Just take your bride on your arm and come at me! I will sweep her right off your side, you have no idea how!"

Georg made faces, as though he did not believe it. The father only nodded toward Georg's corner, affirming the truth of what he had said.

"How you did amuse me today, when you came and asked whether you should write to your friend about the engagement. He knows everything already, you silly boy, he knows everything already! I wrote to him myself, because you forgot to take my writing things away from me. That is why he has not come in years—he knows everything a hundred times better than you do yourself, he crumples your letters unread in his left hand while he holds my letters up to read in his right!"

He swung his arm over his head in sheer enthusiasm. "He knows everything a thousand times better!" he cried.

"Ten thousand times!" said Georg, to mock his father, but even in his own mouth the word took on a deadly earnest ring.

"For years now I have been watching for you to come out with that question! Do you think anything else concerns me? Do you think I read newspapers? Here!" and he threw Georg a sheet of newspaper that had somehow been carried into the bed with him. An old newspaper, with a name on it already quite unknown to Georg.

"How long you dawdled before you finally ripened! Your mother had to die, she could not live to see the happy day; the friend is going to ruin out there in his Russia—three years ago already he was yellow enough to be

thrown out; and as for me, well, you can see for yourself how things stand with me. You have eyes for that, do you not!"

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

Pityingly, the father said in passing, "You probably meant to say that earlier. Now it does not fit at all anymore."

And louder: "So now you know what else there was besides you—until now you knew only about yourself! An innocent child you were, in truth, but in a still truer truth you were a devilish human being!—Therefore know this: 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 he carried away still ringing in his ears. On the stairs, whose steps he raced down as though down a sloping ramp, he startled his charwoman, who was just then coming up to tidy the apartment after the night. "Jesus!" she cried, and covered her face with her apron, but he was already gone. Out through the gateway he sprang, and across the roadway he was driven toward the water. Already he was gripping the railing fast, the way a starving man grips food. He swung himself over, like the accomplished gymnast he had been in his youth, a pride to his parents. Still he held on with hands growing weaker, spied between the bars of the railing a bus that would easily drown out the sound of his fall, called softly, "Dear parents, I did always love you," and let himself drop.

At that moment a positively unending stream of traffic was crossing the bridge.



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