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*The Golden Pot
and Other Tales*

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

MY COUSIN'S CORNER WINDOW



My poor cousin has suffered the same fate as the famous Scarron.* Like him, my cousin has entirely lost the use of his legs owing to an intractable illness, and he needs the help of some stout crutches, and the muscular arm of a surly ex-soldier who acts as a nurse when in the mood, to stagger from his bed to an armchair piled with cushions, and from the armchair to his bed. But there is yet another similarity between my cousin and Scarron, whose special type of humour, deviating from the usual path of French wit, has given him, despite the scantiness of his works, a secure place in French literature. Like Scarron, my cousin is a writer; like Scarron, he is endowed with an especially lively wit, and indulges in remarkably humorous jesting in his own way. To the credit of the German writer, however, let it be noted that he never thought it necessary to spice his little savoury dishes with asafoetida in order to tickle the palates of his German readers, who do not relish such things. He is content with the nobler sort of spice which both delights and invigorates. People enjoy reading what he writes; it is supposed to be good and diverting; I am no judge of such matters. I always used to find pleasure in my cousin's conversation, and it seemed pleasanter to listen to him than to read him. But it is just this unconquerable inclination for writing which has brought the blackest misfortune upon my cousin; the gravest illness could not stop the wheels of his imagination from turning; they continued to work, always bringing forth new things. Thus it was that he would tell me all manner of charming stories, which he had invented in spite of the many and various pains he was enduring. But the path that his thoughts had to follow in order to appear fully formed on paper had been blocked by the evil demon of illness. Whenever my cousin wanted to write something down, not only did his fingers refuse their office, but even his ideas were scattered and dissipated. This plunged my cousin

into the blackest melancholy.

'Cousin!' he said to me one day in a tone that alarmed me, 'it's all up with me! I feel like the old painter whose mind was completely unhinged and who spent entire days sitting in front of a framed canvas with a first coat of paint on it, and telling all his visitors about the manifold beauties of the rich and magnificent painting he had just completed. I give it up, the active, creative life that emerges from my mind in distinct forms and links me with the world! My spirit is retiring to its cell! From that time onwards my cousin refused to see me or anybody else. The surly old ex-soldier would send us away, growling and scolding, like a watch-dog that might well bite.

It is necessary to mention that my cousin lives in a small room with a low ceiling, high above the street. That is the usual custom of writers and poets. What does the low ceiling matter? Imagination soars aloft and builds a high and cheerful dome that rises to the radiant blue sky. Thus the poet's cramped quarters are like the garden that consisted of ten square feet enclosed within four walls: neither broad nor long, but always at an agreeable height. Moreover, my cousin's lodgings are in the most attractive part of our capital city, overlooking the big market square* which is surrounded by magnificent buildings and has the colossal theatre, a work of genius, adorning its centre. The house where my cousin lives stands on a corner, and from the window of a tiny room he can overlook the entire panorama of the splendid square at a single glance.

It happened to be market-day when, forcing my way through the throng of people, I came down the street where my cousin's corner window can be seen from a considerable distance. I was not a little astonished to see in this window the well-known red cap which my cousin used to wear in happier times. Nor was that all! As I came closer, I noticed that my cousin had put on his fine Warsaw dressing-gown and was smoking tobacco in the Turkish pipe he used on Sundays. I waved to him and fluttered my handkerchief; this succeeded in attracting his attention, and he gave me a friendly nod. What hopes! I hurried upstairs with lightning speed. The ex-soldier opened the door; his face, which with its wrinkles and folds normally looked like a wet glove, had been smoothed out by some sunshine into a quite passable

physiognomy. He said his master was sitting in the armchair and was available to visitors. The room had been cleaned, and on the screen separating the bed from the rest of the room had been pinned a sheet of paper on which the following words were written in big letters:

Et si male nunc, non olim sic erit.*

All this suggested the return of hope, the reawakening of vital energy.

'Why,' called my cousin, as I entered the tiny room, 'here you are at last, cousin; do you know that I have really been longing for you? For although you don't care two pins about my immortal works, I still like you, because you're a cheery soul, and amusing if not exactly amusing.'

I felt the blood rising to my face at this compliment from my outspoken cousin.

'You probably think', went on my cousin, ignoring my reaction, 'that my health is improving, or that I've made a complete recovery. That's anything but true. My legs are disloyal vassals who have refused obedience to the head of their ruler, and want nothing more to do with the rest of my worthy corpse. That's to say, I can't move from the spot, and cart myself to and fro in this wheelchair in the most charming fashion, while my old soldier whistles the most tuneful marches he remembers from his army years. But this window is my comfort; it is here that life in all its colour has been revealed to me anew, and I feel at home with its incessant activity. Come, cousin, look outside!'

I sat down opposite my cousin on a small stool for which there was just room in front of the window. The view was indeed strange and surprising. The entire market seemed like a single mass of people squeezed tightly together, so that one would have thought that an apple thrown into it would never reach the ground. Tiny specks of the most varied colours were gleaming in the sunshine; this gave me the impression of a large bed of tulips being blown hither and thither by the wind, and I had to confess that the view, while certainly very attractive, soon became tiring, and might give over-sensitive people a slight feeling of giddiness, like the not disagreeable delirium one feels at the onset of a dream. I assumed that this accounted for the

pleasure that my cousin derived from his corner window, and told him so quite frankly.

My cousin, however, clapped his hands together above his head, and the following conversation developed between us:

(MY COUSIN: Cousin, cousin! I now see clearly that you haven't the tiniest spark of literary talent. You lack the first prerequisite for treading in the footsteps of your worthy paralysed cousin: an eye that can really see. The market down there offers you nothing but the sight of a motley, bewildering throng of people animated by meaningless activity. Ho, ho, my friend! I can derive from it the most varied scenery of town life, and my mind, an honest Callot, or a modern Chodowiecki, dashes off a whole series of sketches, some of them very bold in their outlines. Come on, cousin! Let me see if I can't teach you at least the rudiments of the art of seeing. Look directly down into the street—here are my field-glasses—do you see the somewhat strangely dressed person with a large shopping-basket on her arm who is deep in conversation with a brush-maker and seems to be hurriedly settling domestic matters quite unconnected with bodily nourishment?

ME. I've got her. She has a bright lemon-yellow cloth wound round her head like a turban, in the French style, and her face, as well as her whole appearance, shows clearly that she's a Frenchwoman. She's probably a refugee from the last war who has made a pile for herself.

MY COUSIN. Not a bad guess. I'll wager that her husband makes a tidy income from some branch of French industry, so that his wife can fill her shopping-basket with plenty of good things. Now she's plunging into the throng. Cousin, see if you can follow the various twists and turns of her course without losing sight of her. Her yellow head-cloth will be your guide.

ME. Goodness, how that bright yellow dot forces its way through the crowd. Now she's already close to the church, now she's haggling over something at the booths, now she's gone—oh dear, I've lost her!—no, she's popped up at the far end over there, over near the poultry. She's taking hold of a

plucked goose. She's feeling it with expert fingers.

MY COUSIN. Good, cousin; you have to focus your attention if you are to see distinctly. But instead of giving you boring lessons in an art which can hardly be learnt, let me draw your attention to all sorts of diverting things which are being revealed before our eyes. Do you see the woman who is making room for herself with two sharp elbows, down there at the corner, although the crowd isn't particularly dense?

ME. What an extraordinary figure: a silken hat whose capricious shapelessness has bidden defiance to every fashion, with coloured feathers waving in the breeze, a short silk jacket, whose colour has returned to the primal nothingness, over it a fairly decent shawl, her yellow calico dress, embroidered with flowers round the edge, reaches to her ankles, bluish-grey stockings, laced boots. Following her, a fine-looking maid with two shopping-baskets, a fish-net, a meal-bag. God help us! What furious glances the person in silk is casting all around, how furiously she forces her way into the thickest clusters of people—how she grabs everything, vegetables, fruit, meat, and so forth; how she looks at everything, feels it, haggles over it, and yet never buys anything.

MY COUSIN. This person never misses a single market-day, and I call her 'the rabid housewife'. I suspect that she must be the daughter of a wealthy townsman, perhaps a well-to-do soap-boiler, and that some minor privy secretary, not without difficulty, gained her hand, and all that appertains thereto. Heaven did not endow her with beauty or grace, but all her neighbours considered her the best home manager of any girl they knew, and she is indeed a good manager: she manages to make her husband's life, from dawn till dusk, such a misery that he doesn't know whether he's standing on his head or his heels, and wishes he were at Jericho. The entire register of which drums and trumpets are capable is constantly in use for purchases, orders, petty commerce, and the manifold needs of the household, and so the privy secretary's domestic life resembles a watch-case in which the watch, having been wound up, perpetually plays a wild symphony composed by the Devil himself. On every fourth market-day or so she is accompanied by a different maid.

'*Sapienti sat!** Do you see. . . ? But no, no! The group that has just formed deserves to be immortalized by the pencil of a Hogarth.* Just look, cousin, into the third doorway of the theatre!

ME. A couple of old women sitting on low chairs, with all their odds and ends displayed in a fair-sized basket in front of them: one is selling brightly coloured cloths, mere fal-lals, calculated to dazzle stupid people's eyes, the other has a vast store of blue and grey stockings, wool, and so on. They are bending towards each other and whispering in each other's ears. One is enjoying a cup of coffee; the other, completely absorbed in the subject of the conversation, seems to have forgotten about the glass of schnapps which she was about to swallow; indeed, a couple of striking physiognomies! What a demonic smile! What gesticulations with their withered bony arms!

MY COUSIN. These two women always sit together, and although they are selling different things and should therefore have no conflict or commercial rivalry, until today they have always cast hostile glances at each other, and, if I may trust my skill in reading physiognomies, thrown sundry invectives at each other. Oh, look, look, cousin! They are becoming more like bosom friends by the minute! The cloth-seller is giving the stocking-dealer a cup of coffee. What can that signify? I know! A few minutes ago a young girl came up to the basket, attracted by the fal-lals; she was sixteen at most, as beautiful as the day, and her whole appearance and behaviour revealed her moral propriety and her shamefaced poverty. She had her eye on a piece of white cloth with a coloured border, and was perhaps sorely in need of it. She haggled over it, and the old woman used all her mercantile craft, spreading the cloth out and letting the garish colours shine in the sun. They reached an agreement, but when the poor girl took her few coins from the corner of her handkerchief, there was not enough for such an expense. The girl, her cheeks burning and her eyes glistening with tears, made off as quickly as she could, while the old woman gave a mocking laugh as she folded up the cloth and threw it back in her basket. I dare say a few pleasant remarks were uttered. But the other she-

devil knows the girl, and was able to serve up the sad story of a family reduced to poverty as a scandalous chronicle of irresponsibility and possibly even crime, to delight the heart of the disappointed vendor. The cup of coffee was doubtless the reward for some coarse and brazen piece of defamation.

ME. It may be, dear cousin, that not one word of all your conjectures is true, but as I look at the old women your vivid description sounds so plausible that I am compelled to believe it, willy-nilly.

MY COUSIN. Before we leave the wall of the theatre, let us cast a glance at the fat, good-humoured woman with cheeks bursting with health who is sitting in Stoic calm and composure on a cane chair with her hands concealed under her white apron; she has spread out in front of her, on white cloths, a vast quantity of brightly polished spoons, knives, and forks, Faience crockery, china plates and dishes of old-fashioned shape, tea-cups, coffee-pots, hosiery, and what not, so that her goods, probably clawed together at petty auctions, form a veritable *Orbis pictus*.* She listens impassively to the offers made by hagglers, unconcerned whether or not they reach an agreement; she strikes a bargain and extends one hand from beneath her apron, simply to receive the money from the purchaser, who is allowed to remove the goods himself. She is a calm, prudent trader who will make her pile. Four weeks ago, all her goods consisted in half-a-dozen or so fine cotton stockings, and the same number of drinking glasses. Her trade increases with every market, and as she never brings a better chair and still keeps her hands concealed under her apron, she evidently possesses a stable character and is not being led into pride and conceit by her good fortune. Now, what put this bizarre notion into my head! I've just imagined a mischievous little imp, like the one who crawls under the pious woman's chair in the engraving by Hogarth,* creeping under this market-woman's chair because he envies her good fortune and maliciously sawing away the legs of her chair. Plop! down she tumbles among her glass and china, and her business is in smithereens. That would be a commercial crash in the most literal sense.

ME. Truly, dear cousin, you have already taught me to see better.

As my gaze roams amid the colourful, surging throng, I keep noticing young girls who wander through the market in the company of neatly dressed cooks carrying large and gleaming shopping-baskets, and haggle over such household necessities as the market affords. The girls' modest attire and respectable bearing proves that they come at least from good middle-class homes. What are they doing in the market?

MY COUSIN. That's easily explained. For some years past it's been customary for even the daughters of higher officials of state to be sent to the market to gain practical experience of that part of housekeeping which concerns the purchase of food.

ME. Indeed, a laudable custom, which must not only be of practical use but inculcate a housewifely state of mind.

MY COUSIN. Do you think so, cousin? I for my part think the opposite. What can be the point of doing one's own shopping, unless to convince oneself of the quality of the goods and the real market prices? There are other ways in which the young housewife can easily learn the qualities, the look, and the characteristics of good vegetables, a good piece of meat, and so on. It doesn't prevent the servant from taking a few pence for herself, since she has no difficulty in arriving at a secret understanding with the vendors; and even if it did, that wouldn't outweigh the disadvantages which can easily arise from a girl's visiting the market. I would never, just to save a few pence, expose my daughter to the danger of mingling with the dregs of the people and hearing a smutty joke or having to put up with some vulgar talk from an abandoned woman or a brutal fellow. And then, when it comes to the speculations of lovelorn, blue-coated youths on horseback, or on foot wearing yellow pea-jackets with black collars, the market is . . . But look, look, cousin! how do you like the girl who is just walking past the pump, accompanied by an elderly cook? Take my field-glasses, cousin!

ME. Ha, what a rare creature, how charming and adorable! But her eyes are modestly downcast, her every step is timorous and uncertain, she clings shyly to her companion, who is clearing a path into the crowd by forcing an assault. I'm following them. There's the cook standing by the baskets of

vegetables. She's haggling. The girl, in response to a summons, half averts her eyes and in great haste takes some money out of her purse and hands it over, glad to get away. I can't lose sight of her, thanks to her red shawl. They seem to be searching vainly for something . . . At last, at last, they are lingering with a woman who is offering fine vegetables in dainty baskets. The lovely girl's attention is absorbed by a basket of beautiful cauliflowers. The girl herself chooses a cauliflower and puts it in the cook's basket . . . What, the bold hussy! She takes the cauliflower straight out of the basket, puts it back in the seller's basket, and chooses another, while the violent agitation of her heavy bonneted head indicates that she is showering reproaches on the poor girl, who wanted to make her own decision for the first time.

MY COUSIN. Just imagine that girl's feelings when forced to engage in household tasks which are repugnant to her delicacy. I know the lovely girl; she is the daughter of a Privy Financial Counsellor, a thoroughly natural person devoid of any affectation, truly feminine, and endowed with the infallible judgement and sensitive tact that such women always possess . . . Ho, ho, cousin! that's what I call a happy coincidence. Her antithesis is just coming round the corner. How do you like *this* girl, cousin?

ME. Why, what a slender, dainty figure! Young, stepping lightly, and facing the world with a bold and unabashed look: someone for whom the sun is always shining and the air is always filled with merry music. With what an audacious, carefree air she trips towards the crowd! The maidservant following her with the shopping-basket seems no older than she, and there is a certain cordiality linking the two. The young lady is dressed in very pretty things, her shawl is in the latest fashion. Her hat matches her morning costume, her dress has a tasteful pattern. Everything about her is pretty and decent . . . Oh dear! What do I see? The young lady is wearing white silk shoes. Cast-off dancing-pumps in the market! Indeed, the more I look at this girl, the more I notice something peculiar which I cannot put into words. She certainly seems to be doing her shopping with care and diligence: she always chooses and haggles, she speaks and gesticulates

with a vivacity that comes close to excitement; but I have the feeling that she wants to buy something else besides her household needs.

MY COUSIN. Bravo, bravo, cousin! Your eyes are getting sharper, I see. Just look, my dear fellow: despite her modest dress, and leaving aside the lightness and frivolity of everything about her, the fact that she is wearing white silk shoes to market ought to have told you that the young lady belongs to the ballet, or some other branch of the theatre. As for the other things she's looking for, I expect we'll soon find out—yes, right enough! Look up the street, dear cousin, a little to the right, and tell me whom you see on the pavement outside the hotel, where there are not many people about?

ME. I see a tall, slim youth in a short yellow pea-jacket with a black collar and steel buttons. He is wearing a small red cap with silver embroidery, under which his fine dark curls spill forth almost too luxuriantly. The expression of his handsome, pale, thoroughly masculine face is considerably heightened by the little black moustache on his upper lip. He has a brief-case under his arm and is obviously a student on his way to a lecture, but he is standing rooted to the spot, looking fixedly towards the market, and seems to have forgotten the lecture and everything around him.

MY COUSIN. That's right, dear cousin. All his thoughts are directed towards our little *comédienne*. The appointed time has come; he is approaching the big fruit stall, where the most attractive goods are piled up in an appetizing display, and seems to be asking for fruit that is not available at present. No proper lunch can possibly be complete without a fruit dessert, so our little *comédienne* must finish her shopping for the table at the fruit stall. A round apple with ruddy cheeks slips mischievously out of her little fingers! The man in the yellow jacket bends down and picks it up, a dainty little curtsy from the little fairy of the theatre, their conversation is under way. They help and advise each other in the difficult task of choosing oranges, thus consolidating an acquaintance which they have doubtless already formed, and enjoying a delightful rendezvous which is sure to be repeated and varied in countless ways.

ME. Let the son of the Muses flirt and choose oranges, as much as he pleases; that does not interest me, especially as the angelic child, the charming daughter of the Privy Counsellor, has caught my eye again at the corner of the theatre, where the flower-sellers are offering their wares.

MY COUSIN. I don't like looking at the flowers there, cousin, and thereby hangs a tale. The vendor who usually displays the most beautiful array of select carnations, roses, and other rarer blooms, is a very nice, pretty girl, striving to cultivate her mind; for whenever she is not occupied by trading, she diligently reads books whose uniform shows that they belong to Kralowski's* great literary army, which is victoriously spreading the light of intellectual culture into the remotest corners of our capital. A flower-girl who reads books is an irresistible sight for an author of fiction. It so happened that long ago, when my way took me past the flowers (they are displayed for sale on other days besides market day), I noticed the flower-girl reading and stopped in surprise. She seemed to be seated in a thick bower of blooming geraniums, and had her book open on her lap, with her chin propped on her hand. The hero must have been in deadly danger, or some other crisis in the plot must have been reached, for the girl's cheeks were flushed, her lips were quivering, and she seemed miles away from her surroundings. Cousin, let me quite unreservedly confess to you the strange weakness of a literary man. I was unable to leave the spot, where I shifted nervously from one foot to the other, wondering what the girl was reading. This thought absorbed my entire mind. The spirit of literary vanity awoke and tickled me with the notion that it might be one of my own works which had transported the girl into the fantastic world of my dreams. Finally I plucked up courage, walked over to her, and asked the price of a bunch of carnations standing in a distant row. While the girl was fetching the carnations, I said: 'What are you reading, my pretty child?' and picked up the book which she had hastily clapped shut. O ye gods! It was indeed one of my works, namely ****. The girl brought the flowers and told me their very reasonable price. Flowers? Carnations? At that moment the girl represented a far more estimable public than the

entire elegant world of our capital. Excited and inflamed by the sweetest feelings an author can have, I asked with feigned indifference how the girl liked the book.

'Well, sir,' replied the girl, 'it's a very funny kind of book. At first it makes your head spin a bit; but then you feel as if you were right in the middle of it.'

To my considerable astonishment the girl recounted the plot of the little fairy-tale quite clearly and distinctly, so that I perceived that she must have read it several times; she repeated that it was a very funny kind of book, and said that at times it had made her laugh heartily, and at other times she had felt like crying; and she advised me, in case I had not yet read the book, to collect it from Mr Kralowski one afternoon, for it was in the afternoons that she changed her books. I now prepared to deliver my master-stroke. With downcast eyes, in a voice that rivalled the honey of Hybla for sweetness, I lisped: 'Here, my angel, is the author of the book which has given you such pleasure, standing in front of you as large as life.'

The girl stared at me, speechless, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. I took this for the expression of extreme admiration, indeed of joyous terror that the sublime genius whose creative power had produced such a work should have appeared so suddenly among the geraniums. As the girl's countenance remained unaltered, I thought: 'Perhaps she simply can't believe that a fortunate coincidence should have brought the celebrated author of **** so close to her.' I tried every possible way of explaining that I was identical with that author, but she seemed petrified, and nothing escaped her lips except 'Hm—oh—well—why . . .'. But why should I spend a long time describing the deep humiliation that I incurred at that moment? Apparently it had never entered the girl's head that the books she read must first have been composed. She had no idea that such things as writers or authors existed, and I verily think that closer enquiry would have elicited from her the pious, child-like belief that God made books grow, like mushrooms.

In a subdued voice I asked once more how much the carnations cost. In the mean time, another obscure notion

about the production of books must have formed in the girl's mind; for as I was counting out the money, she asked quite frankly and naïvely whether I made *all* Mr Kralowski's books? Seizing my carnations, I rushed off like lightning.

ME. Cousin, cousin, that's what I call fit punishment for an author's vanity; but while you were telling me your tragic story, I kept my eye fixed on my little darling. Only when she was buying flowers did the impudent demon of the kitchen grant her complete freedom. The surly kitchen governess put the heavy shopping-basket on the ground and devoted herself to the indescribable joy of conversation with three colleagues. At times she crossed her plump arms, at other times, when the external rhetorical expression of her speech seemed to demand it, she placed her arms akimbo; and, contrary to the Bible, her speech was certainly much more than yea and nay. Just look what a magnificent array of flowers the lovely angel has chosen; she has given it to a burly lad to carry. What's this? No, I don't quite like the way she eats cherries from her little basket as she walks along; will the fine cambric cloth which the basket probably contains survive contact with the fruit?

MY COUSIN. An impulsive youthful appetite doesn't bother about the stains made by cherry-juice, which can be dealt with by salt of sorrel or some such well-tried preparation. And it shows a truly child-like absence of affectation that she should indulge herself like that as soon as she has regained her freedom from the tribulations of the wicked market. But I've had my eye for some time now on an extremely puzzling figure: the man standing by the second, more distant pump, beside the cart on which a peasant woman is dispensing plum jam from a large barrel. First of all, dear cousin, do admire the woman's dexterity. Armed with a long wooden spoon, she first deals with the major purchases of quarter-pounds, half-pounds and whole pounds of jam, and then with lightning speed she throws a threepenny-dollop to each of the greedy sweet-lovers who are holding out paper bags and sometimes even their fur caps to receive the jam, which they promptly devour with great enjoyment as a superior snack—the people's caviar! As I watch her dispensing the jam so skilfully

by brandishing her spoon, I recall hearing in my childhood about a rich peasant's wedding conducted in such splendour that a delicious rice-pudding, coated with a thick crust of cinnamon, sugar, and cloves, was dispensed by means of a threshing-flail. Each of the honoured guests had only to open his mouth cheerfully to receive his portion, and so it was just like the Land of Cockayne. But, cousin, have you got your eye fixed on this man?

ME. Certainly! What sort of person can this strange, extraordinary figure possibly be? A gaunt man, at least six feet tall, and as straight as a ramrod, indeed bending backwards! From under his three-cornered, squashed-looking little hat there sticks out the cockade attached to a bag-wig, which then spreads out and nestles against his back. His grey coat, cut according to the fashions of yesteryear, is buttoned up from top to bottom and clings close to his body, without a single crease, and when he was walking over to the cart I noticed that he was wearing black breeches, black stockings, and immense tin buckles on his shoes. Whatever has he got in the rectangular box which he is carrying so carefully under his left arm? It almost resembles the box that a pedlar carries round his neck.

MY COUSIN. You'll soon find out; just watch him attentively.

ME. He's opening the lid of the box. The sun shines in, radiant reflections . . . The box is lined with metal. He is lifting his hat and making an almost reverent bow to the woman selling plum jam. What an original, expressive face: narrow lips, an aquiline nose, big dark eyes, a high forehead, black hair, his wig dressed *en cœur*, with stiff little curls above his ears. He's giving the box to the woman on the cart; she immediately fills it with plum jam, and hands it back to him with a friendly nod. The man takes his leave with a second bow. He winds his way past a keg of herring. He pulls out a drawer from the box, puts in some salted almonds which he has purchased, and closes it again. A third drawer, I see, is intended for parsley and other vegetables. He now walks to and fro across the market-place with long, dignified strides, until he stops in front of a table richly spread with plucked poultry. Here, as always, he makes several deep bows before beginning

to haggle. He talks volubly and at length to the woman, who listens with a particularly friendly expression. He puts the box cautiously down on the ground and seizes two ducks, which he stuffs quite comfortably into the capacious pocket of his coat. Heavens! they're followed by a goose! As for the turkey, he only casts yearning glances at it, but he can't refrain from caressing it with his second and third fingers; he quickly lifts his box, bows to the woman in a most obliging manner, tears himself forcibly away from the tempting object of his desires, and strides away! He is heading straight for the butchers' stands. Is he a cook who has to prepare a banquet? He purchases a haunch of veal and slips it into another of his gigantic pockets. Now he has finished his shopping; he goes up the Charlottenstrasse with such a peculiar air of solemnity that he seems to have been wafted here from some foreign country.

MY COUSIN. I've already spent plenty of time racking my brains over this exotic figure. What do you think, cousin, of my hypothesis? The man is an old drawing-master who has pursued his career, and perhaps still does, in schools of middling quality. Thanks to various industrious enterprises, he has accumulated a lot of money; he is miserly, mistrustful, a hateful cynic, a selfish bachelor; his burnt offerings are reserved for one god—his belly; his sole pleasure is good eating, all alone in his room, of course; he has no servants, but attends to everything himself. On market-days, as you saw, he buys provisions for half the week; he prepares his own food in a little kitchen next door to his miserable room, and since the cook always pleases the master's palate, he devours it with a greedy, perhaps a bestial appetite. You also noticed, dear cousin, the practical skill with which he has turned an old box of paints into a shopping-basket.

ME. That's enough about this disgusting person.

MY COUSIN. Why disgusting? A man who knows the world tells us that 'such odd fish are necessary too',* and he is right, for there can never be enough colour and variety. But if you dislike the man so much, dear cousin, I can propose another hypothesis about what he is and does. Four Frenchmen, all of them Parisians—a language-teacher, a fencing-master, a

dancing-master, and a pastry-cook—arrived in Berlin simultaneously as young men, and made a good living, as they could hardly help doing then (that is, towards the end of the last century). From the moment when the carriage brought them together on their journey they formed a close friendship and were familiar cronies. After finishing their work, they spent every evening together, like true old Frenchmen, in lively conversation over a frugal supper. The dancing-master's legs had lost their agility, the fencing-master's arms were enfeebled by age, the language-teacher had lost his pupils to rivals who claimed to know the latest Parisian dialect, and the crafty inventions of the pastry-cook had been surpassed by young culinary artists who had been trained by the most individual gastronomes in Paris.

ME. This invention does credit to your literary talents, dear cousin. For the last few minutes, however, I have been gazing at those lofty white plumes rising from the densest part of the crowd. At last the figure of their owner is emerging, just beside the pump: a tall, slim woman, not at all bad-looking. Her coat of heavy pink silk is brand new. Her hat is in the latest fashion, the veil attached to it is of fine lace, she has white kid gloves. What compelled this elegant lady, who is probably invited to lunch somewhere, to force her way through the throng of the market-place? But what's this? Is she out shopping as well? She is standing still and beckoning to a dirty, ragged old woman, a living image of the miserable dregs of the populace, who is laboriously hobbling after her with a broken shopping-basket in one hand. The well-dressed lady is beckoning at the corner of the theatre, in order to give alms to the blind militiaman who is propped against the wall there. She pulls the glove off her right hand with some effort. Good heavens! a blood-red fist appears with a decidedly masculine appearance. But, without spending much time over her choice, she hastily presses a coin into the blind man's hand, runs into the middle of the Charlottenstrasse, and then adopts the majestic gait of somebody making a promenade. In this manner she saunters up the Charlottenstrasse towards Unter den Linden, paying no further heed to her ragged companion.

MY COUSIN. The old woman has put her basket on the ground in order to have a rest, and you can survey all the elegant lady's purchases at one glance.

ME. They are strange enough, in all conscience. A cabbage, a lot of potatoes, a few apples, a small loaf, some herrings wrapped in paper, a sheep's-milk cheese, not of the most appetizing colour, a sheep's liver, a small bunch of roses, a pair of slippers, a boot-tree. What in the name of goodness . . .

MY COUSIN. Hush, cousin, that's enough about the lady in pink! Take a careful look at the blind man who was given alms by the thoughtless child of corruption. Could there be a more touching image of undeserved human misery and pious resignation to the will of God and fate? Propped against the wall of the theatre, with his wizened, bony hands supported on a staff which he has pushed one pace forward so that the mindless crowd shall not tread on his toes, with his pallid countenance raised and his militia cap pulled down over his eyes, he stands motionless on the same spot from early morning until the market closes.

ME. He is begging, and yet such good provision is made for blind soldiers.

MY COUSIN. You couldn't be more wrong, dear cousin. This poor man is the slave of a woman who sells vegetables and who belongs to the lower class of vegetable-sellers, since the superior class have their goods transported in baskets loaded on carts. Every morning, you see, this blind man arrives laden with baskets full of vegetables, like a beast of burden, almost sinking under his load, and managing with great difficulty to remain upright by using his staff to help him stagger along. When his strength is almost completely exhausted, the big, robust woman whose servant he is (unless she just uses him to bring the produce to market), hardly bothers even to take him by the arm and help him on to his resting-place, the spot he occupies at present. Here she takes the baskets from his back and carries them to her stall herself, and then leaves him standing there without troubling about him in the slightest until the market closes and she loads the baskets, now empty or partially so, on to his back once more.

ME. It is curious that one can always recognize a blind person,

even if his eyes are not closed or if there is no other visible defect to betray the absence of eyesight, by the upright posture of the head which is characteristic of the blind; it seems to imply a perpetual effort to discern something in the night which envelops the blind man.

MY COUSIN. For me there is no more moving spectacle than such a blind man who, with his head erect, seems to be gazing into the far distance. Life's sun has set for the poor fellow, but his inner eye is already striving to glimpse the everlasting radiance that lights his way into a hereafter full of comfort, hope, and joy. But I am growing too serious. Every market-day the blind militiaman provides me with a treasure trove of observations. You perceive, dear cousin, how this poor man brings out the generosity of the people of Berlin. Often whole lines of people walk past him, and not one of them fails to give him alms. But what matters is the way in which the alms are handed over. Watch for a while, dear cousin, and tell me what you perceive.

ME. Three or four fine-looking, sturdy maidservants are just coming past; their baskets, piled high with heavy goods, seem almost to be making scars and bruises on their muscular arms; they have good reason to hurry in order to get rid of their burdens, and yet each of them pauses for a moment, hastily puts her hand in her shopping-basket, and, without even looking at the blind man, presses a coin into his hand. This will appear as a necessary and unavoidable expenditure on the budget for market-day. Quite right!

'Here comes a woman whose outfit and whose whole appearance clearly reveal her comfort and prosperity. She stops in front of the invalid, pulls out her purse, but cannot find a coin that seems small enough for the act of charity she intends to perform. She calls to her cook. It turns out that the latter has also run out of small change. She must first ask the vegetable-women for change. At last they have obtained the threepenny bit which is to be given away. She taps the blind man's hand to make sure he knows he is going to receive something. He holds out the palm of his hand: the charitable lady presses the coin into his palm and closes his fist for him so that the magnificent gift shall not get lost.

'Why is the dainty young lady skipping to and fro and gradually coming closer to the blind man? Ha! as she hurries past, she slips a coin into the blind man's hand, so quickly that nobody can have noticed it except me, since I happen to have my glasses focused on her. That was certainly more than a threepenny bit.

'The sleek, well-fed man in the brown coat who is marching along so cheerfully must be a very wealthy townsman. He too stops in front of the blind man and engages him in a lengthy conversation, while blocking other people's way and preventing them from giving the blind man any alms; at long last he draws a fat green purse from his pocket, undoes its buttons, not without difficulty, and rummages in his money so dreadfully that I fancy I can hear it chinking from here. *Parturient montes!** But I am disposed to believe that the noble-hearted friend of humanity, carried away by the sight of misery, deigned to dispense a simple penny. Despite all this, I suspect that on market-days the blind man makes a considerable income, by his own standards, and I'm surprised that he takes everything without the least sign of gratitude; I think I can make out a slight movement of his lips which alone shows that he says something that is presumably thanks—but I perceive even this movement only occasionally.

MY COUSIN. There you have the definite expression of complete and final resignation. What is money to him? He can make no use of it; only in the hands of another person, in whom he must place unreserved trust, does it acquire any value. I may be quite wrong, but I think the woman whose baskets he carries is an abominable shrew who treats the poor fellow badly, even though she probably confiscates all the money he receives. Every time she brings back the baskets she gives the blind man a tongue-lashing, and its gravity depends on how well or badly she has fared in the market. The blind man's pallid face, his half-starved figure, his ragged clothing, are enough to suggest that his situation is an unpleasant one, and an active friend of humanity ought to look into it more closely.

ME. As I survey the entire market-place I notice that the reason why the covered flour-wagons over there look so picturesque

is that they afford a resting-place for the eye, around which the colourful throng falls into distinct groups.

MY COUSIN. I know something which is the exact antithesis of the white flour-wagons and the dusty miller's boys and the rosy-cheeked miller-girls, each of them a *bella molinara*.^{*} For I sorely regret the absence of a family of charcoal-burners who used to offer their wares just opposite my window and have now, I hear, been assigned a place on the other side. This family consists of a big, robust man with an expressive face and strongly marked features, vigorous and almost violent in his movements—in short, a faithful copy of the charcoal-burners who appear in novels. Indeed, if I met this man in a lonely forest, I would tremble somewhat, and at such a moment his friendly disposition would please me better than anything else in the world. There is a strange contrast between this man and the second member of his family, a strangely misshapen fellow, scarcely four feet tall, who is extremely comical. You know, dear cousin, that there are some very strangely built people: at the first glance one recognizes them as deformed, and yet on closer inspection one cannot say where the deformity lies.

ME. This reminds me of the naïve remark by a witty soldier who had many dealings with one of these freaks of nature and was annoyed by his inability to explain why the man was so oddly built. 'That man has a hump,' he said, 'but where his hump is, the Devil only knows!'

MY COUSIN. Nature originally intended to make my little charcoal-burner into a gigantic figure about seven feet tall, as is shown by his colossal hands and feet, which are almost the biggest I have ever seen. This little fellow, dressed in a short coat with a high collar and with a funny-looking fur cap on his head, is in a perpetual flurry of movement; he hops and skips to and fro with rather unattractive agility, turning up now here, now there, and he does his best to play the gallant, the ladies' man, the *primo amoroso* of the market-place. He never lets a woman go past, unless she belongs to the upper ranks of society, without skipping after her, and, with inimitable postures, gestures, and grimaces, uttering sweet nothings which, I dare say, suit the taste of the charcoal-

burners. At times he takes his gallantry so far that in conversation with a girl he will slip his arm gently round her waist and pay homage to her beauty, cap in hand, or offer her his service as her true knight. It is remarkable that the girls not only put up with all this but also nod to the little monster in a friendly manner and seem in general to enjoy his gallantries. The little fellow is unquestionably endowed with a plentiful dose of natural mother-wit, a decided talent for clowning, and the energy to put his talent to use. He is the harlequin, the dashing hero, the life and soul of every party in the district that includes the forest where he lives; he is indispensable at every christening, wedding banquet, dance, or drinking-party; people look forward to his jests, and recall them mirthfully for a whole year afterwards. The rest of the family consists, as the children and maids are left at home, only of two women of robust stature and a dark and surly appearance, heightened, of course, by the coal-dust lodged in the wrinkles of their faces. From the tender devotion of a big Pomeranian, with which the family share every bite of food they take on market-day, I gather that life in the charcoal-burners' hut must have all the honest, old-fashioned virtues. What is more, the little chap possesses gigantic strength, and therefore his family uses him to deliver sacks of coal to the customers' houses. I have often seen him being loaded by the women with as many as ten big baskets, piled on top of one another on his back, and he skipped off with them as though unaware of carrying any burden. From behind he looked like the strangest and most extraordinary figure you could possibly see. Naturally the esteemed figure of the little chap himself was completely lost to sight: one could see only a monstrous sack of coals with a pair of feet growing out of it. It was as though a fabulous animal, a fantastic kind of kangaroo, were hopping across the market-place.

ME. Look, cousin, there is a commotion starting over there beside the church. Two vegetable-women have probably got into a violent dispute over the vexed question of *meum* and *tuum*,^{*} and, with their arms akimbo, seem to be treating each other to some choice expressions. The crowd is flocking to them. A dense circle surrounds the two quarrelling women.

Their voices are growing louder and shriller by the minute. They are waving their fists more and more fiercely. They are approaching each other more and more closely. We shall have fisticuffs any moment. The police are clearing a path. What's this? Suddenly I spy a crowd of shiny hats between the two angry women, the old crones instantly manage to quieten the infuriated pair. The dispute is over, without the aid of the police. The women return quietly to their vegetable-baskets and the crowd disperses, having indicated its approval by loud cheers only once or twice, presumably at especially ferocious moments in the dispute.

MY COUSIN. You observe, dear cousin, that during the entire length of time we have been here at the window that was the only quarrel to flare up in the market-place, and that it was dealt with solely by the crowd. Even a more serious and threatening quarrel is commonly curbed by the crowd, which squeezes between the combatants and separates them. Last market-day there was a big, ragged fellow, insolent and savage in his appearance, who was standing between the meat-stalls and the fruit-stalls, and suddenly got into a quarrel with a passing butcher's boy; without more ado he aimed a blow at the boy with the hideous cudgel which he was carrying over his shoulder like a rifle, and would probably have laid the boy out cold if the latter had not adroitly dodged it and leapt into his stall. There he armed himself with a huge butcher's axe and was all ready to attack the big fellow. All the signs pointed to a murderous end which would call the criminal court into play. However, the fruit-sellers, all powerful and well-fed women, felt obliged to enfold the butcher's boy in such loving and tight embraces that he could not move from the spot; he stood there with his weapon raised aloft, like the rugged Pyrrhus* in that rhetorical speech:

So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
And, like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing.

In the mean time other women, brush-makers, shoe-tree sellers, and so on, had surrounded the big fellow and thus

given the police time to arrive on the scene and seize him; apparently he was a convict recently released from gaol.

ME. So the populace does indeed have a sense that order must be maintained? This instinct must have the most salutary effects for all concerned.

MY COUSIN. In general, dear cousin, my observations on the market-place have confirmed my opinion that the Berlin populace has undergone a remarkable change since that unfortunate period when an insolent and overbearing enemy inundated our country and laboured in vain to suppress the popular spirit, which soon rebounded with new strength, like a spring that has been forcibly depressed. In a word: their behaviour has become more polished; and if you take the trouble, one sunny summer afternoon, to go to the tents and watch the groups of people embarking on boats bound for Moabit,* you will notice even ordinary servant-maids and day-labourers striving to attain a certain courtesy, which is a pleasure to behold. The mass of the people has undergone the same experience as an individual who has seen many new and unaccustomed things and, along with the principle of Nil admirari, has acquired smoother manners. The common people of Berlin used to be rough and brutal; a stranger could scarcely ask his way to a street or a house, or anything else, without receiving a coarse or mocking reply, or being deliberately misinformed as a joke. There is no longer any such creature as the Berlin guttersnipe who used to exploit the slightest occasion, such as somebody's unusual attire or a ridiculous accident, for the most outrageous and revolting offences. For these boys beside the gate, selling the cigars called 'The Jolly Fellow from Hamburg *avec du feu*', these limbs of Satan who will end their lives in Spandau or Strausberg, or on the scaffold as one of their race did recently, are quite different from the true Berlin guttersnipe. The latter was not a vagabond, but usually apprenticed to a master, and, ridiculous though it sounds, despite all his godlessness and depravity he did have a certain code of honour, besides being well supplied with very amusing native wit.

ME. Oh, dear cousin, let me tell you quickly how the biting wit of the common people put me to shame not long ago. I

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was walking out of the Brandenburg Gate and was followed by carters from Charlottenburg who offered me a lift; one of them, a boy of sixteen or seventeen at most, took his impudence so far as to grab me by the arm with his dirty fingers. 'Don't touch me, you ruffian' I snapped. 'Why, sir,' answered the boy calmly, goggling at me with his big blank eyes, 'why shouldn't I touch you? Aren't you honest?'

MY COUSIN. Ha, ha! That's a real joke, but it comes from the foul pit of the deepest depravity. The jokes of Berlin fruit-sellers and such-like used to be famous all the world over, and were even honoured by being called Shakespearean, although on closer inspection their energy and originality consisted mainly in the shameless impertinence with which they served up the vilest filth as a savoury dish. The market used to be the scene of quarrels, beatings-up, deceit, theft, and no honest woman could venture to do her own shopping without exposing herself to grievous injury. For not only did the hawkers wage war on each other and on everybody else, but some people were expressly intent on stirring up unrest in order to fish in murky waters, like the riff-raff from every hole and corner that used to serve in the regiments. You see, dear cousin, how nowadays, by contrast, the market offers a delightful picture of prosperity and peaceful manners. I know that this improvement in the outward decency of our common people is furiously denounced by perfervid zealots* and super-patriotic ascetics, who think that such polishing divests them of their popular character. I for my part am firmly and sincerely convinced that a populace that treats both fellow-countrymen and foreigners, not with rudeness or mocking contempt, but with polite manners, can never thereby lose its character. I could cite a most telling example which would demonstrate the truth of my assertion and put me in very bad odour with the aforesaid zealots.

All the while, the throng had kept growing thinner and the market emptier. The vegetable-women packed some of their baskets on newly arrived carts and carried the rest away themselves; the flour-wagons departed; the garden-women removed the remaining supply of flowers on large wheelbarrows; the

police showed themselves more active in maintaining the proper order, especially in the line of carts; nor would this order have been disturbed if the occasional schismatic country boy had not taken it into his head to steer boldly across the marketplace in order to discover and explore his very own Bering Straits, running boldly through the fruit-stalls and straight towards the door of the Lutheran church. This gave rise to a considerable hubbub and boded ill for the too gifted charioteer.

'This market', said my cousin, 'is still a true picture of ever-changing life. Bustling activity and momentary needs brought the mass of people together; within a few minutes all is deserted, the voices that mingled in a bewildering tumult have died away, and every abandoned spot utters only too audibly the dread message "There used to be..."'

A clock struck, the surly ex-soldier entered the room, and, screwing up his face, urged his employer to leave the window and eat before the dishes got cold.

'So you have some appetite, dear cousin?' I asked.

'Oh yes,' replied my cousin with a painful smile, 'you'll soon see.'

The ex-soldier wheeled him into the main room. The dishes were a soup-plate half-full of broth, a soft-boiled egg placed upright in salt, and half a roll.

'A single bite beyond this,' said my cousin in a low and melancholy voice, pressing my hand, 'the slightest scrap of even the most digestible meat, causes me frightful pains, and robs me of all my spirits and of the last spark of good humour that still occasionally tries to glimmer faintly.'

Falling into my cousin's arms and embracing him warmly, I pointed to the sheet of paper attached to the screen beside the bed.

'Yes, cousin!' he exclaimed in a voice that pierced me to the core and filled me with heart-rending sorrow,

'Et si male nunc, non olim sic erit!'

My poor cousin! *Schlecht jetzt aber nicht immer*