

Tales of a Courtyard

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I. EARLY SPRING.

We seem to have been up since early morning. We seem to have been astir and busy like

people preparing for something pleasant—a feast or a wedding party. As the postman

stumbled down our stairs this morning he bawled to the servant girl: “That chestnut tree is a

mass of buds this morning. I tell you, it’s a mass.” We heard him. We opened the windows.

He must have told the other three houses for windows flew up and heads came through to

stare at the chestnut tree with the sticky buds shining in the sun as though coated with honey.

The chestnut tree grows in the middle of the court. There is a stone bench round it where the

children chatter and scuffle by day and where the old people sit in the evening time, very

quiet and close, counting the stars shining through the leaves as though the chestnut tree were

their own fruit tree growing in a moonshiny orchard. On dark, warm nights the

boys and girls

meet there. They are quieter than the old people. We leaned far out of the windows. We

shouted and laughed. “Good morning—yes, the postman spoke the truth.” “Yes, indeed the

sun is shining, praise the Lord.” “Now the warm days won’t be long.” “That tree will be green

before we can take off our coats.” “Oh, my soul, what a winter it has been!” Only the old

people were silent. They stood at the windows, nodding to one another, and sipping the air.

Each moment the sun grew warmer. It fell on our starved hair and lips and hands like kisses.

It made us drunk with joy. “It’s going to be a fine year: the spring has started early. That’s a

sign.” “One has a chance when the sun shines.” “We’ll be sitting outside within a week.” “I

must alter Marya’s cotton pelisse.” “As for me I never cough in the summer.” “You know

that’s a very fine tree, even as trees go.” We talked like rich people; we preened ourselves

like birds. Suddenly some one shouted. “Hoo! I say, look at the students’ window.” The

Russian students had a room in the top floor of the biggest house. Three of them shared

it—two men and a girl. They were scarcely ever seen, except behind the window, pacing up

and down and talking with great gestures, or at dusk half running across the court. They were

desperately poor. We had not seen them all through the winter. To-day their window was

closed. A coat hung across it. The sleeves of the coat must have been pinned to the walls. It

looked very strange as though trying to shield the room from our view. It made us angry.

“Now that’s a disgraceful room,” bawled a woman. “Pretty goings on there must be inside

there.” “We don’t want to see their filthiness.” “Nice thing for a girl to live with two fellows

and no curtain on the window.” “Garr! who’s seen them lately?” And a child yelled,

laughing, “perhaps they’re all dead.” The high little squeaking voice silenced and frightened us suddenly quiet. After all

why shouldn’t they be dead. Nobody went near them. And the window closed down and the

coat stretched across it wasn’t natural on a day like this. You never knew what students might

do. The girl always looked funny, too. A wind blew into the court shaking the boughs of the

chestnut tree. The long shadow of it quivered on the stones. And then while we gloomed and

wondered the door of the biggest house opened. The Russian girl came out. She wore a black

jersey and a skirt up to the knees. She blinked and peered at the light like a little

animal.

When she saw the people leaning from the windows she drew back—just for a moment, then

she set her lips and walked out of the shadow. She looked at nobody. She kept her dark eyes

fixed on the chestnut tree and the shining buds. And at the sight of her we leaned out,

laughed, shook and screamed with laughter, holding our sides. Dead—were they! God in

Heaven, that was good! The swine—they'd take some killing. "Look at her. There she goes!"

And we jeered and pointed at the swollen distorted body of the girl moving through the

sunlight.

II. THE FOLLOWING AFTER.

That's enough—that's enough! he shouted. He sprang from his seat, pulled his coat from the

door peg and began dragging it on. For a moment she was so amazed and terrified that she

could not speak. Then she stuttered "where are you g-going to, Mark?" "Gar-r!" he cried,

throwing up his arms. "I'm going to end the whole bloody business." He turned to her. She

saw his face, grey and quivering. With the effort not to cry his face looked

distorted; he stood

grimacing at her. “Mark! Mark, come here! Mark—listen!” He was gone. She heard his

steps clatter down the stone stairs. She heard the outer door rattle and burst open and slam to.

She ran to the window and saw him crossing the court in the falling snow—running, with

head bent, and making wide foolish gestures as he ran. It was not until he was out of sight

that the whole world changed. It died the moment he disappeared. Yes, that was the court,

with the three white houses, and the white chestnut tree and the ground white and thick under

the snow. And behind her the clock on the shelf was ticking and the fire bars clinking in a

dead room. All—gone, all gone, all—gone! ticked the clock. Her heart beat to it, but faster.

She began walking round the room on tiptoe keeping time to the ticking of the clock and then

keeping time to her heart until suddenly she brushed against his indoor jacket hanging on the

door peg. She flung her arms round it. She buried her face in it. Long dry sobs dragged from

deep in her body, shaking and tearing. “Darling! darling, darling!” she sobbed, walking to

and fro. And then she stood upright and tossed her head. “I cannot bear this. I must go and

find him.” She flung a shawl over her head and ran from the room.

It was cold outside: the air smelled of ice. And the snow shook over, blinding, persistent.

Lamps were lighted in the road. On either side the road seemed to wind away for ever, white

with yellow pools. She had never seen a road like that before. The crazy thought jagged in

her brain—it’s like a white sauce with spots of melted butter. Some one laughed—very

close beside her—down her own throat. Terrified, she started to run and she did not stop

running until she came to the bridge where she and Mark used to linger on their way home,

leaning over the parapet and watching the fairy fishes in the water—the long, wavering

lights. To-night the river was dark. It was dead. So were the fairy fish. She dug her nails

against the stone parapet and called out “Mark, Mark!” and again the long dry sobs dragged

from deep in her body, shaking and tearing. Suddenly she saw some one walking towards her

from the other side of the bridge. With swift, light steps he came. It was Mark. He did not

speak to her—but he smiled upon her and beckoned her to follow. She followed him down a

long street and past great houses, and through a frozen park, up and down, in and out of

doorways, through little squares, past high walls and towering buildings—often she longed to

cry to him to stop, but her mouth and chin were frozen and she could not catch up to him

however hard she tried—she just could not touch him and beg him to wait a moment. On and

on. She saw him raise his head and she looked up and saw that the sky was light. They were

crossing a little court. They passed through a door up some stairs into a room. The room was

touched with the pink light of morning. Mark lay on the bed—straight and still. She was so

tired that for a moment she thought it was the sunrise staining the pillow so red.

III. BY MOONLIGHT.

Feodor was passionately fond of poetry. He had written some pieces himself from time to time

and he was resolved to write a great many more. “Just wait a bit,” he would say, “Just wait

until I get enough money to go off into the country with nothing to do but lie in a field all day,

or sail in a little boat on a river and sleep in a haystack as snug as a bee in a hive. I’ll come

back with enough poems to last you a lifetime. Once I get the money.”... But it seemed quite

impossible that Feodor should ever have any money at all. Each day, from nine o'clock in the

morning until seven o'clock in the evening, he stood outside a large drapery establishment and

swung the door to the right for customers to enter and swung the door to the left for customers

to pass out. He was tall and dark. He wore a bright blue coat with red trimmings and a cap of

black patent leather. Sometimes the same ladies would go in and out of the shop several times

in the day. But they made no impression on Feodor. In the evenings he walked by the river or

strolled through the town until it was late. Then he went home to his tiny room at the top of

the house and lay down on his bed, staring at the ceiling until he fell asleep.

One summer night he came out of the street into the courtyard. The moon was shining and the

tops of the houses shone like silver. The houses themselves, half in light, half in shadow,

looked as though they were draped in velvet. White like marble shone the courtyard and the

chestnut tree stood like an immense bird with green wings in the pool of its own shadow.

Feodor breathed deeply with delight. He walked over to the chestnut tree and sat down on the

little stone bench, folding his arms. He was not alone there. An old man with white hair sat at

the other end of the bench, crouched forward, his hands held between his knees. Feodor

glanced at him once and then forgot about him. He began composing a poem. A feeling of

divine happiness possessed him; his heart seemed to expand as he breathed. Suddenly he saw

the old man fumble in a pocket. He brought out something wrapped in a linen handkerchief

and laid it on his knees. With infinite care he slowly parted the folds of the handkerchief and

Feodor saw a book bound in parchment and tied with purple silk ribbons. He moved a little

nearer the old man, who untied the ribbons and spread the book open. The pages were printed

with large, black letters. Each page had a blue letter at the top embroidered in gold and by the

bright moonlight it was quite easy to read what was written. Feodor moved nearer still. Then

he saw that each page was a poem. He leaned over the old man's shoulder and read for himself

poems such as he had never dreamed of—poems that sounded in his ears like bells ringing in

some splendid tower—like waves beating on warm sands—like dark rivers

falling down

forest-clad mountains. The old man suddenly put his hand over the page and turned to Feodor.

His lips and his eyes smiled but his face drenched in the white light of moon looked unreal,

like a face gleaming through water. “So you like poetry, young man,” he said, in a gentle, sad

voice. Feodor nodded twice without replying. Still smiling the old man looked him up and

down. “Strange,” he muttered, “Strange.” He took up his book and he began to read aloud.

Without moving, scarcely breathing, his eyes dark and shining, Feodor listened to the old man.

A long time passed until the last poem was read and the old man closed the book and tied

again the faded silk ribbons and laid it on the bench beside him. Silence fell between the two.

Feodor slowly came to consciousness of his surroundings, and with this consciousness to the

realization of his own poverty and helplessness and of his own longing for a different life—of

his craving to go away from the city—far away—into that country place with fields and rivers

and big yellow haystacks. “And soon it will all be too late,” he thought, “soon I shall be sitting

on this bench—an old man with white hair—but with no book of poems—with empty hands

I'll be sitting here, and all will be over." He began to breathe sharply and painfully as though

he had been running a very long way, and tears gushed into his eyes and flowed down his

trembling face. The old man paid no attention. He sat smoothing the book under his hand as

though it were a little animal, and talking to the book as though it were a little child. "My own,

my treasure, core of my heart, I will not part with thee. They think I am a fool because I am

old, but all my years I have longed for thee and thou art mine for ever. Sell us this, they say,

sell us this and you shall be a rich man for a year. Bah! I spit in their faces. No one shall buy

?thee. Thou art my all in all until the end." It was like a knife—the quick thought stabbing him.

The book is valuable. Now's your chance. He recoiled in horror. No, there were things a fellow

did not do—steal from an old man was one. But what can the old man do with it. He must be

nearly a hundred years old. An old brain is too feeble to feel a loss. How can I get it? Ha! that's

the question. One can't fight an old man.... Perhaps if I told him—if I explained he might

give it to me—no, I'm mad to think that. Yet he must have taken a fancy to me. Why did he

start reading aloud? The memory of the poems and of the old man's voice made

it impossible

again for him to think of taking the book. Ask him for it—that's what he'd do. He turned to the

old man. "You say your book is valuable," he said politely. "That's interesting." The old man's

head was sunk on his breast. He was asleep. Soft as a cat Feodor seized the book and crept

away from the chestnut tree—across the court—up to his tiny room.

"I have done the right thing—that's certain. To-morrow I shall sell it, and to-morrow evening I

shall be gone from here forever." He put the book under his pillow and went to bed.

Feodor could not sleep. Hours passed—slowly passed. His bed was hard as a dry field. And the

darkness moved as he moved, breathed to his breath, watched him with a swarm of narrow

eyes. Finally he got up, lit a candle and taking the book crept downstairs with it. "If the old

man is not there I shall keep the book—I shall have to keep the book— but if he is there I shall

put it back again or give it to him." He was perfectly confident that the old man would not be

there. He'd have gone hours ago. But this was a good idea of his, otherwise he'd never have

rested in peace again. He slipped the bolt of the door and as the door opened he saw in the

deep shadow the old man still there—under the tree. Feodor went back to his room—threw the

book into a corner and fell fast asleep.

Maria Schulz ran down the passage. Her face was red, her hair tumbled. “What’s the matter,”

shouted Feodor. “There’s an old man,” said Maria. “The police are in the courtyard now. An

old man—found on the bench this morning, dead and cold as a stone.”

