

The cage

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THE CAGE

by Rolf

Down in the street life is passing by.

He lives on the fourth floor, in four furnished and yet strangely empty big rooms. The furniture consists of exquisite pieces in the most costly kinds of wood; the pictures could enrich any collection of an art gallery; the books in his library glitter in their precious bindings. Rows and rows of books—all beautifully and symmetrically arranged as though their owner never felt an urge for adventures of the mind—to read Greek poetry today and to jump tomorrow to the complicated phrases of a Thomas Mann novel. All he possesses is kept meticulously in order as though any moment a press photographer might arrive to take photographs of «Mr. X at home.»

There he lives—on the fourth floor, and through half-closed windows he looks down to the sidewalks year in and year out. When the evening shadows weave their enchantment in the streets, when the sun is setting in all his glory behind the forests on the hills, and when the breeze from the lake mixes with the first fragrance of the grapes ripening, and puts a happy smile on the lips of men, he keeps on pressing his face to the window. His eyes look over each passerby from head to foot. Many of them live in the poorer part of the city; their life is a different one from his own. He looks at the young workman strolling nonchalantly by, cap on his head, his coat thrown carelessly over his shoulder, his shirt half open, showing his broad chest—he does not miss anything, that man at the window, until the passersby disappear into the darkness of the alleys. He watches the small boat rowed by a young man into the open space of the lake; he can hear waves of laughter and music. There may even be a boat rowed by two friends, their oars and heart-beats following the same rhythm. An expression of bitterness overshadows the man's face. He presses his lips to the glass of the window... yet he is not capable of smashing this thin wall which isolates him from life. Perhaps a moment later he will be angry with himself for having these emotions, and clean the window with his freshly laundered handkerchief. Otherwise Lady So-and-So or Miss What's-her-name whom he has invited to tea might spot something.

He could... oh, what a lot of things he could do! He could run away, slamming the door in such a way that it would bring his frightened neighbors to their windows. He might walk under the trees as unconcernedly as the young men who don't care at all who is watching them. He could look out for the open, gay, and smiling face of a friendly young chap and find the chance of a chat with him—what would it matter if his young friend would never have read any of the books in his library, or might not be able to see the difference between a Beethoven sonata and a waltz by Strauss? He could look at laughing eyes, at smiling lips, at unruly mops of hair, or young chests almost bursting out of the multi-colored shirts. He could do all this—and yet... «Somebody might become suspicious...» and this just cannot be imagined. It would be the

ruin of him. Not that he knows very many people in this city, maybe a dozen all in all amongst hundreds of thousands, but anyway . . . If any of the ladies he is seen around with would suspect anything, they'd have the whole city in arms against him. As it is Miss Wat's-her-name is still in hopes of one day catching this priceless fish with his elegantly greying temples. Let her hope—there is no better camouflage against the outside world, nothing better than to foster this phantom and to keep his life in the balance.

True, sometimes he is tempted to think that his life is unsupportable. So many evenings are being spent in a deadly boring way, ceaseless chatter on topics he hasn't the smallest interest in . . . But what else can he do? One has to keep up appearances. The social restrictions, the taboos—all of his education still has the force to dominate him completely.

It's only during his holidays that he travels south, frequenting low taverns, roving through the wharves of the ports, staying overnight in dubious quarters. But even here he remains an onlooker, a miserable Sir Would-Be. On his return he is met at the station by Lady So-and-So and her newest protégée, that middle-aged spinster. «Doesn't he look wonderfully rejuvenated?,» cries Lady What's-her-Name, »so full of zest, so young for his years!»—thus cherishing all the wild hopes of her latest protégée. And he will talk about cities he has never passed, tell of museums he never visited, and then, once again, readjust himself to the cage he has built for himself.

Suddenly his door bell rings. He opens his front door. A young lad, apparently out of work, tries to sell him some small merchandise—Shoe laces, tooth paste and the like. An open and honest face, straightforward brown eyes, unruly locks of hair falling over his well-shaped forehead. . . . This one could bring life into his cage. All he would need to do would be to stretch out his hand, to ask the lad for a nice dinner. Nothing more than to treat this youngster like a human being, letting go of all his outworn prejudices and cutting down the silly barriers of caste. Perhaps he might even be able to advice and help the lad, using his influential friends in town to get him a job—and what gratitude would be his in return . . . He is just about ready to say a friendly encouraging word when the door of the adjoining apartment is suddenly opened—and Mrs. Shocking passes by with a kind of sneering look.

Was that sneer meant for him? Does she suspect anything? Is she already on her way to talk things over with the woman who lives on the floor below? No, he'll never be able to chase that ghost 'you could...' away. How he longs to kill that ghost off once and for all. But he is afraid. Too long he has been worshipping a lie, now there is no more strength left in him to act differently. With a lame excuse he shuts the door in the face of the young lad and returns to the well-kept deadness of his rooms.

Once again his face is pressed to the window.

Down in the street life passes him by.