THE CASTLE

FRANZ KAFKA
through the hole and tell him. However, she had been in that room herself only a little while ago, so she could assure K. without more ado that there were no papers there. K. asked Frieda if he had to leave the peephole now, but she said he could look through it as long as he liked. Now K. was alone with Frieda, for Olga, as he soon saw, had made her way over to her acquaintance and was perched on a cask, swinging her feet in the air. ‘Frieda,’ said K. in a whisper, ‘do you know Mr Klamm very well?’ ‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘Very well.’ She leaned close to K., and playfully adjusted her cream-coloured blouse, which, as K. only now saw, was cut rather low at the neck; it was a neckline which didn’t quite suit her meagre body. Then she said: ‘Don’t you remember how Olga laughed?’ ‘Yes, she’s ill-mannered,’ said K. ‘Well,’ she said soothingly, ‘there really was something to laugh about. You were asking if I knew Klamm, and as it happens I am’—here she instinctively stood a little straighter, and K. once again felt the force of her triumphant expression, which did not seem to connect at all with what she was saying—‘as it happens I am his lover.’ ‘Klamm’s lover,’ said K. She nodded. ‘Then,’ said K., smiling, so as to keep their talk from getting too serious, ‘as far as I am concerned you are someone worthy of respect.’ ‘And not just as far as you’re concerned,’ said Frieda in friendly tones, but without responding to his smile. However, K. had a weapon to use against her pride, and he brought it to bear by saying: ‘And have you ever been in the castle?’ But that did not have the desired effect, for she replied: ‘No, but isn’t it enough that I’m here in the bar?’ She obviously had a raging thirst for praise, and she seemed to want to slake it on K. ‘To be sure,’ said K., ‘here in the bar you’re doing the landlord’s work for him.’ ‘So I am,’ she said, ‘and I began as a dairymaid at the Bridge Inn.’ ‘With those soft hands,’ said K., half questioning, and not sure himself whether he was merely flattering her or she had really made a conquest of him. ‘No one ever noticed them at the time,’ she said, ‘and even now—’ K. looked enquiringly at her, but she shook her head and would say no more. ‘Of course you have your secrets,’ said K., ‘and you won’t discuss them with someone you’ve known for only half an hour, and who has had no chance to tell you anything about himself yet.’ But that, it turned out, was the wrong thing to say; it was as if he had woken Frieda from a slumber in which she liked him, for she took a small piece of wood out of the leather bag that hung from her belt, stopped up the peephole with it, and said to K., visibly forcing herself not to let him see how her mood had changed: ‘As for you, I know everything about you. You are the land surveyor.’ And she added: ‘But now I must get on with my work,’ and went back behind the counter, while now and then one of the men here rose to have his empty glass re filled. K. wanted another quiet word with her, so he took an empty glass from a stand and went over to her. ‘One more thing, Miss Frieda,’ he said, ‘it’s extraordinary, and takes great strength of mind, to work your way up from dairymaid to barmaid, but is that the height of ambition for a person like you? No, what a silly question. Your eyes—don’t laugh at me, Miss Frieda—speak not so much of past struggles as of struggles yet to come. But there are great obstacles in the world, they become greater the greater your goals, and there’s nothing to be ashamed of in making sure you have the help of a man who may be small and unimportant, but is none the less ready to fight. Perhaps we could talk quietly some time, without so many eyes watching us.’ ‘I don’t know what you’re after,’ she said, and this time, against her will, her tone of voice spoke not of the
triumphs of her life but of its endless disappointments. ‘Are you by any chance trying to take me away from Klamm? Good heavens!’ And she struck her hands together. ‘You see right through me,’ said K., as if worn out by such distrust. ‘Yes, I secretly intended to do that very thing. I wanted you to leave Klamm and become my lover instead. Well, now I can go. Olga!’ cried K. ‘We’re going home.’

Olga obediently slid down from the cask, but she couldn’t get away at once from her friends, as they surrounded her. Now Frieda said quietly, with a dark glance at K.: ‘When can I speak to you?’ ‘Can I stay the night here?’ asked K. ‘Yes,’ said Frieda. ‘Can I stay here now?’ ‘You’d better go out with Olga so that I can get the men here to leave. Then you can come back in a little while.’ ‘Good,’ said K., and waited impatiently for Olga. But the men here weren’t letting her go; they had invented a dance with Olga at its centre. They danced in a circle, and whenever they all uttered a shout in unison one of them went up to her, put one hand firmly around her waist, and whirled her about several times. The round dance became faster and faster, the raucous, avid shouting gradually merged into what was almost a single cry. Olga, who had tried to break through the circle earlier, smiling, was now staggering from one man to another, with her hair coming down. ‘The kind of people they send me here!’ said Frieda, biting her thin lips in annoyance. ‘Who are they?’ asked K. ‘Klamm’s servants,’ said Frieda. ‘He always brings them with him, and their presence upsets me. I hardly know what I was discussing with you just now, Mr Land Surveyor, and if there was anything wrong in it you must forgive me. I blame it on the company here, they are the most contemptible and repulsive people I know, and here am I, obliged to fill up their beer glasses. How often I’ve asked Klamm to leave them behind! I have to put up with other gentlemen’s servants too—he might think of me for once, but whatever I say it’s no use, an hour before he arrives they come barging in like cattle into the cowshed. And now they really must go to the stables where they belong. If you weren’t here I’d open that door and Klamm himself would have to drive them out.’ ‘Doesn’t he hear them, then?’ asked K. ‘No,’ said Frieda. ‘He’s asleep.’ ‘What!’ cried K. ‘Asleep? When I looked into the room he was awake and sitting at the desk.’ ‘He’s still sitting there like that,’ said Frieda. ‘He was already asleep when you saw him—would I have let you look in otherwise? That’s the position he sleeps in, the gentlemen sleep a great deal, it’s hard to understand. Then again, if he didn’t sleep so much, how could he stand those men? Well, I’ll have to chase them out myself.’ And picking up a whip from the corner, she took a single awkward leap high into the air, rather like a lamb gambolling, and made for the dancers. At first they turned to her as if she were a new dancer joining them, and indeed, for a moment it looked as if Frieda would drop the whip, but then she raised it again. ‘In the name of Klamm,’ she cried, ‘out into the stables, all of you, out into the stables.’ Now they saw that she was serious, and in a kind of terror that K. couldn’t understand, they began crowding away to the back of the room. A door was pushed open by the first to get there, night air blew in, and they all disappeared with Frieda, who was obviously driving them across the yard to the stables. However, in the sudden silence K. heard footsteps in the corridor. For the sake of his own safety he went round behind the bar counter. The only possible place to hide was underneath it. He had not, to be sure, been forbidden to stay in the bar, but as he was planning to spend the night here he didn’t want to be seen now. So
when the door really was opened, he got under the counter. Of course there was a danger of
being discovered there too, but he could always say he had hidden from the boisterous
servants, which was a not improbable excuse. It was the landlord who came in. ‘Frieda!’ he
called, pacing up and down the room several times. Luckily Frieda soon came back and did
not mention K., but just complained of the common people here, and went round behind
the bar in her attempt to find K., who managed to touch her foot. Now he felt sure of
himself. Since Frieda did not mention K., in the end the landlord had to. ‘So where’s the
land surveyor?’ he asked. In fact he was a courteous man, whose manners had bene fited by
constant and relatively free intercourse with those of much higher rank than himself, but he
spoke to Frieda with particular respect, which was all the more noticeable because during
their conversation he was still very much an employer talking to a member of his staff, and
a very impertinent one at that. ‘I’d quite forgotten the land surveyor,’ said Frieda, planting
her small foot on K.’s chest. ‘He must have left long ago.’ ‘But I never saw him,’ said the
landlord, ‘and I was out in the front hall almost all the time.’ ‘Well, he isn’t here,’ said
Frieda coolly, pressing her foot down harder on K. There was something cheerful and
easygoing in her demeanour which K. hadn’t noticed at all before, and now, improbably, it
gained the upper hand as she suddenly bent down to K., smiling and saying: ‘Maybe he’s
hidden down here.’ She quickly kissed him and then popped up again, saying regretfully:
‘No, he isn’t here.’ The landlord too sprang a surprise by saying: ‘I don’t like it at all, I
wish I knew for certain whether he’s gone. It’s not just because of Mr Klamm, it’s because
of the rules. And the rules apply to you, Miss Frieda, just as they do to me. You stay here in
the bar, I’ll search the rest of the house. Goodnight, and sleep well!’ He had hardly left the
room when Frieda turned off the electric light and joined K. under the bar. ‘My darling!
My sweet darling!’ she whispered, but she did not touch K. She lay on her back as if
swooning with desire, and spread her arms wide. Time must have seemed endless to her in
her amorous bliss, and she sighed rather than sang a little song of some kind. [13] Then she
took alarm, for K. remained quiet, lost in thought, and she began tugging at him like a
child. ‘Come on, I’m stifling down here.’ They embraced one another, her little body
burned in K.’s hands, they rolled, in a semi-conscious state from which K. tried constantly
but unsuccessfully to surface, a little way on, bumped into Klamm’s door with a hollow
thud, then lay there in the puddles of beer and the rubbish [14] covering the floor. Hours
passed as they lay there, hours while they breathed together and their hearts beat in unison,
hours in which K. kept feeling that he had lost himself, or was further away in a strange
land than anyone had ever been before, a distant country where even the air was unlike the
air at home, where you were likely to stifle in the strangeness of it, yet such were its
senseless lures that you could only go on, losing your way even more. So it was not a shock
to him, at least at first, but a cheering sign of dawn when a voice from Klamm’s room
called for Frieda in a deep, commanding, but indifferent tone. ‘Frieda,’ said K. in Frieda’s
ear, alerting her to the summons. In what seemed like instinctive obedience, Frieda was
about to jump up, but then she remembered where she was, stretched, laughed quietly, and
said: ‘I won’t go, I’m never going back to him.’ K. was about to argue and urge her to go to
Klamm, and he began to look for what remained of her blouse, but he couldn’t get the
words out, he was too happy to have Frieda in his hands, happy but fearful too, for it
seemed to him that if Frieda left him he would lose all he possessed. And as if K.’s consent had given her strength, Frieda clenched her fist, knocked on the door with it, and called: ‘I’m with the land surveyor! I’m with the land surveyor!’ At this Klamm fell silent. But K. got up, knelt down beside Frieda, and looked around him in the dim light that comes before dawn. What had happened? Where were his hopes? What could he expect of Frieda now that all was revealed? Instead of making very cautious progress, with his rival’s stature and the greatness of his own goal in mind, he had spent a whole night here rolling about in puddles of beer. The smell of the beer dazed him. ‘What have you done?’ he asked quietly. ‘We’re both lost.’ ‘No,’ said Frieda, ‘I’m the one who’s lost, but I’ve gained you. Calm down, see how those two are laughing.’ ‘Who?’ asked K., and turned. On the bar counter sat his two assistants, looking as if they hadn’t slept well but were still cheerful. It was the cheerfulness that comes from doing your duty punctiliously. ‘What do you want here?’ cried K., as if they were to blame for everything, and he looked round for the whip that Frieda had used yesterday evening. ‘We had to go looking for you,’ said the assistants, ‘and since you didn’t come back to us at the inn we tried Barnabas’s house and finally found you here. We’ve been sitting here all night. Being your assistants isn’t an easy job.’ ‘I need you by day, not by night,’ said K. ‘Go away!’ ‘It’s day now,’ they said, and stayed put. In fact it really was day, the doors into the yard were opened and the servants came pouring in with Olga, whom K. had quite forgotten. Olga was as lively as she had been yesterday evening, untidy as her hair and clothes were, and even in the doorway her eyes sought K. ‘Why didn’t you take me home?’ she asked, almost in tears. ‘For the sake of a woman like that!’ she answered herself, repeating it several times. Frieda, who had disappeared for a moment, came back with a small bundle of clothes, and Olga stepped sadly aside. ‘We can go now,’ said Frieda, and it was obvious that she meant they should go to the Bridge Inn. They formed a little procession, K. leading the way with Frieda and the assistants following. The gentleman’s servants showed evidence of great dislike for Frieda, understandably, since she had been so stern and domineering with them earlier. One even took his stick and acted as if he wasn’t going to let her pass unless she jumped over it, but a glance from her was enough to deter him. Out in the snow, K. breathed a sigh of relief. The pleasure of being out of doors was so great that it made the difficulty of the path tolerable this time, and if K. had been alone it would have been even better. On reaching the inn he went straight to his room and lay down on the bed, Frieda made herself a bed on the floor beside it, and the assistants, who had come in with them, were turned out, but then they came back through the window. K. was too tired to send them away again. The landlady came up specially to welcome Frieda, who called her ‘dear little mother’, and their meeting was a bafflingly warm affair, with much kissing and hugging. There was certainly little peace and quiet in the small room, and the maids often came trudging in, wearing men’s boots, to fetch or remove something. If they needed some item of theirs from the bed, which was stuffed full of all sorts of things, they unceremoniously pulled it out from under K. They spoke to Frieda as one of themselves. In spite of all this bustle, K. stayed in bed all day and all night. Frieda did him various small services. When he finally got up the next morning, feeling very much refreshed, it was already the fourth day since he had arrived in the village.
IV. First Conversation with the Landlady

He would have liked to speak to Frieda in private about the assistants. She laughed and joked with them now and then, but their mere intrusive presence troubled him. Not that they were demanding; they had settled down on the floor in a corner of the room, lying on two old skirts; their aim, as they often assured Frieda, was to avoid disturbing their boss the land surveyor, and to take up as little room as possible. They made various attempts to achieve that end, although with much chuckling and whispering, by folding their arms and legs and huddling together, so that in the twilight all you could see in their corner was a large and indeterminate tangled mass. None the less, K.’s daylight experiences showed him that they were observing him very attentively and constantly staring at him, whether they made telescopes of their hands in an apparently childish game and played similar nonsensical tricks, or just looked his way while they devoted most of their attention to the care of their beards, of which they thought a great deal, each comparing his with the other’s time and again for length and profusion, and getting Frieda to judge between them. K. often watched the three of them with complete indifference from his bed.

When he felt strong enough to leave it, they all came hurrying to serve him. Much as he might defend himself against their attentions, he had not yet recovered entirely. He noticed that when he realized that he was to some extent dependent on them, so he had to let them do as they pleased. And it was not so very unpleasant to drink the good coffee that Frieda had brought to his table, or to warm himself by the stove that Frieda had lit, to make the eager, if clumsy, assistants run up and down stairs ten times to fetch water for washing, soap, a comb and a mirror, and finally, because K. had expressed a quiet wish that might possibly indicate that he wanted it, a small glass of rum.

In the middle of all this ordering them about and being served, K. said, more in an easygoing mood than with any real hope of success: ‘Go away, you two, I don’t need anything more just now, and I’d like to talk to Miss Frieda alone.’ And on seeing no actual opposition to this idea in their faces, he added, to make it up to them: ‘And then the three of us will go and see the village mayor. Wait for me in the saloon downstairs.’ Curiously enough, they obeyed, except that before leaving the room they said: ‘We could always wait here.’ To which K. replied: ‘I know, but I don’t want you to.’

It was annoying, and yet in a way K. was also glad of it, that when Frieda came to sit on his lap as soon as the assistants had gone, she said: ‘What do you have against the assistants, darling? We needn’t keep any secrets from them. They’re good, faithful souls.’ ‘Oh, faithful!’ said K. ‘Watching me all the time. It’s pointless, it’s horrible.’ ‘I think I understand you,’ she said, putting her arms around his neck, and she was about to say