

## German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

### **Adolph Bayersdorfer (1842-1901)**

#### **The Conscriptable Aunt**

The only person whom I have seen with a hair-bag, namely with such a one as men wore on their head in times past, was my old great-uncle, who was employed at the German Imperial Chamber Court in Wetzlar in days of yore and went into a well-earned retirement at the same time as that famous institution. He had represented a very small spring, wheel, or chain in the complicated machinery of the highest German court of justice, being a hidden civil subaltern in a subordinate Records Office, which for its part was the subdivision of another office. Now if I wished to write down my great-uncle's full title – a single monstrous accumulation of names which, by way of meticulous specification, conscientiously included the titles of all positions from the top down until it arrived at his humble post – then I would have to dip for fresh ink at least once, just as the people who had enough time to be able to call him by his full title had to take a breath while reciting the whole of the word.

The blessed bearer of this train of titles, the length of which stood, as was customary, in inverse proportion to the salary of its owner, was a gaunt, taciturn man with a bony face who walked around dressed all in grey and patriarchally buttoned up to the neck, like the embodiment of a theory. Pedantry in all things was probably his only passion in life. He found enjoyment in the precision with which he did the same thing at the same hour every day; and when he was on his walks, which took up the greatest part of his leisure hours (he had twenty-four of them every day),

one invariably saw him turning the same corners at the same strokes of the bell. The town-joker set his watch by my great-uncle's walks in jest, but in the end he thought fit to retain this manner of regulating time in full earnest.

In the mediatised Imperial city where he consumed his pension, he was, at the time of my school-years, as beforementioned, the only person with a hair-bag and, consequently, a particularly interesting figure for us imperial city youth, one whom we habitually stared at, as we would a relic, half with reverent timidity, half with the nascent derision of a doubting mind which inclines towards the pernicious Enlightenment.

My great-uncle was married to my great-aunt, a circumstance the chance nature of which greatly occupied my thoughts as a child. My great-aunt was an old-fashioned woman and had given her husband three daughters, who never could quite come into fashion. The third one, who was almost two decades younger than her sisters, had the rare name Mauritia and was, as my aunt, my religious adviser at all the turning-points of my young life, from baptism to the attainment of the *Toga virilis*.<sup>1</sup> In her later days, she developed the same chancellery appearance as her father and resembled him more than really stood well with her femininity.

That may be connected to the first impressions she had in her youth, for my aunt's birth fell during the chaotic war-years at the beginning of our century, and her little ears were more familiar with drums and musket-shots than with lullabies. Thus she came into the world under the

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<sup>1</sup> The toga of manhood worn by Roman boys who had reached their legal majority.

sign of Mars and was so little able to escape this planetary influence that she was even conscripted in her twenty-first year.

It came about like this. When she was approximately three years old, the dreadful tumult of war, which had passed over the land with fire and sword and visited my great-uncle's place of residence, as it had many regions, twice and thrice, came to a longed-for end, and a faint-hearted peace, which nobody truly believed in, came shyly stepping into the land. But with it also came a number of imperial, royal, electoral, and other commissioners who were to restore the many parish and church registers, the baptismal registers and tax-lists, which had been destroyed or cast away by the War-Fury, as well as this could be done, and with or against the will of the beloved subjects.

Apart from the first and most important point, that of taxes, what the gracious fathers of the land had at heart was a careful taking-down of the family circumstances of the children of their land in order to replace the lost registers of births, marriages, and deaths, so as not to have to do without the long conscription lists and thereby be deprived of the handsome shiny soldiers who can "Present Arms" so marvellously. However, the people, as loyal subjects, soon liberated themselves from this paternal trick by denying their male progeny wherever and however they possibly could. And because someone was caught in this deception every now and then, the government commissioners entrusted with this task became ever more severe and more mistrustful, inspected their districts more often, and wrote down twice the name of many a male who could later be conscripted only the once.

Now one day, such a government official appeared, accompanied by a clerk, in the abode of my great-uncle, who was just then reading in an old forgotten book about an old forgotten legal action and did not notice the company who entered until the sudden stopping of his wife's and daughter's whirring spinning-wheels roused him from dreamy reflection. He therefore deliberately snapped the book shut, having by way of precaution marked with a dog-ear the place where he had had to interrupt the interesting reading of an interminable fiscal lawsuit, and inquired after the gentleman's wishes. His wife and two daughters stood, as they did at every visit which came blown into the haven of their domesticity, embarrassed and with redundant faces in the corners, as if they were in each other's way, while little Mauritia, customarily called "Maurice" in the family, had fled behind the open door of the bedroom.

Now the Commissioner, who was wearing a uniform and wished others to see him as stern while he saw himself as smugly sly, and was actually the spitting image of a fool, asked the father of the family, with mysterious prolixity, about his name and station first of all, then about his wife and children, whereupon Great-Uncle introduced his two daughters. They came forward clumsily, not exactly charming figures, vividly out of step with the world, blushing deeply, and looked as if they were expecting, with guilty expressions but heroic composure, a dreadful sentence to be pronounced. Yet their names were merely written down in the list, just like the names of the father and mother before that. "Do you have no other children?" the stranger now asked very sternly. "There is one more little one," answered the wife, who wanted to beat her husband to it, "but please

excuse us, the child is not yet washed at all or properly dressed.” “That is of no import,” replied the man, with a marvellous mixture of condescension and severity. So little Mauritia had to be introduced, and while Great-Aunt cried, “Maurice, Maurice, where *are* you, just come here and give uncle your hand,” the two daughters rushed behind the door with a catchpole’s strides, violently pulled Miss Mauritia out, who immediately started up her war-cry, wiped her nose with an apron, and looked at her with menace and ferocity, happy that the unknown doom had passed away over their heads. But Auntie Maurice, finding herself in that enviable stage of appearance in which it is not possible for even the most proven expert to draw a conclusion, be it from the facial features, be it from the clothes, as to the sex to which a small citizen of the world will belong in the future – just kept on giving a concert while Great-Uncle conscientiously stated the time and place of birth of the little bawler to the official. Finally, this stern man wrote an observation with his own hand to the list the clerk had filled in and took his leave. Uncle sat back down to his case, after he had sounded the explanatory words for his wife and daughters: “Those were the gentlemen from the new national census,” and wife and daughters sat back down to their spinning-wheels, and little Maurice slowly, at long intervals, sobbed herself into sleep in a corner.

After the passage of eighteen years, much had changed. My Great-Aunt had departed this life, and one of her unfashionable daughters, who had certainly been a pure virgin all her life, had followed her and flown up to Heaven as a big-boned angel and good soul. The other one had stayed with her old father, who, as it appeared, wished to live until the time that

hair-bags came back into fashion. His advanced age, at least, could not be sufficiently explained by his small pension alone. For years afterwards his melancholic figure was seen walking around the city-ditch as an undead ghost.

Aunt Maurice, “the youngest,” had come into the Princely Capital of her liege state and more cramped fatherland. Through the favour of Fate, she had become the governess of the ill-bred fillies of a country-nobleman who was a friend and who, as a result of an unexpected and undeserved inheritance, had moved into the city and near the Court, where he could educate himself and his sons in the higher art of coach-driving. Now one day a messenger from the authorities appeared at my Great-Uncle’s with a written demand for the conscriptable Maurice N., son of the Imperial Chamber Court – etc. etc. – Records Clerk N. to appear at Bureau No. X with a fine of 11 guilders 29 kreutzer and 2 pennies for failure to enrol for conscription. The old man shook his head as he looked at the paper; then he put on his longest grey coat, on the high horse-collar of which his hair-bag had honed a fatty abutment, and went, completely contrary to his hourly routine, to the office. After he had there been roared out of some rooms and into others as a result of the regulatory written mistake in the summons, he, who knew this procedure from his own practical experience and therefore accepted it without any concomitant reflections, finally came to the right hector, to whom his affair appertained. My Great-Uncle, who had suddenly seen a light in the darkness on the way, now presented the mystery and the solution at the same time, giving the reasons for his supposition that his daughter Mauritia had formerly been registered in the

family-list as a boy, through some mistake. Yet he was speaking to a deaf ear and met with the disbelieving expression of an intolerant know-all. If my Great-Uncle had a hair-bag, the official had a mighty queue. With insulting punctiliousness, he had my Great-Uncle's evidence taken down and gave him to understand, in no uncertain terms, that he took him to be the accessory to a prearranged deception. Thus was he dismissed for the time being, with a coldness that presaged disaster. The man with the queue quickly got on to it. Even before my Great-Uncle had informed his daughter of the incident, the latter received, in the Princely Capital, a summons to the police. She certainly did not know what business she could have there; but because this highly laudable institution is not to be trifled with, she put on her Sunday hat, had one more look in the mirror, and went, satisfied with her appearance – she the only person who ever was – to the police-office. People may say, "The Devil was handsome when young," but Aunt Maurice proved the exception that every rule requires and was not pretty even when young. She was large, bony and lean and looked so like her father that it was ridiculous. He, however, had never looked like a woman. But inside this unprepossessing outer shell, she concealed a delicate female soul, vulnerable and timid, which had as of yet rarely had the bitter opportunity to have its sensibility blunted in the pushing, crowding hurly-burly of the world. A contralto voice, which sounded emancipated and stayed with her into ripe old age, when it lent the elderly lady a particular dignity, formed in her youth the sole pleasant contrast to her feminine ugliness, but not, unfortunately, to her masculine appearance.

When she had found the correct office, she shyly entered and stood expectantly by the door. No sooner had she given her name and showed the summons in response to the question issued than the Police Inspector and his clerk exchanged a quick, inviting look before fixing their gazes on the figure by the door for an uncomfortably long time. Again, their eyes met knowingly and with triumphant expressions; their sharp official's eyes had unmistakably recognized the dissimulator. In this case, the Inspector thought it necessary to be abrupt, and he opened the examination with:

“You will be able to imagine why you were summoned?”

“No, unfortunately not.”

“But if I tell you that this is the office for affairs relating to conscription?”

“I regret to say, that simply makes the matter all the more mysterious to me.”

“Then I must tell you without further ado that you are under suspicion of having, through continued simulation, that is, by wearing female clothing and behaving as quite the woman since your arrival here, evaded your conscription obligation; or, more precisely, of still wishing to evade it.”

A pause of petrification.

“I must also confess to you that your outward appearance serves only to lend support to this suspicion.”

Continuation of the pause; a gradual sinking of feelings.

What real femininity would not have had to freeze in speechless astonishment at the presumptuous demand to confess to being a renitent



recruit? The poor woman stood by the door like Lot's wife after salification. But the official knew all these tricks and continued undeterred.

“So, do you confess, or not?”

My aunt gasped a little for air and consciousness, and stammered a few indistinct words which, although they gave no meaning, unequivocally bore the character of refusal and emphatically rejected such a monstrous insinuation.

“If you persist in your denial, I must direct you to the Court Doctor's room for a few moments.”

He called a messenger.

“Take this dissim- I mean, this lady to the doctor's office, give the doctor this document, he already knows about this matter, and wait before the door.”

My aunt was struck utterly aghast and was taken submissively away. The end of the world had just come for her, and her last remnant of *compos mentis* had left her. But when she entered the Court Doctor's room with her uninvited protector, she found there, besides this gentleman, the Court Doctor's wife, with a coquettish basket for the market on her arm, rapidly telling her husband the latest gossip. For this had been building up inside her since breakfast so unduly that she could not possibly keep it to herself any longer.

The garrulous, plumpish lady appeared to my aunt as a rescuing fairy which floats down from the opened heavens to a drowning soul; here, admittedly, weighing one-and-a-half hundredweight. Her paralysis left her and gave place to a complete dissolution of her entire mental capacity into

overflowing feelings of pain. Before so much as a word had been spoken, she fell, sobs convulsively bursting forth, into the fat arms of the curious lady, who, already scenting some monstrous news, held the gates of her five senses wide open. Such an appeal to her humanity and sovereignty was irresistible to the doctor's wife. Not only had she never relinquished the Sceptre of Marriage, she had also exercised her rule in the office several times. She at once made herself master of the situation, and in a few moments had sounded the pretty story from her husband, who had shrivelled up into utter insignificance during the previous scene and now stood there devoid of all official dignity, as if he were the dissimulator. Her female instinct did not have the slightest doubt in this matter and stood far above her husband's science. Under the threat of the most severe marital punishments, she gave him the strict order to leave the mortified lady in peace and see to it that this was also done by the other side. He had to obey in this. With a compassionate gesture, the poor bondsman, who had lost every trace of the Court Doctor, turned to the unknown lady and stammered most obligingly, he had never had any doubts at all –

An imperious look from his wife cut off the second half of his sentence.

With turns of phrase and tears, the group gradually dispersed, and while the doctor's wife, fulfilled by the heroic deed she had performed and full of a burning desire for verbal relief, rushed out into the surging crowd, her husband, in accordance with the command received, took my crying aunt, with apologetic appeasements, back to the Inspector's Office, spoke a few more soothing words, and hastily withdrew, leaving it up to the

Inspector to draw the correct conclusion from his behaviour. When he entered, this man and his clerk, on hearing the polite expressions of the confused-looking doctor, had again exchanged a quick glance, but this time with a hopeless expression of misery and horror. They had plunged down from the Seventh Heaven of their bureaucratic wisdom, and nothing more was left of them than the frail mortal, afflicted with the pestilence of error. The clerk quickly pulled himself together: What did it have to do with him, if his superior did something foolish? With the brutal ruthlessness of a non-labile subordinate official, he buried himself in his documents, calculating and flicking through papers very noisily, and he seemed to have forgotten everything around him in the zeal for his work which had suddenly overtaken him. The inspector was faithlessly left in the lurch before the still quietly crying maiden. He made several attempts at well-worded apologies. They curdled like bad milk before he could complete them. He tried to regain his composure, harden his heart, and coolly entrench himself behind his duty. He did not succeed; he still felt the effect of the surprise too strongly. Every attempt to say something only provoked more audible sobs from the unfortunate woman. In sheer desperation, the uprooted official ran his eyes round the walls like a trapped deer, in the course of which they made a furious sortie at the industrious clerk. But no saving miracle would occur in the racks of dusty documents; no opening could be seen in there for a tormented bureaucrat's soul to escape through. And yet a ray of light came to him from there. And where else could an inspiration come to a worthy official from! "Wait," he said, and pulling a form out of one of the drawers, he filled it out and stamped it in a

businesslike manner. Through these accustomed actions, he regained his composure. He folded up the sheet, not without ceremony, approached the lady, and said, “Now, take this, it will help,” with such a mild and calming expression as only the doctor can have who puts the soothing bandage on the groaning casualty.

The crying recruit had mechanically grasped the paper consolation and now swam home in tears. No sooner was Aunt Maurice in sight of a solid sofa than she immediately fell into the swoon that she had long suppressed, but which was clearly in order, with as many subsequent convulsions as seemed indispensably necessary to her female honour. She soon brought the whole household to their feet. The young Countesses cried, in their inexperience, and the young Counts stood around the case with riding-boots and riding-whips, their faces at a standstill. They would dearly have liked to weep as well, but it ran counter to the dignity of their boots. The old Countess and a chamber-maid attended to the invalid with tried and tested home remedies, and the old Count took a crumpled paper from the hand of the unconscious woman lying there, unfolded it, and read: “Certificate of Military Discharge.” In this monument to police discombobulation, Maurice N., from the year-group 1801, daughter of the quondam Imperial Chamber Court – etc. etc. – Records Clerk, was absolved and acquitted from his duty of military service on account of general unfitness. The rubric, ‘Personal Description’ had not been filled in; even the item, ‘Distinguishing Marks,’ had not been able to induce the official to write any notice that might suggest itself. With this talisman, Aunt Maurice would certainly have been able to oppose all

future demands of the War Ministry, had it ever again wished to lay claim to the peaceful Amazon.

Of course, the convulsions soon died away, and my good Aunt had to go through many a serious illness afterwards, until at last one permanently relieved her and put her beyond all danger of conscription. With the yellowed and faded effects of the good old maid, from which I could not but read a whole lifestory of small joys and great privations, a steadfast struggle for an existence of poverty and honour, I have also inherited the Certificate of Military Discharge, which I have kept to this day as a memento of the good old times, of my late Aunt, of my Great-Uncle with the hair-bag, and of the crackbrained police in my native town.