

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Ludwig Anzengruber (1839-1889)

“What a shame!”

The little bell on the door of the milk-shop rang, and a handsome woman walked up to the counter and placed a small pot down before her. “Mrs. Ressler!” she cried.

The dairywoman hurried in from the next room. “Good evening, Miss Fanny.”

The plump woman began to beat and to whisk in the large pans which stood close by on a bench, and she filled the purchaser’s bowl with that liquid which long-standing habit has taught us townsfolk to accept as milk.

Mrs. Ressler swept the money into the drawer with her fleshy hand, then they bade one another good night; the little bell rang again, and the shop drawer closed with a hard jolt.

“Every time I look at Fanny Weaver,” the fat woman said, returning into the adjoining room, “I can’t help being surprised that she hasn’t got a man, indeed, that one hasn’t turned up yet! How pretty she is still, despite her thirty-four years, and she’s hard-working and honest too, the girl. But that’s something where men never know what they want.”

“Women don’t either,” muttered the dairyman.

Fanny Weaver walked with quite rapid steps, carrying the milk-vessel carefully in her right hand and gathering up her skirt with her left hand to prevent an insistent wind from working mischief with this article.

She turned into a side-alley, which, like many in the city, had sunlight only at the midday hour, lying in constant twilight the rest of the time. The girl disappeared into the doorway of a tall, grey house.

There, on the third floor, was the small flat consisting of one room, in which all was now quiet and still in the evening hour, but which was filled during the day with the humming and thudding of the sewing machine. It was now lively in the kitchen instead, where the fire crackled in the stove and two people conversed animatedly.

A portly man sat on the clean-scrubbed kitchen-seat. His good-natured face was turned towards an old woman, who kneeled before the stove and fed small kindling into the fire.

The man leaned forward somewhat; his back was a little bit bent and his eyes wide open. He listened to the old woman's words with his lips pressed together, looking like a man who might indeed have had some kind of misgiving but did not wish to surrender to it.

Something seemed to have surprised the old woman at the stove; while she spoke, she half turned her head towards the listener but looked straight ahead into the fire, which made her furrowed, pale, woebegone face and her scanty white locks stand out sharply in its glaring yellow light.

"Oh, Mr. Modereiner," she said, "I'd thank the Lord, I would, if my Fanny accepted you, but where marriage is concerned, the girl has always been so very peculiar. She's turned down the finest matches. You may believe it, Mr. Modereiner, that men have come with whom little or no fault at all was to be found."

Mr. Modereiner nodded to indicate his credence.

“She turned them all down, not haughtily, you know her nature, but politely and with all due respect; with every one, she gave cordial thanks for the intended honour, and that’s how it’s been, in spite of all the persuasion on our part, and we didn’t want to force her, God forbid. We’ve never been able to get out of her what it was she actually held against the one or the other, she always evaded us by saying that she just had no desire to get married, and when her father took a hard line to try to get to the bottom of the matter, the flattering little minx knew fine well that she only had to put her arms round his neck and ask him – Did he want to be rid of her? You need to consider, Mr. Modereiner, that this was in the later years. Three sons and a girl have grown up beside her in our house, one of our boys died, the two others now have a wife and child themselves, the younger sister has married and left us, and she didn’t strike it lucky – so at the last, we two oldies would have been all alone in the wide world, as good as abandoned, if Fanny, the eldest, hadn’t stayed with us. Of course, it weighed on our consciences a little: What will become of the girl when we close our eyes and she’s left behind without protection or support, and too old – and that was why my old man made out to be furious, but you can surely imagine, Mr. Modereiner, how little in earnest he was and how readily he let himself be talked round. After his death, my dear Mr. Modereiner, what could I have done? I’ve been utterly dependent on the girl; only a hint at this point was enough for her to fly off the handle right away and ask me if I could complain about her not caring for me as was my due, and if she needed, perhaps, to get help in from outside? You won’t believe how angry she can get, nobody would know from looking at her.

But she's a good creature, God knows! What could I say to her about it? What I need, as an old woman, is next to nothing, but she, she's worked hard year in, year out, contenting herself with the barest necessities and not thinking of any pleasures – a walk in the country on a Sunday, that was all her heart's cheer. To think how, when I'm gone from the world, I'll leave her behind in it so utterly alone, not entrusted to the care of anyone who'll be fond of her and look after her, oh, Mr. Modereiner, that's my greatest, my sole worry, which won't let me pass away in peace." She wiped her eyes with her apron.

Mr. Modereiner cleared his throat a few times, then he softly said, "Forgive me, Mrs. Weaver, but surely you should just let her know that."

"Yes, I'm sure that would go down well," said the old woman, rising from her knees. "In the first place, I mayn't speak a word of my death, or she laughs at me, or gets angry, and in the second place - -"

"The second place?"

Mrs. Weaver put her finger to her lips. "I can hear her coming. Mr. Modereiner, try your luck, I can't do anything for you, but I'll pray in private to our Lord for Him to give His blessing. Good Heavens, then I could lie down to die in peace."

Then the door opened and the girl walked in. She quickly put the milk-bowl down and offered both hands to the man in greeting. "Oh, Mr. Modereiner, so you have come to see us once again? I was almost afraid that our coffee-slop, a cup of which mother always forces on you, had driven you away."

"Oh," said Mr. Modereiner, with a bow that was very stiff but all the

more ceremonial for it, "in your company, Miss Fanny, it tastes like nectar-"

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. Modereiner," the maiden laughed, "whatever you do, don't be gallant! It does not become you, and you do know that I don't ask for it in the least, and that I like to see you without your needing to put yourself to such trouble."

Only now did she let go of his hands, after a powerful squeeze, and she walked away from him with a smile. Fanny turned towards her mother. She stood perplexed for a short while on perceiving her moist eyes, then she knitted her eyebrows and asked, "What's the matter with you?"

"It's the stove. The wood was wet, it smoked," the old woman lied.

Fanny sighed; she quickly glanced over at Modereiner and then up to the ceiling as though she were calling the man and the heavens to witness to the thoughtless way in which her mother made her worry.

Mrs. Weaver declared that, Fanny having now returned, it would by no means be proper to keep Mr. Modereiner sitting in the kitchen; the girl might go into the parlour with him: she would make the coffee in the meantime and come immediately after. "Go in, children," she said, pushing them both towards the door.

So the man and the maiden sat opposite each other at the round table in the quiet parlour. A hanging lamp cast its bright light on the sitters. The man leaned forward against the edge of the table and looked thoughtfully at the woman opposite, as if he wished to say something and were pondering the introductory words; she was silent, and crossing her arms on her breast, she waited.

"Miss Fanny," Modereiner began, "you said earlier that you liked to

see me?”

The maiden unfolded her arms, quickly sat up straight and said, “Well, you’ve known that a long time.”

“I know, Miss Fanny,” he continued, “and I’ve always deemed it an honour, and the feeling’s always been mutual, and I’d take it to be my greatest happiness if it could lead to something where the feeling would always be there, on good and bad days!”

The maiden looked up in astonishment, then she sank her chin deep into her ruff and hesitantly drawled the words: “How so? Can’t we always remain good friends?”

“Well, yes, Miss Fanny, we certainly can. Most assuredly for my part – touch wood. But allow me to bring this up, if today or tomorrow – no, I’m so stupid – I mean, when your good mother – God give her many years yet – but when she eventually follows your good father, as she must, and you are left orphaned, as a single woman, I think that compels us to consider your reputation; I’m a single, unmarried man and the world is always quick to think the worst in such cases.”

Fanny shook her head, smiling. “For that very reason, who will care about it? And” – she pointed to the door with both hands – “you know, Mr. Modereiner, I think my old woman out there will hold out with me for a long time yet, for so long that people’s talk will no longer be able to hurt us, I’d say.”

Modereiner smiled too. “You’re evading skilfully, Miss Fanny, but it’s not right to do that to an old friend. By the way, I also think as you do, that the Lord will give your dear mother long life yet and the both of us could

grow grey in the meantime; I just don't see what the good of that would be. Have a heart, Miss Fanny, and let another heart have joy. The two of you have to muddle your way through life so laboriously, shouldn't a third person who would take it to be the highest honour and the greatest happiness, muddle along with you? Don't be so jealous. It'd be a great comfort to your mother, I know this from her own words, you ask her, if you doubt anything I say. The two of us have liked each other very much for a number of years now, we're made for each other, Miss Fanny; if ever two people have made an honourable couple, it is us, and we are well-suited. And as for my intentions being honourable, and staying so, you know me, don't offer me an affront and think otherwise of me."

Fanny rose. "Mr. Modereiner, forgive me, I shouldn't have let you speak to the end, that would have saved you a proposal and me the answer, and it would have been better that way. But it took me by surprise, especially from you. It's hard for me to tell you that I must express my thanks for the honour intended me, but I don't want to get married full stop."

"Oh – but whyever not?"

He asked this with such a stunned expression that Fanny gave an involuntary smile; but her cheeks smoothed out again at once, she shrugged her shoulders, and after a short while she said, "No more of this, Mr. Modereiner, as you are my friend; that is, if you wish to remain so after what has just happened between us?"

With an expression of undeserved insult on his features, Modereiner laid his broad, heavily-ringed right hand on his heart.

“I’ll go now and see if mother’s finished making the coffee.”

The maiden walked towards the door, but as she walked past, she fleetingly touched the man’s shoulder with her hand and said, “It’s strange, we women can associate with a friend without thinking about his being a man, but you men, even the ones who aren’t in the least stupid, suddenly have to remember that the friend’s a woman. That’s the way it goes!”

Then the mother entered and served the coffee.

Fanny, who crumbled her pastries and threw them into her saucer, did not see the looks and signs which her mother exchanged with Modereiner, or at least gave the appearance of not having seen anything. Along with this silent eloquence, the two developed a truly ravenous appetite; the old woman exposed herself to several choking fits by hasty gulps, and Mr. Modereiner burnt his lips a few times, which he strove to put right by subsequent blowing. They were at pains to finish quickly, and Mrs. Weaver waited quite impatiently for her daughter to put the empty cup down on the saucer, then hastily gathered up the dishes and carried them into the kitchen to wash them.

Outside, the spoons began to clink against each other, the plates to clatter; inside, no sound was audible for a long time.

Mr. Modereiner sat with bowed head; as things lay, it seemed to him equally unbearable to leave as embarrassing to stay.

The maiden cleared her throat, then she quietly said: “Are you angry with me, Mr. Modereiner?”

He shook his head then quickly looked up. “Miss Fanny, with all due respect! You say you don’t want anything at all to do with marriage, but the

answer to my question: Why? – you still owe me that. Permit me to tell you in advance, on the basis of our long-standing acquaintance, that I couldn't accept the excuse of capriciousness on your part; no, it can't possibly be a matter of indifference to me to know the reason why I'm to entirely forgo the hope I privately had for your hand! Being fobbed off with a handsome compliment is hard for anyone to take, but I, Miss Fanny – don't take it the wrong way and don't take it amiss, as if I were boasting or showing a pushy curiosity – but I, as a friend of the house for many years and – I may say – as a man of honour, do think I have some right to be told, quite candidly, what actually induced you to turn down my proposal?"

The maiden rested her head on her left hand, and her voice sounded hoarse when she answered: "If you appeal to that, Mr. Modereiner, I'd certainly have to tell you what one tells only to someone in whose honourableness one places the highest confidence; but because that wouldn't make the slightest bit of difference in this case, you would be doing me more than a favour, a kindness, if you would not insist on it."

"No, Fanny," said the man, and rising to his feet, he took only a few steps towards the chair on which her mother had sat beside her earlier, but he still had to support himself with his fists on the table, his knees were trembling. He sat down right beside her and grasped her right hand, which was lying in her lap. "No, Fanny, I want to know why you don't want to be my wife."

The girl stared straight ahead, sitting there, her face flushed to the roots of her hair; suddenly, she raised her head, looked the man straight in the eyes and said, "Because I've been another man's."

He did not move and stared at her with a vacant look; he had clearly not understood her.

She lowered her eyelids and whispered, "That was in my earliest youth, you understand, Mr. Modereiner. There was a lot of foolishness and knavery involved. The foolishness was on my part." Now she felt the man's arm twitch and his fingers loosening their grip on her right hand, but he did not pull his hand back.

He began in a choked voice, "That's..." He stopped short, then continued: "We don't need to think about that." Hereupon he sat in silence for a short while, then suddenly he stood up and, laying his hand on the girl's shoulder as if in appeasement, he said with friendly decisiveness: "That's really nothing at all, Fanny!"

Then she rose, pushed the chair behind her out of the way, and said, stepping back: "Forgive me, Mr. Modereiner, in my eyes it's a great deal. I don't say that from humility, I've merely formed my feeling from the facts, ever since I've known what the custom is in these cases in this world of ours. A good man can't get over it without thinking of forgiving and forgetting; but I won't allow even the best one to be my judge, and won't put up with sympathy and mercy from anyone, I'm too proud for that. Don't talk, Mr. Modereiner! Earlier, I clearly noticed how your hand twitched, and how you were left speechless a good while; I respect you all the more for it. For, to speak my mind – it may seem ridiculous to you, but we women sometimes think so irrationally – I might feel insulted by a man if what has happened in the past left him totally indifferent. You see, Mr. Modereiner, I've lodged myself in a dead-end and there's nothing to be done with me; I

can't help it that there's nothing else I can do, so be sensible."

She fell silent and looked expectantly for a while at the man who stood bowed, looking dejected, then she continued. "It's late now, Mr. Modereiner. Don't take it amiss of me; but you know that feet which tread the machine all day must have a rest, and rise early again." She took his hands and said cordially: "Don't be angry at the refusal. Don't take it to heart. When you want to find a wife, they're thick on the ground for you, large and small, blonde and brunette, just as meets your liking. Let us see you again soon and stay my friend. Yes? Good night."

Modereiner murmured, "Good night" with assurances of his unaltered friendship, and saw himself out.

The girl very quietly hummed a few notes of a song through her nose, actually converting a suppressed sigh into another sound; then she lighted the candle on a night-table beside her bed, laid a book down, lowered the hanging-lamp on the rattling-chain, and blew out the flame.

Then the old woman rushed in and flung herself at her child's breast. "Again – again!" she stammered, sobbing.

The young woman stroked the old one's locks. "Don't be childish, mother, you've known a long time how I think and that I won't change my thoughts. How can what happened just a while ago take you by surprise?"

"Child, what is to become of you?"

"But mother, I've long had my 'character,' as it is written in my registration certificate, as a manual worker."

"Jesus, when I think what will happen to you" – the old woman clenched her fist and threatened the empty air before her – "Oh..."

The girl placed her hand on her mother's mouth. "Be quiet, let it be! Such follies occur often enough in the world and make nobody any the wiser; at best, we can strive so that later, they don't affect either ourselves or others anymore."

The old woman looked up at her child with folded hands. "What a shame," she said.

Mr. Modereiner had gone down the steps, and in the hallway he sighed, "Such a girl! What a shame!"

Half a year passed without him setting foot in the Weaver residence; but when he timidly and yet conspicuously avoided an encounter with Fanny even in the street, the girl thought that he was just like the many others who could see a woman as nothing other than their wife, and felt the failure of their honourable or dishonourable intentions to be an insult to their vanity:- which insult has been known from time immemorial, and in every zone, to count as an unforgivable crime, and still counts as such today.

And so she felt disappointed in the worthiness of her old friend.

"What a shame!"