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Fräulein Stark

An excerpt translated by Simon Pare

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Fräulein Stark, the housekeeper, took her meals in the kitchen and only entered the dining room and study when Monsignore rang for her. The door between the two remained open, with the result that my uncle had to listen to Stark's soup-slurping and Stark to the clicking of his cigarette lighter, but this couple never sat down at the same table nor did they ever fall into the same bed nor were they even laid together in the grave, where both have now been for some time.

Her name was Magdalena and she had grown up in the Appenzell region, high in the mountains. Her mother apparently died young while delivering her eighth or ninth child, yet this appears not to have troubled the father, a gnarled upland farmer. Silent he was before this death and silent he remained after this death, suspicious of the world and yet more suspicious of his own brood. He hated little Magdalena, he hated her teacher and, with the exception of the Bible in which, day in day out, he would attempt to decode a verse beneath the crooked nail of his forefinger, he hated all kinds of writing: laws, newspapers, timetables, telephone books, milking brochures, the official gazette, his army service book and even regulations about pig breeding which constituted his livelihood. The family summered on remote alps, far from any church or school, and his wife was barely in the ground when he moved his horde of children to live all year round up in a shadowy, wuthering valley where winter came as early as October.

Was the Fraülein devout? Probably, although it must have been a peculiar, very female Appenzeller style of devotion. She wanted nothing to do

with the bloody Redeemer — that was a male thing, a silly skirmish between Roman peasants and Jewish Pharisees. However, every morning she paid a visit to the Black Madonna, which occupied a sort of grotto at the back of the cathedral nave; here she was at home, here she was at peace, the creases vanished from her lower brow and suddenly, as I observed several times, the two of them would smile the same smile, the carved wooden Madonna and stocky Magdalena Stark from the mountains of Appenzell who had washed up in the city, in the honourable household of the abbey librarian.

This man wandered around his house of books in bell-shaped robes, and she preferred trousers. He was a gourmet and a gourmand, yet convinced that as a man of the spirit, he was above the world of things and of the flesh, and she purported to be salt of the earth, a simple soul. She was tall for an Appenzeller, taller than Monsignore in any case, and he stood out distinctly from his gaunt predecessors by his fleshy lips, round belly and the mischievous devil constantly breathing down his dog-collared neck. Should he stumble through the gate late at night with two old drinking pals with duelling scars on their cheeks, Stark had no trouble chasing the boozy brothers away and steering her suddenly placid Monsignore between the labyrinthine shelves of the catalogue room to his curtain-shrouded baldachin cot. I found this funny, I even had to laugh, but Fräulein Stark, who wore a blue tracksuit at night, would grab me by the wrist and lead me back to my bedroom as firmly as she had just guided Monsignore to his. She didn't seem to appreciate my curiosity for my uncle's nightlife. If he starts to puke, she would bark, put your hands over your ears. Goodnight.

The abbey librarian wrote one brochure after another and, having grown up in a letter-phobic, picture-free parlour, she would at best occasionally compose her name in childish handwriting that curled garland-like around the line: Frl. Stark. She spoke a nasal Appenzeller dialect that seemed to be lodged somewhere in her sinuses, and he would prattle away in every major language — Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, English, supposedly Russian too; Listen to this, nepos, he would thunder, I'm going to laugh like Ivan Abramovitch, ho ho ho, hee hee hee!

The abbey librarian ordered crocodile-skin bags, fashionable hats, umbrellas, eau de cologne and once even a lady's shaver for her, and she, hiding his gifts behind the rows of books on the lower shelves, roasted ducks for him, concocted a red wine sauce to serve with his ox tongue and, during Lent, when he was keen to lose twenty kilos, she would serve him river trout

seasoned with forest herbs. In winter she stuffed hot water bottles under his covers, and in summer, when he suffered and groaned from the heat, she would help him into a light, crinkly, red-lined cassock that had apparently been tailormade for Monsignore by an exclusive boutique in Rome.

Real silk, Fräulein Stark said, there's nothing finer.

There is, I said, thinking of my uncle's book-handling gloves.

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For weeks before my departure, I had been tormented by terrible homesickness and a fear of Fräulein Stark, but as soon as I arrived I felt great; it was nicer here than at home where they had once more set up the changing table, made up the cot, designed the birth announcements and bought powder — baby powder. It was the third or fourth time this had happened, and we all suspected that it would go wrong this time too; Mama would deliver only a dead thing, a bloody, mucus-covered lump that someone would hand over outside the clinic's back door to the pig farmer. I wanted nothing to do with it; my parents were right — I was better off at the library. Behind the catalogue room I had my own small bedchamber, cluttered with old tomes, atlases, globes and models of the world; I was allowed to touch the mummy in the hall, sit on the organ bench in the cathedral, roam around the attic, go down into the cellars and, best of all, my uncle had entrusted me with a job; I was part of the team, I was one of them. You are not *working*, my uncle had insisted, you hold an office. I enjoyed hearing this; it made me feel good. I did not earn any money but from day to day, from woman to woman, my duties grew a little more exciting, a little more mysterious . . .

They began at nine o'clock in the morning. We would hear the chatter of our lady visitors as they came up the staircase of the old monastery, but the two attendants — by age-old custom, they took up their positions ten minutes early — would initially hang their heads, for they were tired, tired from the previous day, tired of a life of sitting and waiting and dozing, and would not contemplate beginning their activities until the ninth stroke of the clock had entirely faded away. Then, at last, they would raise their gloved left hands and hold their trembling knuckles to their yawning mouths. Once this was done, they would look at each other with ancient and long-dead

desperation in their eyes because now it was past nine and the black bell over the entrance had swung! It was time to stand up, time to pull back the bolt, time to let the visitors in. The custodians opened the gate, and the cloakroom attendant, who also wore white gloves, a green uniform jacket and what looked like a circus cap, stood behind his counter, still half-asleep, to receive the items that the rules required to be left at the cloakroom: coats, umbrellas, bags, rucksacks, picnic baskets, food, hiking sticks; in short, anything that might harm this sacred realm of books and the baroque hall's precious floor. Then everything was ready. The first coachload had swapped all their jackets and handbags for tokens, the ladies had kept only their hats and, led by a guide in squeaking rubber shoes, they strode up the long corridor towards me. My apologies for interrupting at this point —

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but before I can state what my duties were, I must mention the floor, the parquet of the Baroque book basilica. This floor was an assemblage of cherry wood and pine, as grand as a ship's deck, more melodious than the body of a violin, *bref*, as my uncle would say before proceeding to ignore his own declaration; *bref*, meaning in short: it was a sacred stage, prolonged upwards by the wooden panelling, the gently undulating bookshelves and rococo-thin wall columns, which, sometimes light, sometimes dark, rose up and out in ribs and flourishes, but also hugged the mirrors in the vaults and the ceiling paintings so that the heavens, which were bordered with tendrils of cherry wood, had an almost earthly dimension and the sun-bathed floor something heavenly about them.

The rubber shoes stop and stand still.

I place a pair of felt overshoes in front of her, and the guide smiles down at me as she slips her feet inside them. Next, please!

This woman too receives overshoes, glides across the threshold, skates inside — and now you know my task: I was to hand out protective overshoes to each visitor in the correct size — small, medium or large. I was to make sure that not a shoe passed without its felt sheath and that only people with slippers floated over the threshold into the baroque hall and towards the books. Next, please!

Mine was a huge responsibility, obviously, because the violin-wood floor with its inlaid work was deemed so precious that even the slightest damage, for instance a dent in the tender cherry wood from a stiletto, would have wrenched howls of horror from my uncle and his assistant librarians, but I barely encountered any trouble: our visitors were well behaved, the majority of them cultivated, and they slid the tips of their shoes obediently into the felt bonnets. I was, as my uncle said, the slipper ministrant at the gates of the book temple. I was focused from nine o'clock in the morning to six o'clock in the evening — with an hour's lunch break — on legs and feet — let them arrive, made them stop — thank you, my boy! Next, please! — and when they had 'done' the exhibition, as many of them said, I would place the cast-off pairs back in my carefully arranged rows. On board the book ark, my uncle said, reason, and therefore order, was the highest principle.

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It was one evening in July. My uncle was wearing the silk summer cassock from the exclusive Roman boutique and Fräulein Stark her Alpine get-up, cord trousers and a checked shirt. As usual, my uncle was enthroned on the prelate's chair at the head of the table, had laid his napkin over his chest and, as he praised asceticism, dabbed his brow with a damask cloth sprinkled with eau de cologne. I was sitting at the long side of the table, albeit near the foot, two chairs away from Monsignore, with my back to the open kitchen door, and was acting the know-it-all schoolboy. If my uncle raised his eyebrow, always the left one, impressed by the wavy lines on his thinker's forehead I too would try to twitch my eyebrow, always the left one. Well I never, my uncle said, how muggy it is!

The Fräulein was eating next door as usual, and with every spoonful she sucked in out there, the high-ceilinged dining room seemed to grow dimmer, the wall clock's ticking louder, and the cadaverous faces of the prince-abbots and abbey librarians hanging on the wall opposite me retreated farther and farther into the gleaming black varnish.

My uncle looked up.

Stark was standing in the doorway.

Those slippers, she said, are not good for the boy.

We lowered our spoons.

Is he guilty of an error? my uncle asked.

No, Stark declared, he did his job well (a brief pause) — maybe *too* well!

Do you not realize what nonsense you are spouting?

No, she said.

What is this about?

About his salvation. About what is written in the catechism.

For some time the Fräulein stood there in the doorway with her arms crossed, her lips narrowed and her eyes too.

My uncle raised his left eyebrow and, in the full glare of his gaze, I ruefully shrugged my shoulders. Then the Fräulein stretched out her powerful hands, whisked the bowl from the table and carried it into the kitchen, her eyes glued to it. The nearby church clock struck quarter past, the evening sky began to glow. My uncle and I held our breath, as we both sensed that there was more to come! And indeed there she was again, smiling her Madonna-like smile and said, Your nephew, Monsignore, has sinned against the Sixth!

I'm sorry?

Covetous glances.

Obviously somewhat bewildered by all this, my uncle grinned and shook his head, which was glistening with sweat. But he composed himself. He placed his hands on the table, to the left and the right of his soup dish, pushed himself back in his throne-like chair and, with his eyes raised to the ceiling, said: Fräulein Stark, I do not recall having pressed the bell.

She nodded. I thought the boy should be moved to the assistant librarians' room.

My dear woman, who is in charge here?

You, was her crafty reply, have responsibility for the books. *I* look to the boy.

My nephew will remain where he is.

In the scriptorium.

No, he said.

Yes, she said.

Fräulein Stark, *hic est nepos praefecti*, he is the prefect's nephew —

Yes, she said, that's my point! Your nephew is a little Katz, so we need to keep a close eye on him.

The Fräulein flashed her Madonna smile, and my uncle, turning his eyes to the ceiling once more, said without emotion: The boy bears his father's name.

The furniture had gone dark and over on the far side of the courtyard, the evening sky loomed out of the monastery's black roof like a flaming red wall. It was true: Mama was a born Katz and that was my uncle's name too, but both of them seemed to have lost their surname, Mama through marriage, my uncle through his priesthood; he was called Monsignore. Our Fräulein, he said with a sigh, is of the plain type.