

2. The First Time

Summer 1817

'The first time! Do I remember the first time?!' Johann Salvator Euler's voice rang out across the small Heuriger. None of the guests at the other tables, immersed in their own conversations or their wine, looked up, but Euler dropped his voice to a confidential whisper - as far as anything he said could be called a whisper - as he bent forward across the table, 'It's quite a story. Did I ever tell you . . .?'

Kyselak leant back. The wine, the sun on his face, the drone of Euler's voice and the music from the band in the larger wine garden across the road all induced a comfortable sense of well-being. Yes, Euler had already told him the story of what had happened when, as a fifteen-year-old schoolboy, he had gone to the little dressmaker's in the Alsergrund to collect his mother's pelisse, which had been adapted - once again - to the latest fashion. Indeed, he had heard it several times; it had gone through more changes than his mother's pelisse. It was amusing to follow its transformation - or metamorphosis, there was a good classical word! - with each successive retelling, from the fumbblings of a frightened schoolboy being used by a lonely older woman (her husband had fallen during the great victory over Napoleon at Aspern) into the brief amour of a debonair young Lothario who took his pleasures where he found them, this time from a 'lusty young widow, greedy for it after a long privation, if you know what I mean'.

As the accidie of a Viennese Sunday took hold of him, Kyselak's mind went back to his own school-days. The first time! Yes, he remembered his first time. His father was quite happy with the idea, but he had great difficulty talking his mother round. The countryside had quietened down now that the wars were over and Napoleon far away in St Helena, so it wasn't the danger that made her so unwilling to let him go off on his own on a walking tour during the summer. After all, he would soon be eighteen. In the summer he would finish school to go to university in the autumn. No, it was just that it wasn't respectable. To go round the countryside with a stick and a few spare clothes in a bundle, that was what wandering journeymen did, not the son of a respected if minor official of the k.k. Patrimonial- Familien- und Avitital-Fondskasse who was a student at the Piaristen-Gymnasium! He had imagined himself setting off, bundle on his back, stick in his hand, along just such a road as the one outside the Heuriger here in Neustift, straight out of the city into the Vienna Woods, roaming on wherever his fancy took him. But no. If he insisted on going off on an 'expedition' on foot, then he must do so out of sight of neighbours and friends.

Once his summer journey had been decided upon, his mother had thrown herself into the arrangements with her usual energy. It also provided her with an almost inexhaustible topic of conversation. 'Yes,' she said to the gossip-avid circle of cronies gathered round the coffee table, 'it'll be nice for Josef. He can visit my brother and his wife in Stein an der Donau and all the relatives in the Wachau we haven't seen for ages. His cousin Katharina in Senftenberg must be about the same age as him, perhaps a couple of years older, and they've never met. Yes, it'll be very nice for Josef to get to know my side of the family.'

And so he'd been packed off in a variety of conveyances to Melk, where he'd spent a disagreeable night in one of the monastery guest rooms. But then he'd finally been able to set out on his own, cross the Danube and follow the open road, the inviting lane, the seductive footpath until he reached Stein, where he was to take a boat back down the river to Vienna. It had been tame compared with his later journeyings, but it had been the first time he had truly been his own master and it had given him a taste for the countryside, for nature, which had since then taken him to much wilder places, to the mountains of the Tyrol and Styria, of Slovakia and Transylvania. But he still remembered that first, tame trip, that first foray out of the confines of parental protection. And he had good reason to remember it. It had signalled the start of his adult life in more than just one respect . . .

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'The wild rose is blooming now,
Along the hedgerows
Of the Wachau . . .'

He had started singing along to the old folk tune the band opposite had struck up. Euler threw him an exasperated look. That sentimental stuff was distracting his audience. It contrasted rather awkwardly with his stories of the exploits of a ruthless male, carrying all before him, cast an ironic light on them, even. Kyselak nodded an apology to his friend, took another mouthful of the refreshing grüner Veltliner and fell back into his daydreaming.

It had been nice to meet cousin Katharina, very nice indeed, especially in a sleepy little village like Senftenberg. He had felt a little resentful as he knocked on the door of his aunt's house (well, his mother's sister-in-law's cousin's to be precise, the family she wanted him to get to know was extended to breaking point). The walk through the Wachau, following the course of the Danube, had only succeeded in whetting his appetite. He would really have liked to continue straight on, past Senftenberg and up the valley of the Krems, plunging into the unknown depths of the Waldviertel - the name conjured up in his mind pictures of virgin forest, huge trees tossing their heads in the roaring wind - and on to the heights of the Bohemian Forest, with eagles soaring above hidden lakes that lapped against precipitous cliffs . . . Since that first journey he had spent every summer exploring more and more remote parts of the Empire on foot. Now of course he was well acquainted with the great Bohemian Forest, that spreads its shadowy cloak over the northern edge of the little dukedom of Austria, stretching well over a hundred miles to the west, from the source of the River Thaya, just north of the pleasant valley of the Krems where he was now, to the point where the land of Bohemia meets Austria and Bavaria. That had become one of his special places, a kind of geological nodal point where, like crystals forming at the bottom of a beaker, a throng of mighty spines and ridges press against each other, thrusting up a rugged massif that displays its blue peak far and wide to the three countries, dispatching rolling hills and rushing streams in all directions. He had stood on the summit of the Plöckenstein and looked down on just such a forest-fringed lake as he was visualising while he stood there among the charming if domestic array of geraniums, paeonies and hollyhocks outside this house, the evening sun reflected in the vine-framed windows . . .

'Yes? Oh, you must be cousin Josef, I suppose. We're expecting you. We got your mother's letter.'

Kyselak came to with a start and stared at the intimidating figure before him. Who could she be, this tall, severe-looking woman with the steel-rimmed spectacles and her hair in a tight bun? She looked like an archetypal schoolmistress or governess, but surely his aunt didn't keep a governess for her only daughter, who was nineteen now, his mother had told him.

'Cat got your tongue?' she asked in her rather acid voice. 'Come in, come in. I'm Katharina, by the way. Come and meet mother, then I'll show you to your room. I got it ready for you this morning. We were expecting you somewhat earlier.'

Confused, Kyselak mumbled an excuse in which his intended 'enjoying the beautiful local scenery' became 'enjoying the local beauties' and drew a surprising amused glance from his cousin. He just had time to present his compliments to the old lady in the frilly cap (mother? she looked more like a model grandmother, just the way he imagined kindly old Frau Holle in the fairy tale) before he was swept upstairs to a tiny room under the eaves. It was tiny but charming, with a vase of wild roses on the bedside table and a view of the ruined castle, its tower standing tall on a rocky bluff above the valley, glowing red in the rays of the setting sun.

Supper was not the inquisitorial torment he had come to fear from visits to his mother's other relatives. His aunt did quiz him a little about the doings of various

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members of the Vienna branch of the family, but she seemed to prefer to ramble on herself about this or that nephew and niece, brother and uncle.

The food, if simple, was satisfyingly plentiful. The table was covered with a rich variety of smoked meats and sausages - 'from my brother Albrecht in Krems, he always remembers us whenever he slaughters a beast and sends us a ham or a nice blood sausage. Things haven't been that easy for us since my poor husband was taken from us . . . Still, Albrecht makes sure we don't go hungry. It's quite an event when they slaughter a pig, a real party. The last time he invited Katharina to go and stay overnight . . . ' An image of his prim, schoolma'amish cousin dancing round the split-open carcase waving a black pudding, her tightly buttoned-up dress spattered with blood, crept irresistibly into his mind. To chase it away, he had to concentrate on his food again, and attacked a pungent goat's cheese - 'from my cousin Ferdinand who keeps goats up the valley in Reichau, well, I say cousin, but he's not really, he was the best friend of my late husband, God rest his soul, they went to school together and they used to love to go hunting together, many's the time they'd come back, frozen but with a nice deer for me to joint and cure . . . ' Kyselak almost choked on his bread. Was that a wink Katharina had just given him? It couldn't have been. He threw a shy glance to where she was sitting, enthroned at the head of the table, ramrod straight, her angular features composed in their customary severe expression. It must have been the candles flickering on the lenses of her spectacles. He took a deep draught of wine to soothe his throat. Or perhaps he had drunk too much of the local grüner Veltliner? He was feeling slightly muzzy in the head already and he didn't want to make a fool of himself. Somehow his glass always seemed to be full.

'Now you two youngsters don't mind me,' said his aunt once the maid had cleared away the dishes. 'I'll just sit down in my chair and do a bit of my needlework - I'm embroidering a picture of my late husband's grave, with his dates and everything. I'll probably nod off at some point,' she added with a giggle, 'but you two just go ahead and enjoy yourselves.'

Enjoy ourselves?! What was Katharina going to propose, he wondered as she led him over to the table in the window embrasure behind her mother's wing-back armchair, a cut-throat game of Old Maid?

'I'm sure you'd like to see my flower albums,' she said in the tone of a question demanding the answer yes, 'I've got a rather interesting collection of medicinal herbs.'

She placed two thick volumes on the table in front of him. They were rather prettily bound in beige cloth with a light-blue vertical stripe interspersed with thinner stripes with elongated lozenges between them. Stamped on the front in gold was 'Katharina Oberparleiter: Garden and Wild Flowers'. The other volume simply said 'Herbs'. As she opened it, it gave off a rich, pungent, slightly musty smell.

'I collected some of these when we went to Meran last summer, but you'd be surprised what you can find just in a little place like Senftenberg. Even you will know this one. It's the common daisy. But what not many people know is that a decoction of the fresh root is excellent against the scurvy. The local peasants boil it in milk and give it to puppies to stop them growing. It doesn't work, of course, nothing will stop young puppies from growing —'

Still somewhat fuddled from the wine, Kyselak stared at the limp, shrivelled plants, all the life-giving sap dried out of them.

'— and this is valerian, you may have seen it, it has a calming, soporific effect —' He could believe it. Just looking at it and listening to her holding forth in pedagogic tones was sending him to sleep. Katharina stretched over to turn the page

' - the gentian, the main stomachic, though people also call it the thunder plant, storms will come if you are rash enough to pick it, they say —'

and it was some time before he realised that the pressure on his arm came from her firm breast. He shifted in embarrassment, but his embarrassment turned to alarm when she rested her hand on his thigh as she pointed out a particularly fine specimen of lady's bedstraw on the page farthest away from her,

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'— will cure the most violent bleedings at the nose and almost all other evacuations of blood. In the Sudetenland women put it in their beds to make childbirth easier —'
He tried to move unobtrusively to the side but found himself hemmed in by the solid table leg. She couldn't realise what she was doing, but she was setting off a reaction inside his breeches which it would be difficult to conceal if she didn't remove her hand. He sighed with relief when the gentle pressure on his thigh was released,
'— and the houseleek you'll see everywhere here because the people believe it protects their houses from storm and lightning —'
but then gasped as it returned, only this time there!, precisely on the bulge that was starting to distend his breeches. He could hardly believe it! He gave her a quick sidelong glance, but her eyes were firmly fixed on her album as she proceeded with her lecture.

'— eyebright is sometimes said to cure dimness of sight, but that is uncertain, to say the least —'

She clearly did know what she was doing as he felt her fingers through the material of his breeches squeezing and slackening, squeezing and slackening. In panic, he glanced over his shoulder and his heart missed a beat as he saw his aunt's head jerk up. Had she heard, had she seen? But then he relaxed as her head nodded back down onto her chest to the accompaniment of a quiet, bubbling snore. And still Katharina calmly continued her lecture.

' - an odd, stiff, sticky, annual species more at home in the warmer countries of the Mediterranean —'

He was beginning to enjoy the experience, when all at once his left hand was firmly grasped and placed between her legs. While he was peeping at the old woman she must have pulled up her dress! His hand was resting on soft, silky skin, warm to the touch. He felt paralysed. Despite his desire to find out the hidden secrets of the female anatomy, he didn't dare move his hand. He sat there, staring straight ahead as Katharina continued, apparently unmoved, to praise the invigorating virtues of the wild orchid

'— it is supposed to be, as the herbal puts it, a strengthener of the parts of generation and a promoter of venereal desires —'

He recovered his composure a little and decided to embark on a little furtive exploration when his whole body froze in shock: with a few deft movements she had opened the flap of his breeches. He was naked! Exposed! There! Even if concealed between the table and the wall. As she grasped him, she shifted forward, clamping his hand between her thighs. He felt with surprise the roughness of hair on the side of his hand and a wetness as his fingers were forced against soft flesh. Then all awareness of anything outside himself vanished. His insides seemed to liquidise and drop as he spilled his seed over the polished floor.

Katharina did interrupt her lecture as she squeezed his hand tight for a few seconds, before releasing him. He sat there in a daze, breathing heavily, only to be startled out of it by his aunt's voice asking, 'What are you doing down there, dear? Is anything wrong?' Hastily he fastened the flap of his breeches as he heard his cousin say, 'No, Mother, it's all right. I'm just clearing up the specimens Josef dropped on the floor.'
When she stood up, tucking a handkerchief into her sleeve, she said, without looking at him, 'Josef's tired, Mother, after all the exertion and excitement. He's going up to bed now. He wants to get up at crack of dawn tomorrow so as not to miss the best of the day for the next stage of his expedition.'

'That's very sensible,' his aunt said, nodding to him in approval. 'I don't suppose you noticed, but I dropped off for a while. I think I'll add a few more stitches to my late husband's gravestone, he'd have been proud of it, he always liked granite, he used to say . . . but here's me rambling on again and you can hardly keep your eyes open. Off you go and have a good night's sleep - a clear conscience makes a soft pillow as my late husband, God rest his soul, always used to say - we'll see you in the morning.'

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Kyselak leant back and stared at the roses growing in profusion against the opposite wall of the wine garden. Euler was still droning on about his conquests among the ranks of the seamstresses. Ever since what he wittily (or so he obviously thought) called his 'seminal experience' with his mother's dressmaker, he had made the districts beyond the glacis of the city fortifications what he liked to call (in sentimental rather than witty mode this time) the 'hunting grounds of his heart'. These largely lower-middle-class districts were full of small workshops, carpenters, glaziers, wheelwrights, potters, tailors and, of course, dressmakers. And employed there was many a young girl who was willing to grant her favours to a 'gentleman' who could afford to give her the 'good time' that was likely to be all too rare in her subsequent marriage. Nice girls, some of them, pretty too, though not really Kyselak's cup of tea .

. .

Suddenly his memory was tweaked by the smell of coffee being carried past for the women at the next table. Coffee . . . and roses . . .

He had woken up the next morning in his aunt's house to the smell of coffee, the appetising smell of coffee, even if in 1817, when the country was still exhausted from the wars and the expenses of the Congress, the main ingredient was chicory. Dawn had clearly already cracked in this household, so he washed and dressed quickly, then hurried down, but paused outside the dining-room, unsure how to behave towards Katharina. He pushed the door open to be greeted by her habitual schoolma'amy look. Abashed, he slunk over to the table, muttering an excuse for what he presumed they would think of as his late rising. She came over and placed a bowl of coffee in front of him with a glance that showed a slight softening of the severe features, even the hint of a wink. As she took her hand away from his bowl, the back, as if by chance, gently stroked his cheek. For a second she stood still, as if in a dream then, jerking back into her everyday persona, said to his aunt, 'Mother, Josef wants to go and have a look at the castle before he heads off down to Krems,' and swept out of the room.

'Oh yes, the castle, you really must see that. The Baron has put a lot of work into restoring it, or at least stopping it from falling down any more. He doesn't live there himself, you know, it's a ruin really, his house is farther up the valley, you should see that too, it's covered all over with roses and just now they're in full bloom . . . lovely . . . we have some in our little garden, my late husband - how he loved his garden - he planted them, but there's no comparison, at the big house they're all colours, from white and yellow to the deepest crimson . . . Rose Hall you could call it . . . and the Baron's very keen on preserving and restoring all the local antiquities, very learned he is about that kind of thing, only just now, because of the difficult times, he's had to call a temporary halt, but the scaffolding's still there, so you'll be able to have a clamber around, if you want, I'm sure a healthy young lad like yourself loves climbing and scrambling over rocks and ruins. As my late husband used to say . . .'

Kyselak sang as he set off on as beautiful a summer's morning as a man could wish for:

The wild rose is blooming now
Along the hedgerows
Of the Wachau.
A cottage peeps through the vines,
There lives a girl,
I know she'll be mine . . .

The castle was little more than a tower rising up from a steep rock above the village. It did indeed have scaffolding round it and Kyselak climbed up and looked at the panorama of rolling hills disappearing into a blue haze. The glorious view, the balmy air, the bird-song, the unaccustomed freedom of the last four weeks and, above all, the experience of the previous evening caused an outpouring of vague but

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exhilarating emotion. He ached to do something - anything - to give it concrete expression. An abandoned pot of creosote, the brush still sticking in it, caught his eye. He grabbed it and started to daub his initials and those of Katharina surrounded by a heart on a barrier of rough wooden planks blocking off the drop into the empty courtyard. But he stopped and painted it over, blotting it out with savage, stabbing brushstrokes. It seemed too trite, too much of a cliché for the emotions seething inside him (and someone might recognise her initials and embarrass her with questions about her secret admirer). He felt he had come of age, he was a man, an individual who had something to say for himself. He looked up at the wall above him and, on a sudden inspiration, climbed to the top level of the scaffolding and scrambled up the crumbling side of a window embrasure where the stones stuck out like steps. Standing erect on the very top, he threw his arms wide in a gesture as if to embrace the whole world and its millions. Then, carefully leaning over the side, he wrote his name in large black letters for all to see: KYSELAK, 1817, as if to say *veni, vidi, vici*, Kyselak was here.