

The Garden Square

I

THE CHILD CAME OVER QUIETLY from the far side of the square and stood beside the girl.

“I’m hungry,” he announced.

The man took this as an opportunity to start a conversation.

“I suppose it is about teatime?”

The girl was not disconcerted: on the contrary, she turned and smiled at him.

“Yes, it must be nearly half-past four, when he usually has his tea.”

She took two jam-covered bread slices from a basket beside her on the bench and handed them to the child, then skilfully knotted a bib around his neck.

“He’s a nice child,” said the man.

The girl shook her head as if in denial.

“He’s not mine,” she remarked.

The child moved off with his slices of bread. As it was a Thursday, the park was full of children: big ones playing with marbles or chasing each other, small ones playing in the sandpits, while smaller ones still sat

patiently waiting in their prams for the time when they would join the others.

“Although,” the girl continued, “he could be mine, and people often assume he is mine. But I have to tell them he’s got nothing to do with me.”

“I see,” said the man. “I have no children either.”

“Sometimes it seems strange, don’t you think, that there should be so many children everywhere, and yet none of them are your own?”

“I suppose so, yes, when you come to think of it. But then, as you said, there are so many already.”

“All the same...”

“But if you were fond of them, if they give you pleasure to watch, doesn’t it matter less?”

“Couldn’t the opposite also be true?”

“Probably. I expect it depends on one’s nature: I think that some people are quite happy with the children who are already there, and I believe I am one of them. I have seen so many children and I could have had children of my own, and yet, you see, I manage to be quite satisfied with those of others.”

“Have you really seen so many?”

“Yes. You see, I travel.”

“I see,” the girl said in a friendly manner.

CHAPTER I

“I travel all the time, except just now, of course, when I’m resting.”

“Parks are good places to rest in, particularly at this time of year. I like them too. It’s nice being out of doors.”

“They cost nothing, they’re always cheerful because of the children, and then if you don’t know many people there’s always the opportunity to start a conversation.”

“That’s true. Do you sell things when you travel?”

“Yes, that’s my profession.”

“Always the same things?”

“No, different things, but all of them small. You know those little things one always needs and so often forgets to buy. They all fit into a medium-sized suitcase. I suppose you could call me a travelling salesman, if you know what I mean.”

“Like those people you see in markets selling things from an open suitcase?”

“That’s right. I often work at the edges of street markets.”

“I hope you don’t think it rude of me to ask, but do you manage to make a living?”

“I’ve nothing to complain of.”

“I thought that was probably the case.”

“I don’t mean to say that I earn a lot of money, but I earn a little something every day, and in its way I call that making a living.”

“So you manage to make ends meet, if I may be so bold?”

“Yes, I think I just about make ends meet: I don’t mean that every day is as good as the previous one. No. Sometimes things are a little tight, but in general I manage well enough.”

“I’m glad.”

“Thank you. Yes, I manage more or less and have really nothing to complain about. Being single with no home of my own, I have few worries, and the ones I have are naturally only for myself – sometimes for instance I find that I have run out of toothpaste, sometimes I might want for a little company. But on the whole it works out well. Thank you for asking.”

“Would you say that almost anyone could do your work? As far as you can tell, I mean?”

“Yes indeed. I would even say that it is the best possible example of a job that can be done by everybody.”

“You see, I should have thought it might need special skills?”

“Well I suppose it is better to know how to read, if only for the newspaper in the evenings at the hotel,

and also of course for the names of the train stations. It makes life a little easier, but that's all. That's not much of a requirement and, you see, you can still make ends meet."

"I really meant other kinds of qualities: I would have thought your work needed endurance, or patience perhaps, and a great deal of perseverance?"

"I have never done any other work, so it's hard for me to tell. But I always imagined that the qualities you mention would be necessary for any work; in fact that there could hardly be a job where they are not needed."

"I am sorry to go on asking you all these questions, but do you think you will always go on travelling like this? Or do you think that one day you might stop?"

"I don't know."

"I'm sorry. Forgive me for being so curious, but we were talking..."

"It's quite all right. But I am afraid I don't know if I will go on travelling. There really is no other answer I can give you: I don't know. How does one know such things?"

"I only meant that if you travelled all the time, as you do, I would have thought that one day you would want to stop and stay in one place, that's all."

“It’s true, I suppose, that one should want to stop. But how do you stop doing one thing and start another? How do people decide to leave one job for another, and why?”

“If I’ve understood correctly, the decision to stop travelling would depend only on yourself, not on anything else?”

“I don’t think I have ever quite known how such things are decided. I have no particular attachments. In fact, I am a rather solitary person, and unless some great piece of luck came my way I cannot really see how I could change my work. And somehow I can’t imagine where this luck would come from, from which part of my life. Of course I don’t mean that it could not come my way one day – after all, one never knows – nor that if it did I would not accept it very gladly, but for the moment I must confess I cannot see much luck coming my way and helping me to a decision.”

“But couldn’t you just simply want it? I mean, couldn’t you decide you wanted to change your work?”

“No, I don’t think so. Every day I want to be clean, well fed and sleep well, and I also like to be decently dressed. So you see I hardly have time for wanting much

more. And then, I must admit, I don't really dislike travelling."

"Can I ask you another question? How did all this start?"

"How could I begin to tell you? Stories like that are so long and so complicated, and sometimes I really think they are a little beyond me. It would mean going so far back that I feel tired before I start. But on the whole I think things happened to me as they do to anyone else, no differently."

A wind had risen, so light it seemed to hint at the approaching summer. For a moment it chased the clouds away, leaving a new warmth hanging over the city.

"How lovely it is," the man said.

"Yes," said the girl, "it's almost the beginning of the hot weather. From now on it will be a little warmer each day."

"You see, I had no special aptitude for any particular work or for any particular kind of life. And so I suppose I will go on as I am. Yes, I think I will."

"So really your feelings are only negative? They are just against any particular work or any particular life?"

"Against? No. That's too strong a word. I can only say that I have no very strong likes. I really just came

to be as I am in the way that most people come to be as they are.”

“But between the things that happened to you a long time ago and now, wasn’t there time for you to change – almost every day in fact – and start liking things? Anything?”

“I suppose so. I don’t deny it. For some people life must be like that, yes, and then again for others it is not. Some people must get used to the idea of never changing, and I think that really is true of me. So I expect I will just go on as I am.”

“Well, for me things will not go on being the same.”

“But can you know already?”

“Yes, I can, because my situation is not one which can continue: sooner or later it must come to an end. I am waiting to get married. And as soon as I am married, my present life will be quite finished.”

“I understand.”

“I mean that once it is over it will leave so few traces that it might as well never have been.”

“Perhaps I too – after all, it’s impossible to foresee everything, isn’t it? – might change my life one day.”

“Ah, but the difference is that I want to change mine. What I do now is hardly a job. People call it one to make things easier for themselves, but in fact it is not.

It's a state of being, a complete state of being, you understand, like for example being a child or ill. And so it must come to an end."

"I understand, but I've just come back from a long journey and now I'm resting. I never much like thinking of the future, and today, when I'm resting, even less: that's why I am so bad at explaining to you how it is I can put up with my life as it is and not change it, and not even be able to imagine changing. I'm sorry."

"Oh no, I'm the one who should apologize."

"Of course not. After all, we can always talk."

"That's right. And it has no consequences."

"And so you are waiting for something to happen?"

"Yes. I can see no reason why I should not get married one day like everybody else. As I told you."

"You're quite right. There is no reason at all why you should not get married too."

"Of course, in my current state – one which is so looked down upon – you could say that the opposite would be more true, and that there is no reason at all for it to happen. And so somehow I think that to make it seem quite ordinary and natural, I must want it with all my might. And that is how I want it."

“I am sure nothing is impossible. That’s what people say, at least.”

“I have thought about it a great deal: here I am, young, healthy and truthful, just like any woman you see anywhere whom some man has settled for. And surely it would be surprising if somewhere there isn’t a man who won’t see that I am just as good as anyone else and settle for me. I am full of hope.”

“I am sure it will happen to you. But if you were suggesting that I make the same sort of change, I can only ask what I would do with a wife? I have nothing in the world but my suitcase, and I can barely sustain myself.”

“Oh no, I did not mean to say that you need this particular change. I was talking of change in general. For me marriage is the only possible change, but for you it could be something else.”

“I expect you are right, but you seem to forget that people are different. You see, however much I wanted to change, even if I wanted it with all my might, I could never manage to want it as much as you do. You seem to want it at all costs.”

“Perhaps that is because for you a change would be less great than it would for me. As far as I am