

When Apples are Ripe

The hour was late. Behind the linden trees which lined the garden fence, the moon was just coming up, glinting through the tips of the fruit trees and lighting up the entire rear wall of the house which the garden backed on to. The narrow paved courtyard which was separated from the garden by a paling was lit up too, and the white curtains behind the small windows on the ground floor of the house were completely illuminated by its beams. From time to time it seemed as though a small hand was peeping out between those curtains and surreptitiously pulling them apart, for on one occasion the figure of a girl came into view, leaning on the window-seat. She was wearing a white kerchief knotted beneath her chin, and she was holding a small lady's watch up to the moonlight, evidently so as to observe the more closely the movement of its hands. From somewhere beyond the garden the clock in the church tower was just striking the three-quarters.

Down in the garden among the bushes, and on the steps and lawns, all was dark and still, save for the marten perched among the damsons, who was enjoying a noisy meal and scratching his claws on the bark of a tree-trunk. All of a sudden he cocked his head. Something was rustling on the other side of the garden fence. Then a large head peered over. The marten hopped down with a single bound and vanished between the houses, and over the boards of the fence a stocky young lad let himself slowly down into the garden.

Facing the damson-tree and not far from the fence stood a not especially tall August apple-tree; its fruit was just ripe, and its boughs laden almost to breaking-point. The lad was evidently familiar with it, for he grinned and nodded at it while he stalked all round it on tip-toe; then, having stood quietly listening for some moments, he unfastened a large sack from his midriff and warily began to climb. Soon there were snapping sounds from up in the branches and apples began tumbling into the sack one after another at brief and regular intervals.

In the midst of this activity, it happened that one of the apples accidentally fell to the ground and rolled a few yards away into the bushes where, quite hidden from view, there was a stone garden table with a bench in front of it. And there – something the lad had not reckoned with – sat a young man, completely motionless, his elbows propped on the table. When the rolling apple touched his foot, he jumped up, startled; a moment later he was venturing circumspectly out on to the path. As he looked up to where the moon was shining on the tree, he saw a branch with red apples on it rocking to and fro, almost imperceptibly at first and then more and more violently; then a hand reached up into the moonlight, grasped an apple, and disappeared almost at once into the deep shadow of the leaves.

The man down below stepped quietly in under the tree, and now at last could make out the lad, wrapped round the trunk like some monstrous black caterpillar. Whether the man was in fact a huntsman is hard to say, for all the little moustache he sported and the scalloped tails of his hunting-coat; but at this juncture something like the fever of the chase must have seized hold of him. Breathlessly, for all the world as though he had been waiting here half the night solely to apprehend lads in apple-trees, he thrust his hand up into the boughs and put it gently but firmly round the boot which hung defencelessly down the tree-trunk. The boot twitched, further up the tree the apple-picking ceased, but no words were exchanged. Every time the lad tugged, the

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hunter renewed his grip. This went on for quite a while, until at length the lad resorted to entreaties instead.

'But sir, sir!'

'Rascal!'

'The apples have been peeping over the fence all summer!'

'Just you wait, I'll give you something to remember!' and at that the young man grasped further up the tree trunk and seized the lad by the seat of his pants. 'That's pretty rough material you have there!' he said.

"Sir, it's corduroy, sir!"

The hunter pulled a knife from his pocket and tried to open the blade with his free hand. When the lad heard the spring snapping back, he made shift to clamber down, but the young man prevented him. 'Stay where you are!' he insisted. 'You're in an ideal position just like that!'

The lad seemed completely aghast. 'Oh holy Moses!', he said, 'they're not even mine, they're my master's! - Sir, haven't you a cane with you, sir? Then you could settle the matter just with me! And there'd be more pleasure in it for you, just like taking exercise! My master says it's as good as going for a canter on a horse.'

But no: the hunter made his incision. When the lad felt the cold steel sliding past so close to his skin, he dropped his full sack on to the ground; the man put the excised patch carefully away in his waistcoat pocket. 'Now you can come down if you want to', he said.

No answer came. One moment after another went by, but the boy still did not appear. From his vantage-point in the tree, at the very moment when the damage was being inflicted upon him from below, the lad had suddenly spotted a narrow window opening in the house yonder. A dainty foot reached out - he spied the gleam of a white stocking in the moonlight - and soon the lady to whom it belonged was standing outside in the paved courtyard. For a short while she continued to keep her hand on the opened window, then she walked slowly over to the little gate in the paling and leaned the upper half of her body out into the dark garden.

The lad almost dislocated his neck trying to observe all this. As he did so, various thoughts seemed to pass through his mind, for his mouth was suddenly contorted right back to his ears; whereupon he bumptiously took up his stand with legs astraddle on two adjacent branches, while with one hand he clutched the damaged pieces of his clothing together.

'Well, are you coming down now?' asked the young man.

'Yes, I'm coming', replied the lad.

'Well, hurry up about it, then!'

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'The only thing is', continued the lad, taking a bite of an apple as he spoke, so decisively that the huntsman could hear the crunch from down below, 'the only thing is, I happen to be a cobbler.'

'What's wrong with being a cobbler?'

'If I were a tailor, I'd be able to mend the hole myself.' And he went on eating his apple.

The young man began hunting in his pocket for a small coin, but all he could find was a weighty silver double-thaler piece. He was just pulling his hand out again, when he heard from down by the house the distinct sound of the latch on the gate in the paling being lifted, and from the church tower the clock began to strike twelve. He gave a sudden start. 'You idiot', he muttered to himself, clapping a hand to his head. Then he put his hand back into his pocket and said good-naturedly: 'I presume you come from a poor family?'

'You know what it's like', said the boy, 'things you want are hard to come by.'

'Very well, catch this and you'll be able to get your trousers patched!' And he threw the heavy coin up into the tree. The lad snatched it, turned it curiously over and over in the moonlight to inspect it, and then put it into his pocket with a smirk.

Out on the long path between the flower beds leading to the apple-tree, brisk footsteps and the rustle of a dress on the sand could be heard. The huntsman bit his lip and tried to drag the lad down by force, but the boy carefully pulled his legs up, one after the other, and his efforts were in vain.

'Do you hear me?' panted the man. 'You're free to go now!'

'Fine', said the lad. 'If only I'd got my sack!'

'Your sack?'

'I dropped it a moment ago, over there.'

'And why should I worry about that?'

'Sir, well sir, you're standing right by it.'

The man bent down, picked up the sack, began to hoist it up, and then dropped it again.

'Just chuck it up', said the lad. 'Go on, I'll catch it all right.'

The huntsman threw a despairing glance up into the tree, where the dark, squat figure was still standing between the branches, legs astraddle and motionless. But hearing the dainty footsteps coming little by little ever nearer, he quickly stepped out on to the path.

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Before he could blink, the girl's arms were round his neck.

'Heinrich!'

'For goodness' sake!' He held her mouth closed with his hand and pointed up into the tree. She looked at him with puzzled eyes, but instead of paying her any heed, he only bundled her into the bushes with both hands.

'You confounded scamp! Don't let me ever catch you round here again!' And he caught up the heavy sack from the ground and heaved it into the tree with a grunt.

'Oh yes, indeed', said the boy, carefully relieving him of his burden, 'these are the red ones, they come pretty heavy.' Whereupon he took a small piece of string from his pocket and fastened it round the sack about nine inches above the apples, while pulling the top of the sack tight with his teeth; then he hoisted it on to his shoulder, carefully and evenly, so that the load would be shared equally by his chest and his back. Having concluded the business to his satisfaction, he grabbed a branch which was just above his head and shook it with both hands. 'Stop thief!' he bawled. 'Thieves in the apple-trees!' And the ripe fruits came hurtling down through the branches on all sides of the tree.

Below him in the bushes came a rustling, a girl's voice screamed, the latch of the gate in the paling clicked, and when the lad craned his neck again, he was just in time to see the little window slamming shut and the white stocking disappearing inside the house.

A moment later he was sitting astride the garden fence, peering along the path, down which he espied his new acquaintance dashing out into the moonlight on his long legs. The lad put his hand in his pocket, fingered his silver coin and laughed so furiously to himself that the apples began to dance on his shoulders. Finally, when the entire household began running to and fro in the garden with sticks and lanterns, he dropped silently down on the far side of the fence and strolled along the path to the neighbouring garden where he lived.