

The Unseemly Old Lady

My grandmother was seventy-two years old when my grandfather died. He had a small lithographer's business in a little town in Baden and there he worked with two or three assistants until his death. My grandmother managed the household without a maid, looked after the ramshackle old house and cooked for the menfolk and children.

She was a little thin woman with lively lizard's eyes, though slow of speech. On very scanty means she had reared five of the seven children she had borne. As a result, she had grown smaller with the years.

Her two girls went to America and two of the sons also moved away. Only the youngest, who was delicate, stayed in the little town. He became a printer and set up a family far too large for him.

So after my grandfather died she was alone in the house.

The children wrote each other letters dealing with the problem of what should be done about her. One of them could offer her a home, and the printer wanted to move with his family into her house. But the old woman turned a deaf ear to these proposals and would only accept, from each of her children who could afford it, a small monetary allowance. The lithographer's business, long behind the times, was sold for practically nothing, and there were debts as well.

The children wrote saying that, all the same, she could not live quite alone, but since she entirely ignored this, they gave in and sent her a little money every month. At any rate, they thought, there was always the printer who had stayed in the town.

What was more, he undertook to give his brothers and sisters news of their mother from time to time. The printer's letters to

my father, and what my father himself learnt on a visit and, two years later, after my grandmother's burial, give me a picture of what went on in those two years.

It seems that, from the start, the printer was disappointed that my grandmother had declined to take him into the house, which was fairly large and now standing empty. He had four children and lived in three rooms. But in any case the old lady had only very casual relations with him. She invited the children for coffee every Sunday afternoon, and that was about all.

She visited her son once or twice in three months and helped her daughter-in-law with the jam-making. The young woman gathered from some of her remarks that she found the printer's little dwelling too cramped for her. He, in reporting this, could not forbear to add an exclamation mark.

My father wrote asking what the old woman was up to nowadays, to which he replied rather curtly: going to the cinema.

It must be understood that this was not at all the thing; at least, not in her children's eyes. Thirty years ago the cinema was not what it is today. It meant wretched, ill-ventilated premises, often converted from disused skittle-alleys, with garish posters outside displaying the murders and tragedies of passion. Strictly speaking, only adolescents went or, for the darkness, courting couples. An old woman there by herself would certainly be conspicuous.

And there was another aspect of this cinema-going to be considered. Of course, admission was cheap, but since the pleasure fell more or less into the category of self-indulgences it represented 'money thrown away'. And to throw money away was not respectable.

Furthermore, not only did my grandmother keep up no regular association with her son in the place, but she neither invited nor visited any of her other acquaintances. She never went to the coffee-parties in the little town. On the other hand, she frequented a cobbler's workshop in a poor and even slightly

notorious alley where, especially in the afternoon, all manner of not particularly reputable characters hung about: out-of-work waitresses and itinerant craftsmen. The cobbler was a middle-aged man who had knocked about the world without it leading to anything. It was also said that he drank. In any case, he was no proper associate for my grandmother.

The printer intimated in a letter that he had hinted as much to his mother and had met with a very cool reply. 'He's seen a thing or two,' she answered and that was the end of the conversation. It was not easy to talk to my grandmother about things she did not wish to discuss.

About six months after my grandfather's death the printer wrote to my father saying that their mother now ate at the inn every other day.

That really was news! Grandmother, who all her life had cooked for a dozen people and herself had always eaten up the leavings, now ate at the inn. What had come over her?

Shortly after this, my father made a business trip in the neighbourhood and he visited his mother. She was just about to go out when he turned up. She took off her hat again and gave him a glass of red wine and a biscuit. She seemed in a perfectly equable mood, neither particularly animated nor particularly silent. She asked after us, though not in much detail, and wanted principally to know whether there were cherries for the children. There she was completely her old self. The room was of course scrupulously clean and she looked well.

The only thing that gave an indication of her new life was that she did not want to go with my father to the churchyard to visit her husband's grave. 'You can go by yourself,' she said lightly. 'It's the third on the left in the eleventh row. I've got to go somewhere.'

The printer said afterwards that probably she had had to go to her cobbler. He complained bitterly.

'Here am I, stuck in this hole with my family, and only five

hours' badly-paid work, on top of which my asthma's troubling me again, while the house in the main street stands empty.'

My father had taken a room at the inn, but nevertheless expected to be invited by his mother, if only as a matter of form; however, she did not mention it. Yet even when the house had been full, she had always objected to his not staying with them and spending money on an hotel into the bargain.

But she appeared to have finished with family life and to be treading new paths now in the evening of her days. My father, who had his fair share of humour, found her 'pretty sprightly' and told my uncle to let the old woman do what she wanted.

And what did she want to do?

The next thing reported was that she had hired a brake and taken an excursion on a perfectly ordinary Thursday. A brake was a large, high-sprung, horse-drawn vehicle with a seating capacity for whole families. Very occasionally, when we grandchildren had come for a visit, grandfather had hired a brake. Grandmother had always stayed behind. She had refused to come along with a scornful wave of the hand.

And after the brake came the trip to K., a larger town some two hours' distance by train. There was a race-meeting there and it was to the races that my grandmother went.

The printer was now positively alarmed. He wanted to have a doctor called in. My father shook his head as he read the letter, but was against calling in a doctor.

My grandmother had not travelled alone to K. She had taken with her a young girl who, according to the printer's letter, was slightly feeble-minded: the kitchen-maid at the inn where the old lady took her meals every second day.

From now on this 'half-wit' played quite a part.

My grandmother apparently doted on her. She took her to the cinema and to the cobbler – who, incidentally, turned out to be a Social Democrat – and it was rumoured that the two women played cards in the kitchen over a glass of wine.

'Now she's bought the half-wit a hat with roses on it,' wrote the printer in despair. 'And our Anna has no Communion dress!'

My uncle's letters became quite hysterical, dealt only with the 'unseemly conduct of our dear mother' and otherwise said nothing. The rest I know from my father.

The innkeeper had whispered to him with a wink: 'Mrs B's enjoying herself nowadays, so they say.'

As a matter of fact, even in these last years my grandmother did not live extravagantly in any way. When she did not eat at the inn, she usually took no more than a little egg dish, some coffee and, above all, her beloved biscuits. She did, however, allow herself a cheap red wine, of which she drank a small glass at every meal. She kept the house very clean, and not just the bedroom and kitchen which she used. All the same, without her children's knowledge, she mortgaged it. What she did with the money never came out. She seems to have given it to the cobbler. After her death he moved to another town and was said to have started a fair-sized business in hand-made shoes.

When you come to think of it, she lived two lives in succession. The first one as daughter, wife and mother; the second simply as Mrs B, an unattached person without responsibilities and with modest but sufficient means. The first life lasted some sixty years; the second no more than two.

My father learnt that in the last six months she had permitted herself certain liberties unknown to normal people. Thus she might rise in summer at three in the morning and take walks in the deserted streets of the little town, which she had entirely to herself. And, it was generally alleged, when the priest called on her to keep the old woman company in her loneliness, she invited him to the cinema.

She was not at all lonely. A crowd of jolly people forgathered at the cobbler's, it appears, and there was much gossip. She always kept a bottle of her own red wine there and drank her little glassful whilst the others gossiped and inveighed against

the town officials. This wine was reserved for her, though sometimes she provided stronger drink for the company.

She died quite suddenly on an autumn afternoon, in her bedroom, though not in bed but on an upright chair by the window. She had invited the 'half-wit' to the cinema that evening, so the girl was with her when she died. She was seventy-four years old.

I have seen a photograph of her which was taken for the children and shows her laid out.

What you see is a tiny little face, very wrinkled, and a thin-lipped, wide mouth. Much that is small, but no smallness. She had savoured to the full the long years of servitude and the short years of freedom and consumed the bread of life to the last crumb.