

Kapuzinergruft

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The family Trotta has not left Roth. He returns to them, but now to another branch of it, one which had not been ennobled, but is well-off anyway. The young Trotta, recently fatherless lives with his mother in a big house with servants. He is an officer and spends his time with his friends drinking and carousing in the many coffee-houses which dot Vienna. Life is not a serious matter, dallying with women is a nice distraction, marriage not, something to be postponed indefinitely, nevertheless he is in love with a young woman Elizabeth, a weakness of which he is very much ashamed, yet eager to confess it to someone, his mother being the only one he can think of; still confessing to your mother is as little *comme-il-faut* as being seriously in love.

Into his life enters two figures. One a distant relative stemming from Slovenia, from where the Trotta family originates. He is charmed by him and his ways as he is visited by him one morning. They go out for lunch and he buys his vest and his clock as mementoes. The relative, another Trotta, but by name of Bronco, is a peasant and off-season he travels widely in the empire and sells roasted chestnuts. This leads to another encounter. A friend of his, a Jewish coachman by name of Reisiger, living in Zlotograd, a distant city close to the Russian border, seeks out our young Trotta referring to their common friend Bronco asks for a favor for his son, a gifted violinist. Our Trotta is enamored by the colorful character, and seeks out his friend Chojnicki, the brother of the very same Chojnicki, who played an important part in 'Radetzkmarsch', and enlists his help. The matter is easily arranged, Chojnicki, as enamored by Reisiger as Trotta, does not even bother to make the young boy audition. The charm of Reisiger does not fade and Trotta takes up an invitation to travel to the distant border town to visit his newfound friend. The Austrian Empire is vast enclosing a mosaic of different ethnicities yet its infrastructure unifies it. The railway stations look the same everywhere as do the coffee shops, and he feels instantly at home,

Soon thereafter war descends and the thought of death and destruction fills the future. In this state of despondency anything can be done, in particular to marry his sweetheart. To ask for her hand turns out to be far easier than he had anticipated, his future father-in-law second-guesses his intentions right away, and the union is assured to the delight of all parties. A hurried wedding takes place, with his mother being somewhat aloof as to the prospects. He has also decided that he does not want to serve in his regular regiment but wants to transfer to a border regiment in Zlotograd, enabling him to serve with Reisiger and his relative Bronco, rather than his usual crew with which he has grown disenchanted. But before joining he has some sixteen hours of leave, which he intends to spend with his bride. As they head to their destination he is dismayed to note in her mannerism traces of those of her father whom he despises. That she brings with her a book to read, does not help matter. Once arriving at the hotel they are met by the old servant - Jacques, incidentally of the same name as the servant in Radetzkmarsch, and in front of his eyes he suffers a stroke and dies during the night, forcing him to neglect his bride, who mortally

insulted leaves in the early morning for home. There being a war in progress, there is little time and motivation for Trotta to dwell on his misfortune forced as he is to look for his regiment which is retreating from the pursuing Russian enemy. He finds it finally, only to be taken prisoner along with his two friends and moved deep into Siberia. There are adventures and eventually after the end of the war he is returned to Vienna. His world has disappeared. His mother has been ruined by the war keeping nothing but the big house. He is pressed to seek out his bride, who has kept her married name and is engaged in some crafts business financed by her father and enlisting the expertise of some strange woman Jolanth Szatmary who calls herself a Professor. Trotta is invited to her office which is being extravagantly furnished. He feels very much out of place. At a rendez-vous with his Elizabeth the Professor tags along. The two women seem to have a liaison, yet his bride gives him secretly a little note and they meet later that evening in a coffee-house with a strange and distracting smell. They planlessly wander the streets together only to find themselves in a cheap hotel room finally consummating their aborted marriage.

The crafts business does not make money, the efforts of the father-in-law to make money fail, a certain smooth operator from Mark Brandenburg charms Trotta's mother and the house is being mortgaged. And the business fails, Elizabeth moves in with them, lodgers are taken on (mostly friends who are less than regular paying their rents), and a son is born, and Trotta, who has no occupation now finds himself having two, that of son and father. Although Elizabeth has begged him to impregnate her, she soon gets bored with domestic life, the influence of Szatmara reasserts itself, and she takes off for Hollywood to become a film star. Meanwhile the mother suffers a stroke and finally dies after Elizabeth is long since gone, confessing on her death bed that she never could stand her daughter-in-law and that her grandson should not be raised in the house. Her son obliges and at the end of the book you find him alone as the country one day is attached to the German Reich. What to do but seek out the 'Kapuzinergruft' where the Habsburger emperors are buried. The Habsburg empire definitely having run its course.

The 'Kapuzinergruft' is a sketchy work and not comparable to 'Radetzky Marsch', whose epic reach tend to dwarf anything else that Roth has written. It was written just before his death, and a certain lack of energy in its execution is noticeable. Roth is normally an impatient writer and hence has a propensity for being slap-dash, little of which is present in Radetzky Marsch, but here the lack of completion is also due to fatigue. Nevertheless the novel has some commendable features, especially those pertaining to his tortured relations to his wife and his mother. Especially the somewhat perverted relationship with his wife is intriguing. Do they love each other, or is the formal bond forged by marriage and youthful innocent infatuation stronger than conventional attraction? What is really the relationship with the woman Jolanth? A relationship into which Elizabeth has been drawn against her will? And the final flight to Hollywood? A culmination of her destiny? The portrait of the mother is drawn only after Trotta's return from the war. A case of distracted planning on the side of Roth? Getting second thoughts? The appearances of the 'Vetter' Bronco and the colorful Jewish coachman seem a bit too transparent and hardly convincing and engaging. It is not an epic but a hasty sketch whose impact is impressionistic and intermittent, but at its best as engaging as anything you can expect in fiction.

