

Unterm Birnbaum

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This extended novella was written at the end of the authors life, but is placed in the early 1830's, clearly as that of his childhood. It is basically a detective story, not a regular one with a murder mystery, but one in which supposedly a murder has been committed, and one in which the perpetrators are known to the reader, and strongly suspected at first by the other characters of the story. The nature of the suspense is whether the guilty ones will be found out or not.

It is the story of the merchant Abel Hratscheck and his wife Ursel. He is not a very capable merchant over his heads in debt, and his wife of dubious origins (has he not be an actress according to village rumours) has pretensions. The marriage of some late provenance is shadowed by tragedy, their children having met an early death. Just before Christmas a creditor arrives and then disappears mysteriously the next morning, his body never found in the nearby Oder, only the carriage in which he had travelled. Suspicions fall onto Hratscheck who is taken into custody. The minister of the village testifies energetically and demonstratively to his good character, the prosecutor cannot make a case against him, and after the most damning of the evidence against him, given by an old witchy neighbouring woman of his, to the effect that he had been seen digging under the cherry tree shortly after the disappearance, turns into an anti-climax (a body is found, but one that has been under the earth for at least twenty years and assumed to be a waylaid French soldier) and that concomitantly the suspect can convincingly explain away all the circumstantial evidence against him, he is subsequently released. Gradually remaining suspicion fades away and the story is more or less forgotten and forgiven and can forthwith be referred to in jest. A year goes by, the house is extended (by money supposedly inherited) but his wife though is stricken by a mysterious illness. Upon the completion of the extension, she rallies, but temporarily and then succumbs and dies. Her last wish is that her husband should send a letter to an bishop, he suspecting that it is one of a veiled confession, refuses to do so, and instead spends money on an ostentatious cross for her grave. The reader is led to suspect that something is hidden in the basement of the house, and indeed, his servants refuses to go down and get wine from his collection claiming that there are ghosts. Somehow the merchant decides one night to move the body, provoked by comments by his witchy neighbour. How to do it without being discovered? He learns from the witch that seeds from a certain bush makes you invisible. He searches out the bush, tries it, only to find that it does not work. Instead he covers the windows of the cellar with plank, just wide enough to block out the narrow windows. However, that plank was there to prevent his wine-casks stored above the cellar from rolling. When he enters with his spade, they slowly start to come into motion trapping him. He is found the next morning, 'in flagrante' so to speak, although he is dead. Everything is given an explanation, and the minister, who has supported him and his wife all the time, is of course deeply hurt. He is given but a secret funeral and a short note appears in the paper.

So the story is ultimately supposed to convey a sense of place and time, in addition to giving acute psychological insights into the main characters to illuminate the causes for their actions and motivations. It is natural to compare it to stories by Chekov, who wrote around the same time and often with the same subject matter of village life. In doing so the shortcomings are obvious. A story of Chekov conjures vivid visual images, this one really does not. Also a story by Chekov is denser, and covers thus far more ground page by page. Surely in the hands of Chekov much what is now being explicated would be subtly hinted at, and instead of 120 pages we might have a third as much. On the other hand the story, although considered a lesser not to say marginal work by the author certainly has its merits. The reader is throughout entertaining a genuine sympathy for the couple secretly hoping that they will be spared their just desserts. Even if the locale is not vividly presented, there is nevertheless a nice feeling of the coming and going of the seasons.

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