

FRANZ KAFKA

Metamorphosis
and Other Stories

Translated with an Introduction
by MICHAEL HOFMANN

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take a smaller, cheaper, but also better situated and more practical apartment than their present one, which Gregor had found for them. While they were talking in these terms, almost at one and the same time Mr and Mrs Samsa noticed their increasingly lively daughter, the way that of late, in spite of the trouble that had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into an attractive and well-built girl. Falling silent, and communicating almost unconsciously through glances, they thought it was about time to find a suitable husband for her. And it felt like a confirmation of their new dreams and their fond intentions when, as they reached their destination, their daughter was the first to get up, and stretched her nubile young body.

In the Penal Colony

'It is a strange piece of equipment,' said the officer to the travelling researcher, and with a certain air of admiration he surveyed the equipment with which he must certainly be familiar. The traveller seemed to have taken up the commandant's invitation merely out of politeness, when he asked him if he would like to be present at the execution of a soldier, who had been condemned for insubordination and insulting an officer. Interest in the execution seemed not to be that great in the penal colony either. The only other persons present in the deep, sandy little valley, ringed by bare slopes, apart from the officer and the traveller, were the condemned man himself, a stupid-looking, dishevelled, slack-mouthed fellow, and a soldier who was holding the heavy chain to which smaller chains had been made fast that secured the condemned man by the wrists and ankles and neck, and that were connected one to another by further chains. The condemned man looked so doggishly submissive, it really seemed as if one might allow him to roam the slopes freely, and only needed to whistle when it was time for the execution, and he would come.

The traveller had little use for the machine, and with an almost ostentatious indifference paraded back and forth behind the condemned man, while the officer saw to the last preparations, now crawling underneath the machine (whose foundations were sunk deep in the ground), now climbing a ladder to

inspect some of its upper parts. These jobs seemed as though they might have been left to a mechanic, but the officer performed them with great enthusiasm, whether he was a particular devotee of the machine, or whether for some other reasons, these tasks couldn't be entrusted to any other person. 'Everything's ready now!' he finally called, and climbed down from the ladder. He was quite shattered, was breathing hard through his open mouth, and had stuffed a couple of ladies' cambric handkerchiefs down the collar of his uniform. 'Those uniforms are much too heavy for the tropics,' said the traveller, instead of asking, as the officer might have expected, about the machine. 'True,' said the officer, and washed his greasy, oily hands in a bucket of water standing by for the purpose, 'but to us they signify home, and we don't want to lose touch with home. — As for the machine,' he went on to add, drying his hands on a rag, and simultaneously pointing to the machine, 'up to this point, I've had to take a hand myself, but from here on in the machine works automatically.' The traveller nodded and followed the officer, who, to insure himself against any possible eventualities, then conceded: 'Of course, there are occasional malfunctions; I hope we shan't experience any today, but we have to allow for the possibility. After all, the machine has to operate for twelve hours non-stop. At least, if there are any malfunctions, they are usually very minor, and can be taken care of immediately.'

'Don't you want to sit down?' he asked at last, reached into a tangle of bamboo chairs, pulled one out, and offered it to the traveller, who felt unable to refuse. He found himself sitting at the edge of a pit, into which he cast a glance. It wasn't a very deep pit. On one side, the earth had been formed into a kind of rampart, on the other side was the machine. 'I don't know,' the officer said, 'whether the commandant has explained the machine to you yet.' The traveller made a gesture with his

hands that might be taken either way; the officer asked for nothing more, because now he was able to explain the machine himself. 'This machine,' he began, and reached for a strut on which he supported himself, 'this machine was the brainchild of our previous commandant. I was involved in the project from the very first trials, and worked on every stage to its completion. Credit for the invention, however, is his alone. Did you hear of our previous commandant? No? Well, I don't think I'm going too far if I say that the organization of the entire penal colony is his work. At the time of his death, we, his friends, already knew that the organization was so seamlessly efficient that his successor, even if he had a thousand new plans in his head, would be unable to change anything of the old design. And our prediction has been borne out, too; the new commandant has had to acknowledge its truth. It's really too bad that you never got to meet the previous commandant! — However,' the officer brought himself up short, 'here I am gabbling away, and his machine is in front of us. It consists, as you will see, of three parts. Over time, each one has acquired a sort of popular nickname. Thus, the lowest part is called the bed, the top part is the engraver, and the suspended part here in the middle is the harrow.' 'The harrow?' asked the traveller. He hadn't been paying complete attention; the sun was too strong in the unshaded valley; it was hard to concentrate one's attention. The officer now seemed the more admirable to him, in his tight-fitting parade uniform, weighed down with epaulettes, hung with braid, enlarging so enthusiastically on his theme, and even, while he spoke, pulling out a wrench and tightening the odd bolt. The soldier seemed to be in a similar condition to the traveller. He had wrapped the condemned man's chain round both his wrists, was propping himself up on his rifle with one hand, had let his head loll back, and was taking no interest in anything around him. The traveller wasn't

surprised, as the officer was speaking in French, and French was a language neither the soldier nor the condemned man could possibly have understood. This made it all the more surprising that the condemned man was trying hard to follow the officer's explanations. With a kind of sleepy persistence he looked wherever the officer pointed, and when the latter was interrupted by a question from the traveller, he, as much as the officer, turned to look at him.

'Yes, the harrow,' said the officer, 'an appropriate name for it, don't you think? The needles are set as in a harrow, and the whole thing is used like a harrow, albeit on one spot, and in a far more sophisticated manner. You will see, soon enough. The condemned man is laid on the bed. — Allow me to explain the machine first, and then demonstrate its use to you. That way, you'll be better able to follow it. Also, one of the cogs in the engraver is rather worn; it makes a loud grinding sound when the machine is turned on, and it's very hard to hear yourself think then; unfortunately, spare parts are very hard to get hold of. — Well, as I say, this here is the bed. The entire surface is covered with a layer of cotton-wool; its purpose you will learn in due time. The condemned man, naked, of course, is made to lie face down on the cotton-wool; these are the straps to secure his hands, his feet, and his neck. Here at the head end of the bed, where, as I say, the man is lying face down to begin with, is a little felt stump, which can be easily adjusted so that it goes directly into the man's mouth. It serves the purpose of stifling his screams and preventing him from biting off his tongue. The man has no option but to take the felt into his mouth, otherwise the neck-retainer would break his neck.' 'That's cotton-wool, you say?' asked the traveller, leaning forward. 'Yes, of course,' said the officer with a smile, 'feel for yourself.' And he took the traveller's hand, and moved it over the bed. 'It's cotton-wool with a special preparation, which is why it might appear different

to you; I'll discuss the point of that when I come to it.' The traveller found himself warming to the machine a little; raising his hand to shield his eyes from the sun, he looked up at its top part. It was a large structure. The bed and the engraver were of equal size, and looked like two dark troughs. The engraver was roughly six feet over the bed; the two were linked at the corners by four brass rods, that were effulgent in the sun. Between the two troughs, the harrow hung on a steel band.

The officer had barely noticed the traveller's previous indifference, but he now responded to his quickening interest; he therefore broke off his exposition to give him time to look at the machine uninterrupted. The condemned man did likewise; as he was unable to shield his eyes, he squinted up.

'So, you've got the man lying there,' said the traveller, and he leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

'That's right,' said the officer, and pushed his cap back a little, and wiped his face, 'now, listen carefully! Both the bed and the engraver are independently battery-operated; the bed needs power for itself, the engraver for its harrow. As soon as the man has been tied down, the bed is set in motion. It vibrates both sideways and up and down, in tiny, very rapid movements. You will have seen similar apparatus in hospitals; only, with our bed, all its movements are very carefully calibrated; they need to correspond absolutely precisely to the movements of the harrow. And it's the harrow that is entrusted with the actual carrying out of the sentence.'

'And what is the sentence?' asked the traveller. 'Oh, don't you know?' the officer blurted out, and bit his lip: 'I'm sorry, perhaps I'm getting a little ahead of myself in my explanations; please forgive me. The commandant always used to give the explanations in person; the new commandant has excused himself from this honourable duty; but the fact that he has failed to communicate the form of the sentence to such a distinguished

visitor' – the traveller made the attempt to ward off the distinction with both hands, but the officer insisted on the expression – 'to such a distinguished visitor as yourself, well, that sort of development' – he was about to launch into an oath, but mastered himself, and merely said: 'I wasn't told, it's not my fault: Although in point of fact, I'm best placed to explain the varieties of judgement, because I carry the sketches of the previous commandant' – he patted his breast pocket, – 'right here.'

'Sketches made by the commandant himself?' asked the traveller: 'Was there no limit to the man's talents? He was soldier, judge, engineer, chemist and artist, all in one?'

'Yes indeed,' said the officer, nodding with eyes fixed in thought. Then he looked critically at his hands; they didn't strike him as sufficiently clean to handle the sketches; so he went over to the bucket, and gave them another wash. Then he pulled out a small leather folder, and said: 'Our sentence doesn't sound particularly severe. The condemned man has to have the law he has transgressed inscribed by the harrow on his body. This man here, for instance' – the officer gestured at the condemned man – 'will be inscribed with: Respect your commanding officer!'

The traveller glanced at the man; when the officer pointed at him, he had lowered his head and tensed his hearing to the utmost, in the hope of picking up some scrap of information. But the movements of his blubbery pressed lips showed that quite evidently he had not managed to glean anything. The traveller had various questions at the tip of his tongue, but, seeing the man, he merely asked: 'Does he know his sentence?' 'No,' said the officer, and wanted to proceed with his explanations, but the traveller interrupted him: 'He doesn't know his own sentence?' 'No,' said the officer again, halted for a moment, as though to get from the traveller some sort of justification for

such a question, and then went on: 'It would be useless to tell him. It will be put to him physically.' The traveller felt he had nothing further to ask, but he sensed the condemned man's eyes on him; did he approve of the process, he appeared to be asking. And therefore the traveller, having just sat back, now leaned forward again and asked: 'But he knows he has received sentence, surely?' 'No,' said the officer, and smiled at the traveller, as though in expectation of further striking revelations from him. 'No,' mused the traveller, and stroked his forehead; 'so the man doesn't know what view was taken of the case for his defence?' 'He had no opportunity to defend himself,' said the officer, and looked away, as though talking to himself, and unwilling to embarrass the traveller by telling him such self-evident truths. 'He must have had an opportunity to defend himself,' said the traveller, and got up from his seat.

The officer appreciated he was in danger of being delayed for some considerable time in his mission to explain the machine; he therefore went over to the traveller, took him by the arm, pointed to the condemned man, who now, seeing himself the object of so much interest, was standing at attention – and the soldier too gave a tug on the chain – and said: 'It's like this. I have been appointed judge in the penal colony. In spite of my youth. Because I assisted the former commandant in all punishment-related issues, and also I have the best understanding of the machine. My basis for deciding is this: guilt is always beyond doubt. Other courts are unable to follow this principle, because there are many people serving on them, or they have other, higher courts above them. This is not the case here, or at least it wasn't under the previous commandant. The new one, admittedly, has already shown some interest in meddling with my court, but thus far I have been successful in staving him off, and I will continue to be successful in that regard. – You wanted to hear an explanation of the case; it's just as

straightforward as the rest of them. This morning a captain brought a charge that this man, who is his batman, and sleeps outside his door, failed in the performance of his duty. He is required to get up every hour, and salute outside the captain's door. Not a particularly arduous duty, and a very necessary one, because it keeps the man fresh for guard duty and for service to his master. Last night, the captain wanted to see whether his servant was discharging his duty properly. At the stroke of two, he opened his door, and found the man sprawled out asleep. He fetched his riding crop, and struck him a blow across the face. Instead of getting up and begging for forgiveness, the man grabbed his master by the legs; shook him, and cried: "Drop that whip, or I'll gobble you up." — That's the long and short of it. An hour ago, the captain came to me, I took down his report and wrote out the judgement. Then I had the man clapped in irons. It was all very simple. If I had called on the man first, and questioned him, it would have produced nothing but confusion. He would have lied to me; if I'd managed to catch him lying, he would have told different lies, and so on. But now I've got him, and I'm not going to let him go. — Is that enough of an explanation? But time is pressing, and I haven't finished with the explanation of the machine.' He made the traveller sit down again, stepped up to the machine and began: 'As you see, the harrow follows the human form; here is the harrow for the upper body, here are harrows for the legs. All there is for the head is this one little spike. Do you understand?' He leaned forward and smiled encouragingly at the traveller, prepared to give the most detailed explanations.

The traveller looked at the harrow with wrinkled brow. The information about the methods of the court had left him unsatisfied. And then again, he had to remind himself, this was a penal colony, certain rules obtained, and military discipline evidently had to be kept tight. In addition, he put a little hope

in the character of the new commandant, who clearly, albeit slowly, intended to reform the whole process, whatever the views of this particular narrow-minded officer. Reaching this point in his thinking, the traveller asked: 'Will the commandant attend the execution?' 'I'm not sure,' said the officer, caught off balance by the direct question, and his encouraging smile was distorted: 'That's one more reason why we have to hurry. I will even, I'm sorry to say, have to curtail my explanations somewhat. But then I could supply further information tomorrow, once the machine has been cleaned — the fact that it gets so dirty is really its only drawback. So, just the bare essentials from here on. — When the man is lying on the bed, and the bed has begun to tremble, the harrow is lowered on to his body. It automatically adjusts itself so that it barely grazes his body with the tips of its needles; the distance once established, the steel rope tautens into a pole. And then the performance begins. Of course someone without the necessary background would notice no difference in the punishments. The harrow does more or less the same job. Trembling, it sticks its points into the body lying on the bed, which is itself trembling. To make it possible for anyone to view the way the sentence is carried out, the harrow is made of glass. Fitting the needles to it gave us considerable technical headaches, as you might imagine, but after many attempts the difficulties have been surmounted. We shirked no effort. And now anyone can see through the glass the way the inscription is made on the body. Would you like to step nearer, and see the needles for yourself?'

The traveller slowly got to his feet, walked over, and leaned down over the harrow. 'You see,' the officer continued, 'needles in many positions, but always in pairs. Each long one has a short one next to it. It's the long one that writes, and the short one squirts water to wash off the blood, so that the writing

is always clearly legible. The mixture of water and blood is conducted into these little runnels, and finally flows into this principal runnel, which feeds the drainage pipe into the pit here.' The officer's finger sketched the route the blood and water mixture had to follow. When, in an effort to make it as clear as possible, the officer cupped his hands at the end of the drainage pipe, the traveller lifted his head and with one hand put out behind him, groped his way back to his chair. Then he saw to his horror that the condemned man had also followed the officer's invitation to inspect the harrow from close to. He had dragged the sleepy soldier along a short way on the chain, and was leaning down over the glass. One could see him looking with his uncertain eyes for what the two gentlemen had just studied, and how, because he didn't have an explanation, he was unable to make sense of it. He bent over this way and that. Repeatedly, he ran his eyes over the glass. The traveller wanted to drive him back, because what he was doing was probably punishable. But the officer with one hand restrained the traveller, and with the other picked a lump of earth from the rampart, and threw it at the soldier. His head jerked up, he saw what the condemned man had dared to do, dropped his rifle, dug his heels into the ground, and yanked at the chain, whereupon the condemned man fell over; then he stood over the man as he writhed on the ground, jangling his chains. 'Pick him up!' yelled the officer, because he noticed that the traveller was becoming unhelpfully distracted by the condemned man. The traveller even leaned down past the harrow, just to see what was going on with the condemned man. 'Treat him gently!' yelled the officer. He ran round the machine, picked up the condemned man under the arms, and, after several stumbles, finally got him upright with some help from the soldier.

'Well, I suppose I know everything now,' said the traveller, as the officer came back to him. 'Everything except the most

important thing of all,' he replied, took the traveller by the arm, and pointed up: 'There in the engraver is the mechanism which governs the movement of the harrow, and that mechanism is set according to drawings of the various possible judgements. I still use the drawings made by the previous commandant. Here they are' - he took a few sheets from the leather folder - 'I'm afraid I can't give them to you to look at, they are the most precious things I have. Sit down, I'll show you a few; from this distance you'll be able to have quite a good view.' He showed him the first page. The traveller would have liked to say something complimentary, but all he saw were labyrinthine criss-crossing lines that covered the paper so thickly that it was hard to see any white space at all. 'Read it,' said the officer. 'I can't,' said the traveller. 'But it's perfectly clear,' said the officer. 'It's very artful,' said the traveller evasively, 'but I'm afraid I can't decipher it.' 'Ha,' said the officer, and he laughed and took back the folder, 'well it's no primary school calligraphy, that's for sure. It does take a long time to read. I'm sure you would eventually be able to decipher it. Of course, the writing mustn't be too straightforward; it's not supposed to be fatal straight away, but only after an interval of twelve hours or so on average; the turning-point occurs after about six. And many many ornaments surround the script proper; the actual text is traced round the body like a narrow belt; the rest of the body is set aside for decoration. Are you now able to grasp the work of the harrow and the whole apparatus? - Take a look!' He jumped on to the ladder, turned a wheel, and called down: 'Watch out, step aside!' and it started up. Had it not been for the squeaking of the wheel, it would have been majestic. As though surprised by the annoying wheel, the officer waved his fist at it, and then spread his arms apologetically towards the traveller, and quickly climbed down, to watch the working of the machine from below. Something was still amiss, discernible

only to him; he climbed back up, reached into the interior of the engraver with both hands, then, to get down quicker, instead of using the ladder, he slid down one of its poles, and, to make himself heard, screamed excitedly into the traveller's ear: 'Do you understand the procedure? The harrow is starting to write; once it's completed the first phase of writing on the man's back, the cotton-wool roll comes down and slowly turns the body on to its side, to offer clean space to the harrow. At the same time, the raw parts already inscribed are pressed against the cotton wool; its special finish immediately stanches the bleeding, and prepares the surface for a deepening of the writing. The jagged edges of the harrow here strip the cotton-wool off the wounds as the body is further rotated, and drop it into the trench, and then the harrow gets to work again. Its script steadily deepens over twelve hours. For the first six of them the condemned man lives almost as before, only he experiences pain. After two hours the felt is taken away, because the man has no strength left with which to scream. In the electrically heated dish here at the head end some warm rice porridge is put, at which the man, if he likes, can lap with his tongue. No one ever passes up the chance. At least I don't know of anyone, and I have seen plenty. It is only in about the sixth hour that he loses his relish for food. I am usually kneeling down here, watching for this to happen. The man rarely swallows his last morsel, he turns it in his mouth, and spits it into the trench. I need to duck, otherwise I would get hit in the face. But how quiet the man comes to be in the sixth hour! The very dimmest of them begins to understand. You see it in the eyes. From there it starts to spread. A sight that might seduce one to take one's place under the harrow as well. Nothing more happens, but the man begins to decipher the script, he purses his lips as if he were listening. As you've seen, it's not easy to decipher the script with one's eyes; our man deciphers it with his wounds.

Admittedly, it's hard work; and takes six more hours to complete. At the end of that time, the harrow pierces him through, and tosses him into the pit, where the body smacks down on the bloody water and cotton-wool. That concludes the judgement, and we, the soldier and myself, shovel some earth over him.'

The traveller had inclined his ear to the officer, and, with his hands in his pockets, he watched the machine at work. The condemned man watched too, but without comprehension. He stooped down a little to follow the wavering needles, when, on a sign from the officer, the soldier from behind cut through his shirt and trousers so that they dropped off him; he was reaching for them to cover his nakedness, but the soldier lifted him up in the air and shook off the last of his rags. The officer switched off the machine, and in the new silence the condemned man was laid under the harrow. His chains were taken off him, and he was strapped on instead; initially, it struck the condemned man as an improvement. Then the harrow dipped a little, because the man was lean. When the needle-points touched him, a shudder passed over his skin; while the soldier was busy with his right hand, he put out his left, not knowing where to; but it was straight at the traveller. The officer kept gazing at the traveller from the side, as though trying to read in his expression what impression the execution, which he had – however superficially – explained to him, was making on him.

The strap for the man's wrist broke; presumably the soldier had drawn it too tight. The soldier held up the broken strap, requiring the officer to help. The officer went over to him, facing the traveller the while, and said: 'The machine has a great many moving parts; every so often something in it is bound to break or tear, but that shouldn't affect one's overall sense of its performance. A strap is easily replaced; I'm going to have to use a chain; though admittedly it will have an adverse effect on the precision of the vibrations where the right arm is

concerned.' And while he chained the arm, he added: 'However, the means to preserve the machine are severely diminished. Under the previous commandant, there was a fund ring-fenced for the purpose, to which I had free access. There was a storehouse containing all sorts of spares. I must confess I was spoiled, and used to be quite wasteful with the materials – earlier, you understand, not any more, whatever the new commandant claims, he's just set on doing everything possible differently. So now he keeps the machine funds under his own supervision, and if I ask for a new strap, the old broken one is demanded by way of proof, and then the replacement doesn't come for another ten days, and the quality is terrible, and it's basically useless. And as for how I'm supposed to run the machine in the meantime, well, that's not their concern, is it?'

The traveller reflected: intervening in other people's affairs is always fraught with risks. He wasn't a citizen of the penal colony, or of the state to which it belonged. If he wanted to condemn this execution, or even seek to obstruct it, he laid himself open to the objection: you're a stranger, what do you know? To which he would have had no reply; at most he could have added that he was a little surprised at himself, because he was travelling with the desire to see things for himself, and not at all to meddle in foreign notions of justice. Here, though, things looked rather enticing. The injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were incontestable. No one could claim any self-interest on the part of the traveller, because the condemned man was a stranger to him, not a compatriot, and by no means a sympathetic fellow either. The traveller himself carried letters from high officials, had been received here with great politeness, and the fact that he had been asked to witness this execution even seemed to suggest that his opinion on this justice was being sought. This was all the more probable as the commandant, as he had already heard

almost ad nauseam, was no advocate of this justice, and seemed to be behaving almost as a personal enemy of the officer.

At that moment the traveller heard the officer give a cry of rage. He had just, not without some trouble, forced the felt knob into the condemned man's mouth, when the condemned man closed his eyes in a spasm of nausea and vomited. Hastily the officer snatched him up from the knob into the air, to turn his head to the pit; but it was too late and the spew was already all over the machine. 'All the commandant's fault!' screamed the officer, and shook the brass rods in a fury, 'the way the machine is being treated like a cowshed.' With shaking hands, he showed the traveller what had happened. 'And haven't I just spent hours trying to get the commandant to understand that prisoners shouldn't be fed on the eve of an execution? But no, with their new mild approach they do things differently. The commandant's ladies stuff the man full of sugary sweet things on the eve of his marching off. All his life he's fed on stinking fish, and now he's made to eat confectionery! But hey, why not, I wouldn't really have any objections, but why have I not got a new felt, as I've been asking for for the past three months. How can a man take that felt in his mouth without nausea anyway, when over a hundred men have sucked and bitten on it in their death throes?'

The condemned man had dropped his head again and looked calm, the soldier was busy swabbing the machine with the condemned man's shirt. The officer went over to the traveller, who, half suspecting something, had taken a step back, but the officer took him by the hand, and pulled him aside. 'I'd like to have a word with you in confidence,' he said, 'if you'll allow?' 'Of course,' said the traveller, and listened with lowered eyes.

'This procedure and this execution, which you now have an opportunity to admire, currently has no public supporters in our colony. I am its sole defender, and the sole defender of the

former commandant's legacy. I no longer have the leisure to devise elaborations or refinements of the process – it's all I can do to preserve it as presently constituted. While the old commandant was alive, the whole colony was full of his supporters; I may have some of his persuasive gift, but I don't have his authority; and therefore his supporters have melted away, there are still plenty of them around, but no one will admit to being one. Today, an execution day, if you were to go to a tea-house and listen around, you might hear only ambivalent opinions expressed. They are all supporters, but given the current commandant and his current views, they are completely useless to me. So now I'm turning to you: Do you think it's right that purely because of this commandant and the women who dominate him, do you think it's right that such a lifework' – he pointed to the machine – 'should be allowed to rot? Is that permissible? Even if you're just a stranger, spending a couple of days on our island? There's no time to lose, procedures are already afoot against my justiciary authority; consultations are held in the commandant's office, to which I am not invited; even your visit today strikes me as typical for the situation; they're cowards, and they prefer to send you, a foreigner. – How different executions used to be! Even the day before, the whole valley was packed with visitors; everyone came to spectate; early in the morning, the commandant appeared with his ladies; the whole camp was woken by fanfares; I reported that everything was ready; the best people – not one senior official was ever missing – stood around the machine; this pile of bamboo chairs is a pathetic memento of those days. The machine gleamed with polish, for almost every execution I availed myself of some spare parts. In front of hundreds of pairs of eyes – the spectators stood on tiptoe all the way up to those heights – the condemned man was laid under the harrow by the commandant in person. The work that today is done by a

common soldier was in those days done by me, the president of the court, and it honoured me. And then the execution began! There were no discordant squeaks to interfere with the smooth running of the machine. Some of the crowd didn't even bother to watch, they lay there in the sand with eyes shut; but they all knew: justice is being enacted. In the silence, nothing was audible but the sighing of the condemned man, muffled by the felt. Today the machine isn't able to get a stronger sigh from the condemned than the felt is capable of suppressing; but in those days the engraving needles exuded an acid which is no longer permitted today. Well, and then the sixth hour came around! It was impossible to find room for all those who wanted to view the proceedings from close to. With his typical insight, the commandant decreed that children should be given priority; thanks to my job, I was always able to stand nearby; often I would hunker down, with two children either side of me, my arms around them. How we watched the transfiguration in the tormented faces, how we held our cheeks in the glow of this arduously achieved and already passing justice! I tell you, comrade, those were times!' The officer had clearly forgotten who he was talking to; he had thrown his arm around the traveller, and had pressed his head against his shoulder. The traveller didn't know quite what to do, impatiently he gazed past the officer. The soldier was done with his swabbing, and poured rice porridge from a can into the little dish. No sooner had the condemned man noticed this – he seemed to have recovered himself – than he put out his tongue and began to lap at it. The soldier kept pushing him away, because the porridge was supposed to be reserved for some later time, but it didn't make a particularly good impression either when the soldier reached in with his dirty hands in front of the hungry condemned man, to help himself.

The officer quickly recovered himself. 'I wasn't trying to

move you,' he said, 'I know it's not possible to make those times comprehensible now. At least the machine is still working and speaking for itself. It speaks for itself, even if it's all alone in the valley. And, at the end, the body still lurches with the same unfathomably gentle fall into the pit, even if there are no longer, as there were then, hundreds of flies collected round the pit. Back then, we had to put up a stronger rail around the pit, but it's long since collapsed.'

The traveller wanted to turn his face from the officer, and looked aimlessly round. The officer supposed he was looking at the desert valley; he therefore seized his hands, moved round to catch his eye, and asked him: 'Do you feel it then, the disgrace?'

But the traveller didn't speak. The officer let him go a moment; with legs apart, and hands on his hips he stood still and stared at the ground. Then he smiled encouragingly at the traveller and said: 'I happened to be near you yesterday when the commandant invited you to come. I heard the invitation. I know the commandant. I understood the point of the invitation straightaway. Even though his power is such that he might easily take steps against me directly, he doesn't dare, he prefers to offer me up to the judgement of a respected stranger like yourself. Everything is nicely calculated; it's your second day on the island, you never knew the old commandant and his philosophy, you are caught up in European perspectives, perhaps you are a principled opponent of the death penalty in general, and of such an execution machine in particular, moreover you can see how the process has sadly degenerated, without official sanction, on a somewhat impaired facility – would it not be highly likely in view of all these factors (thus the commandant) that you disapprove of my work? And if you do disapprove of it, will you really keep your views to yourself (still the commandant), as you will certainly set great store by

your oft-tested convictions? Then again, you have learned to see and to respect many oddities of many peoples, probably you will not speak out explicitly against the procedure, in the way you would, were you at home. But the commandant doesn't even need that. A fleeting, even a careless word, will suffice. It need not accord with your convictions, so long as it chimes with his ideas. I am quite sure he will interrogate you as cunningly as only he can. His womenfolk will sit around in a ring, and prick up their ears; I could imagine you saying, for instance: "With us; justice is performed differently," or "Where I come from, the condemned man is acquainted with the judgement," or "We don't just have the death penalty," or "We only used torture till the Middle Ages." All these are true observations, innocent remarks that do not concern my procedure. But how will the commandant react to them? I see him, the good commandant, quickly push his chair aside and rush out on to the balcony, I see his womenfolk streaming after him, I hear his voice – a voice of thunder, as the ladies are pleased to call it – and he says: "A great savant from the west, in the course of a study of various forms of justice in all countries of the world, has just declared that our traditional form is inhuman. Following the judgement of such a man, it is evidently no longer possible for me to countenance this process. With immediate effect, I therefore, etc. etc." You try to intervene, you never said what he claims, you never described my process as inhuman; on the contrary, according to your profound insight you find it all too human and absolutely in accord with human dignity; and you admire the machinery – but it's too late; you don't even get out on to the balcony, which is full of ladies; you try to get attention; you raise your voice; but a lady's hand covers your mouth – and I and the work of the old commandant are both doomed.'

The traveller suppressed a smile; that was how easy the task

was that had struck him as so difficult. He said evasively: 'You overestimate my importance; the commandant read my letter of introduction, he knows I am not an expert in legal procedures. If I were to give an opinion, it would be that of a private individual, no more qualified than anyone else, and certainly much less significant than the opinion of the commandant, who, it appears, has very far-reaching powers here in this penal colony. If his opinion on this procedure is indeed as fixed as you seem to think, then I am afraid the procedure will soon be wound up, albeit without any intervention on my part.'

Did the officer understand? No, he did not understand. He shook his head energetically, looked briefly in the direction of the condemned man and the soldier, who both jumped and stopped eating their rice, stepped right up to the traveller, looked not at his face, but at some point on his jacket, and, more quietly than before, said: 'You don't know the commandant; but your view of him and of all of us is bound to be – if you don't mind my saying so – a little naïve. Believe me, your influence cannot be overstated. I was delighted when I heard that you were going to come to the execution on your own. That order of the commandant was intended to hurt me, but now I can turn it to my advantage. Undistracted by the lying whispers and contemptuous demeanours of others – both of which there would certainly have been in the case of a broader participation – you have listened to my explanations, you have seen the machine and are now about to witness the execution. I expect your mind is already made up; if there are any little grey areas of indecision, the sight of the execution will clear them up. And now I beg you: please give me your support with the commandant!'

The traveller cut him off. 'But how could I,' he exclaimed, 'it's completely impossible. I am as little able to help you as I am to harm you.'

'No, but you can,' said the officer. The traveller noticed to his alarm that the officer had clenched his fists. 'You can,' the officer repeated more urgently. 'I have a plan that is bound to succeed. You think you have insufficient influence. I know it's sufficient. But even if I were to allow you were right, isn't it the case that everything, even possibly inadequate means, must be tried in the preservation of the procedure? So listen, here's the plan. The most important thing is that you refrain from expressing a judgement on the procedure as long as you possibly can. If you're not asked flat out, you should avoid giving a view; your remarks should be brief and vague; people should have the impression that you're embittered, that, if you were to allow yourself to speak, you would have little option but to start cursing. I don't ask you to lie; not at all; just short factual replies, "Yes, I witnessed the execution," or "Yes, I listened to all his explanations." No more than that. There is more than enough reason for you to be evidently bitter, although it's not the reason the commandant would necessarily expect. He will completely misunderstand it, and interpret it to his way of thinking. That's the essence of my plan. Tomorrow morning there's a big meeting of all the senior administrative personnel at headquarters, under the chairmanship of the commandant. The commandant has of course learned to turn such meetings into a personal charade. He has had a gallery built, which is always full of spectators. I am forced to attend the meetings, though they make me shudder with disgust. I am sure you will be invited along to the session; if you behave in the way my plan envisages, the invitation will become an urgent request. But if, for some inexplicable reason, you should fail to be invited, then you would have to solicit an invitation yourself; there is no question then of your not being given one. So there you are tomorrow morning, along with the ladies, on the commandant's balcony. He shoots regular glances up, to check

that you really are there. After sundry trivial, frivolous subjects, included merely for the sake of the public – generally it's port construction, you wouldn't believe all the port construction talk! – our legal procedure will be on the agenda. If it should turn out not to be, or not to be high enough on the agenda; then I will see to it that it is. I will get up and report on the execution today. Very briefly, just that single item. Such a report is not customary at those sessions, but I make it anyway. The commandant thanks me, as ever, with a friendly smile, and then – he won't be able to help himself – he seizes the opportunity. "We have just had presented to us," or words to that effect, "an account of the execution. I would merely like to add to that account, the fact that this execution was witnessed by the great researcher, of whose prestigious visit to our colony you all will have been apprised. Our session today also gains in importance from his personal attendance. Should we not therefore now turn to the great researcher, and ask him for his view of this traditional execution, and the hearing that preceded it?" Applause breaks out, universal agreement, the loudest voice is mine. The commandant bows before you, and says, "Well, on behalf of us all, I should like to ask you that question." And then you step up to the railing. In plain view of everyone, you clasp it with your hands, otherwise the ladies would take hold of them and start toying with your fingers. – And then you speak. I don't know how I'll survive the tension of so many hours to get through first. In your speech you must let rip, let the truth speak full volume, lean down over the rails and bellow, yes bellow your views, your implacable views, down to the commandant. But maybe you don't want to do that, perhaps it's not in your nature, perhaps people go about things differently where you come from, and that's fine too, that's perfectly in order, maybe you won't even have to stand, you just say a very few words, whisper them barely loudly enough for the

administrative staff below to hear you, that's enough, you don't need to speak about the inadequate attendance, the squeaky wheels, the torn straps, the revolting felt, no, I'll take care of all of that, and believe me, if I don't send him fleeing out of the room with my speech, then I'll force him down on his knees so that he will confess: Old commandant, great predecessor, I bow down before you. – That's my plan; will you help me put it into effect? But of course you will, you must.' And the officer grasped the traveller by both arms, and, breathing heavily, gazed into his face. He had yelled the last sentences at such a pitch that the soldier and the condemned man had also been alerted; they hadn't understood what he was talking about, but they did at least stop eating and, still chewing, looked over at the traveller.

The answer he had to give was not at any time in doubt for the traveller; he had experienced too much in the course of a lifetime for him to start vacillating now; he was basically an honest man, and he knew no fear. Even so, he hesitated for a moment as he looked at the soldier and the condemned man. And then he said what he had to say: 'No.' The officer blinked several times, but without looking away from him. 'Do you want an explanation?' asked the traveller. The officer nodded mutely. 'I am opposed to this process,' the traveller said. 'Even before you took me into your confidence – of course I will not break this confidence in any way – I was already considering whether I would be justified in taking steps against it, and whether my taking steps could have the least prospect of making a difference. The party I would first turn to was clear to me too: I mean the commandant, of course. You made it even clearer to me, without in the least cementing my resolve; on the contrary, your honest conviction moves me, while not shaking my opinion.'

The officer remained mute, walked over to the machine,

gripped one of its brass rods, and then, leaning back a little, looked up at the engraver, as though to check whether it was all in good order. The soldier and the condemned man seemed to have struck up some kind of friendship; the condemned man was making little hand signals to the soldier, hard though this was for a man in chains; the soldier leaned forward to him; the condemned man whispered something, to which the soldier nodded.

The traveller set off after the officer, and said: 'I don't know yet what I will do. I will indeed express my view of the process to the commandant, not in a public forum, though, but face to face; nor will I remain here long enough to be drawn into any sort of public session; I shall be leaving tomorrow morning, or at least boarding a ship then.'

The officer didn't appear to have been listening. 'The procedure didn't convince you, then?' he observed to himself, and smiled in the way a grown-up might smile at a foolish child, keeping his own serious reflections to himself behind the smile.

'So the time has come,' he said, and looked at the traveller with bright eyes that contained some summons, some call for involvement.

'Time for what?' the traveller asked in perplexity, but received no reply.

'You are at liberty,' the officer said to the condemned man in his language. The man at first would not believe him. 'Come on, you're at liberty,' the officer said again. For the first time, the condemned man's face grew animated. Was it true? Was it just a whim on the part of the officer, which might as suddenly change again? Had the foreign traveller secured forgiveness for him? What had happened? His face seemed to inquire. But not for long. Whatever it was, he could be free if he wanted, and he started to stir, as much as the harrow would allow.

'You're tearing my straps!' yelled the officer. 'Keep still! We'll

let you out!' And, together with the soldier, to whom he had given a signal, he set about the task. The condemned man was chuckling softly to himself, now turning his face left to look at the officer, then right at the soldier, not leaving out the traveller either.

'Pull him out,' the officer told the soldier. Some caution was needed here, on account of the harrow. The condemned man had already received some lacerations to his back, purely as a consequence of his own impatience.

From now on the officer hardly bothered about him any more. He walked up to the traveller, produced the little leather map-case again, leafed around in it, finally found the sheet of paper he was looking for, and showed it to the traveller. 'Read it,' he said. 'I can't,' said the traveller, 'I told you, I can't read these inscriptions.' 'Come on, look at it properly,' said the officer, and stood beside the traveller, to help him with the reading. When that didn't help either, he lifted his little finger high up in the air, as though the paper must on no account be touched, and moved it across the paper, to make it a little easier for the traveller. The traveller made an effort too, so that at least here he might please the officer, but it was beyond him. The officer started to spell out the inscription, and then read it back to him fluently. "'Be just!" – it says,' he said, 'now you can read it.' The traveller bent down so low over the paper that the officer, fearing he might touch it, moved it away from him; the traveller didn't say anything, but it was clear that he still hadn't been able to read it. "'Be just!" – it says,' repeated the officer. 'Maybe so,' said the traveller, 'I'll believe you.' 'Well then,' said the officer, at least part-contented, and he climbed up on the ladder with the sheet of paper; he very carefully set the sheet of paper in the engraver, and seemed then comprehensively to rearrange the machinery; it was very laborious, they were evidently very tiny wheels, and sometimes the officer's

whole head disappeared into the engraver, so minutely did he have to consult the machinery.

From down on the ground, the traveller gave his entire attention to the work, his neck became stiff, and his eyes started to hurt from the expanse of sun-bright sky. The soldier and the condemned man were entirely preoccupied with one another. The shirt and trousers of the condemned man, which were already in the pit, were fished out by the soldier with the tip of his bayonet. The shirt was dreadfully soiled, and the condemned man washed it in the tub of water. When he then put on his shirt and trousers, both men had to laugh, because the garments had been sliced apart up the back. Perhaps the condemned man felt under some obligation to entertain the other, he twirled round in front of him in the cut clothing, while the soldier squatted on the ground and smacked his thighs as he laughed. At least the two of them did show a modicum of restraint in the presence of the two gentlemen.

When the officer had finally finished, he went over everything once more in detail and smiled, this time slammed shut the lid of the engraver which had been open, climbed down, looked into the pit and then at the condemned man, saw to his satisfaction that he had recovered his clothing, went over to the water tub to wash his hands, noticed the disgusting filth too late, was sad that he could now no longer wash his hands; finally instead plunged them – it was hardly adequate as a replacement, but it was all he could do – into the sand, and then stood up and started to unbutton his tunic. At this stage the two 'ladies' handkerchiefs that he had stuffed under his collar came into his hands. 'Here are your handkerchiefs,' he said, and threw them to the condemned man. And to the traveller he explained: 'A present from the ladies.'

In spite of the evident haste with which he first took off his tunic and then stripped off altogether, he still treated each

successive garment with great care, even stroking the silver braid on his tunic with his fingers, and shaking his tassel out. Admittedly, it sat oddly with his care that as soon as he was finished with a garment, he tossed it with a jerk of revulsion into the pit. The last thing he was left holding was a short sword on a sword belt. He pulled it out of its sheath, broke it over his knee, then bundling everything together – the pieces of sword, the sheath and the belt – flung them down so viciously that they jangled together at the bottom of the pit.

And then he stood there naked. The traveller bit his lip and said nothing. He knew what was about to happen, but he had no right to interfere with anything the officer was minded to do. If the justicial procedure to which the officer adhered was really so close to being abrogated – possibly in consequence of the intervention of the traveller, and which he felt obliged to make – then the officer was now behaving perfectly correctly; the traveller in his place would not have behaved any differently.

The soldier and the condemned man initially understood nothing, they weren't even watching. The condemned man was overjoyed to have received his handkerchiefs back, but he didn't have long to enjoy their possession, because the soldier took them from him with a sudden quick movement. The condemned man now tried to snatch them back from where the soldier had tucked them, under his belt, but the soldier remained alert. So they squabbled together, half in play. It wasn't until the officer stood there completely naked that they took notice. The condemned man in particular seemed struck by the sense of some vast reversal in their roles. The thing that had happened to him, was now happening to the officer. Perhaps it would continue to the end. Probably it was on some order given by the foreign traveller. That was his vengeance. Without himself having suffered to the limit, he would be

avenged to that limit. An expression of broad silent mirth appeared on his face, and did not leave it.

The officer, though, had now turned to his machine. If it had been clear before that he understood the machine well, the way he dealt with it and the way it obeyed him now could make one almost afraid. With his hand he merely approached the harrow, and it rose and sank several times till it had reached the correct height to receive him; he barely touched the edge of the couch, and already it began to tremble; the stump of felt approached his mouth, it was clear that the officer did not really want it, but his hesitation was only momentary, straight away he yielded and received it into his mouth. Everything was ready, only the straps were still hanging down the sides, but they were clearly superfluous, the officer did not need to be tied down. Then the condemned man noticed the loose straps, in his view the execution was not complete unless the straps were tied on, he eagerly motioned to the soldier, and they ran up and tied the officer. The officer meanwhile had already stretched out his foot to push the lever that was to set the engraver in motion; when he saw the two coming up, he took it back, and allowed himself to be made fast. Now he could no longer reach the lever; neither the soldier nor the condemned man would be capable of finding it, and the traveller was determined not to be co-opted. It wasn't necessary; no sooner had the straps been tied than the machine went into operation; the bed trembled, the needles danced on the skin, the harrow floated up and down. The traveller had been staring at it a while before remembering that a wheel in the engraver was supposed to squeak; but everything was quiet, not the least hum was audible.

By operating so silently, the machine seemed to make itself unnoticeable. The traveller looked across at the soldier and the condemned man. The condemned man was the livelier of the

two, everything about the machine interested him, now he stooped down, now he stretched up, all the time he had his index finger out, to draw the soldier's attention to something. The traveller was mortified. He had decided he would remain here till the end, but he could not have endured the presence of the other two for long. 'Go home,' he said. The soldier might have been prepared to go, but to the condemned man the order seemed positively punitive. He implored him with folded hands to be allowed to remain here, and when the traveller shook his head he even dropped to his knees. The traveller saw that orders did no good here, he would have to go over and drive the two of them away. Then up in the engraver he heard a noise. Was the cogwheel playing up after all? But it was something else. Slowly the lid of the engraver lifted and then opened up completely. The teeth of one cogwheel emerged into view, before long the entire cog was visible, it was as though some giant force were crushing the engraver so that there was no room for this wheel, the wheel moved to the edge of the engraver, fell out, rolled in the sand a while and came to a stop. Then already another cog popped up, and then many more followed, large, small, of no ascertainable size, and with all of them the same thing happened, you thought the engraver was surely empty by now, but then another, particularly numerous cluster of them came up, fell down, rolled in the sand, and toppled over and lay still. With all this going on, the condemned man forgot the traveller's order, he was mesmerized by the cogs, he kept trying to reach out and touch one, and also encouraged the soldier to do so, but then hastily withdrew his hand, because another cog came along and gave him a fright, at least by its initial approach.

The traveller, on the other hand, was very disquieted; it was evident that the machine was falling apart; its smooth operation was an illusion; he had the sense that he had to look after

the officer now, as he evidently could not fend for himself. But while the tumbling of the cogwheels had claimed all his attention, he had forgotten to keep the rest of the machine in view; now, though, once the last wheel had come out of the engraver, he leaned down over the harrow, and found he had a new, and worse surprise waiting for him. The harrow was not writing, it was merely stabbing, and the bed was not revolving the body either, but merely raising it trembling towards the needles. The traveller wanted to intervene, perhaps to bring the whole thing to a stop, this wasn't torture of the kind the officer wanted to achieve, it was crude murder. He stretched out his hands. But already the harrow lifted aside with the transfixed body, something it didn't otherwise do till the twelfth hour. Blood flowed in a hundred streams, undiluted with any water, the water supply having failed as well. And now the last thing failed too, the body did not come off the long needle spikes, it poured forth its blood and hung over the pit, but without falling into it. The harrow was about to return to its previous position, but then, as if it noticed it was not yet freed of its burden, it hung over the pit longer. 'Can't you help!' the traveller yelled to the soldier and the condemned man, and grabbed hold of the officer's feet himself. He wanted to press down against the feet, while the other two on the opposite side would busy themselves with the officer's head, and gradually lift the man off the needles. But the two of them did not seem to want to come; the condemned man even turned away; the traveller had to walk over to them, and force them to attend to the officer's head. There, almost against his will, he was forced to see the dead man's face. It was as it had been in life; there was no trace of the promised transfiguration; the thing that all the others had found in the machine, the officer himself had failed to find; his lips were pressed together, his eyes were open, their expression was that of the living man,

their look was firm and assured, and the point of the great iron spike had passed through the forehead.

When the traveller, followed by the soldier and the condemned man, reached the first few buildings of the colony, the soldier pointed to one of them, and said: 'This is the tea-house.'

On the ground floor of one building was a low-ceilinged, rather cave-like space, with walls and ceiling blackened by smoke. Along the street side, it was entirely open. Even though there was little to distinguish the tea-house from the colony's other buildings, which, with the exception of the commandant's palatial dwellings, were all very run-down, it still evoked a sense of history in the traveller, and he sensed the might of earlier times. He walked up to it, followed by his companions, threaded his way between the unoccupied tables, and breathed in the cool, rather fusty air that came from its interior. 'The old man is buried here,' said the soldier, 'the priest refused to allow him a place in the cemetery. For a time, people were undecided where they should bury him, and in the end they buried him here. Of course the officer didn't tell you anything about that, because for him that's the most shameful thing. He even tried once or twice to dig him up overnight, but he was always chased away.' 'Where is his grave?' asked the traveller, who could not believe what the soldier told him. Straightaway, both the soldier and the condemned man went on ahead, and pointed at the alleged grave with their hands. They led the traveller as far as the back wall, where there were a few tables with people sitting at them. They were probably port workers, strongly built men with short, gleaming black beards. All of them were jacketless, their shirts were ripped, they looked demoralized and poor. As the traveller approached, one or two got to their feet, backed against the wall, and looked up at him. 'He's a stranger,' the whisper went up around the traveller, 'he wants

to see the grave.' They pushed one of the tables aside, under which there actually was a gravestone. It bore an inscription in very small letters, the traveller was forced to kneel down to read it. It read: 'Here rests the old commandant. His supporters, who now have no name, dug him this grave, and set this stone for him. It is prophesied that after a certain number of years, the commandant will rise again, and from these premises here, lead his followers on to the reconquest of the colony. Believe and be patient!' When the traveller had finished reading, and stood up again, he saw himself surrounded by men all standing and smiling, as if they had read the inscription at the same time and found it ridiculous, and expected him to share their view. The traveller feigned unawareness, distributed a few coins among them, waited while the table was pushed back over the gravestone, left the tea-house and walked down to the port.

The soldier and the condemned man had met acquaintances in the tea-house, and were detained by them. But they must have broken free of them again shortly, because the traveller was only halfway down a long flight of steps leading down to the ships when he heard them coming after him. Probably they wanted to make the traveller take them with him at the very last moment. While the traveller was negotiating the price of the steamer crossing with a shipping agent, the other two raced down the steps, silently, because they didn't dare raise their voices. But by the time they reached the bottom, the traveller was already in the boat, and the boatman was just untying it from the shore. It was just possible for them both still to have leaped into the boat, but the traveller picked up a heavy knotted rope, with which he threatened them and so dissuaded them from jumping.

*A Country Doctor:
Short Prose for my Father*